USF averts budget knife

By Richard Danielson, Times Staff Writer
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TAMPA — In response to this year's cuts by the Legislature, many Florida universities are killing academic programs or laying off professors, or both.

But not the University of South Florida.

That's because the university already has gone through two years of painful pruning. Since 2007, it has cut 595 jobs and re-organized its College of Arts & Sciences.

"We took our lumps, if you will, a year ago," provost Ralph Wilcox said. "It prepared us well, although we're not done."

In the long run, he said, USF has more work to do to balance its budget. But for the coming year, he expects not to eliminate any academic programs and anticipates "negligible" faculty cuts.

In contrast, Florida State University last week announced plans to lay off up to 200 employees, including 25 tenured professors.

The University of Florida and the University of Central Florida each expect 50-plus layoffs. Florida Atlantic University says it will lay off 30.

And at Florida International University, the Dalai Lama himself has offered $100,000 to help save religious studies.

Like those institutions, USF faces a tight budget. Over the past two years, it has lost $88 million in recurring state support. But Wilcox said USF can keep employees who otherwise might be laid off because of:

• $23.3 million in federal stimulus funds coming in the 2009-10 fiscal year, which starts in July.

• More than $100 million in reserves.

• A 15 percent increase in undergraduate tuition.

• Savings from past cuts and last year's streamlining of the College of Arts & Sciences.

There, USF reorganized about three dozen departments, mainly into three leaner groups that share support staff.

Of the 595 jobs eliminated over the last two years, most were vacant. Sixty-two employees from across the university were either laid off or transferred to other positions.

Even with the downsizing, USF's work force remains considerable, with more than 12,500 employees on all its campuses. The university's budget is $1.3 billion, and administrators expect to enroll at least 46,000 students in the fall.

USF St. Petersburg, a separately accredited institution that handles its own budgeting, has gone through a similar process.

In two years, its state allocations of general revenue and lottery funds have fallen from $30.4 million to $22.2 million.

It cut 69 jobs, including 33 faculty positions. Most were achieved through attrition, by combining jobs, by moving employees whose jobs were eliminated to comparable open positions or by not renewing visiting faculty members when their appointments ended.

Thanks to $1.9 million in federal stimulus funds, USF St. Petersburg can keep 51 positions, including 21 faculty spots, that otherwise would be cut.

"Without the stimulus package, we would fall off a cliff," said Margaret Sullivan, the interim regional chancellor.

Along with reorganizing academic departments, USF has pinched pennies.

Twice, in 2008 and this year, the university imposed six-month freezes on most hires and nonessential spending.

And it has drawn on its reserves. USF started the current fiscal year with $163.5 million in reserves for education and general uses and has spent $61 million of that. So it will start the next fiscal year on July 1 with an estimated $102 million in reserves.

The reserves have gone to pay for "nonpermanent instruction" — visiting instructors, adjuncts, and graduate teaching assistants — as well as for things like summer school, which currently has an enrollment of more than 29,000.

But the reserves won't last forever, and the federal stimulus funds aren't expected to last beyond 2011.

USF's trustees have approved a 15 percent increase in tuition for the coming school year, plus a 5 percent increase in fees for student activities, health services and athletics. But the revenue gained from the tuition increase is expected to build over time, Wilcox said.

"It's going to take a long, long time to replenish $88 million," he said.

For one thing, Florida's in-state undergraduate tuition is among the lowest in the nation. Also, the new tuition increases don't apply to students who were already enrolled on July 1, 2007.

The result?

While existing programs are safe this year, "that's not to say we won't be evaluating the future status of academic programs," Wilcox said.

"We're going to have to do something more," he said. "I'm absolutely sure."

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report, which also contains information from the Orlando Sentinel, Miami Herald and South Florida Sun-Sentinel.
Tuition and fees for full-time, in-state undergraduate students for taking 30 credit hours in 2009-10, including the recently approved 15 percent increase in tuition:

**USF Tampa:** $4,503
Increase: $586

**USF St. Petersburg:** $3,684
Increase: $512