

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## With jobs scarce, more turn to university education

By Bill Zlatos

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A Pennsylvania education panel is recommending the state establish a "no-frills" college to let students earn bachelor's degrees at a lower tuition rate.

The idea is one of nine recommendations endorsed by the State Board of Education's higher education council to reduce the cost of attending college. The council voted Wednesday to forward the recommendations to Gov. Ed Rendell and state lawmakers.

The institution would offer an accelerated, year-round academic program similar to a community college, but students would graduate with four-year bachelor's degrees instead of two-year associate degrees.

Money would have to be set aside in the state budget for the idea to be implemented.

Some public universities in Pennsylvania are seeing a surge in applications as students and parents fret over the recession.

"We believe the economy is having some impact on us," said Bill Bailey, dean of enrollment management at Clarion University of Pennsylvania. "There's a trickle-down approach from students who may have looked at private schools or large state-related universities where the costs are higher."

One concern is the debt that graduates carry. In 2007, 71 percent of college students in the state graduated with an average debt of about \$24,000, according to a report from the Pennsylvania Partnership for Children.

Applications are up 8.9 percent at Clarion this month over the same period last year. They're up 15 percent at California University of Pennsylvania, 12 percent at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and 9 percent at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

"In this economy, students realize the value of their dollar may go a little further at a state school," said Bill Edmonds, dean of admissions at California University.

Pennsylvania's 14 state-owned universities charge in-state residents \$5,358 a year for undergraduate classes.

"Right now, we're several hundred applications ahead of where we were at this point last year," said W.C. Vance, director of undergraduate admissions at Slippery Rock University. He declined to be more specific.

Vance and officials at other public universities said the increase in applications could be due to better marketing and recruitment.

"At this point," he said, "we haven't encountered students who said that they were planning on going elsewhere, but might be looking at a more affordable institution because of the economy."

The University of Pittsburgh is "in the range" of last year's record-breaking 20,685 applications, said Betsy A. Porter, Pitt's director of admissions and financial aid. She expects to learn more about the impact of the economy in March, the deadline for applying for financial aid.

Penn State has 53,580 undergraduate applications as of Jan. 13. That's 5 percent higher than the same time last year. Penn State eventually received a record 64,792 undergraduate applications.

Anne Rohrback, executive director of undergraduate admissions at Penn State, doesn't see an impact from the dour economy yet. But she said there could be a domino effect, with students who might normally apply to private colleges applying to four-year public universities, and students who might normally apply to public universities applying to community colleges.

Ninety-three percent of private college presidents said they were "greatly or moderately concerned about preventing a decline in student enrollment," according to a survey released last month by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

Officials at private colleges are feeling some anxiety about this prospect, admitted Don Francis, president of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Pennsylvania, based in Harrisburg.

"At this point," he said, "I don't think anyone knows" what will happen with the economy.

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