

California's higher education system could face decline

The state's budget cuts to the three-tiered system -- UC, Cal State and community colleges -- may threaten the system's world-class reputation and the future of a generation of students.

By Larry Gordon, Gale Holland and Mitchell Landsberg

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California's master plan for higher education, the product of an era of seemingly limitless opportunity, was nearly 30 years old when Nicolette Lafranchi was born in 1988. By the time she turned 20 last year, the plan was working well for her, just as it had for tens of millions of students before her.

That's less true now.

In the wake of massive cuts in California's three-tiered system of public colleges and universities, Lafranchi discovered that she can no longer transfer from Santa Rosa Junior College to San Francisco State University in December, as she had planned, because midyear admissions were eliminated.

Nor is that necessarily her biggest problem. A fall statistics class she needs is full. Without it, she faces the possibility of forfeiting her health insurance, which requires her to carry at least 12 college credits. A scholarship she had been receiving was eliminated.

"It's a lot at one time," she said. "You know, it's kind of sad. You think it's the state of California and we're the next generation, we have to take over from the baby boomers, but we're going to be a group of uneducated people.

"It's not kind of -- it *is* sad."

California's higher education system, created to offer the opportunity for advancement to any resident, rich or poor, has seen hard times before. But the deep cuts imposed by the Legislature and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger this year are raising the question of whether the University of California, the California State University system and the nation's largest community college network can maintain their reputations for quality, or whether a public higher educational system that has been lauded as the world's finest may be in serious decline.

"This notion of the California dream, the idea that every adult could go to college, we've been hacking away at that during every recession for the past 25 years, and this year may well be it," said Patrick M. Callan, president of the San Jose-based National Center for Public Policy and Education. "We're coming out of this really tarnished."

The governor and legislative leaders acknowledge that the cuts will be devastating, but say they have no choice.

Already, campuses from Humboldt to San Diego are raising fees, shedding courses, slashing enrollment, and compelling faculty and staff to take unpaid furlough days. Class sizes are up, library hours are down, and long-held dreams for new programs and schools are on hold.

It's a far cry from the master plan's sweeping ambitions.

The state's college and university systems, which educate 2.3 million students annually, have roots in California's early days, but their modern history begins in 1960, when the educational plan was approved. It called for all state residents to have access to a tuition-free, public higher education, and outlined the mission of the three levels of colleges.

The higher education system has been credited with helping to shape and nurture California's economy and draw striving migrants from around the world.

"It had a magnet effect here for people who had ambitions for their children, that they could come to a place with good and virtually free public education all the way through college," said Richard White, an American history professor at Stanford University.

But White, who earned his bachelor's degree at UC Santa Cruz, said he is worried that the budget cuts and higher student fees could jeopardize that tradition. The state's public universities will remain "perfectly good universities but not what they were before." And that, he said, "is a real tragedy."

So how bad is it?

According to the Department of Finance, the state is expected to spend about \$8.7 billion in general revenue funds on UC, Cal State and the community colleges in the coming fiscal year. That would be a 17% drop from two years ago, the department reported.

Federal stimulus money will offset some of that, but there remains much uncertainty about the level of funding from Washington, and how long it will last.

UC's state general revenue fund budget of \$2.6 billion will be 20% less than it was two years ago. Cal State is seeing a similar percentage drop to about \$2.3 billion.

California's community colleges are not taking quite as big a hit as the two university systems -- down 7% from the past two

"It's a trickle-down effect and now I have to wait to get those classes," said Diaz, who grew up in Covina.

Critics of the UC administration contend that UC is purposefully aiming the cuts at undergraduates to increase political pressure, and should instead tap other income sources, including endowments and research grants.

"I think it's a really dangerous game and the students are already going to suffer," said Bob Samuels, a UCLA lecturer who is president of UC's American Federation of Teachers union. This week, Samuels was among 67 UCLA lecturers who received warnings that they might face layoffs next year.

Several analysts said they expect raids on UC's blue-chip faculty, many of whom face up to 10% salary cuts.

"Don't be surprised if they leave," warned Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Assn. of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. "There's a big difference between having 10 Nobel Laureates on campus and having none." (Actually, UC Berkeley now has seven, the most among the UC system's 10 campuses.)

UC's enormous reservoir of federal and private research grants, hospital revenues and its formidable fundraising operations shield it more than Cal State from the pain of the state's deficits. State funding accounts for less than one-sixth of the UC system's overall operating budget.

California State University has been complaining about funding shortfalls and rising student fees for most of the decade, but the main issue until this year was lack of support for growth.

Now, Cal State Chancellor Charles B. Reed frets about plans to reduce the system's enrollment by 40,000 over the next few years, from a current population of 450,000.

Cal State also has raised student fees by a total of 32% for the coming school year and is imposing 24 furlough days for all employees, including college presidents.

The University of California system has taken a series of belt-tightening steps, including reducing freshman enrollment by 6% and hiking undergraduate fees by 9.3%.

"Everything's being looked at. Everything's on the table," said UCLA Chancellor Gene Block. "It will be a different place in a few years. We will be offering a smaller program."

He said he hoped that could be accomplished without diminishing the overall strength of the education, but said course offerings will be reduced about 10% this fall. Average class sizes will be about 60, up 20% from three years ago.

Throughout the UC system, which enrolls about 225,000 students and employs 180,000 faculty and staff, other austerities are underway. UC Davis is ending a program that trained veterinarians to become professors. UC San Diego has frozen faculty hiring. UC Berkeley has reduced library hours. And UC Riverside is considering delaying its plans for a new medical school.

UC President Mark G. Yudof said such painful steps do not mean the system has collapsed. "I don't think the sky has fallen yet," he said, "but I look at these trends and ask myself how long can you reduce course offerings and still hold your head up and say you are still offering students a high-quality education?"

Yudof and others say this is a time to consider fundamental changes in how UC works. Russell Gould, the Board of Regents chairman, is launching a commission to examine the university's future, including such ideas as: Should its campuses grow or shrink? Should they specialize in certain academic areas? Should majors or departments be reduced, merged or eliminated?

For now, UCLA chemistry professor Robin Garrell said, the campuses will live through this year's cuts.

"But," she said, "it's going to be hard to emerge whole or able to maintain that sense of optimism, the aggressive pursuit of discovery and innovation, and offer the innovative and wonderful experience for our students."

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