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State College Cuts Make Graduating a Struggle

By GREG WINTER

The moment registration opens, Michele D. Hannah dives for courses with the fury of a fifth-year college student vexed by a constant riddle.

"When will I get the classes I need to graduate?" said Ms. Hannah, Class of "I have no idea" at the University of Iowa.

Classes have gotten so tight, or so scarce, that Ms. Hannah says she trolls the university's Web site like a day trader, checking every few hours for the stray course opening that might suddenly appear.

But it probably will not. At many public universities, grappling with record budget cuts and enrollments at the same time, the classroom is no longer being spared. After whittling away at staff, coaxing faculty members to juggle more classes, stripping sports teams and trusting aging roofs to hold out a few years longer, many public universities have reluctantly begun chopping away at academics, making it harder for students to graduate on time.

The University of Illinois has canceled 1,000 classes on hundreds of subjects this year. Up to 1,000 students at the University of North Carolina will be shut out of beginning Spanish. The University of Colorado has eliminated academic programs in journalism, business and engineering. The University of California has put off opening an entire campus.

Virginia Tech is scrapping an education major and suspending mandatory history classes because it does not have enough professors to lead them. The University of Nebraska is canceling Portuguese, closing agricultural research laboratories and off-site classrooms, shedding exercise science, paring Russian and museum studies. Rutgers is pruning the arts and sciences.

The University of Missouri has reduced the number of class time slots across the board, cut its teacher training program in half, eliminated a nursing degree and trimmed international studies. The University of Michigan will nearly double the size of some classes, shorten library hours and offer fewer freshman seminars. At the California State University, up to 30,000 students will be turned away come spring.

"The academic cuts are probably the most severe I've seen," said Edward M. Elmendorf, an assistant secretary of education in the Reagan administration and now a senior vice president at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. "And I don't see any mitigation in them in the coming year."

Universities have taken pains to trim in the least harmful ways, shearing courses or majors in hopes of leaving the academic core intact. Still, the budget cuts, more than 10 percent of state appropriations in some cases, have been too great not to take their toll.

"There is no doubt that we're at a stage where the quality of the educational experience is less than it was two years ago, five years ago, and certainly less than what we set for our standards," said Robert N. Shelton, provost of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "I'm not crying wolf. In pockets, it's definitely the case."

What this means for students will vary from campus to campus, even from major to major. Yet one of the most common academic cuts has been a reduction in the number of course sections offered — that is, how many times a class is taught in a given semester or year. While the course may not be eliminated, its accessibility often suffers, leading to what some worry is an inevitable consequence.

"It will influence students' ability to graduate on time," said Larry D. Roper, vice provost for student affairs at Oregon State University.

This is especially true because so many students are working to pay for their educations, making their schedules tight. When classes are not offered frequently enough throughout the week, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to attend, and therefore to graduate on time.

Making matters worse, college officials say, the more tuition rises to keep public campuses afloat during troubled economic times, the more students will end up working to pay it, only heightening the obstacles to a degree. "If I didn't worry about that I would be irresponsible," said George W. Breslauer, dean of social sciences at the University of California at Berkeley.

It is hard to overstate the passion that tuition increases and academic pruning have elicited on campuses. More than 1,000 members of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars, an organization of college honor students, responded by e-mail or telephone to a reporter's query seeking comment on the situation, and most expressed irritation and anxiety.

"It frustrates me, even makes me angry, to know that my parents are paying more and more for an education which is giving me less and less," said Valerie Szybala, a third-year student at Virginia Tech, encapsulating many students' sentiments.

"They have a point," said Chester S. Gardner, vice president for academic affairs at the University of Illinois. "The quality of education has been impacted yet the cost is going up. You can't debate that. That's just a fact."

Even seemingly ancillary cuts, students said, can be costly.

Andrew M. Fields thinks about little else than his beloved track and field team at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., often spending more time in the weight room than with his girlfriend in an effort to earn the athletic scholarship that has been his goal since elementary school. With no warning, though, the university decided this summer to eliminate the team to save money, and now Mr. Fields's hopes for a scholarship are as distant as his best hammer throw.

"The boat's sunk," said Mr. Fields, a 270-pound shot-putter who worked overnight shifts in a baby-wipe factory to raise as much tuition money as he could. Now he wonders where he will get the rest. "It doesn't look too good."

For their part, universities are scrambling to keep valued faculty members. Confronted with bigger class loads, less time for research, fewer administrative aides, less money for graduate assistants and salary freezes, tenured professors are vowing to leave — and occasionally making good on their threats.

"It still looks good from the road but, oh Lord, there's a lot of suffering inside," said Chris Hart, a spokesman for the University System of Maryland, which has been struggling to retain faculty. "Professors are saying, 'You can't support my research, so I'm taking it elsewhere.' "

Their departure, or even their increased teaching time, can have a domino effect, college officials say, because universities are so heavily dependent on the research grants professors secure from industry and government.

"It is a tremendous cash cow," said Fred J. Antczak, associate dean for academic programs at the University of Iowa, noting that the university takes in \$350 million in research money each year. "If we start getting hurt on those figures, I don't know how we stay solvent."

Of equal concern, some large public universities are planning to reduce enrollment in the coming years or to keep it stagnant, despite a projected boom in the college-age population over the next decade.

"For the last 40 years, we've always said to high school students that if you work hard, there will be a place for you somewhere in the system," said Brad Hayward, a spokesman for the University of California, which usually grows by about 8,000 students a year. Next fall, though, it will receive no extra state money to do so. "This begins to call that promise into question."

Beyond working multiple jobs, commuting for hours to save on housing and spending their summers in class to graduate as quickly as possible, students have come up with what Robert Kellman, a sophomore at the University of Michigan, calls "unique ways of circumventing the system."

Though painting porches all summer was more lucrative than Mr. Kellman had expected, he said he hardly made enough to cover the \$15,000 or so he owes as an out-of-state student each semester. So, he said, he is planning to spend his junior year abroad, not at university-sanctioned programs that may cost as much but at cheaper foreign colleges — perhaps in Egypt, or maybe in England — where he can earn the same credits for less.

"My hand was kind of forced because of the money," he said.

Dennis Linders, a senior at the University of Florida, is taking a similar tack, though for different reasons. He is so frustrated by how hard it is to find courses that he is abandoning campus this spring, leaving behind the revelry of his final semester, Mr. Linders said, just to find classes — in the Netherlands.

"Sure it may cost a bit more, but at least I'll have more freedom in taking classes I want," he said. He is tired, he said, of having to "settle for whatever is left on the table."