

Movement underway to form Emeritus student union

By Ashley Archibald in Santa Monica College

DOWNTOWN — Students of Emeritus College will meet Thursday afternoon to form a student union to advocate for class offerings for senior citizens amidst a climate of budget cuts.

Emeritus College has roughly 3,200 students but no advocacy arm despite the fact that its classes, mostly offered free-of-charge, could be threatened by ongoing budget difficulties at the state level.

“Never in its 37 years of existence has the college been so threatened with extinction as it is today,” said Harriet Epstein, one of the union organizers. “In his latest budget, (California Gov. Jerry) Brown calls for the elimination of non-credit college courses which would, in effect, end Emeritus.”

A student union would allow Emeritus students to speak with one voice to impress upon Sacramento lawmakers the importance of education for seniors, a large group of voters and taxpayers whose numbers will only swell as more Baby Boomers — born between 1946 and 1964, according to the U.S. Census Bureau — join the ranks.

The students have already had one run in with funding cuts — they mobilized over the winter to get classes that had been cut while for-credit courses were funded.

“This is a large group of voters and taxpayers who deserve some attention from their legislators,” Epstein said. “It’s time for legislators to give back a little to citizens who have put so much into the system.”

Gov. Brown’s budget doesn’t require a decrease in funding, but it strongly suggests that colleges limit funding of non-credit classes to basic skills and English instruction.

Emeritus classes may not fall under those categories, but they serve a greater good that benefits both those taking the courses and society as a whole, said

Don Girard, senior director of government relations and institutional communications at Santa Monica College, which runs Emeritus.

The classes target needs specific to the senior population, like mobility and socialization.

“We welcome student voices to articulate the need, value and benefit that this program provides,” Girard said. “From our point of view it benefits the students and society at large, which is equally important.”

Classes are one way to keep seniors engaged in society and healthy. Studies have shown that seniors who continue in education are less likely to suffer from dementia and other cognitive impairments.

It makes sense, said Kali Lightfoot, executive director of the National Resource Center for Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes.

Bernard Osher, the founder of the institutes and now 85 years old, noticed that his friends who stayed active and participated in senior college programs fared better than friends who didn't.

He established the institutes to look deeper into the issue. Locally, there are Osher institutes at UCLA and UC Irvine.

“What we know about aging is that social connectivity is hugely important to staying healthy, maybe more important than all the drugs we take,” Lightfoot said. “The combination of being intellectually challenged, making new friends, finding new interests and having people to share those with are all important to being healthy.”

California is not alone in its budgetary woes, although it has been hit harder than most, she said.

“It's a huge problem for community colleges because they've had extensive programs for older adults,” she said.

Thursday's meeting will establish a mission statement, define membership, elect officers, choose class representatives and set an agenda for action. It will begin at 1 p.m. at the Emeritus Room 409 and will run through 3:30 p.m.

To contact the Emeritus Student Union, send e-mails to emeritusstudents@gmail.com.

