

Private institutions see increase in enrollment despite recession

WASHINGTON - Despite the recession, private colleges and universities have not experienced decreased enrollment for the fall semester, according to a July survey released by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

Nearly 300 private institutions that participated in the survey projected either a slight increase or stability in both undergraduate and graduate enrollments for the fall 2009 semester. About 74 percent of the survey participants reported no decline in fall enrollment and some expected increases of more than 5 percent.

For St. Gregory's University in Shawnee, Okla., enrollment for this fall semester was already expected to show an increase in the double digits.

"The school doesn't start classes until Aug. 26, but we know we're going to be up by 15 percent in enrollment. It may even be closer to 20 percent when classes begin," St. Gregory's provost Richard Ludwick told Catholic News Service Aug. 10.

Ludwick attributed the climb in enrollment at the Benedictine-run school to the economy, saying tighter finances cause people to reflect on what's important. "The lessons and values students receive in return for their investment in a Catholic education is striking a chord with families," he said.

Private schools rely upon tuition, donations and endowments to sustain themselves but as families keep a closer watch on their wallets, officials at private institutions are taking steps to keep college affordable and offering incentives for incoming students.

At Dominican University of California in San Rafael, the fall enrollment has increased by 9 percent this year.

The university, run by Dominican sisters, guarantees that students will graduate within four years of declaring their major if they follow the university's prescribed track for their major. If a student fails to graduate in four years, the university will

provide the remaining required classes at no cost, thereby eliminating the need for students and families to pay more tuition.

Pat Coleman, the university's vice president of enrollment, said more than ever families are looking at the cost of colleges as part of the application process. She said her office gives families plenty of information about financial aid early on so they know what options are available.

The College of Notre Dame of Maryland, a women's college in Baltimore, also has seen an increase in fall enrollment. In addition to reaching out to prospective students from high schools, the college is providing incentives for community college graduates to continue their education at a four-year institution.

"In the current economy, the fact is students are choosing to start out at community college which is often overlooked by universities," said Heidi Lippmeier Fletcher, president of enrollment management at the college, run by the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Graduates from accredited community colleges graduating with a 3.25 grade point average are eligible for scholarships totaling about \$15,000 per year. Students are also considered for other institutional scholarships and grants for which they qualify.

The school also offers accelerated degree programs in business, nursing and elementary education for working adults. Classes are offered during evenings and weekends and allow students to enter the workforce earlier and save on tuition.

Though private institutions have projected enrollment increases this fall, Fletcher told CNS the recession has caused the college to step up its efforts.

"We had to speak more about the value of private education and help students and parents understand the investment they will be making," she said.

Although many schools have projected enrollment increases, nearly 40 percent of the survey's responding institutions reported students dropping out during the 2008-09 academic year because of the recession. These students also indicated their inability to return for the fall 2009 term.

Tony Pals, director of public information for the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, said the expectation is that these students will return to school and their dropping out was only a temporary solution.