Florida universities hit by funding crisis

Stimulus money provides lifeline for cash-strapped public colleges.

This March, Michael Perfit, chair of the geology department at the University of Florida in Gainesville, learned that budget cuts might slash 11 of the 24 faculty and staff positions in his group. "It was like someone saying your whole family was killed in a car accident," he says. "I thought, 'This will destroy us.'"

Perfit's department ultimately dodged the full car wreck, thanks to a combination of factors that blunted — at least temporarily — the planned massive reductions in state funding for university research. But happy conclusions are not the norm this year. Like other US sunbelt states, including Arizona (see Nature 458, 14–15; 2009) and California (see Nature doi:10.1038/n.2009.553; 2009), Florida has learned the hard way that real estate and tourism are not stable economic anchors in a recession.

Florida's 11 public universities have already endured years of severe budget cuts (see 'Marine biologists say save our subs'), and the fiscal year that begins on 1 July will be worse. Researchers embarked this spring on last-minute lobbying to save their departments. They are also looking to new funding streams — particularly the $787-billion economic stimulus bill passed by Congress in February. The new money has prevented some cuts, and others hope that stimulus grants will help researchers directly.

University leaders say they are already cutting into the meat of research budgets. The University of Central Florida in Orlando announced on 4 June that it plans to phase out five departments, including statistics and engineering technology; administrators say the decision was made on factors such as teaching and research quality, student demand and costs. Even that was just one $6-million component of a plan to deal with a $38-million cut in recurring funding.

At the University of Florida, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences — which contains Perfit's department — initially feared it would lose 10% of its $93-million annual budget. In February, departments began looking at how to plan for such a worst-case scenario. The dean of the college, Paul D'Anieri, recommended the geology department, the operating budget of which was already down 65% since 2005, as one group to look at for potentially deep staff cuts.

David Richardson, the university's associate dean of research, says when deciding what to cut, the administration took into consideration a range of factors such as size, number of students served and productivity. But decisions were ultimately constrained by the fact that tenured university faculty belong to a union that negotiates contracts collectively, which meant that non-tenured positions were easier to eliminate. "At some level, frankly, those lay-off orders were determined more by that than by choices made on the basis of what is best," says Richardson.

By March, Perfit was looking at losing all of the ten non-tenured faculty, plus one tenured position in his team. He sprang into action, soliciting friends of the programme in fields ranging from oil exploration to the environmental industry to write 75 letters of support to administrators. Without support staff to run the department's mass spectrometers, he argued, grant-funded projects in geology and other departments would be jeopardized. And if junior faculty left, their grant money might leave with them. "For me it was more than just the people; it was like my child was being destroyed," says Perfit. "I was fighting with all I had."

The impact of the lobbying campaign is difficult to gauge. But, says Richardson, "those efforts clearly focused attention on the role of these academic and research programmes."

A number of factors worked in Perfit's favour, primarily that, in the end, the college of arts and sciences suffered only a 3.8% cut to its budget instead of 10%. The administration did not have to resort to lay-offs in the department, but Perfit lost two positions when faculty who were already leaving were not replaced.

An influx of stimulus funding played a major role in the outcome, reducing the required cut in the total university budget from $42 million to $32 million. In addition, a bill passed on 1 June allows Florida's public universities to raise tuition fees by up to 15% per year if they choose — an option that had been barred by law until now. However, barring some source of replacement funding, deeper cuts will still have to be made in the next budget cycle.

Marine biologists say save our subs

Two industrious subs in Florida's harbors have logged more than 8,500 dives between them, and continued to do so even as the financial status of the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute (HBOI) in Fort Pierce, Florida, considers selling their mother ship.

Many marine scientists are agitated at the thought of losing access to the Johnson Sea Links (JSLs), which have been a part of the HBOI since its founding in the 1970s. More than 2,000 scientists and non-scientists worldwide have signed a petition asking the state to support the JSLs.

In the face of state-wide budget cuts (see main story), Florida Atlantic University (FAU) at Boca Raton, which administers the HBOI, is reviewing several scientific departments, including the institute. In 2004, funding from the estate of its founder, Seward Johnson, was cut off; since then it has floundered financially, and in 2007 it merged with FAU. Harbor Branch still struggles to fund its US$20-million annual budget. In May, HBOI and three other institutions were awarded a joint $22.5-million grant over five years from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to establish a cooperative institute for ocean exploration, headquartered at the HBOI. But because only a portion of the grant will come to the HBOI, it is not sufficient to fund sub operations, says Peter Tatro, the institute's associate executive director. NOAA spokeswoman Jana Goldman says that specific tools such as the JSLs are not required by the grant, as long as the research goals are carried out.

Because of the budget woes, one JSL has been mothballed since 2006, and the second does not get

Marine biologists say save our subs

Two industrious subs in Florida's harbors have logged more than 8,500 dives between them, and continued to do so even as the financial status of the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute (HBOI) in Fort Pierce, Florida, considers selling their mother ship.

Many marine scientists are agitated at the thought of losing access to the Johnson Sea Links (JSLs), which have been a part of the HBOI since its founding in the 1970s. More than 2,000 scientists and non-scientists worldwide have signed a petition asking the state to support the JSLs.

In the face of state-wide budget cuts (see main story), Florida Atlantic University (FAU) at Boca Raton, which administers the HBOI, is reviewing several scientific departments, including the institute. In 2004, funding from the estate of its founder, Seward Johnson, was cut off; since then it has floundered financially, and in 2007 it merged with FAU. Harbor Branch still struggles to fund its US$20-million annual budget. In May, HBOI and three other institutions were awarded a joint $22.5-million grant over five years from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to establish a cooperative institute for ocean exploration, headquartered at the HBOI. But because only a portion of the grant will come to the HBOI, it is not sufficient to fund sub operations, says Peter Tatro, the institute's associate executive director. NOAA spokeswoman Jana Goldman says that specific tools such as the JSLs are not required by the grant, as long as the research goals are carried out.

Because of the budget woes, one JSL has been mothballed since 2006, and the second does not get

Marine biologists say save our subs

Two industrious subs in Florida's harbors have logged more than 8,500 dives between them, and continued to do so even as the financial status of the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute (HBOI) in Fort Pierce, Florida, considers selling their mother ship.

Many marine scientists are agitated at the thought of losing access to the Johnson Sea Links (JSLs), which have been a part of the HBOI since its founding in the 1970s. More than 2,000 scientists and non-scientists worldwide have signed a petition asking the state to support the JSLs.

In the face of state-wide budget cuts (see main story), Florida Atlantic University (FAU) at Boca Raton, which administers the HBOI, is reviewing several scientific departments, including the institute. In 2004, funding from the estate of its founder, Seward Johnson, was cut off; since then it has floundered financially, and in 2007 it merged with FAU. Harbor Branch still struggles to fund its US$20-million annual budget. In May, HBOI and three other institutions were awarded a joint $22.5-million grant over five years from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to establish a cooperative institute for ocean exploration, headquartered at the HBOI. But because only a portion of the grant will come to the HBOI, it is not sufficient to fund sub operations, says Peter Tatro, the institute's associate executive director. NOAA spokeswoman Jana Goldman says that specific tools such as the JSLs are not required by the grant, as long as the research goals are carried out.

Because of the budget woes, one JSL has been mothballed since 2006, and the second does not get
Stimulus funding will become even more important to universities in the immediate future, as agencies such as the National Science Foundation begin awarding grants to universities now applying directly for stimulus research funding. The University of Florida has submitted some 300 such proposals in the past three months for $75 million in research and infrastructure grants.

“Every major research university is doing the same thing,” says Win Phillips, the university’s vice-president of research. “It’s an overwhelming opportunity.” The smaller University of South Florida has churned out 132 proposals for nearly $100 million in grants.

With so many applications submitted, success rates are likely to be even lower than usual, and some are questioning whether all the paperwork will pay off (see Nature 459, 763; 2009). Still, says Richardson, “the grants that do come will be welcome, and will allow us to keep research groups going to a larger extent than we could have without them.”

Ultimately, he hopes the benefits will be more profound among scientists struggling for any ray of hope in the current economic climate. “I think that there is going to be a sense in the academic profession that government support for research is on the upswing,” he says, “and that will encourage people to remain dedicated to their research goals.”

Mark Schrope

The University of Florida applied for $75 million in federal money to counteract flagging state support.

Some scientists are optimistic about future funding from government agencies or from the federal stimulus package, and predict the subs will again do good business. “It would be very shortsighted to sell the ship,” says John Reed, a coral-reef biologist at the HBOI.

Other options include leasing the Seward Johnson or modifying the JSLs so they can launch from any ship. No decision has been made, Tatro says; the review will be completed this autumn.

“I’d like to find a federal agency that says, ‘We’d like to have a manned submersible programme, and we’ll pay for it.’”

Amber Dance