

California cuts threaten universities

By Jennifer Medina, New York Times

LOS ANGELES – Class sizes have increased, courses have been cut and tuition has been raised – repeatedly. Fewer colleges are offering summer classes. Administrators rely increasingly on higher tuition from out-of-staters. And there are signs it could get worse: If a tax increase proposed by Gov. Jerry Brown is not approved this year, officials say they will be forced to consider draconian cuts like eliminating entire schools or programs.

For generations, the University of California system – home to such globally renowned institutions as Berkeley and U.C.L.A. – has been widely recognized as perhaps the best example of what public universities could be. Along with the California State University system and the state's vast number of community colleges, higher education options here have long been the envy of other states.

But after years, and even decades, of budget cutbacks from the state, that reputation is under increasing threat. University leaders, who had responded typically to earlier budget cuts with assurances that their institutions were still in top form, now are sounding the alarm. In trying to rally support, they openly worry that their schools do not offer the same quality of education as a decade ago.

"I'd be lying if I said what we offer students hasn't been changed and that there hasn't been a degradation of the learning environment," said Timothy White, the chancellor of UC Riverside, which has had record growth in recent years. Last year, plans to open a medical school on the campus were shelved after state budget cuts.

While there are more students than ever, the number of academic advisers has dropped to 300, from 500 a few years ago, for more than 18,000 undergraduates. Courses that used to require four writing assignments now demand half that because professors have fewer assistants to help them with grading papers, something other campuses have implemented as well.

While no one is arguing that cutting higher education spending is a good thing, some say that the state budget crisis makes it necessary – and may provide an opportunity for needed changes.

Jon Coupal, the president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, which strongly opposes the proposed tax increase, said the colleges should do more to show they are cutting spending, like reducing pay for top administrators or closing programs that do not directly benefit the state.

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