

Enrollment numbers declining in Missouri

Colleges under pressures to bring in more students

BY TIM BARKER
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ST. LOUIS — The University of Missouri-Columbia needs to find 638 students over the next few weeks to avoid ending a winning streak that started in 1995.

Since then, the school has managed to grow — sometimes by a little, and sometimes by a lot — every year.

The numbers won't be final for a couple of weeks. And while Mizzou did pick up nearly 500 stragglers by the time the official count was taken last year, things don't look so promising this time around.

Of course, it's not a major blow for a school with more than 34,000 students to lose a couple hundred of them.

But it illustrates the mounting pressure colleges face as they deal with a demographic shift that's churning out smaller high school graduating classes.

It's forcing schools to get creative in attracting students, often setting their sights on states where students are more plentiful. The problem is that many schools have the same ideas, said Ann Korschgen, Mizzou's vice provost for enrollment management.

"There is much more aggressive competition this year," Korschgen said in an email. "Many other major universities from across the country are trying to attract nonresident students, often with substantial scholarship packages or tuition waivers."

A look around the region shows that Mizzou is among several campuses with slipping enrollment. It should be noted that some schools will gain sub-

stantially between now and the time they take their official counts, while others will lose students.

In Springfield, Mo., Missouri State University's early enrollment figures show a 7.8 percent decline, but it is expected to surge by more than 2,000 students after high schoolers enroll in dual-credit programs. Similarly, Lindenwood University's preliminary numbers suggest an 8.4 percent dip, but the figures don't factor in some late-starting programs expected to create an enrollment increase topping 4 percent.

More troubling is what's happening at St. Louis Community College, where enrollment has fallen more than 18 percent since 2011 when the school boasted an enrollment of more than 29,000. This year alone, enrollment is down nearly 11 percent, falling below the 24,000 mark.

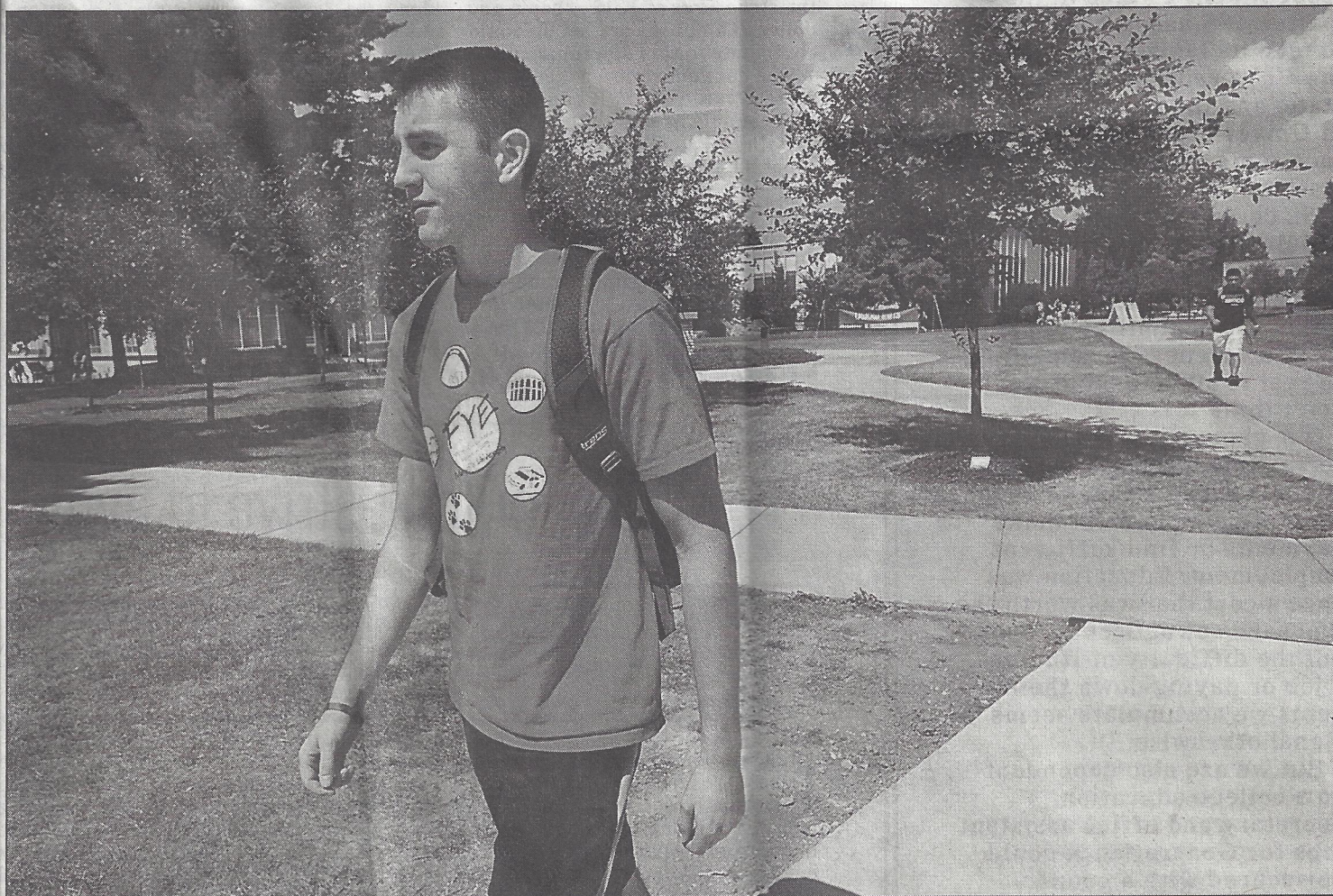
While the school is scrambling to deal with the repercussions of the decline, it was not unexpected.

Community colleges, in particular, tend to see an enrollment boost during tough economic times, followed by a decline when things get better. That, combined with the smaller pool of high school graduates, is hurting the school.

"I don't think where we are is any surprise to us," said Donna Dare, vice chancellor for academic and student affairs. "Community colleges across the country are feeling the pinch. We're all trying to level out and see where we stabilize."

The community's college's downward trend also means trouble for the University of Missouri-St. Louis, which draws half of its transfer students from there.

It's a situation that's driven UMSL to push its recruiting



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Freshman Ryan Serrano walks across the quad at Maryville University to his dorm after class Aug. 30. Serrano, from Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., is studying criminal justice at Maryville.

boundaries as far as Chicago — with mixed results.

On one hand, the school saw a 5 percent increase in transfer applications this year, fueling hopes of a 1 percent increase in undergrads. But the optimism faded when the surge in applicants failed to produce an increase in actual students, said Alan Byrd, dean of enrollment services.

Instead, the school is looking at a slight enrollment decline and the prospect of similar results in coming years.

“We have to be able to attract more students from outside the region,” Byrd said. “We can’t rely on local students to meet our enrollment goals.”

There are schools, however, that are having success in spite of the high school demographic obstacle.

Early returns show the Missouri University of Science and Technology with a 4 percent increase in students.

Laura Stoll, vice provost and dean of enrollment management, attributes the hike to the school’s strong reputation and the fact that its graduates earn an average starting salary approaching \$60,000 a year.

“We hear it from the families,” Stoll said. “People want a return on their investment.”

On the far extreme is Maryville University, which is looking at a 19 percent enroll-

ment increase, topping the 5,000 mark.

That is, in part, because of an aggressive out-of-state recruiting effort that started several years ago, said Mark Lombardi, the school’s president. The university also has ramped up its graduate and online offerings — all part of an effort to counter the decline in high schoolers.

“A lot of schools sort of circled the wagons and looked inward,” Lombardi said. “We did the reverse.”

Maryville pulls 60 percent of its students from within 200 miles of the school. And while enrollment has remained steady with that group, Lombardi said the strongest growth had come

from out of state.

The school actively seeks students throughout the Midwest and now has full-time recruiters in Texas and California, a state that’s having trouble meeting the higher education needs of its residents.

Among the school’s recent additions is Ryan Serrano, a freshman from Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.

Serrano, who is studying criminal justice, said he learned about Maryville when he went to one of the university’s recruiting sessions at his high school.

Maryville gradually climbed to the top of his wish list as he visited schools on the East and West coasts.