Area colleges fielding more interest

BY KAITLIN MULHERE / SENTINEL STAFF

Following a year of leadership changes, officials at area universities and colleges say they're optimistic about 2014, despite continued financial constraints and increased competition for students.

The ride isn't smooth yet, Franklin Pierce University President James F. Birge said.

"Higher education today, whether it's public or private, is a dicey enterprise," he said.

But with continued interest from college-age students, as well as the successful growth of new programs, especially in the health sciences, Birge, along with the leaders of Antioch University New England, Keene State College, and River Valley Community College, say they're excited for the future of their respective schools.

Enrollment/tuition

Enrollment at the 5,500-student Keene State is on track to hold steady next year, and President Anne E. Huot said she doesn't foresee any major growth in the school's size in coming years.

This year's entering class, with 1,258 students, was a rebound from a smaller fall 2012 enrollment of 1,186. Meanwhile, the college's yield rate, or the number of students who are offered acceptance and then enroll, is up 1 percent.

Those are both positive signs at a time when the overall number of high school graduates in New England is dropping and families are being increasingly selective about schools, Huot said.

The leaders of the area's other three higher education institutions, though, spoke of plans to grow the number of students at their schools in the future, even if only marginally in 2014.

Enrollment at Franklin Pierce was down slightly between 2012 and 2013, but it's still trending up when considered in a five-year frame, Birge said. The university has roughly 1,400 undergraduates at Rindge and 600 students served through its four College of Graduate and Professional Studies centers.

By 2017, the university wants to increase system-wide enrollment to 2,500, with about 1,550 students on the Rindge campus, achieved by subtle annual increases in enrollment.

When he first arrived over the summer, Antioch New England President Stephen B. Jones said he hoped to expand the school's reach by significantly increasing enrollment over the next several years.

This fall, Antioch was slightly behind its enrollment goal, with 265 new students instead of the 280 they'd planned for with a $14 million operating budget. But Jones said the university, which has just over 1,000 students, is still planning for a modest enrollment increase for next year, and the budget will reflect that.

Finally, River Valley has created a new committee aimed at increasing enrollment and student retention rates. The community college hopes to grow enrollment between 2 percent and 4 percent next year and by about 25 percent in the next five years.

"I know when you first hear that number it sounds pretty ambitious," President Alicia B. Harvey-Smith said. "But we don't feel we're at capacity in our catchment area."

Right now, there are 1,300 students taking courses through River Valley in credit, non-credit and Project Running Start classes at area high schools. About 22 percent of that population takes classes out of the school's Keene Academic Center.

All of the schools also plan to continue looking for ways to keep the price of their degrees from out-pricing prospective students.

The Community College System of New Hampshire is currently looking for ways to decrease the charge per credit, and Keene State College is in the second year of an in-state tuition freeze set by the University System of New Hampshire.

Fees, room and board, and out-of-state tuition costs at Keene State will be decided by the end of January.

Franklin Pierce has held tuition flat for two of the past three years, meaning the class of 2013 saw only a 4 percent increase in tuition.
levels during their time at the university.

"We want to remain very sensitive to that, to a family's ability to pay," Birge said. "But at the same time, we know we have rising costs to operate an institution."

When Birge started in his role in 2009, the university ranked among the priciest of schools in its comparative set. Now, with tuition at $29,100 and a cost of attendance of about $42,500, the university is in the middle of that list.

"But (in 2013) we still found that families were in need of greater discounts," Birge said.

**Developing infrastructure**

River Valley is the only school with significant construction plans for 2014.

Construction on the school's $2.9 million renovation project, the largest changes to the Claremont campus in several years, began in the fall and will wrap up this summer.

Changes include new labs and technology for the health sciences department, new faculty offices, replacing the dining hall with a new cafe and remodeling hallways and classrooms.

"It's going to be a wonderful face lift for our building and inside our building," said Valerie J. Mahar, vice president of student affairs and community relations.

The project takes care of 85 percent of River Valley's infrastructure needs, Mahar said. And the school has submitted a proposal to the community college system for a phase two project that would take care of the remaining needs.

Keene State will spend much of 2014 planning for larger projects in the future, including a new visual media arts center, the first project on tap in the college's new master plan.

One exception, though, is a new $1.2 million lab for nursing students in Rhodes Hall that will open early in the spring semester. Renovation of the space cost about $600,000, but it also includes pricey equipment and software that simulates human conditions so nursing students can practice in a realistic environment before starting their clinical internships, Jay V. Kahn, vice president for finance and planning, said.

About 60 nursing students per year will use the lab, which can also be used for continuing education or training for local EMTs.

**Supporting the Monadnock area economy**

One way the schools are looking to attract students is by expanding popular new academic programs, including nursing and criminal justice at Keene State, health sciences at Franklin Pierce and a variety of education and psychology specializations at Antioch.

Keene State also aims to attract more students by working with area middle and high schools to help locals see the value of a degree from the college, Kahn said.

"We find that students are surprised that we're as competitive with many of the more desirable destinations throughout New England," he said.

Plus, as a public institution, it's Keene State's role to support the local economy, including building up the state's ranks of educated, trained young workers, Huot said. (See accompanying story.)

If a New Hampshire student leaves the state to go to college, the chances of him or her coming back after earning a degree are low, she said.

"The more we can encourage New Hampshire residents to attend schools here, the greater impact it will have on our community," Huot said.

A Keene State survey last year of 8,554 graduates from the years of 2002 and 2011 found that 46 percent are still living in New Hampshire, and of those who were New Hampshire residents when they started at Keene State, 77 percent still called the Granite State home.

River Valley tries to respond to workforce needs by focusing resources in high-demand fields, such as health care, business management, and newly launched pre-engineering. But it also supports the local economy with several non-credit courses, Harvey-Smith said.

In the past two years, nearly 200 area residents have completed WorkReadyNH at River Valley, a grant-funded program offered at all community colleges in New Hampshire. The free nine week course teaches people who are out of work or at the beginning of their career in "soft skills," such as communication, problem solving, resume and interview technique and workplace etiquette.

River Valley also recently completed its second machine tool boot camp, a free two-week intensive school that teaches general machinist skills so participants can get hired by area manufacturers. Roughly 150 students have participated.

Next year the community college would like to expand customized training such as the boot camp to other industry areas, Harvey-Smith said.

As a strictly graduate school, Antioch's role in developing the local workforce looks different than the other schools, Jones said. Roughly two-thirds of the school's students are seeking a master's degree and the rest are working on their doctoral degrees, and southwestern New Hampshire will only need a certain number of clinical psychologists with doctorates' degrees, for example, Jones said.

He foresees agreements such as one that Antioch recently made with Landmark College, where six of the college's staff members are taking a class offered through Antioch on autism.

That same kind of partnership, to provide training or education to local workers, could be set up with area schools or with local hospitals, say, to get training in specialized training in psychology.

Jones also spoke about the unique opportunity Antioch, Franklin Pierce, River Valley and Keene State have to work together to ensure that both graduates and employers have what they need to grow in this area. "It's really serendipitous that the four of us don't really compete," he said.

Jones mentioned the potential for a joint bachelor and master's degree program, where qualified students could come straight to Antioch from Keene State. He also spoke of plans this year for the schools to expand their conversations with local business leaders about ways to build an appealing community and workplace for young graduates.

"The talent drain is something nobody can address in isolation."