

Furloughs are better: But universities are hit twice

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Capital city businesses as well as residents are going to feel proposed state budget cuts in ways that many areas of the state will not if lawmakers go forward with pay reductions for all state employees.

The Senate is proposing a 1 percent reduction for employees making more than \$100,000. The House is proposing a graduated pay reduction for employees: 4 percent for those earning between \$26,400 and \$80,000 and 5 percent for those earning \$80,001 and more.

Because this is a college town as well as the state capital, however, a double whammy hits our universities. The proposed reductions in the House budget would apply to the university employees as well as to state agencies, but the universities have already been required to offer multimillions in reductions that may include layoffs as well as other cuts. As many as 200 faculty layoffs at Florida State has been mentioned.

FAMU's Chief Financial Officer Teresa Hardee said Thursday that, according to the Board of Governors, all 11 public universities should expect to be stripped of another 15 percent the last quarter of the school year "as a precautionary action."

These cuts will inevitably mean fewer faculty and staff will be hired and retained — and fewer students will come to our universities as a result. The capital city economy thrives on its university life and is already feeling the losses. Last fall a hiring freeze was implemented at FSU, enrollment there has been decreased by almost 2,000 students this year because fewer faculty members are available to teach, and students who continue to enroll are going to be paying more for both tuition and housing at the same time they have larger classes.

In response to its anticipated \$35 million reduction from state revenues, FSU administrators are now talking about furloughs as an alternative to layoffs in the 2009-10 school year.

This approach would be workable — and preferable to layoffs — with each employee able to take one day a week off without pay for most university employees.

But everything is up in the air — lives and plans and ambitions — because final budget numbers won't be known until lawmakers complete their budget by May 1st. And that in itself is a part of the problem for universities trying to plan with any vitality for the next school year.

As FSU President T.K. Wetherell told *Democrat* higher-education writer Doug Blackburn in March, "It's really not just the economy. It's a system that's broken."

The Florida Legislature has quite simply failed to acknowledge the wisdom of investing in higher education, of keeping our universities strong and Florida a competitor in the world economy. Lawmakers have knowingly and willingly put our universities on a starvation diet, as they have already put state agencies.

Yet for state employees who don't work at the universities, even the preferable alternative of furloughs over salary cuts aren't feasible.

State agencies are already operating at a reduced number of employees. The work would simply not get done if agencies had to shut down often enough to send every employee on furlough equivalent to that 1 percent to 5 percent that lawmakers appear ready to extract from paychecks.

Lawmakers have decided to give themselves a small pay cut, too. And it's a good thing. As managers and leaders of our state workforce, they are doing a disappointingly poor job.