



Mount Royal University braces for cuts, despite new money from province

Internal memo says proposed cuts meant to balance the budget

Reid Southwick · CBC News ·

Posted: May 16, 2018 5:30 AM MT | Last Updated: 5 hours ago



Mount Royal University is in line for an extra \$2 million from the provincial government. (CBC)

Mount Royal University appears to be bracing for spending cuts — including reductions in its academic budget — despite a big funding boost from the province, an internal memo shows.

The university is in line for an extra \$2 million from the NDP government's 2018-19 budget that compensates post-secondary institutions for lost revenue from an Alberta-wide tuition freeze.

According to the province, MRU has received a total of \$13 million in new funds from the province in the past three years.

Cuts to balance \$240-million budget

Despite this, an internal memo from MRU executives reveals proposed cuts they say are designed to balance the institution's roughly \$240-million budget. The email to employees, obtained by CBC News, is dated April 18, which means the reductions could have changed since then.

The draft budget measures ranged from a four per cent cut for finance and administration, to a 2.25 per cent decline to the university's academic affairs division, which is responsible for classroom expenses, among other areas.

The student affairs and campus life portfolio, which includes athletics, residences and career services, would see a three per cent spending cut under the proposed changes.

"Collectively, these adjustments realign our resources and position our institution for growth," states the memo, sent to MRU staff on behalf of Annalise Van Ham, the vice-president of finance and administration, and Lesley Brown, the provost and vice-president of academic affairs.

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The university declined to comment on details of its budget, because deliberations are still underway. In a statement, it said the budget "strengthens our long-term sustainability."

But the university said it did cut a number of positions in its revenue generation and retail departments, though it didn't say how many.

"Every effort was made to minimize the impact on students and the classroom," Van Ham said in the statement.

The memo says the recent \$2-million funding bump from the province represents less than one per cent of MRU's annual budget, noting scheduled salary increases for staff are expected to boost costs by \$3.8 million.

"While the grant increase does not solve all of our financial challenges, it does let us invest in our future," the memo states.

New funds diverted to reserves

The university plans to divert the new provincial funds to its reserves, which have previously paid for research, special projects and infrastructure upgrades. According to the memo, executives will finalize details of their plans for reserve funds next year.

Despite planned cuts to academic affairs, the university does plan to create some new full-time professor positions, which are meant to increase the ratio of full-time faculty to contract staff, the memo states. Details of the new hires will not be revealed until the budget is finalized later this month.

Marc Schroeder, president of the Mount Royal Faculty Association, declined to be interviewed, because collective bargaining is underway between staff and the university for a new contract.

In a brief statement, Schroeder said his group is concerned with the level of transparency and consultations involved with the university's budget deliberations.

Wealth not spread to teachers: faculty group

In a previous email to faculty, Schroeder took aim at the university's efforts to rein in its budget, arguing the university has reaped growing revenues in recent years but hasn't spread that wealth to teaching and research.

In the March 26 memo, also obtained by CBC News, he raised doubts the university could impose more cuts or greater workloads on faculty, "without further straining the high-quality, personalized learning we endeavour to provide to our students."

Mount Royal's student union said the proposed cuts are a big concern, but an even larger sticking point is that the university has not yet directly consulted with students on its budget plans.





Amanda LeBlanc is a vice-president of Mount Royal University's student union. (Reid Southwick/CBC)

The Students' Association of Mount Royal University has been invited to upcoming information sessions on the budget, but it doesn't consider those to be direct consultations with student leaders.

"Students at the university understand the economic reality of Alberta, and the economic reality that Mount Royal University faces," said Amanda LeBlanc, a vice-president at the student union.

"However, we want students to have a voice in the process. They're the largest stakeholder. They deserve (to have) their input to be considered."

The university said its budget discussions "involved broad engagement."

It's holding information sessions on campus next week before the board of governors approves the final budget on May 28.

