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Not her mother's UC

Budget cuts mean my freshman daughter's experience at UC Santa Barbara is far from the system's glory days.

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When my classmates and I entered the University of California at Santa Cruz a generation ago, we were urged to step out of our intellectual comfort zones to explore the fat catalog of course offerings -- a new language here, a biology seminar there; try Russian literature or African studies; learn about the Puritans or perhaps the anarchists. We made lists of classes to attend in the first days of each quarter and then, like shoppers squeezing the melons, tried many to find three or four that felt right.

As a first-year student at UC Santa Barbara this year, my daughter, Sara, also is running from course to course at the start of each quarter, but rather than doing so to make her choices, she is hoping to be chosen by overworked professors facing overflowing classrooms. There are fewer classes and fewer teachers and teaching assistants. Classes are larger, and lecture courses often lack smaller discussion groups.

Undergrads are pleading for places. Teachers give priority to seniors in their areas of concentration, then often resort to lotteries, auditions or applications for the remaining spots. Sara persuaded a global studies professor to allow her in last week. Then a French teacher took mercy on her and raised the student cap, and finally this week, so did a feminist studies teacher.

We realize Sara is among the lucky ones to have been admitted to a UC, with its pool of talented faculty. Furthermore, freshmen have always had to jockey for attention -- that's a rite of passage. But UC administrators say they never have experienced anything like this year's budget cuts. Santa Barbara has lost 25% of its state funding in recent years. Admissions were up about 7% in the 2009-10 school year, while classes were cut by 10%. Santa Cruz, for example, offered 123 literature courses in the previous school year, compared with 101 this year.

What does all this mean for students? Besides the stress, it means a less personalized education. With nearly 40 kids in her French class, Sara will have fewer opportunities to ask questions or practice speaking; the teacher will be more pressed for time during office hours and when grading papers.

Departments are eliminating nonessential courses and barring students from others if they

are not majoring in that area. This creates pressure on students to declare a major early and narrows what they can study. That may be fine if you've known you wanted to go into medicine since the first episode of "ER," but if you're like me, education is more of a discovery. I entered university as a zoology major, having just read Jane Goodall, then stumbled across a course on American political thought, which led to a course on U.S. economic history, and I graduated in American studies.

If the state fails to restore the support that made the University of California into the country's leading public university system, I fear my daughter will not have the opportunity to find her passion.

-- *Marjorie Miller*