

Regents freeze new enrollments

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Briefly setting aside Apple Cup rivalries, the regents for the state's two largest universities joined forces Friday to fire a shot across the bow of the state Legislature.

Until the state provides more money, the Washington State University and University of Washington regents said, the two schools will freeze the number of new freshmen and transfer students they accept - effective immediately.

That will mean higher standards for admission and, as some of the regents readily admit, turning away applicants who would probably excel as students.

"What the regents are saying is not so much a threat as an expression of reality. We'll do our best, but we're full," said WSU president V. Lane Rawlins. He said the school accepted about 3,000 freshmen and about 2,000 transfer students this year. No matter how many qualified students apply next year, the university will now freeze new enrollments at those levels.

The universities say they're caught between two opposing trends: a growing number of qualified student applicants at the same time the state is shrinking the amount of money it contributes per student.

With less money for more students, some of the regents said, the inevitable results are bigger classes and a watering-down of educational quality.

"All you do is start cramming more kids in larger classes and teaching with more TAs (teaching assistants). People start saying 'What am I paying for?'" said Bill Marler, president of WSU's board of regents. "I didn't sign on to watch us dilute education to the point where it doesn't mean anything."

Will it work? Some lawmakers think so. Rep. Don Cox, R-Colfax, said that talk of such a cap last year helped spare higher education from worse budget cuts.

"It got people to listen a lot harder to the issues they were talking about," Cox said.

Unlike private universities, the state's public universities rely on taxpayers to subsidize the cost of educating students. And for several years, legislative budget writers have been shrinking state taxpayers' share. Ten years ago, the state paid the equivalent of \$11,045 per WSU student, according to the state Higher Education Coordinating Board. By 2001, that had dropped to \$10,064. This fall, it fell further, to \$9,201.

Trying to compensate, lawmakers and the schools have repeatedly raised tuition. In the past 12 years, UW tuition and fees have risen 130 percent, five times more than inflation.

If the trend continues, HEC Board analysts estimate, tuition at WSU and UW - now about \$4,600 a year - will be \$6,753 by the end of this decade.

Marler said it's time for state lawmakers to step in, raise taxes and use the money to preserve higher education. Well-educated citizens are critical to the state's economic future, he said.

"I don't like taxes," the Bainbridge Island attorney said. "But do I think

that educating the public is a public good? You bet I do."

Higher education cries for help are not new. Five years ago, a state commission warned that a looming "'baby boom echo" and high-tech economy will send an additional 100,000 students to the state's colleges by the year 2020.

"'This is a duty we dare not shirk," the panel wrote in 1998. "'If we fail to provide educational opportunity, we will consign our state to economic decline, and to a growing division between an affluent, educated elite and an uneducated and disaffected underclass. Nothing could be more dangerous to the long-term prospects of our democracy."

"'I don't like doing this," Marler said of the enrollment cap. "'I'd rather be all excited about the Apple Cup or going to the Rose Bowl. But we've got a really big problem here. What are you going to do with 100,000 kids?"

For the past several years, the state's colleges have been enrolling extra students, even without state money to subsidize them. There are now more than 1,700 students at WSU and UW "'for whom no state funding is provided," according to Friday's resolution. And community colleges and other state universities have thousands more. In just six years, the number of such unsubsidized students has risen from about 1,000 to nearly 16,000 statewide, according to the Office of Financial Management.

"'Their nature, as institutions, is to want to serve as many students as possible," said Bruce Botka, the HEC Board's director of government relations.

Capping enrollments is a bit of a political risk for the universities. At Friday's meeting, several UW regents tweaked the resolution wording, for fear of angering lawmakers and making things worse.

Another worry: parents.

"'When the phone call comes: 'my daughter has a 3.3 GPA, we've lived in Washington for four generations, and she can't get into a state landgrant college?' lawmakers are not going to want that call, and we don't want that call," said WSU regent Ken Alhadeff. But, he said, the universities have no choice.

"'There are going to be some very disappointed people," said Rawlins, "'but we're stretched as far as we can stretch."

This sidebar appeared with the story:

IN OTHER ACTION

WSU Board of Regents

The WSU Board of Regents approved a \$621 million operating budget for the next two years.

Under the 2004-2005 budget, the university plans to increase employee salaries by 2 percent, effective Jan. 1, 2004 - the first general salary increase on campus in more than two years. The budget also will give the provost \$1.3 million a year to allocate to programs that attract high enrollment. And it will add \$3.4 million per year to pay for increased energy costs.

The operating budget is made up of state funding, tuition and other sources. The decisions on how to allocate the money were made at budget hearings in September and October. The regents approved the proposed allocations Friday at their meeting in Seattle.

NOTES:

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