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Florida universities could turn away 60,000 students by 2012, report says

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As many as 60,000 Florida students could get shut out of state universities during the next few years because of enrollment caps and budget cuts, a state education group predicts.

ENLACE Florida, or Engaging Latino Communities for Education, painted the gloomy picture in a report released this month called "Higher Education in Florida on the Brink."

While ENLACE specializes in Hispanic education issues, the report studies the potential effects on all college-bound students.

The report warns there may not even be space for all community college graduates or Bright Futures scholarship recipients, two groups traditionally guaranteed spots in the state university system.

"Access to a higher education is at risk for all Florida students," the report states.

Florida's universities are facing \$147 million in cuts this year, and as much as \$171 million in 2008-09, according to state estimates.

The Board of Governors, which makes policy for the state university system, has told universities they may have to reduce enrollment if they don't get more money. State funding accounts for about 75 percent of educating a university student, with tuition paying for the remaining 25 percent.

ENLACE used data from the Board of Governors that show university enrollment trends and projected high school graduation rates. Enrollment at state universities has increased an average of 3.2 percent a year in recent years, the report states. ENLACE came out with several scenarios of what may happen if demand continues to rise while the universities freeze or reduce enrollment.

If the university system froze enrollment at 300,000 spots, the report predicts, about 40,000 qualified students would be denied admission to state universities by 2012. The report also considers a 1.5 percent enrollment decline, a "worst-case scenario that is not beyond the realm of possibility," to estimate that 60,000 students could get shut out by 2012.

"We're already seeing anecdotal evidence that it's harder for students to get in. That's not surprising, since applications have gone up, and universities have been able to raise their admissions [standards]," said Paul Dosal, executive director of ENLACE Florida. "What would be surprising is if they then decide to reduce the number of freshmen admissions."

That's already happening at Florida State University, where the university could drop its number of freshmen and new transfer students by as much as 1,500 this fall. Most other universities are freezing enrollment, but have no immediate plans to decrease the number of students they serve.

Alexandra Lubin, 17, a senior at Boca Raton High School, said she has found it tougher than she expected to get into state universities. She said she has a B average, a 1070 on her SAT and a 24 on her ACT. She applied to FSU, the University of Central Florida in Orlando, the University of South Florida in Tampa and Florida Gulf Coast University. Lubin was admitted into Florida Gulf Coast. But she received "deferred admissions" to the other schools, meaning they aren't yet ready to accept her but may later if her test scores or grades improve in the next few months. She wonders if enrollment freezes will squeeze her out.

"I know people last year who were sitting in the same spot I am now, and they got accepted," Lubin said. "But it seems like there's a lot more competition this year."

The state university system has historically focused on providing college access to state students, offering low tuition and capping the number of out-of-state students admitted to 10 percent. But in the past year, the Board of Governors has concluded that funding has been inadequate and class sizes have soared.

"All of us want to provide access to every qualified student," said Carolyn Roberts, chairwoman of the Board of Governors. "But how can we do that if we don't have the financial means? If you're giving access to something that is less than adequate, then we're not doing our jobs."

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