

latimes.com

'Desperate' UC students scurry to snag key classes

Some courses have hundreds wait-listed as the new term begins. Many students fear they won't get the classes needed to graduate on time -- and with higher fees, may not be able to afford an extra year

By Larry Gordon

January 20, 2010

The Greek mythology class has long been popular at UC Santa Barbara, but never quite like this.

For the current term, 500 students are enrolled in Professor Apostolos Athanassakis' classics course, filling the lecture hall to capacity. And 300 others have tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to land a spot on the roster, he said.

Recent state funding cuts have translated to reductions in undergraduate course offerings across the beachside campus, sending students scurrying for classes such as Athanassakis' that fulfill various requirements.

The professor said it's "the most desperate" start to a winter quarter that he can recall in 41 years of teaching at UC Santa Barbara.

"There is confusion and fear. The students don't know what to do," said Athanassakis, whose course includes readings on battles, schemes and romances from Homer and Hesiod. "They're afraid they may not be able to graduate."

That story is being repeated across the University of California system as the new term begins. Students complain that fewer course offerings -- reductions of up to 11% on some campuses compared with a year ago -- will make it harder for them to graduate on time. And in an era of steep student fee hikes, finishing promptly or early is an urgent priority for many.

To compensate for a smaller course catalog, campuses are packing more students into remaining classes. They are studying ways to streamline graduation requirements or drop some altogether. And they are trying to provide alternatives for squeezed-out students, such as online viewing of chemistry lectures for 100 UCLA students who could not fit into the classroom.

Marcus Rochelle, a Santa Barbara sophomore, said he's only been able to sign up for three classes this term. So he has tried to crash several others, showing up unregistered in

hopes of snagging a seat. But he is reluctant to buy books for those courses, and he fears he is falling behind.

"If the rest of my years here look like this, there's no way I can graduate in four years," said the political science major from Happy Valley, Calif. "I'm really hoping not to go into a fifth year because that will be an extra 10 grand I don't have."

UC officials say the cuts vary widely across the nine undergraduate campuses. Administrators insist that although the cuts are upsetting for students, most will be able to take a full load if they consider courses beyond their usual areas of interest and accept that horror of college life: the early morning class.

"It's a hard situation, it's frustrating for the students, it creates a lot of anxiety. But be persistent, be flexible," said Nina Robinson, UC's director of student policy. "If you see a class section that's open at 8 o'clock in the morning, grab it."

Recent UC undergraduates generally have managed to graduate more quickly than some previous classes. About 59% of those who started in 2004 finished in four years, compared with 36% of those who were freshmen in the early 1990s, UC data shows. About 78% of recent classes have graduated within five years.

With the course cutbacks, however, Robinson said students in some majors may need more time to fulfill requirements. "But I don't think we are going to see huge shifts," she said.

Higher fees may also make students more focused in choosing majors and classes to avoid a fifth year, she noted.

UC Santa Barbara junior Jake Elwood had hoped to graduate this summer, an early finish helped by high school Advanced Placement courses and UC summer sessions. But this term, the political science major from Berkeley was unable to enroll in some classes he needed, including a humanities requirement he had hoped the Greek mythology course would fill. He has just three courses, not the four he sought.

"The beginning of the quarter is usually a pretty exciting time. . . . But it's hard to have that same excitement when you are not sure which classes you are going to be in and which ones you're not," said Elwood, who now expects to stay a couple of extra quarters. "A lot of people are stressed out."

Professors say they are feeling the crush too.

Andrew Norris, an associate professor of political science at UC Santa Barbara, already had allowed 10% more students to register for his introductory political philosophy course this quarter. Nevertheless, a large number of crashers tried to get into the class, which has enrolled about 375. Students are now e-mailing him and making in-person appeals as he walks to and from class.

"They plead, they beg," said Norris. Some students try to woo him with their personal or financial troubles. "It breaks my heart," he said. But he said he cannot enroll more students and has urged them instead to ask the governor and legislators to restore UC's funding.

The situations vary among UC schools because of each campus' spending choices, enrollment and number of nontenured lecturers, whose classes are first to be cut.

UC Santa Barbara is offering 160 fewer undergraduate courses this winter -- an 8% drop from the same quarter last year. The situation is exacerbated because enrollment unexpectedly rose by about 1,000 students this year.

Some students worry that they may not have enough credits to meet requirements for financial aid or campus housing. But officials promised extra advising to help students search for appropriate courses and said no punitive action will be taken if students show that they are trying to meet the requirements. Nobody "will have the plug pulled on them," said David Marshall, executive dean of UC Santa Barbara's College of Letters and Science.

Marshall also said there could be a bright side as students learn about new subject areas "in great courses they just hadn't thought about at the beginning."

At UCLA, officials report a 6% drop in winter-term undergraduate classes and a boost in average class size from 49 to 53 students. UC Irvine reported a 4% decline in fall class offerings and a spokeswoman said she expects the winter numbers to be worse.

UC Santa Cruz reported an 11% drop in winter quarter courses. UC Davis had shortages in widely required courses such as chemistry and composition, but no major reductions.

Ricardo Gomez, a third-year student at UC Berkeley, is enrolled in just two classes as spring semester begins. The interdisciplinary major from Oxnard is on three waiting lists in hopes of snagging two more courses.

"I'm worried about this," he said. "It's hurting me because I will have to stay here longer and not get the experience I want in college if I don't get these classes."

larry.gordon@latimes.com