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### Arizona community colleges seek clout at Capitol

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By Mary Beth Faller  
 The Republic | azcentral.com  
 Tue Jan 1, 2013 10:47 PM

Saying they want a "seat at the table," the 10 community-college districts in Arizona are forming a council to represent their interests to the state Legislature.

While the state's two-year institutions already have a lobbyist, the new Arizona Community College Coordinating Council soon will hire an executive director who can push the colleges' agenda and fight for a share of Arizona's [education funding](#). The Maricopa County Community College District governing board recently approved the measure.

State [funding](#) to the community colleges has significantly decreased over the past few years, including a cut of nearly \$60million since 2008 to the Maricopa Community Colleges, by far the largest district with about 250,000 students a year taking at least one class.

Rufus Gasper, chancellor of the 10-college Maricopa district, said that having an insider as an advocate for the colleges probably would not have prevented those budget cuts.

But he cited Proposition 204, the education-funding sales tax that voters rejected in November, as one example in which the lack of a strong advocate hurt the state's community colleges.

"If you look at Prop. 204, the community colleges in Arizona would not have gotten any resources from that until collections had exceeded \$1billion," he said. "The current collection rate is around \$900million, so even if it passed, we would not have received anything."

"When the discussions were about who should be part of that first \$1billion, it was 'Let's talk to K-12 and let's talk to the universities.' We were not considered a factor."

"We would like that to not happen in the future. We want a seat at the table because we know we're the largest provider of workforce training and we need someone to talk about what we do."

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Gasper said the current lobbyist is familiar with the Legislature, while the council's executive director will be an expert on community colleges. That person also will work with the media and the education community.

Currently, there is a presidents' council that includes all the colleges, although the leadership rotates among the 10 districts, according to Jeanne Swarouth, president of Northland Pioneer College, which has 12,000 students in Navajo and Apache counties.

"It's very difficult for any legislator or any government-office person to actually figure out what we're doing or where we are," she said. "The new council will have a stronger, more unified voice than we've had in the past."

In addition, the council will balance the interests of the rural districts with those of the urban districts, particularly when it comes to funding.

"It's a little easier for the urban areas to partner with businesses and industry, and out here, we hardly have any business or industry left," Swarouth said.

In addition, it's likely that eventually, at least some funding for community colleges will be tied to performance factors such as completion rates.

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"The incredible diversity in our community makes that an important discussion — we don't want to be measured by the same performance standards as the Maricopa district," she said.

The council, which will report to the districts' governing boards, will cost \$300,000 with the new CEO earning \$75,000 for a half-time position, Glasper said. Each district will pay a portion based on its student population, with Maricopa paying the largest share at about \$176,000.

The council's executive director will probably be hired in the next few months, and will likely be a retired president or chancellor of a major community college system.

Besides Maricopa and Navajo, which includes Northland Pioneer, the other districts are Cochise, Coconino, Graham, Mohave, Pima, Pinal, Yavapai and Yuma/La Paz.

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