

Foreign Students Pinch University of California Home-State Admissions

Lower acceptance rate at many campuses doesn't sit right with some families

UCSD freshmen Noah Hernandez, left, and Amir Levine say they have seen firsthand how increased international competition has kept Californians out of their first-choice schools. ENLARGE

UCSD freshmen Noah Hernandez, left, and Amir Levine say they have seen firsthand how increased international competition has kept Californians out of their first-choice schools. PHOTO: LUIS GARCIA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By MIRIAM JORDAN and DOUGLAS BELKIN

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50 COMMENTS

SAN DIEGO—With foreigners enrolling in U.S. schools at record numbers, students such as Noah Hernandez, a freshman at the University of California, San Diego, are getting a global view of the world without leaving their home state. The school has thousands of Chinese students, including Mr. Hernandez's roommate, who pay three times the in-state tuition.

"If I were running a school, it would make sense" to accept them, said the biology major, as a clutch of Mandarin-speaking students walked by.

Then he began thinking of a childhood friend, who also had a stellar academic record yet didn't get into UCSD to study engineering. Now, he says he wonders "whether taking so many international students is fair to California students who are going to stay here and benefit the state."

Mr. Hernandez illustrates the mixed feelings with which students and educators regard the foreign undergraduates flocking to public universities nationwide.

A record 974,926 international students were enrolled at accredited two- and four-year U.S. schools for the 2014-15 school year, a 10% rise over a year earlier, according to the Institute of International Education. About one-third of those students—304,040—are from China.

These rising international admissions are making domestic admissions more competitive across the country, said Allan Goodman, president of the IIE. And he predicts "continuing and substantial growth" in the international student population, which is now 4.8% of students overall.

The growth in international students has contributed to tighter admission standards at many UC campuses. The UC system accepted 62% of in-state applicants in the 2014 school year, down from 84% four years earlier.

This doesn't sit right with families whose children have been denied admission: They say they have been paying California taxes for decades and that state universities have lost sight of their mission.

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"We're shutting out California kids," said Carol Bastian, a college counselor at Mountain View High School in Silicon Valley. "Undoubtedly, this is because we have a very rich new clientele, particularly Chinese."

It isn't just the Chinese. The number of students from India, most of whom are in the U.S. seeking graduate degrees, rose 29% in the latest school year, while students from Brazil and Saudi Arabia also posted significant gains. South Korea is also a big source, though its number of students declined by 6.4% from a year earlier.

A Wall Street Journal analysis of the 50 largest U.S. state schools found that those outside California didn't see a decline in acceptance rate for in-state students even with the growth in international students.

The University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, which has among the most Chinese undergraduates of any public university in the nation, is admitting state residents at the same clip as it was a decade ago, but fewer are enrolling because the school has sharply raised tuition.

At Michigan State University, where the influx of Chinese students has been dramatic, the admissions rate has also held steady because there are fewer Michiganders graduating from high school and applying to college.

Still, there is widespread resentment toward the Chinese and suspicion they are stealing in-state slots. Attacks online, in school newspapers and on cars belonging to Chinese students have been reported at Michigan State, Ohio State University and Kansas State University, among others.

Some states, like North Carolina, already limit out-of-state enrollment at their flagship schools. In California, UC system president Janet Napolitano imposed a cap this year of about 20% on the share of international and out-of-state students at campuses in Los Angeles and Berkeley. At UCSD and other campuses, no limit was imposed.

The acceptance rate for state residents at UCSD last year was 30%, down from 46% in 2006. Over the same period, the acceptance rate for international applicants edged up to 39% from 37%, even as the number of international undergraduates rocketed to 3,382 from 437. From China alone, the number of students jumped to 2,219 from 70.

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UCSD attributed its declining admissions rate to a surge in applications accompanied by falling state subsidies. Per-student public spending for UC students dropped to less than \$12,000 last year from more than \$25,000 in 2001.

“Nonresidents are helping offset the costs of tuition for California students in the sense that they are bringing in additional revenue,” UCSD spokesman Jeffrey Gattas said. “That allows us to...hire faculty or enroll another California resident.”

Alternatives to taking so many out-of-state or foreign students include raising in-state tuition—frozen since 2012—cutting operating costs and securing more state subsidies. In California, proposals to raise tuition have drawn protests on campuses. Curbing expenditures is a challenge amid escalating costs related to high-ticket items such as retirement programs.

Under pressure from Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown and the state legislature to boost enrollment of state residents, Ms. Napolitano has announced plans to raise by 5,000 the number of California undergraduates admitted in fall 2016, thanks to \$25 million in additional state support and another \$25 million that will come from the UC system. UC regents are scheduled to vote this week on the plan.

For 2017-18, Ms. Napolitano plans to seek additional state funding to enroll 2,500 more Californians and 2,500 more for the following year.

“There’s an academic value to...learning side-by-side with young men and women from other states and other countries,” said Steve Montiel, a spokesman for Ms. Napolitano. “There also has been a financial value: Nonresident tuition has subsidized enrollment of Californians.”

According to the plan, admission of out-of-state and international students will continue to grow, though at a slower pace than in recent years.

Meantime, the competition is keeping many Californians out of their first-choice schools. Said UCSD freshman Amir Levine, who would have preferred UCLA: “How much someone can pay shouldn’t have any bearing on whether you get in.”

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