Budget riles colleges

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If the state Legislature's worst budget proposals go through, it will ruin any chance that Florida's universities could help lift Florida out of its recession, university officials say.

"Our ability to recruit and retain intellectual talent is all we have," said University of South Florida Provost Ralph Wilcox. But a proposed half-billion-dollar cut to the state universities would force faculty layoffs and the termination of whole academic programs.

It would send the message to the best university teachers and researchers across the country to stay away from Florida, Wilcox said.

The proposed half-billion-dollar cut is coming from the House of Representatives. The state Senate cut is about half that amount. The 11 universities in the state system have already lost $352 million to state cuts since 2007. Their budgets now total about $3.3 billion.

The House and Senate would replace some of those losses with money from a tuition increase and the federal stimulus. If the House cuts go through, the damage to the universities would still be severe, Wilcox said, primarily because the federal infusion would stop after one or two years.

State higher education officials urged university administrators, faculty and students on Friday to call state lawmakers with the warning that proposed budget cuts could devastate Florida's colleges and universities.

"You can tear academic programs down very quickly, but it takes many, many years to build them up," said state Board of Governors Chairwoman Sheila McDevitt.

The statewide leadership of the faculty union, the United Faculty of Florida, also called on its members to contact key state lawmakers.

"DO NOT BACK DOWN from that support," wrote USF union President...
Sherman Dorn in the UFF's Friday newsletter. "Faculty, staff, and students are counting on your fighting for the Senate's higher-education budget numbers to prevent a system-wide disaster."

State lawmakers are cutting from every section of the state budget, trying to plug a $3 billion budget deficit and the threat of losing its favorable bond rating.

"We understand clearly the difficulty that the Legislature is having this year," McDevitt said. "We just have to make it clear that the House proposal would just create so much difficulty for us that I don't think we could easily repair it."

The University of South Florida would lose $78 million in annual revenue under the House proposal. The Senate plan would cost USF about $38 million. This is on top of $52 million in cuts since 2007.

USF hasn't outlined precisely what could be cut, as the University of Florida and Florida State University have. FSU, for instance, could lose 21 academic programs, including molecular biophysics, software engineering and anthropology.

But the cuts would be severe, Wilcox said.

"We have been planning for some months now in anticipation of a recurring reduction. We had not considered anything of the magnitude of the House cut," he said.

If it passes, "our universities are going to look very, very different in the days to come. We are not going to be able to serve Florida students in the ways that they rightly deserve.

"We are not going to be able to compete on a national level to recruit and retain faculty. We are not going to be able to compete for precious research investments as we have in the past."