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Students, faculty rebel

By Gregory J. Wilcox
Staff Writer

University of West L.A. tuition at issue

The faculty, staff and some students at the University of West Los Angeles, which operates law and paralegal schools and has a campus in Woodland Hills, are rebelling against the administration for what they say is mismanagement and a budget awash in red ink.

The law school's 12-member Faculty Senate, in a unanimous vote, has said it has no confidence in President Robert W.

Brown and Chief Financial Officer David Wolf, and shared those concerns in an open letter to students last month.

The letter, signed by Andrew H. Kopkin, associate dean of academic affairs and student services and Faculty Senate chairman, said in part that "many other faculty and staff members support the Senate's resolutions."

Two days later, Brown sent an e-mail to

some members of the administration, including Kopkin, warning them not to involve students in the unrest and saying it could lead to suspensions or terminations for anyone involved.

Brown later abandoned that stance and said in an interview that he is trying to shepherd the university through a trying time. He doesn't think the unrest is as widespread as some make it seem.

Kopkin declined to answer questions. But third-semester student Marc McCulloch said there is concern over a string of tuition increases, including two since he started, and some past business decisions by the administration, including the sale of the West Los Angeles campus.

In 2004, tuition was \$585 a credit unit then got bumped up to \$635 in the summer, he said. Then for the 2005-06

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academic year, it jumped 9.4 percent to \$695 a unit.

"There was a fair amount of hue and cry. President Brown came here about this time last year and was attacked over the rate increase and he hasn't been back since, at least not for the students," McCulloch said.

He also said that 192 out of 280 students signed a petition seeking that Brown and Wolf be replaced.

McCulloch, on behalf of the students, sent a letter to trustees demanding, in part, that the recent tuition increase be rescinded, that Brown and Wolf be forced to resign and that pay reductions be implemented for some administrators.

"They didn't give us the courtesy of a response," McCulloch said.

Brown does not dispute the fact the school has financial problems.

It's been in the red since at least since 1998, when the deficit was about \$169,000, then topped \$1 million for three years starting in 2001.

Now Brown says the finances are improving, though, with the deficit falling last year as expenses were cut. "Next year, I believe we'll be in a position to have a better-than-break-even budget," he said.

Brown said that when he took over seven years ago, the environment for students was very

competitive.

West Los Angeles' business model was based on volume — lots of students coming in the front door — but there was also a lot of attrition. The Alameda-based Western Association of Schools and Colleges Inc. was also looking into whether West Los Angeles should lose its accreditation, which allows the school to offer low-interest government loans to students.

With accreditation at issue, enrollment fell from between 300 and 400 students to fewer than 100. But the school still had to maintain the same infrastructure.

"We knew we would have these deficits for years," Brown said of the shift from student volume to retention.

To ease the financial burden, the administration in the early part of the decade sold its only asset, the 3.8-acre campus near Los Angeles International Airport to Hertz, and then was able to lease it back, rent-free, until this year. The administrators also subleased some space during the day to a charter high school to generate revenue.

The deal with Hertz was to expire in February but has been extended until July. Brown says things are starting to stabilize: Enrollment is up and he is in negotiations for a new campus location that should be finalized before summer.

He also claims that tuition at West Los Angeles is generally

cheaper than at other schools.

"I don't want to continue to have to be as aggressive," he said of future tuition hikes. "And where enrollment is now, I hope we can be in 4 (percent) to 7 percent range."

Trustees have no intention of replacing either Brown or Wolf.

"The board has confidence in Robert Brown and David Wolf and has indicated that to the faculty," said trustee chairman Paul J. Coony.

He said a faculty member has been invited to join the board and a student position will be also be added, and he and Brown will meet with students after final exams to discuss the situation.

"We need to keep the lines of communication open among all of us."

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