

Colleges step up recruiting efforts

As enrollment declines, schools may 'downsize, merge or close.'

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Ohio colleges are bolstering efforts to recruit students as the state braces for a sharp drop in the number of college-age students.

Schools are spreading their reach into new areas while competing for fewer students in Ohio. Officials at Ohio State University and Ohio University say their efforts already are paying off as application numbers surge. But some still expect shifting demographics in the state to take a heavy toll on schools.

'We are probably going to see some colleges downsize or merge or close,' said C. Todd Jones, the president of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Ohio, which represents 50 schools across the state.

New federal projections forecast a 19.3 percent drop in the population of new Ohio high-school graduates between 2010 and 2023, while national figures rise slightly. Only two other states, New Hampshire and Vermont, slip further in annual projections by the National Center for Education Statistics.

The new forecast shows a steadier decline in Ohio than in past projections. By 2023, it says, Ohio is estimated to have 99,000 graduates, the fewest since at least 1984.

Schools aim to offset those changes partly by recruiting more outside Ohio.

This year, Ohio State is sending workers to Los Angeles, Atlanta and Dallas, rapidly growing areas that weren't a focus for the school in the past. In several states, the university is hiring more workers to live and recruit in just one city.

'We've made strategic and targeted investments to increase our outreach both in the state of Ohio and across the



Students walk past the new Armstrong Student Center on the campus of Miami University. Many Ohio colleges are bolstering their efforts to recruit students. GREG LYNCH / STAFF

country and across the world," said Dolan Evanovich, OSU's vice president for strategic enrollment planning.

Similar efforts at Ohio University have pulled more students from the Northeast. Leaders at the school deliberately kept out-of-state fees flat for years to draw students from the East Coast and other areas where costs have increased.

"We have seen big growth in our out-of-state efforts," said Craig Cornell, OU's vice provost for enrollment management.

Private schools have headed into new territory, too.

Recruiters at Baldwin Wallace University have gone to areas where they traced heavy online traffic to the school website. This year, the school in Berea, near Cleveland, is spreading recruitment efforts to Nashville, Tenn., and cities in Georgia. The school also added a second full-time recruiter in New York.

"We're traveling more now than we ever have," said Ross Grippi, the director of marketing and recruitment for the school of 3,500 students.

But schools haven't backed

off recruiting in Ohio. As colleges search farther, competition is growing for the shrinking base of students in the state.

"We're now seeing neighboring states increasing their aid packages to attract students," said Jones, of the association of independent schools. "The impact of Midwestern demographics is being felt nationwide."

Ohio State opened a new downtown Cleveland office in Terminal Tower this year; two recruiters work full time to draw students from northeastern Ohio. Meanwhile, Ohio University and private schools are sending more recruiters to central Ohio, one of the few areas where they expect population growth.

Such efforts already are changing the makeup of Ohio schools.

"Our numbers reflect the demographic realities in Ohio," said Cam Cruickshank, the vice president for enrollment management and online education at the University of Toledo.

The share of Toledo students from Ohio dropped about 10 percent this year, but gains

in students from outside the state were higher. The percentage of in-state students at OSU dropped 5 percent this year, to about 70 percent, but total enrollment climbed. Leaders at other schools expect similar changes.

Student populations also are likely to become older on average, officials said.

Schools are expanding programs for adult students as the number of younger students shrinks. Demand is growing at community colleges for degrees geared toward working professionals, said Mabel Freeman, the interim vice president of student affairs at Columbus State Community College.

Toledo has pulled back on recruiting efforts focused on recent high-school graduates, Cruickshank said, while devoting more recruiters to adults and other student groups. 'We've been doing a lot to try to diversify our enrollment so that we're less susceptible to these fluctuations in demographics,' he said.

So far, many schools say they are poised to weather the population decline.