Effort to replace college program raises controversy

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As sure as the desert sun has began to heat up over the Imperial Valley so have tensions continued to boil over the proposition of the Imperial Valley University Partnership.

An advertisement in this newspaper boosts the partnership among San Diego State University-Imperial Valley campus, Imperial Valley College and the Imperial County Office of Education.

The letter — signed by SDSU-IV Dean David Pearson, IVC President Ed Gould and ICOE Superintendent Anne Mallory — boasts retaining the best aspects of SDSU-IV’s current Freshman Scholars Program.

Yet because of the pending termination of the freshman program at the end of the 2011-2012 school year, some SDSU-IV faculty and students are not happy, for various reasons.

Below are their reasons for and against the termination of the Freshman Scholars Program and the proposition of the Imperial Valley University Partnership, which is set to start with 100 new students in fall 2012.

FOR

The new Imperial Valley University Partnership Program will retain all of the positive aspects of the San Diego State University-Imperial Valley campus Freshman Scholars Program including high student retention, high graduation rates and a cohort structure (which is an academic track where students move along together in a small setting), according to the partnership letter.

SDSU-IV Dean David Pearson said the new program will also allow for greater access to resources for students and faculty, an overall lower cost for students and bring greater aspects of student life to both campuses.

“Students will have access to the facilities here, the counselors here, the faculty here, the library here as well as on the campuses of SDSU in Calexico and in Brawley,” he said.
“We love our existing freshman program but it’s small, small, small,” Pearson said. “Our job as educators is to be able to have that kind of quality offering to far larger numbers of people.”

Within the new program, students will be admitted to both IVC and SDSU-IV and will allow for students to graduate faster, IVC President Ed Gould said.

“The only reason we’re waiting till 2012 is it takes some time to market it; to get (all) the counselors and advisers to know the nuances of the program,” Gould said.

“Some of the detail is still in the works with the committee in terms of how it’s going to be broken down. A lot is probably going to be determined by the students themselves as we go into the high schools and talk to students,” Gould said.

Pearson said only two big changes will occur as a result of the program in that some SDSU-IV classes will take place at IVC and the program will admit more students. The current freshman program is capped at 40 new students per semester.

“I think we are all in agreement of the concept. We’re trying to improve access for the citizens of the Valley,” SDSU President Stephen Weber said.

“It’s not a cost issue for us at all,” he said. “The issue is effectiveness and how to get better education results in the Valley. This is an underserved population any way you look at it and we have a responsibility to try and improve the education opportunities in the Valley.”

Weber and Pearson said the current freshman program was a pilot program that was extended because of its success but, being a pilot program, was not meant to continue.

“I understand the vested interest by folks who had a role in the formulation of the existing program but, in my thinking, that’s profoundly shortsighted,” Pearson said.

“Providing education to the largest number of students is our obligation — not just our joy and our profession — as educators,” he said.

Administration also contends that entities which promote education support the idea of the University Partnership.

“Within the last year we’ve seen such a synergy around the P-16 Council and higher education,” Imperial County Office of Education Superintendent Anne Mallory said. “It’s very exciting.”

AGAINST

While administration is seeing nothing but positives in a new University Partnership Program, SDSU-IV faculty and students in the know are much more wary of the partnership and do not want to see the current Freshman Scholars Program go away.

“The way this is set up, if these programs don’t work we won’t have a program in the Valley,” SDSU-IV professor emeritus Roger Dunn said.

“There’s no safety net,” he said. “If it doesn’t work then we have nothing, and that’s what we’re worried about.”
Dunn, who is semi-retired, contends that not only has the proposal for the University Partnership not been approved by a single committee or a faculty vote, but decisions are seemingly being made with little to no faculty involvement.

“We didn’t find out about it for seven months,” he said. “It’s a little bit of an insult to the community and the campus.”

“We would like to be included more directly, and I think if that would’ve happened in the beginning we would be able to have something really successful,” said Donna Castañeda, SDSU-IV professor and chairwoman of arts and sciences division.

Also, Dunn said a lot of red flags have popped up including SDSU-IV Dean David Pearson calling faculty into his office one-by-one and a gag order being put in place regarding the partnership.

“Our faculty has a growing distrust,” Dunn said.

Some students agree with Dunn.

“The people that are proposing the new program can’t give us reasons for the current program’s termination,” said Alya Hurych, SDSU-IV sophomore and product of the freshman program.

She said while administration is “quick to list a bunch of pros,” a lot of questions are still being left unanswered.

“We’re not afraid of change, we just don’t like change without justification,” said Jesus Quintero, SDSU-IV senior and cohort in the duo’s cause.

The current program was terminated in 2005 but no new program was put in place back then, Hurych said. “Thanks to community support it was given an extension,” she said.

Quintero said former SDSU-IV Dean Stephen Roeder submitted a proposal in spring 2010 to make the freshman program permanent, which, he claims, was either denied or overlooked without any reasoning from the administration.

The students held an informational meeting with current freshmen about the changes coming to both schools and, Hurych said, it raised a lot of questions for them as well.

Dunn said faculty members are also worried since both SDSU President Stephen Webber and IVC President Ed Gould will be retiring this year.

“With new leadership, (the new leaders) might have new ideas and there’s no guarantee that they’ll follow through (with the proposition),” Castañeda said.

“Most faculty just have a lot of questions we would like answers to and we haven’t gotten so far,” she said.

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