

Budget Woes Take Their Toll on Cal State University System

By JIM CARLTON

APRIL 6, 2009

SAN FRANCISCO -- Relentless budget cutting by California lawmakers is taking some of the luster off the California State University system, one of the state's most prized institutions.

Once regarded as a national model, the 23-campus system is reeling from more than \$500 million in budget cuts and underfunding over the past two years. As a result, CSU officials for the first time are dropping the policy of accepting all qualified applicants to schools of their choice in a system now brimming with more than 450,000 students.

Cal State is the nation's largest four-year university program by enrollment. For the 2009-10 year, 10,000 eligible applicants are being turned away from the schools they wanted to attend.

More students are likely to become discouraged and end up not going to a state college at all, academic officials say. "It's really undermining everything we are supposed to be doing for California, which is training a new generation of skilled workers," says Lillian Taiz, president of the California Faculty Association, a union for teachers.

Students and faculty, meanwhile, are coping with a cutback in courses that has resulted in some classes ballooning in size. Those cutbacks are also forcing more undergraduates to postpone graduation. On the campus of San Francisco State University last week, junior Elizabeth Alegria of Los Angeles said she had planned to graduate by the end of this year but now expects she won't be able to finish until next year at the earliest because she can't get into some required classes.

Ms. Alegria, 22 years old, said that in December she tried to register for Psychology 435, but it was already filled for the current term. So she "crashed" the class the next day to try to get the teacher to accept her but was turned away, along with dozens of other crashers. "It was very disappointing," says Ms. Alegria, who works as a bookstore clerk and is trying to get her financial aid extended. "I didn't plan for this at all."

Nationwide, state universities are taking a hit as states deal with budgetary squeezes amid the recession. The CSU system isn't the only academic institution taking a hit in California. In their efforts to close a \$42 billion budget deficit in February, state lawmakers also cut budgets at the University of California and in K-12 schools. Lawmakers approved the cuts as part of a deal with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in which they also raised taxes.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Schwarzenegger said funding for higher education has increased 30% since he took office in 2003, and that the cuts now are necessary. "The state was forced to reduce spending -- just like California families and businesses are doing during this national economic downturn," said the spokeswoman, Camille Anderson.

But CSU officials say the worst part is that the cutting may not be over. With as much as \$8 billion in new budgetary red ink predicted by summer, they are pleading with state lawmakers to spare the institution from deeper cuts. A combination of cuts and projected 10% tuition increases have kept the system's 2009-10 budget frozen at the current year's level of about \$4.4 billion in general fund and tuition revenue.

But school officials say the system is falling behind because there is no money to keep up with enrollment increases, cost-of-living increases for staff and other increased costs. Any additional cuts, they say, could lead to widespread faculty layoffs, something that so far has been avoided. "We feel that we are really at a tipping point

where steps we would have to take would cause lasting damage," says Robert Turnage, CSU's assistant vice chancellor for budget.

Campuses are already suffering the fallout of the previous cuts. At San Diego State University, one of Jean Twenge's psychology classes has more than doubled from 120 students two years ago to 300 this semester. The class is so big that Ms. Twenge says she has had to stop requiring students to discuss issues and write papers. "I know the names of like two or three people," says Ms. Twenge, an assistant professor of psychology. "Most of my students I would not recognize if I bumped into them on the street."

At California State University at Fullerton, officials are reducing their fall enrollment by about 1,000 students from the current level of 37,000. Much of the reduction is coming from turning away between 600 and 700 eligible freshmen applicants who otherwise would have gone there, they say. Cal State Fullerton is also cutting its summer-school classes by 40%, resulting in enrollment dropping by about a third to 7,000 students from 10,000. "It's pretty grim, and it could get worse before it gets better," says Ephraim Smith, the school's vice president for academic affairs.

At San Francisco State, about 200 students staged a walkout and march March 12 to protest the cuts. The walkout at the campus -- known for extensive student unrest during the 1960s -- was organized by a group called Student Unity Power.

Last week, students seemed resigned to their plight. Zachary Hornung, a 21-year-old sophomore, said reduced classes at the campus would probably push back his graduation date by a year, to 2013 from 2012. Like many students, he is able to take only 12 college units this semester instead of the normal load of 15. "This just has everybody on hold," he said.

Write to Jim Carlton at jim.carlton@wsj.com