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California Cuts Weigh Heavily on Its Colleges

By JENNIFER MEDINA

RIVERSIDE, Calif. — The doors to the state's newest medical school are already open, technically. A gleaming building with new labs is ready to house researchers and students. But when the state budget was approved last week, the plans to open the medical school at the University of California's campus here were shelved for at least another year.

The compromise to close the state's huge budget gap included cuts to state agencies of all kinds, but none were as deep as those to the state's public colleges and universities. The state's two systems were each cut by $650 million, and they each could lose $100 million more if the state's optimistic revenue expectations do not materialize. For both systems, the $650 million is roughly a 20 percent cut of operating money from the state.

This fall, for the first time, the University of California will take in more money from student tuition than from state finances.

The state's two-tier system has long been seen as a model of public higher education, with the University of California's 10 campuses as major research hubs and the California State University's network of 23 campuses graduating tens of thousands each year. But the cuts, which are the biggest in the state's history, threaten to erode the system's stellar reputation.

"There's no question that California has had the most emulated public universities in the nation, and for the rest of the world," said Terry W. Hartle, senior vice president of the American Council on Education. "What we are seeing is the abandonment of the state's commitment to make California's education available to all its citizens."

Tuition is expected to rise roughly 20 percent next year, just the latest in series of steep increases. Yearly in-state tuition at California State University will average about $5,500, while at the University of California, it is expected to be $13,200 if the increases are approved this month. Programs all over the state are being shuttered, star professors are leaving for colleges in other states, faculty positions are being left unfilled and class sizes are

continuing to grow. While the state's spending on the system is down to a level not seen since the late-1990s, the campuses enroll tens of thousands more students.

Schools, meanwhile, are stepping up their efforts to recruit students from other states, using their higher tuition payments to help fill the coffers at the expense of California applicants.

"The state has been a very unreliable partner in the last 20 years," said Mark G. Yudof, the president of the University of California. "We are losing sight of what we are supposed to be. The trends were bad before, and they are just abysmal now."

Last year, when budget cuts prompted a 26 percent tuition increase at the University of California, thousands of students protested, shutting down freeways and holding walkouts. The reaction this time has been more muted so far, partly because so many students are on summer break and the exact amount of the increases is still unknown.

An editorial this week in the Berkeley campus newspaper, The Daily Californian, however, placed the blame squarely on Sacramento.

"We cannot afford nor can we tolerate more cuts of this magnitude," the editorial read. "While recent efforts at protest have proved ineffective and disappointing, we hope that any efforts to express public anger is channeled at our state officials, not the regents. Tuition increases are a result of state disinvestment, and students must remember that."

While states across the country have tightened their belts, none of their higher education cuts have matched the severity of California's, Dr. Hartle said. Mr. Yudof said that he was comforted by knowing that hundreds of students still received millions of dollars in financial aid to help them pay for tuition.

To a large extent, the wealthiest and poorest students fare better, either because they can afford the hefty increases or because they have enough financial aid to cover them. But students from families with incomes in the low six figures often feel the biggest pinch, taking out more loans with each tuition increase.

"It starts to feel impossible really quick," said Alison Linton, 20, a sophomore at Riverside, who said she had taken out $30,000 in loans so far. "But there's nothing you can do besides say, 'I need more cash.' "

For the most part, students are paying more money for less service. In Riverside, the libraries close earlier, there are fewer teaching assistants and academic tutors, and it is often impossible to secure a spot in a class needed to graduate.

In some ways, the trouble is even more acute at the California State University system, which has historically been an attractive option for students who do not qualify for the more prestigious University of California. While getting into such schools was once taken for granted, all but a handful of the system's colleges now have a competitive admission process.

Officials once planned to enroll as many as 440,000 students at California State University campuses, but the cuts have scaled back those plans considerably, and next year's enrollment is expected to be 412,000 students. That is still 90,000 more students than were in the system in 1998, the last time the university had this level of financing.

"We're built for access, but there are students who we should be getting to come and we just can't afford for them to all come," said Charles B. Reed, the chancellor of the California State University system. "The worst thing we can do is admit students and not be able to serve them."

Each of the campuses is responsible for making its own cuts, which are based on the number of students enrolled. At Fresno State, 57 positions are going unfilled. In Long Beach, the mechanical engineering program may shut down because there are just a couple of professors still teaching.

Mr. Yudof and other administrators say that their biggest fear is that they will lose crucial faculty members — and not be able to hire anyone in their place. He said that the system had eliminated cost of living adjustments for faculty for the past four years and that faculty salaries were roughly 12 percent lower than at peer institutions.

Peter Wolynes went to the University of California, San Diego, in 2000, leaving his post at the University of Illinois for a chemistry department he thought would rapidly expand.

"It was an exciting time then; this was the place where you thought it would grow and you could have some influence," Dr. Wolynes said. But in recent years, he said, the number of support staff began to dwindle, making it hard for him to focus on his research.

Now, he is leaving for Rice University, one of a trio of engineering professors who are going to be getting more help with their laboratory work — along with bigger paychecks.

Last week, a medical accreditation board said that it could not grant the new school at the University of California, Riverside, accreditation without sufficient support from the state. Now, construction at the school continues, paid for by bond money and existing campus funds.

But Chancellor Timothy P. White is determined to buttonhole legislators and convince them that the medical school is sorely needed.

“Nobody says to me, ‘Oh, I disagree!’ ” Dr. White said. “To say we need a medical school is as all-American as motherhood and apple pie. The problem is we have to pay for it.”