Changes in Freshman Scholars Program worry some

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CALEXICO — Being part of the Freshman Scholars Program isn’t just about the scholarships, class guarantee or curriculum for SDSU-IV freshman Alya Hurych.

It’s about being part of a selective group of students who are like family.

It’s a unique identity that students, parents, faculty and community members worry could be threatened with the San Diego State University-Imperial Valley program’s possible expansion and partnership with Imperial Valley College that was recently disclosed at an Imperial County P-16 Council meeting.

“We walk around with our heads held high,” Hurych said. “I’m afraid that if San Diego State and Imperial Valley College blend you’re going to lose that distinction.”

Community members immediately rallied, largely because of fear from the program’s cut and then reinstatement in 2005 by the San Diego campus.

“The Imperial Valley has some educational gems, doesn’t have a lot of them … but the Freshman Scholars Program is one of those,” said Roger Dunn, SDSU-IV’s associate dean until August and first director of freshman program. “It stands for something, it gives people a sense of access to a four-year institution.”

SDSU-IV Dean David Pearson maintains the program won’t be eliminated.

“We’re still in the ideas stage,” Pearson said. “But the Freshman Scholars Program will not be killed, it will be expanded.”

Transitioning Associate Dean Michael Sabath, who Pearson said is the expansion’s architect, said
university will keep the program’s level of quality.

“The existing Freshman Scholars Program will continue for now until we’re sure we have something good or better that would be in its place,” Sabath said.

Pearson emphasized that nothing was on paper and no decisions have been made or approved by the “top folks at Imperial Valley College and San Diego State.”

“No one is saying to dilute the program but expand it,” Pearson said, adding the expansion would aim to increase retention and graduation rates of students in Imperial Valley.

Despite rumors, Sabath said the program’s funding isn’t facing any immediate cut, but Pearson said the expansion would keep people from worrying whether the program will be on the “chopping block” every year.

Some aren’t convinced of these claims.

Dunn said he believes SDSU Provost Nancy Marlin, who cut the program in 2005, is reluctant because of the 2005 outrage and is promoting the current change through the dean.

“If the president is going to cut the program it would be good if they announced this, but you notice they are not doing that,” he said. “They’re promoting a shift to something that is really just another 2+2 program, which is wonderful but not the same as this little gem.”

Marlin hadn’t returned phone calls by press time.

Freshman Scholars Program Recruiter Norma Aguilar said funding for the program shouldn’t be a problem because the program helps bring in money because students are enrolled full-time.

When asked why Imperial Valley College has to be a part of the program’s expansion, Pearson said SDSU-IV doesn’t have the money and the expansion must be done in the most cost-effective way possible.

“We want to preserve all the valuable features of the Freshman Scholars Program but enhance it because more resources would be available to students,” he said.

Questions have been asked in the past week from people who have been involved with the program since its inception as to why they were not previously notified or included in the discussions. Pearson said the meetings so far, which he said started a month ago, have been informal and there was no intent of keeping them secret.

“We didn’t want to have a half-cooked concept and start discussions,” he said. “We wanted a more concrete idea.”

Sabath said they hoped that by December they would have a clearer concept, at which point they would start getting input from the community.

Input they are sure to get.

“Everyone, including elected officials in the Valley, need to regroup, come up with a strategy and come out in greater numbers to speak out against this,” Calexico City Manager Victor Carrillo said.

Info Boxes:

FRESHMAN SCHOLARS PROGRAM: The Freshman Scholars Program, founded in 2003, has offered 278 high school graduates SDSU-IV scholarships since its inception. It features a fast-track curriculum, a close cohort and advisers that have helped the students’ academic success. The program usually allows a maximum of 50 students. While most students at SDSU-IV transfer from Imperial Valley College, freshman scholars are the only freshman students at the Imperial Valley campus. The program started with 11 graduates and has grown since. A 2.0 grade-point average is needed for admission along with California State
University eligibility. Students with a 3.7 GPA can qualify for the dean’s scholarship. FSP is known for its excellent retention and graduation rate. The program is mostly funded by fundraisers.

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