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State's Deficit Threatens Future of University Center of Lake County

Going back to school to finish a bachelor's degree, earn a graduate degree, or sharpen professional skills is a frequent survival strategy in tough economic times. The State's current budget might make that more difficult in the Lake County region, according to G. Gary Grace, Executive Director & Dean of the University Center of Lake County.

"The Illinois Board of Higher Education has informed our Governing Board that the Center is slated for a 62.5% decrease in its annual appropriation for FY 2010 if the State's current deficit goes unaddressed. The remaining \$1.1 million in operating funds is close to our early beginnings when we had two-thirds fewer staff, half the

degree programs currently offered, and rental space instead of the 100,000 square feet of state-built instructional facilities now in Waukegan and Grayslake.”

Since its founding in 1996, the University Center’s consortium of 18 Illinois colleges and universities has seen enrollments in degree and certificate courses in Lake County increase from 1529 to 5606, more than 266%. With 90 programs and professional development opportunities, the state-of-the-art Center helps individuals stay close to home while increasing their education for job advancement or new careers. In the most recent fall and spring terms, students from 97 local communities took courses.

“I am a married woman and I have three children. I live in McHenry and commuting to any other university would have been nearly impossible for me,” said Nicole Belpedio, a December 2008 graduate of Southern Illinois University Carbondale’s BS in Elementary Education program. “Without the University Center, I would not [have been] able to fulfill my dream of completing my college education.”

University Center services range from pre-admission advising for those considering a return to college, to library and technology services for students enrolled in Center programs, to a full-service conference center for local business and industry.

With the Center's future in jeopardy, Grace said "Our Board has directed the staff to find a way to reduce spending by a half million dollars while keeping the doors open and basic services intact for the coming six months. Modest operating reserves will allow us to do this in the short term, but we need a long-term solution." He is hoping that the legislative delegation can rediscover the powerful bipartisan cooperation that led to the Center's innovative creation. Otherwise, Grace fears that prolonging this deep budget cut will mean an end to a university presence in Lake County—even as the nation focuses on education as a pathway to economic recovery.

For more information about the University Center of Lake County, visit www.ucenter.org or call (847) 665-4000.