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From the issue dated July 10, 2009

RECALIBRATING AMBITION WHEN MONEY IS TIGHT

How 5 Colleges Plan to Keep Growing in Hard Times

By KATHRYN MASTERSON

Momentum can stall in a time of diminished resources. For colleges on the fast track, leaders have shifted money around and made some hard choices to keep growing. *The Chronicle* reached out to five up-and-coming institutions to find out how they manage their ambitions during tough times.

Montclair State University

Challenge: Keep expanding to meet increased student demand

This year, as many colleges instituted hiring freezes to save money, Montclair State University continued its push to hire full-time professors.

In the past eight years, as enrollment has grown by almost 4,000 — it now stands at 17,475 — the New Jersey institution has brought in hundreds of new full-time faculty members.

A 2002 strategic plan designed to elevate the former teachers' college to a doctoral-level research university called for expanding the student body and increasing the number of tenure-track faculty positions. But the recession has intensified student demand even more than officials expected. Applications jumped 20 percent this spring as job-hunters sought additional education.

Even so, declining state support and the challenge of keeping tuition low has slowed the pace of growth at Montclair State, says Susan A. Cole, the president. The university is filling 37 full-time faculty positions this fall, but if more state funds were available, she says, it could hire 50 more, and build more facilities to accommodate student demand.

The university had planned to enroll 18,000 students by the fall of 2008. It now expects to reach that level in a year or two. "You cannot do everything you want to do and should do," Ms. Cole says, "because the resources aren't there."

University of the Pacific

Challenge: Fill seats in the face of drastic state-budget cuts

When the University of the Pacific hired Robert J. Alexander as associate provost for enrollment a year ago, his task was to raise the number of undergraduate applications and increase the visibility of the 6,200-student private college in Northern California.

Mr. Alexander, who filled classes at Tulane University after Hurricane Katrina, put an aggressive marketing program into place, helping Pacific almost triple the number of applications and become more selective. Now, with the economic crisis threatening state aid, his challenge is to make sure that the 920 students who made deposits this spring will actually show up this fall.

To compensate for the possibility that students might seek out cheaper options (fees for tuition and room and board reach \$42,000), the university doubled its admissions offers this year, to 6,000. Though some officials worried that too many students might accept, Pacific beat its enrollment target by just 20 students.

Now the university is working to hold on to those students, with earlier orientations and continued marketing. Campus leaders are also lobbying against the proposed elimination of the state's Cal Grant program. The loss of those grants, which average about \$9,700 and are provided to 35 percent of Pacific's students, could have a significant impact on attendance.

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"We feel really successful so far, but we're all holding our breath," he says. "There are so many X factors between now and the date students show up."

University of Cincinnati

Challenge: Replace a strong leader

For the University of Cincinnati, a major research university, concern about a possible slowing of its rapid growth has more to do with the loss of its ambitious president, Nancy L. Zimpher, than with the economy.

In February, Ms. Zimpher became chancellor of the State University of New York. In March, Cincinnati's Board of Trustees passed a series of resolutions, dubbed "Maintaining Momentum," which emphasized goals set out in the strategic plan. Two of those dealt with the university's commitment to work with the broader community, a top priority of Ms. Zimpher's.

Cincinnati, which sees its mission as extending beyond its campus, has joined local companies and public agencies in research and other projects. Its outreach includes helping to produce more college-ready students from the city, and working on regional economic revitalization.

"Everything we do is tied to the idea of engagement," says Monica Rimai, interim president.

The university, which has upgraded and expanded many of its facilities in recent years, has enjoyed increased popularity as well. Enrollment has grown to 37,000. In 2007, Cincinnati had its first freshman wait list, and this year the number of students who have committed to attend is up by 15 percent.

Although Ms. Zimpher is gone, the university is in a good position to weather the economic storm after previous cutbacks, says Ms. Rimai, who was senior vice president for administration and finance. That includes the elimination of 150 to 200 jobs since 2005.

Officials anticipate a budget cut of at least 8 percent this fall. To preserve support for high-priority areas, Cincinnati will probably lay off more people and merge several colleges.

For now, the university is waiting for the state to decide how deep it has to cut. That number, says Ms. Rimai, "will affect the pace we can make changes."

University of Richmond

Challenge: Spread word about a generous aid policy

This spring private colleges were concerned about the ways the economic crisis would affect enrollment for the fall, and how price-sensitive families would be. At the University of Richmond, which has a sticker price of \$49,000, applications were down about 1 percent, yet its yield went up. The target was 805 students; 895 freshmen have committed to attend.

Nanci Tessier, the new vice president for enrollment, attributes the results to generous financial-aid policies and to a campaign to spread the message that Richmond, despite its cost, is affordable for many families. The university has need-blind admissions and a guarantee to meet 100 percent of demonstrated need. Each student's contribution through work and loans is capped at \$4,000 a year.

"We want bright and talented students applying to Richmond whether they need financial aid or not," Ms. Tessier says.

Increasing access and diversity are major goals of Edward L. Ayers, the president, and are a big part of the university's new strategic plan.

Key to that is emphasizing affordability. Until four years ago, affordability might not have been the chief concern to potential applicants or to alumni. But then Richmond, once known as a lower-cost private university, raised tuition by \$7,000 — a 27-percent increase — and took criticism for it.

The increase didn't lead to a drop in demand. Last year applications were at an all-time high, Ms. Tessier says. And even with the recession, the number of students expected to pay full price went up slightly this year. One-third of them will not receive any financial aid. "Certainly we're in a very strong position in the marketplace," she says.

Richmond's financial picture, too, is strong. Net tuition revenue went up almost \$5,000 per student in four years, and the endowment, which is over \$1-billion, is mostly unrestricted, according to Moody's Investors Service. The university also has "uncommonly strong operating margins," the ratings agency says, because of prudent financial practices. The surpluses have allowed it to build new facilities, including a football stadium, while remaining committed to its current financial-aid policy.

In this economic climate, that can only help.

University of North Texas

Challenge: Bolster research capacity

Already recognized as a strong regional public university that enrolls a high number of transfer and

minority students, the University of North Texas is looking to science and technology to help it become a research powerhouse.

Fortunately, the state is actually increasing its appropriations to higher education. In June lawmakers approved a bill that makes North Texas and six other "emerging research universities" eligible for matching funds when they raise private money to expand research and hire new faculty members.

Among the recent strides on the campus: new buildings for chemistry and life sciences, increases in spending on research (up 15 percent last year and at least 20 percent this year), and \$25-million promised by Gretchen M. Bataille, president of the university, for collaborative research clusters designed to tackle high-profile issues like autism and plant signaling. The clusters are expected to bring in new faculty members and graduate students. (Graduate stipends will be increased by \$2.5-million this year.)

North Texas is also going after federal stimulus money. "We're just working every angle to enhance our research," Ms. Bataille says.

While the economy has not forced the university to make major cuts, officials have been evaluating its programs and centers to see where it makes sense to combine them. In October the university merged programs in library science and instructional technology into a college of information. And several biology specialties are now part of a general biology degree, although students can still concentrate in ecology, immunology, or microbiology.

The pruning allows the university to reallocate money to high-priority areas, such as the graduate stipends. "It forces us to put money into the programs that are really making a difference," says Ms. Bataille.

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