Colleges try to protect quality of classes on leaner budget

Amid cutbacks, state's major schools get record freshman classes

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Students paying rising tuition are keeping an eye on the quality of education they receive from South Carolina universities that are bloodied by budget cuts and strained by record enrollment.

Clemson University and the University of South Carolina say they are protecting their academic cores, however, when asked if students now pay more for less.

Clemson senior Sarah Costa answers, "It depends."

Clemson dropped sections of a sign language class she wanted and the professor fought to add one, she said. She's one of 13 students in the added section and credits her professor for making it happen.

Clemson Provost Dori Helms spent much of the first two days of classes signing paperwork for faculty and staff to take on extra class sections.

"We are doing everything we can to make sure quality doesn't diminish. We aren't cutting sections or increasing the size of sections," Helms said. Students may not get a class at the time of day they want, but enough sessions are being offered.

"My mandate was make sure students get the courses they need," Helms said.

Helms wants classes the same size as last year.



JOHN C. STEVENSON / Staff

See QUALITY on page 5A Clemson University said it is doing whatever possible to maintain quality.



PATRICK COLLARD / Staff

Clemson junior Sarah Whitley said she hasn't noticed a difference in her classes this year



PATRICK COLLARD / Staff

Clemson students Felipe Fernandes and Danielle Zambrano say classes and the dining hall are full.

She wants 40 percent to 45 percent of classes to have fewer than 20 students and no more than 15 percent of classes to have more than 50 students.

As Clemson responded to more than $40 million in state budget cuts, academic budgets were trimmed not more than 5 percent. Vacant positions were eliminated, but no faculty or lecturers were cut. Some recently graduated graduate students were kept to teach, Helms said.

"Even in spite of the cuts, we have been able to maintain the quality," Helms said. Cuts were made "in a very, very studied way to protect our students and academic core."

Clemson students are paying more — tuition rose 4.5 percent for residents and 7.5 percent for out-of-state students this year — but they're not getting any less, Helms said.

Buildings may not be cleaned as often and lawns may go longer without cutting, but services related to teaching, student support and research were protected, said Cathy Sams, Clemson spokeswoman.

"There's no way we can adjust to losing 450 positions and still offer the same level of service," Sams said. Employees are taking on extra responsibilities. Areas are being reorganized.

"We have to make some adjustments, but ideally students won't notice," she said.

At USC, state appropriations were cut by $55.4 million, or a quarter of the university's state funding.

"For the Columbia campus, including the School of Medicine, that comes to $45.4 million, or 24.7 percent of our budget," said USC spokeswoman Margaret Lamb. "To put this into perspective, the University of South Carolina now receives the same amount in recurring state funding that it received 36 years ago, in 1973, adjusted for inflation."

USC raised tuition 3.6 percent this year on the Columbia campus and by as much as 5.8 percent on its other campuses — the lowest increase in eight years, as USC President Harris Pastides cited concern for the burden of a larger increase on students and their families.

Lamb said, "We have protected our core mission of education. Students will notice fewer class sections and larger class sizes in some areas, and we have cut significantly the number of adjunct faculty members, instructors and lecturers."

USC made no reductions in tenured or tenure-track faculty slots, but some have gone unfilled, she said.

Meanwhile, scores of faculty volunteered to take on extra teaching loads, and the university expects to be able to use stimulus funds to hire adjuncts, Lamb said.

"The university is committed to maintaining the best educational experience possible and preserving students' progress toward their degrees," Lamb said. She said other academic support programs are being protected.

USC and Clemson had record freshman classes this year. USC has 3,930 freshmen, compared to 3,859 last year, according to preliminary university estimates.

At Clemson, the increase is greater than officials expected, and Clemson students have noticed a more crowded campus.

In the opening days of fall semester this week, Clemson's record freshman class stood at 3,389 students, compared to 2,927 this time last year, according to preliminary numbers from Stan Smith, the registrar.

Total preliminary enrollment, including undergraduate and graduate students, was 18,499, compared to 17,642 at this time last year.

Parking, a perennial problem at Clemson, is worse because more students mean more cars.

Overloaded buses pass by waiting students. At the end of the first day of classes, Costa was the last person allowed to board a bus to commuter parking before the doors closed on a large group that had to be left behind.

Schilleter Dining Hall "is more crowded than ever," and computer labs "are packed no matter what time you go," said Clemson sophomore Danielle Zambrano of Greenville.

Clemson senior Felipe Fernandes of Clemson said it was harder to sign up for classes, and he wasn't able to get a marketing class he needs to graduate in December.

"I haven't gotten to the point where I feel like I'm paying for less," said Fernandes, who plans to attend the needed marketing class and beg his way in.

Clemson "has the same feel as my freshman and sophomore years," said Clemson junior Sarah Whitley, of Simpsonville. "I haven't noticed a difference. I have always loved my classes here."

Freshman K.T. Zanzoun described her impression of Clemson in one word, "awesome," although freshman Pat Twomey said freshmen he knows who are in overflow housing and rooming with resident assistants "are not too happy about it."

The added enrollment also meant added tuition revenue. Chip Egan, interim dean of Clemson's College of Architecture, Arts and Humanities, used that money to add class sections in general education courses most students need, such as basic English and communications classes to accommodate the growing enrollment.

"We're dedicated to making sure that students don't get in a jam," Egan said. "We don't want students to delay graduation because courses aren't available."

While nearly all states have cut higher education expenditures, South Carolina made one of the steepest cuts in the nation, said David Shulenburger, vice president for academic affairs at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities.

Federal stimulus dollars help, "but it is essentially one-year money and uncertain at that," so schools have to adjust their budgets significantly, he said. Common strategies include open positions, travel cuts, combined classes and reduced hours, he said.

"What students will notice is less availability," Shulenburger said. "They will see fewer class sections and fewer elective course offerings as schools retrench to ensure they can teach core academics."

Students probably won't see a change in the level of quality, but class schedules may be less convenient, particularly for working students who must fit classes around jobs, and they will see more graduate student teachers.

"You've got fixed budgets. You've got students to teach. You do what you can," Shulenburger said.