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College admissions officers see little change

But many schools in state see rise in financial aid requests

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College admissions officers did not know what to expect heading into this year's application period. They wondered if the recession would drive students toward in-state or public colleges and away from more expensive ones - or committing to any college at all.

Despite evidence that such trends occurred nationally, Maryland admissions officers are generally relieved at how little change they have observed in the state.

Students applied and committed to Maryland colleges and universities, public and private, at robust levels this spring.

"Things look remarkably the same," said Shannon Gundy, director of undergraduate admissions at the University of Maryland, College Park.

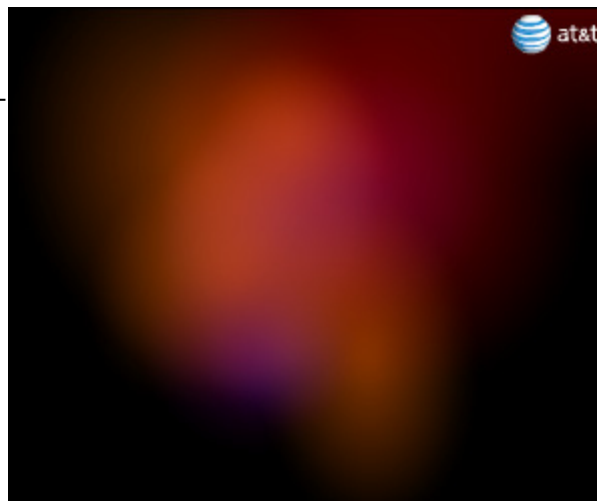
It's somewhat surprising that Maryland students did not flood into the University System of Maryland from private and out-of-state schools, said Jacqueline King, assistant vice president of policy analysis at the American Council on Education.

"It suggests that our economy in Maryland is better than in a lot of other states," King said. "It also shows that helping kids do what they want with higher education is something families prioritize here."

That's not to say the recession produced no strain. Financial aid requests went up at many schools, and counselors said they're hearing more widespread cost concerns. Pricey universities such as the Johns Hopkins University reluctantly admitted fewer students who need financial aid. The aid office at College Park added Saturday office hours to accommodate more families.

"It's not so much that we're having more conversations about money," Gundy said. "It's that the conversations are so much more intense. There's a real desperation out there."

Nationally, some early evidence suggests that students shifted their interest from private schools to public schools because of costs. In a survey released this month by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, 60 percent of counselors said they saw an increased interest in public institutions. More students than usual turned away from their "dream schools" because of economic fears, according to 71 percent of the counselors.



"The potential effects of the economy loomed large over this admission cycle," said Joyce Smith, chief executive officer for NACAC. "It appears that students and families were more concerned about cost, and plans about whether or where to enroll were changed as a result."

In Maryland, applications dipped at some private colleges, such as McDaniel and Goucher. At the state's most selective university, Hopkins, though, the numbers have remained consistent.

University of Maryland, Baltimore County saw a 2 percent rise in applications, and its fall class projects to be 5 percent larger than in 2008.

UMBC admissions director Yvette Mozi-Ross said she was pleasantly surprised that out-of-state applications did not drop, and said, "People seemed very concerned about financial aid and very savvy about financial issues."

The state's largest public institution, the University of Maryland, College Park, received only 1 percent more applications than in 2008, but that followed a 17 percent jump the previous year, so interest in College Park remains high.

Despite the mixed data, several high school counselors said students were more interested in public colleges.

At River Hill, one of Howard County's highest-performing high schools, applications to College Park and UMBC were up 10 percent to 15 percent, said guidance coordinator Philip Vangeli.

"I think a lot of students did apply to their dream schools, but then they looked at the total picture and decided that in-state was the best fit," he said. "I think the reputation of College Park is a big factor. Our students think they can get the same quality of education there as they can at most private schools."

The economy unquestionably affected the number of financial aid requests.

At Goucher, aid requests were up 64 percent. Hopkins, which costs about \$53,000 a year, chose to reserve more money for returning students and admitted fewer applicants who need financial aid. Admissions officers project that 32 percent of the incoming class will be on grant aid compared with 38 percent a year ago.

It's a difficult choice faced by many expensive colleges that try to admit without regard to financial need.

"In general, colleges worked really hard to keep their financial aid budgets stable," King said. "But the problem is they're seeing so much higher demand."

Admissions officers also believe some students might not show up in the fall because of last-minute financial crises.

Despite the financial situation, however, college admissions officers and high school counselors agree on one constant - students are determined to attend college.

"I think people recognize that a college education is the best investment they can make in their own future or a child's future," King said.

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