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Well-Regarded Public Colleges Get a Surge of Bargain-Hunters

NEW PALTZ, N.Y. — Admissions officers at the State University of New York college campus here are suddenly afraid of getting what they have always wished for: legions of top high-school seniors saying “yes” to their fat envelopes.

Students are already tripled up in many dorm rooms after an unexpectedly large freshman class entered last fall. And despite looming budget cuts from the state, which more tuition-paying students could help offset, officials say they are determined not to diminish the quality of student life by expanding enrollment at their liberal-arts college beyond the current 6,000 undergraduates.

At SUNY New Paltz, as at many other well-regarded public institutions this spring, admissions calculations carefully measured over many years are being set aside as an unraveling economy is making less expensive state colleges more appealing.

The application deadline is not until April 1, but officials here conservatively predict 15,500 students competing for 1,100 spots, a 12 percent jump over last year.

Similar surges are occurring at public colleges and universities across the country, education experts say.

The Connecticut State University System is projecting an 11 percent rise across its four campuses — the largest one-year increase ever — with Central Connecticut State up 16 percent by January. At Oregon State University, freshman applications are up 12 percent, and transfer applications more than 31 percent. At the University of Cincinnati, applications are still pouring in, but by early February they were outpacing last year’s pool by 10 percent.

“The country is in the process of reconsidering the easy accumulation of debt for consumer things, and it may well be that that will be a factor that tilts people toward public institutions because of the cheaper sticker price,” said Patrick M. Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy

and Higher Education, a nonprofit research and advocacy organization.

A poll by the center in December showed that “people’s anxiety about paying for college is almost at an unprecedented high,” Mr. Callan said.

“We’re not sure how they will respond, but we’re pretty sure they won’t respond by deciding not to go,” he added.

“Middle class families understand that you’re going to be consigned to the minimum-wage economy if you don’t get some higher education or training.”

Private colleges, which are more expensive than public institutions, are facing a different problem: worried about losing students, they are trying to find ways to increase financial aid.

In the SUNY system, the biggest growth is at its eight four-year technology colleges, whose vocational degrees are in demand because of their practicality; they have seen 11 percent more applicants than last year.

Tucked next to the snow-carpeted Shawangunk Mountains about 75 miles north of New York City, SUNY New Paltz has become steadily more popular — and more selective — over the past decade, with the grade-point average of entering students climbing to 92 from 85 and their SAT scores to 1,160 from 1,100.

Named the “hottest small state school” in the country by Newsweek magazine and the Kaplan testing company last year, it has a total price tag of \$16,000 a year, making it increasingly attractive to middle-class families running for cover in a battered economy.

Given last year’s surprise of 24 percent of accepted students actually enrolling — a big increase from the 20 or 21 percent in previous years — the college plans to send 4,500 acceptance letters this year, 1,000 fewer than usual, and keep a longer waiting list.

“We have to be very careful moving forward with the size



Lisa Jones, right, and Kimberly Strano assess applications at SUNY New Paltz.

Well-Regarded Public Colleges Get a Surge of Bargain-Hunters (continued)

of this freshman class,” said L. David Eaton, the college’s vice president for enrollment management. “Admissions people have all kinds of formulas they use for predictions: How many historically do we expect to accept our offer and enroll? The prevailing attitude is that all that is up for grabs.”

But the flood of applications — made greater by a demographic bubble as the offspring of baby boomers reach college age — comes as SUNY is facing a \$210 million cut in its \$1.4 billion annual state appropriation for four-year schools, with New Paltz, whose state share is \$63 million, expecting to lose up to \$9 million next year.

“That’s the conundrum,” said Megan Galbraith, a spokeswoman for SUNY, the nation’s largest public university system under a single governing board, with 438,000 students on 64 campuses statewide. “There’s increased demand for what SUNY has to offer in this economy. But with this budget, there will be challenges meeting that demand. Our campuses are increasing class sizes. Services may be diminished. Even in residence halls, you might see more tripling up. It’s that type of ripple effect in the quality of the student experience.”

Over the last decade, enrollment in the SUNY system has grown by 20 percent. But officials at New Paltz do not want to grow, and instead see the swelling applicant pool as a way to further refine its status and student body. In the last five years, the college has winnowed the student-to-faculty ratio to 14 to 1, from 17 to 1; more than two-thirds of courses are taught by full-time faculty members today, compared with 50 percent a decade ago.

“I’m not just a number,” said Alexis Schild, a history major from Staten Island. “The professors really care about you.

They remember your name.”

Steven G. Poskanzer, president of SUNY New Paltz, wants to keep the momentum going, with plans for a \$48 million science building and new residence halls. But he said layoffs were possible.

“Eighty-four percent of our budget is people, so when you get cuts of this magnitude, it’s difficult to imagine that we end up with the same size work force,” he said. “We’re going to have to make some very hard choices. But it’s better to do fewer things and do them well than to take many things and water them down.”

Last year’s unexpected yield of students who decided to enroll resulted in a freshman class of 1,300, or “200 over target,” said Mr. Eaton. (New Paltz also accepts about 800 transfer students each year.)

College officials scrambled to make room for the extra students and drafted plans for a new dormitory, but that will not be built until the fall of 2010 at the earliest. While an enrollment spike can translate into more tuition dollars, it can also mean fewer available study carrels in the library, crowded dining halls and faculty advisors who feel stretched thin.

So the admissions office is playing it safe. With more than 4,000 students already accepted, hundreds of qualified students who previously would have gotten fat envelopes are instead being added to a waiting list.

“If you exceed your targets, you can make a lot of money, but it backfires,” Mr. Eaton said. “If you bring in a lot of students and it diminishes their experience, then it goes back to what people say when they go home. There’s a point beyond which it becomes a problem.”