

SNC faculty may not have a job this fall

By Carole Jablon-Bernardi

INCLINE VILLAGE – When a college is competing to maintain enrollment, even grow it, and is faced with rising tuition costs to offset expenses, faculty can become the target.

Such is the case at Sierra Nevada College.

The administration of the four-year liberal arts institution in Incline Village announced to faculty members that no contracts would be renewed for the 2017-18 school year. SNC intends to award faculty agreements by August, but urged instructors that “no reliance should be made on this time line nor should the statement of the intended dates create an expectation or guarantee of future employment with SNC.”

For several years there has been a downward enrollment pressure on small, private liberal arts-oriented colleges that survive on small endowments. While SNC has experienced steady, modest enrollment growth over the last several years (primarily due to its graduate programs in teacher education which are primarily delivered in Reno, Henderson and online) the main SNC Tahoe campus and its undergraduate programs have been subject to this pattern being felt by many colleges across the country.

Changing demographics and less general demand for traditional liberal arts programs around the country, as well as competition for students, has intensified. SNC Tahoe competes with many better resourced liberal arts colleges for what has been identified as a “shrinking pool of students.”

“These are challenging times,” Atam Lalchandani, chair of the SNC board of trustees, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Higher education

in our country is undergoing a seismic shift. Many institutions like SNC Tahoe are finding ways to reduce the cost of higher education and improve accessibility.”

The college is aligning its annual contracting procedure to time better with its enrollment calendar. Historically, the college has become contractually obligated to a major expense before having good visibility of its revenues for the coming year. The change for 2017 is intended to be more fiscally responsible because it allows the college to budget, and spend, in line with enrollment.

A significant portion of the entering class at SNC Tahoe comes in later than other institutions (beyond the traditional May-early June period). This year, registrations are coming in at a slower rate than usual. SNC Tahoe is still in the process of gauging the most likely level of enrollment that can be expected for the 2017-18 academic year. The fall semester starts Aug. 21

SNC Tahoe anticipates growth in its enrollments at its **Lake Tahoe Community College** location, which was launched last fall. It’s even expanding offerings.

As of June 9, the board of regents for the Nevada State System of Higher Education approved a partnership between SNC Tahoe and Truckee Meadows Community College for this coming fall, similar to the SNC center in South Lake Tahoe.

These expansions help the long-term sustainability of the college by optimizing enrollment with options.

The shift in contract renewal timing does not suspend faculty pay or benefits. Faculty will continue to be paid during the summer. Many of the faculty work in summer and the college is proceeding business as usual as it relates to summer. No rehiring, or interviewing process applies to this shift and there are no unions involved. The college is shifting faculty contract renewals (some faculty are on 12-month contracts and

others nine-month) from May to August.

When Rick Parsons, associate professor of art at SNC received his letter from President Alan Walker on May 24, he read the words "to provide written notice of non-renewal per Section 11 of the Handbook," and admits it caused concern. Although the announcement also included a statement from Walker saying, "SNC is taking this action in order to have more time to better gauge the level of enrollment that can be expected for the 2017-18 academic year and the impact on the college's ability to develop a balanced budget based on this decision, and other budget factors," Parsons says it makes sense, but does little to alleviate the anxiety.

"SNC is a tuition driven Institution. The faculty understands this, but it's not easy being put in this situation. As a faculty member, I believe admissions and recruitment should be the No. 1 priority for SNC," Parsons told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Students are the heartbeat of this institution and they are the critical component that makes the college run on many levels. The highly qualified dedicated faculty and an active engaging curriculum, coupled with the location of the institution, is what attracts students. I think all members of SNC's faculty, staff and administration should focus on enrollment to help stabilize the institution."

Contract non-renewal comes on the heels of more than \$2.1 million in budget cuts at SNC Tahoe since August 2015. That doesn't stall the vision of Walker.

"A prosperous future awaits SNC Tahoe and to realize the promise of such a future it will need to be re-imagined, and reinvented, as a comprehensive university that is skilled at embedding the fundamental skills and knowledge areas at the heart of the liberal arts programs. We are well on the way to that vision," Walker told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Some would argue that taking free or inexpensive courses

online offers the same value. But others would argue being in a room with a teacher, and students is a much richer experience.