Private colleges boom as Calif universities falter
By CHRISTINA HOAG Associated Press News Fuze

LOS ANGELES—California's public higher education crisis has a flip side: swelling enrollment, expanding faculty, and state-of-the-art construction at the state's private colleges and universities.

With five years of funding cuts causing stumbles in the state's public higher education systems, California students are increasingly turning to private institutions, as well as out-of-state schools, to get their degrees.

California independent colleges report big upticks in enrollment of both freshmen and transferring students disillusioned with spiraling tuition for fewer classes at California State University, University of California, and community colleges. Universities in neighboring states also say they're seeing more interest from California students than ever before.

"When it takes more than six years to graduate from a public university, that makes all of California's private schools a much better value for the money," said Homa Shabahang, vice provost at the University of La Verne, where enrollment has soared almost 70 percent over the past five years to 8,600 students.

California has long been recognized for its state-funded higher education and is one of a handful of states that boast two sprawling university systems. CSU enrolls 420,000 students at 23 campuses, while UC enrolls 222,000 at 10 campuses. Tuition is a bargain compared to private schools and many state universities—annual tuition runs $5,970 at Cal State and $13,200 at UC.

The state's community college system, meanwhile, is the largest in the nation, with 112 colleges enrolling 2.6 million students. Fulltime students pay $1,104 a year.

But California's promise of offering residents an affordable college education has slipped as the state's budget crisis has translated into $2.5 billion in funding cuts to higher education since 2008.

State colleges and universities have boosted tuition, slashed faculty and pared back enrollment, making it harder for students to get admitted, come up with the cash, graduate on time and even find chairs in crammed classrooms.

Independent schools have responded by touting their small classes, course availability and on-time graduation, as well as beefing up financial aid. It's proving a strong lure for many students.

"It's either a high-price tuition or a low price and gamble with your education," said Mario Melgar, who transferred to Azusa Pacific University this fall from Pasadena City College.

The 21-year-old physical therapy student said he didn't even bother to complete his associate's degree because he couldn't get into the classes. He wanted to transfer to a Cal State but students there told him it was a similar situation so he cobbled together Azusa Pacific's $30,000-a-year tuition with financial aid and loans.

"It's not going to get any better soon and I want to start working," he said.

Although the independent schools are picking up some of the slack from the state systems, many students are still falling through the cracks, said Patrick Callan, president of the Higher Education Policy Institute in San Jose.

"The privates are going to help a lot of students, but they account for a small amount of capacity," Callan said. "The scale of this problem is too big. In California, most students are in the big public systems."

Public universities say they're simply caught between rising demand and shrinking funds, but note they continue to serve hundreds of thousands of students inexpensively. Applications at UC have risen for eight consecutive years and tuition remains a relative bargain despite recent hikes, noted spokeswoman Dianne Klein.
Larger out-of-state schools have also seen more interest from California students. The University of Oregon this summer hired two regional admissions counselors, one each for Northern and Southern California, to recruit more high school seniors. The number of freshmen just from Southern California jumped from 177 five years ago to 449 this year.

California students have driven Northern Arizona University's 40 percent enrollment surge over the past three years. The school draws California students with a break on out-of-state rates and a pledge to keep the rate the same for four years.

The growing wave of interest means the independents have become more selective in who they choose to admit, raising the colleges' academic profiles. At the same time, they're offering more financial aid.

Saint Mary's College of California in Moraga has seen a 51 percent increase in applications since 2009—nearly 6,000 students applied for 600 freshman slots this fall.

"That leads to some difficult conversations," said Michael Beseda, vice provost for enrollment. "We've had calls from family members of alumni saying they can't get in."

The $38,450-a-year college has also boosted its financial aid, now received by 86 percent of students, up from 74 percent in 2009.

Mills College in Oakland is working more closely with high school counselors to ensure that students know about financial aid options that can make a private school affordable, said Brian O'Rourke, vice president for enrollment.

To cope with more students, some privates are expanding facilities and programs. The University of La Verne, which undertook a major marketing campaign five years ago, has built a 400-bed residence hall and athletic fields and renovated academic buildings.

Azusa Pacific, which enrolled 300 more students this fall from 2009's fall enrollment, has hired 63 new fulltime faculty and is looking at adding new majors and class sites.

Despite the boom, private colleges see the overall situation as unfortunate.

"We're happy to have these students but I hope nobody thinks we're the long-term solution," said Beseda of Saint Mary's. "The long-term solution is to invest more in higher education."

Contact the reporter at http://twitter.com/ChristinaHoag.