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Officials fear enrollment could fall as California college costs rise

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The bleak economy and state budget cuts are sketching a grim picture for college students.

With less state funding for community colleges and universities, students can expect to pay higher fees and sit in classes with more students. Some colleges have had to accept fewer students for 2008-09, leaving higher education less accessible.

Take California State University, Stanislaus, where officials anticipate admitting 200 fewer students this fall and offering 1,700 fewer seats in classes.

CSU and University of California fees for all campuses will increase from 7 percent to 10 percent for 2008-09.

"It's a rough spot everybody's kind of in right now," said Erin Bowe, communications junior and student body vice president at Cal State Stanislaus. "There are students that are talking a lot lately about student loans. There are friends of mine who have taken loans out who never would have thought of taking them out."

The pot for state and federal financial aid money is staying the same, but with a lagging economy, more people are needing more help paying for college.

UC Merced is trying to increase student enrollment and officials don't anticipate cutting students in the near future.

University fees are increasing as well. CSU undergraduate students will see a 10 percent rise in fees -- \$276 at CSU Stanislaus -- and UC students expect an increase of 7.4 percent in undergraduate fees, or about \$500 at UC Merced.

Fees have increased at California public universities more than 94 percent over the past six years, according to Tuition Relief Now, a statewide group advocating for college tuition freezes. At the same time, the amount of state funding earmarked for higher education has dropped from 17 percent of the general fund in 1977 to 11 percent today, according to the same group.

Tuition at universities may lead to fewer students attending college.

Some UC and CSU campuses will pull back on enrollment and increase fees, so community colleges will see an increase in demand. At \$20 a unit and enrollment for anyone, they are a cheaper alternative.

Living expenses and textbooks will continue to be major expenses for college students.

Here's a look at the impact on three Northern San Joaquin Valley schools:

Modesto Junior College

Though MJC has battled declining enrollment lately, officials expect to see an influx of students this fall. According to Gov. Schwarzenegger's May budget revision, community colleges will be funded for 1.67 percent more students than last year, translating to about 300 more students at MJC this fall.

"It's a juggling act. We'd love to accommodate all the (student enrollment) growth, but we have to balance that with what we're funded for," said MJC spokeswoman Linda Hoile.

Whenever the economy dips, MJC officials note a spike in enrollment.

"I predict we will see an increased number of incoming students, and those students are going to be interested in taking general education classes that they would have been taking at UCs and CSUs. It's yet to be seen if we can meet demand," said Susie Agostini, director of matriculation, admissions and records.

MJC students should pay attention to admissions procedures and consider taking advantage of the school's StartSmart program, which combines orientation, advising and registration and gives participants a chance to sign up for classes earlier than other students.

CSU, Stanislaus

Students are noticing larger class sizes and fewer courses offered at Cal State Stanislaus. Officials will have to balance keeping classes small and not turning students away.

"Small class sizes are great, but you don't want to take six years to graduate," Bowe said.

With annual tuition jumping 10 percent from \$2,772 in 2007-08 to \$3,048 for 2008-09, students are feeling the pressure. Parking passes also are increasing steeply and gas is soaring.

"Lots of students are stressed out. With parking fees going up, it just makes everything that much harder," Bowe said.

Some students are moving out of the dorms to save money, she added.

Officials are prioritizing what classes to offer based on which are most needed for students nearing graduation.

UC Merced

UCs are a little more isolated from budget cuts, but they are still tightening their belts. UC system officials decided not to cut student enrollment this fall, but may the year after. UC Merced expects 700 new students this fall.

"This is the largest high school graduating class in California history. It would be a breach of (the UC system's) commitment to the state to turn hardworking students away," said Mary Miller, UC Merced vice chancellor of administration.

The 3-year-old campus does not expect to cut people or programs, but will slow the rate of growth, Miller said. Not many employees will be added and raises might not happen this year, she said. Officials don't anticipate trimming classes, but class sizes may grow.

Students are feeling the impact of higher tuition, gas and food costs.

"Student fees are going to increase. But gas prices and food prices are definitely hitting our pockets pretty well," said Uday Deep Bali, outgoing student body president and electrical engineering senior. He described a noticeable increase in students carpooling and taking buses.

Many students will work during the summer months instead of taking classes, Bali said, so they have extra money to get them through next year.

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