Cal State May Cut Enrollment by 40,000, Chancellor Says

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California State University will probably reduce its enrollment by 40,000 students, the largest single-year decrease in its history, if proposed cuts in state support are adopted, the system's chancellor said on Thursday.

The chancellor, Charles B. Reed, said in an interview that the 23-campus system would be unable to weather steep state budget cuts without denying admission to large numbers of freshmen and transfer students for the 2010-11 academic year. In view of a large state budget deficit, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, has proposed cutting state support for the university system by nearly 20 percent in the 2009-10 fiscal year.

"If the Legislature and the governor are going to continue to significantly reduce our budget," Mr. Reed said, "we cannot educate more and more students with less and less money."

The proposed enrollment cut would be about 9 percent of Cal State's total enrollment of 450,000 students. If carried out, it would be the largest single-year net loss of students in the system's history and the largest percentage loss since World War II.

Mr. Reed ordered a reduction of 10,000 students for the 2009-10 academic year, but he later said that campuses would probably be able to reduce enrollment by a total of only 3,000 to 4,000.

Strategies for Turning Away Students

Cal State campuses could adopt a variety of methods to sharply cut enrollment when students start applying this fall for admission in 2010, Mr. Reed said. Campuses could increase their minimum academic standards for incoming freshmen, and they could take significantly fewer students who apply from outside their immediate surrounding area, he said.

At California State University at Northridge, officials reduced enrollment for the 2009-10 academic year by about 1,800 full-time-equivalent students out of a total full-time student population of about 26,000, said Terry D. Piper, vice president for student affairs. But achieving additional enrollment cuts in the 2010-11 year will be more difficult, he said, because applying students will adapt to the new requirements, he said.
“We certainly would continue the strategies we put in place for this year, but they would have a diminishing impact over time,” Mr. Piper said.

The budget cuts proposed by Governor Schwarzenegger have prompted dire warnings from California’s public colleges and universities. Two weeks ago, community-college leaders said they may need to cut enrollment by 250,000 students—also a reduction of about 9 percent—in the coming academic year, and University of California officials have said they may announce new enrollment cuts of their own this summer.

Colleges and universities will know their final financial outlook when state officials agree on a budget, which lawmakers said they expect to do by the end of the month.

Mr. Reed said the international competitiveness of the state’s largest industries—like high technology, agriculture, and entertainment—would be put at risk because of the cuts to higher education. But business interests, he said, have largely failed to advocate for colleges and universities during the current budget crisis.

“I don’t think hardly anybody knows or understands the enormity of the reductions, or the cuts, or the impacts that it’s going to have in higher education,” Mr. Reed said.

“They’re not going to understand until next winter, when we are denying admission to 40,000 students,” he said.