COLLEGES
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College District, its second state loan in 25 years. The loss of more state funds would force colleges to shift their missions dramatically, said Patrick Murphy, a University of San Francisco professor who studies school finances.

Community colleges may have to cut enrollment, lay off instructors and stop offering classes at some campuses, he said, as many schools have already done.

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Twenty-three faculty and staff have already been laid off over the last several months, ahead of the July adoption of the 2013-14 budget. If the November initiatives fail, Lewis said, Cabrillo’s cuts would double to $8 million, with those cuts going into effect Jan. 1, 2013.

With university tuition hikes preventing some students from affording those schools, additional cuts at the community colleges would be unnecessary, he said.

Alameda County’s four-year college Peralta district, for example, has cut enrollment dramatically since 2008, when the equivalent of 20,000 full-time students attended its schools. If Brown’s tax plan fails, Peralta will enroll 16,000 full-time students, said Ron Cechard, the district’s chief financial officer.

“That’s unconscionable, in my mind,” he said. “There’s such an unmet need out there.” Statewide enrollment has dropped about 10 percent — from 2.9 million to 2.6 million — from 2008 to last year.

No matter how dire the November election outlooks, the schools are having to deal with a more immediate uncertainty.

For college districts, the fiscal year starts July 1, and the school year begins in August or September. That means student leaders will start classes before college leaders know whether their schools will lose millions of dollars.

The sobering possibility of deep mid-year cuts follows three years of reductions that have left classes overflowing, shutting hundreds of thousands of frustrated students.

At some colleges, administrators have drawn down reserve funds to ease the effects, and those funds have sunk to dangerously low levels.

California requires districts to keep a 5 percent budget reserve, and Santa Clara County’s Foothill De Anza district and the Peralta district each are brushing up against that figure this year.

Using reserves has kept the Foothill De Anza district in the black, but its two colleges could soon see a lot of red as the district deals with a budget deficit for the fourth straight year.

Under a best-case scenario presented to employees May 17 by Chancellor Linda Thor, the district will need to cut nearly $8 million this year, or 4 percent of its $205 million budget, on top of a $15 million cut taken last year.

“Tied to the campus would worsen to more than $15 million this year,” before the cuts, the district’s total budget will be between $176 million and $179 million.

“It’s a choice of two bad scenarios,” Thor said in an interview. “But we will not run this district into insolvency. We will cut, we will lay off people, but we will not be able this district to bankruptcy.”

Foothill and De Anza colleges have cut 11 percent of their classes the past two years, and plan to cut 6.1 percent more if the state tax initiative fails.

“We’ve already done all the economizing we can,” said Kevin McEvers, the district’s chief financial officer.

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