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USER POLL

What are you doing this spring break?

- Staying in SLO
- Going back home to stay with the folks
- Wild spring break getaway
- Not sure

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WEATHER

San Luis Obispo

62°



Student fees put to (mis)use by colleges

by Carrie McGourty

A "frustrated" graduate student wrote to the Mustang Daily suspicious of the way student fees were being dispersed in the aerospace engineering department this year.

The student claimed that if the student fee committees spend all of their money on instruction, then they would qualify for "some mysterious pot of money" from the dean of the College of Engineering. But if they use their funds "for what it was intended for (lab materials and such) that they would be ineligible." The student also alleged that the department placed money directly into the general budget without student consent.

By these claims, it's highly tempting to suspect a scandal in which the administration is trying to rob the students of their independent fees, but that's hardly the case. After investigating the issue, what's happening in the aerospace engineering department is reflective of a university-wide trend in which students are being asked to backfill budgets.

Within the past three years, budget cuts to the California State University system drastically impacted Cal Poly and its colleges, said Amy Hewes, the director of publications and communications for the College of Engineering. As a result, departments have strongly urged (but have no right to require) the student fee committees to use their funds for necessities such as lecturers and increased classes, Hewes said. Some students on the fee committees said they feel "pressured" to meet the requests of the administration, but understand the necessity to do so. "We are in a bad situation, and people are frustrated," said Jim Young, aerospace engineering senior and president of the aerospace engineering student fee committee. "But I feel like we have to cooperate with the department. The main reason we're here is for instruction."

And in fact, when the College of Engineering passed a proposal to increase academic fees in 2002, it was with the intent that it would "pay for additional course offerings, lab upgrades and equipment purchases. Yet, dealing out the majority of the funds for instruction is troubling to some students who feel that the department is "using the student fee money as a way to bail themselves out," said Steve Kubik, aerospace engineering senior and vice president of his department's fee committee. "Student

fee money brought beautiful projects to work," Kubik said. "The reason why aerospace companies love us is because we can do more than just say, 'Hey, I learned that in a book.' "

But both Kubik and Young said they agree that it is a strong priority to offer additional course sections that will allow students to progress in their field. Currently, most of the \$250,000 from aerospace engineering student fees is being used to pay for lecturers, and the rest is given to student projects on an "as needed basis," Young said. So what is this "mysterious pot of money" that is being used to advocate responsible use of the student fees? According to Hewes, the legislature from the CSU gave the college of engineering \$300,000, which came from an unforeseen fluctuation in the budget. Dean Peter Y. Lee will decide who gets the money, and will favor those departments that spent their money wisely to meet their immediate needs (such as instruction).

It's as though student fee committees are being forced to decide what to eat first: dinner or dessert? They can fulfill their department's most important needs first, like instruction and lab courses, and sustain their programs; or they can delight in a shiny new piece of equipment, and forfeit the quality of their academic career.

Fortunately, these college students are wise enough to know what's good for them. But just wonder — what would happen to the College of Engineering, and every department for that matter, if there weren't student fees to supply such basic things as instruction?

Carrie McGourty is a journalism senior and Mustang Daily columnist.

