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Despite challenges, University Center keeps growing

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SPRINGFIELD — As state universities across Illinois have been forced to cut their budgets in recent years, the small Lake County facility that hosts some of their classes has been forced to be creative with its cash as well.

Since starting as executive director of the University Center of Lake County 10 years ago, Gary Grace's challenges have changed from trying to grow a new, relatively unique institution to now trying to keep it running well despite the state's budget challenges.

The center hosts 18 member universities that offer college-degree programs in Grayslake and Waukegan for people who — because of their jobs or families — can't leave the area or make the long commute to a university.

Many of the programs are geared toward career development.

"We have a number of folks who are looking to retool and find alternate jobs with a different skill set," he said.

Students pay tuition to the schools, such as Northern Illinois University, that offer the classes via adjunct teachers they've hired, the Internet or even faculty who make the trip to Lake County to teach. The state funds the University Center itself.

But like anyone depending on state funding lately, the center has faced budget challenges in recent years.

So just as the University Center was expanding and looking to enhance its programs, the state took a chunk out of its budget. Its state help was cut nearly in half from \$2.9 million a year to \$1.7 million. This fiscal year, Grace said, it has received none of the state money that has been owed since July.

"The development stuff, we never got to," Grace said.

Despite that, the University Center could add a 19th member soon. And enrollment, at nearly 2,000 students, has never been higher.

Some of the member universities want to expand, too.

Southern Illinois University is the member school farthest from the Grayslake campus but has the biggest presence there. Vice President of Academic Affairs Paul Sarvela says part of SIU's goal is to serve students unable to attend a typical university.

For that reason, and the fact that Lake County and the suburbs continue to grow, SIU wants to expand its offerings at the University Center, Sarvela said

And, Sarvela said, the Lake County facility's budget issues are similar to what a typical state school is going through. Everyone depending on state money has to wait a long time for it to come.

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"A lot of budgeting is dealing with the unknown," Sarvela said.

Lawmakers' budget talks in Springfield will heat up next month.

Sen. Terry Link, a Waukegan Democrat, said he doesn't think the center will take another big budget hit. But, he says, officials might have to get creative to find the money. Link said he thinks the center is important for the region, but it has to scrap for cash because it doesn't have the stature of a state university.

"They've got to fight for it every time," he said.

The center has been able to supplement its budget with savings, as well as earnings from local businesses or school districts that want to have meetings in its large Grayslake facility. But schools and companies have seen their budgets dry up, too.

In the meantime, like all schools and universities waiting for state money, Grace said the center just has to wait and see what lawmakers do. And their decisions might not become clear until the last minute.

"We haven't heard anything," Grace said. "We don't expect to hear too much."