

State colleges also face cuts in ambitions

Lewin Tamar



Ross D. Franklin/Associated Press

Great things were promised for Arizona State University in Tempe seven years ago, but that was before recession struck.

When Michael Crow became president of Arizona State University seven years ago, he promised to make it "The New American University," with 100,000 students by 2020. It would break down the musty old boundaries between disciplines, encourage advanced research and entrepreneurship to drive the new economy, and draw in students from underserved sectors of the state.

He quickly made a name for himself, increasing enrollment by nearly a third to 67,000 students, luring big-name professors and starting interdisciplinary schools in areas like sustainability, projects with partners like the Mayo Clinic and Sichuan University in China, and dozens of new degree programs

But this year, Mr. Crow's plans have crashed into new budget realities, raising questions about how many public research universities the nation needs and whether universities like Arizona State, in their drive to become prominent research institutions, have lost focus on their public mission to provide solid undergraduate education for state residents.

These days, the headlines about Arizona State describe its enormous cuts.

The university has eliminated more than 500 jobs, including deans, department chairmen and hundreds of teaching assistants. Last month, Mr. Crow announced that the university would close 48 programs, cap enrollment and move up the freshman application deadline by five months. Every employee, from Mr. Crow down, will have 10 to 15 unpaid furlough days this spring.

"The New American University has died; welcome to the Neutered American University," the student newspaper editorialized last month the morning after the latest cuts were announced.

While Arizona State's economic problems have been particularly dramatic, layoffs and salary freezes are becoming common at public universities across the nation; the University of Florida recently eliminated 430 faculty and staff positions, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, laid off about 100 employees, and the University of Vermont froze some administrative staff salaries, left open 22 faculty positions and laid off 16 workers.

"What's happening, everywhere, is what's happening to Michael Crow," said Jane Wellman, executive director of the Delta Project on Postsecondary Costs, Productivity and Accountability, an organization that studies spending by colleges and universities. "The trend line is states disinvesting in higher education."

The picture varies by state. Dozens of states, hit hard by the recession, made midyear cuts in their financing for higher education. And yet, budgets are largely intact at some leading research universities, like the University of Michigan.

Public universities everywhere are bracing for deep cuts in next year's budgets, but the federal stimulus package, providing billions for education and billions more for research, should ease the problem somewhat.

Despite the cuts, Mr. Crow said he was sticking to his priorities, protecting his new programs and his tenured and tenure-track faculty members. And he is hoping to expand research, with, for example, renewable-energy money from the stimulus package.

"I don't retreat very easily," he said. "The economy is shifting faster than the university can adjust, but we're trying to protect students from the hurricane. We're protecting the core of the core."

But not everyone is convinced that the Arizona State model makes sense.

"It may be that the idea of a 100,000-student research university was never very sustainable," said Patrick M. Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, which promotes access to higher education. "In this economy, the places that have been trying to claw their way up the ladder, the ones whose aspirations have exceeded their financial vision, are going to have the toughest time. They can't be all things to all people."

But Mr. Crow thinks he can simultaneously broaden access for Arizonans, improve academic quality and increase research.

His university, he said, is an inclusive institution where there are 7,000 students with no family income at all and a growing population of American Indian students. Tuition in most programs is under \$6,000 a year for state residents, in part because of a State Constitution provision that it be as "nearly free" as possible, which courts have interpreted to mean that its tuition must be in the bottom third of public universities nationwide.

Mr. Crow's record for improving quality is impressive, too. He has hired more than 600 tenured or tenure-track faculty members, and last year, for the first time, won a spot on the National Science Foundation's list of the top 20 research universities without a medical school, along with powerhouses like M.I.T. and the University of California, Berkeley.

But not every university can be in the top 20. And in a time of shrinking state budgets, undergraduates at public universities will most likely pay the price in higher tuition, larger classes and less interaction with tenured professors. So it is a real question how many public research universities the nation can afford, and what share of resources should go to less expensive forms of education, like community colleges.

"Universities aspire to prestige," Ms. Wellman said, "and that is achieved by increasing selectivity, getting a research mission and having faculty do as little teaching as possible, not by teaching and learning, and taking students from Point A to Point B."

Mark G. Yudof, president of the University of California, laments that it has become an article of faith that every depressed area needs a research university.

"Research universities are very expensive," Mr. Yudof said, "and you can't have one in every county and every state. Your first obligation as a public university is to treat the undergraduates right. That's going to need a national attitude adjustment from leadership and boards of regents."

California's three-tier higher-education system, which serves 3.3 million students, almost 20 percent of the nation's college population, is among the hardest hit by the current recession. This year, with hundreds of millions of dollars removed from their budgets, both the California State University system and the University of California are being forced to shrink their enrollment.

"We're trying as hard as we can to preserve the instructional program," Mr. Yudof said. "But with the economy shrinking, and less money allocated to public universities, can I guarantee that the class that would have been 40 won't be 45? I can't."

Finding the right balance between improving academic quality and serving state residents is not easy.

Case in point: merit scholarships. Arizona State University recruits National Merit Scholars nationwide with a four-year \$90,000 scholarship, a package so generous that Arizona State enrolls 600 National Merit Scholars, more than Yale or Stanford. Through the cuts, Mr. Crow has kept that program, even while proposing to cut a scholarship for Arizona residents with high scores on state tests, a proposal the state regents turned down.

And even as his plans for expanding the university have slowed, Mr. Crow is trying to increase the enrollment of out-of-state students — who pay triple tuition — to as high as 40 percent next year.

When the latest cuts were announced, many Arizona State students said they believed Mr. Crow was doing his best to protect them but that, ultimately, the quality of their education could suffer.

"My African-American history professor said he thinks classes will be bigger next semester, and that's too bad," said Tierra Jenkins, a sophomore civil engineering student.

Many blame the Legislature for short-sightedness in failing to support the university when it plays such a key role in the state's economy and residents' upward mobility.

"It really takes a lot of wind out of the sails of this university," said Kyle Whitman, a senior and an economics major who works part-time in Mr. Crow's office. "It's been on such a strong trajectory."

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