Q&A: Chancellor Brian King looks to future of Los Rios

Community College District
By Loretta Kalb
lkalb@sacbee.com
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Brian King became chancellor of the Los Rios Community College District in February, taking over the state's second-largest district as it begins recovering from years of budget cuts.

King, 49, served as president of Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz County before moving to the Los Rios district. He replaced Brice Harris, who became chancellor of the California Community Colleges system in November.

How is Los Rios different than districts in the rest of the state?
What's unique about us is we are the second-largest district in a very large, populated state. It helps in terms of resourcing and the ability to bring innovative approaches on a large scale.

How do you feel about your transition to Los Rios and the change in community?
This is a great job, a great district. It's very well run and well thought of in the community. There are so many opportunities to be involved in economic development.

I think the regional effort, the Next Economy (a business-led effort to foster economic growth), is very important to the future and vision of the Los Rios district, since we're the most important provider of job training in the region and we're in partnerships with school districts throughout the region.

--Community colleges in California had $1.5 billion in budget cuts in a five-year span, and student enrollment is at a 20-year low. What's ahead?
The good news is that with the passage of Proposition 30 we are not having to cut our budget for the first time since 2008. But certainly, the cuts have been so immense that we are not able to provide all the classes we know we need.

Even with that tax increase's passage, Los Rios could still have to draw about $20 million from its reserves to balance the budget. What's the initial outlook?
The governor's proposed budget calls for $196 million more for community colleges and, with the May revise, we're hopeful that there could be slightly more money available. In talking with the Legislature, the proposal is for roughly half of that money to go to cost-of-living increases and the other half to restore course offerings to allow us to serve more students. We also anticipate some funding to implement the statewide student success initiatives – proposals that should lead to greater success and higher completion rates.

Recent data show a significant percentage of students do not get a certificate or degree or transfer to a four-year college. What's going on?
I don't know that the numbers have changed. Among students who show up prepared for community college, about 70 to 75 percent do achieve their goal of a certificate or degree or transfer within six years.

We have a better understanding of what the numbers are, and I think that is very positive. We are making decisions based on the data and having an opportunity to share data with our partners in K-12 and higher education.

What has been Los Rios' enrollment decline?
At our peak, our enrollment was over 90,000 in 2008, before the budget hammer fell. It's about 80,000 currently. ... We anticipate some modest growth in enrollment in the coming year.

Are students likely to see a continuation of fee increases?
We would hope that there won't be that significant of an unexpected increase for many years and would hope to see predictable, small increases only when absolutely necessary.

How long will it be before the supply of classes meets demand?
We envision a three- to five-year process.

What about online courses?
We definitely have a strategic vision for online education. About 15 to 20 percent of our courses are online. There is a mythology about online being inexpensive. You don't have a physical classroom.

But the technology, both hardware and software, are not less expensive. Some of our most disadvantaged students struggle with online access. We need to be mindful of that.

Call The Bee's Loretta Kalb, (916) 321-1073. Follow her on Twitter @LorettaSacBee. Read her Report Card blog at http://blogs.sacbee.com/report-card/.