

Boston Business Journal

An A for enrollment: Area colleges hold their own in drawing students

By [Mary Moore](#)

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The economy has not taken the deep hit on enrollment at private colleges and universities in Massachusetts that higher education experts had expected and, in fact, freshman class numbers and total student body sizes have increased over last year, according to data provided by a number of schools throughout the state.

Some college admissions professionals are scratching their heads in confusion over the shift, and of course all of them consider it a pleasant surprise.

The most competitive colleges and universities — [W Harvard University](#), [W Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) and [W Boston College](#), for example — can count on high numbers of incoming and retaining students. Like clockwork, Boston College every year receives about 30,000 applications for 2,250 freshman slots, said spokesman Jack Dunn.

But small and niche colleges and universities have had to work harder in recent years to keep their numbers up — recruiting new students from outside their traditional geographies, increasing their national and international profiles, offering new student services, and, for those that once were single-sex institutions, marketing their new co-ed status.

Some private colleges and universities did not participate in this story. [W Bentley University](#) and [W Gordon College](#) declined to provide information, and [W Wentworth Institute of Technology](#) and [W Suffolk University](#) did not respond with data by deadline.

Enrollment data provided by the schools that did participate will not be final until the fall. However, colleges and universities, some of them already close to orientation, by and large appear to have skated through one of the most important decision-making periods — called “summer melt” — when the bulk of students who accept freshman seats at more than one college or university settle on their final choices.

This year, fewer students have changed their minds, said Kathy Dawley, president of [W Maguire Associates](#), a Concord higher education consulting firm.

“It is, in a way puzzling. We all anticipated coming into the second full year of recession-related outcomes for families that we might begin to see more of a public preference, particularly for in-state students, but that has not come to fruition,” Dawley said.

And more current students are staying enrolled, leaving a few colleges with maxed-out facilities and forcing some to scale back on freshman classes this year. [W Berklee College of Music](#), for one, is “pretty much as high as we can go,” said Mark Campbell, vice president for enrollment.

The college five years ago launched an in-person audition and interview requirement for admission that has created a more competitive process than ever, Campbell said, and applications have increased 50 percent.

One higher education consultant suggested the recession actually might be a boon for higher education.

“It’s a good time to go to school, when the economy is down,” said Joe Cronin, Sr., president of [W Advisors Inc.](#), based in Quincy. “There are no jobs and school becomes a better option.”

Schools are not lowering their academic standards and accepting more marginal students to fill seats or tapping deeper into their wait lists, Dawley said, which might be an immediate presumption. And financial aid is not the lure, she added.

Although most schools this year have increased total financial aid dollars, those increases are a bit misleading. With larger enrollment and higher tuition, financial aid actually does not comprise a higher percentage of overall budgets, Dawley said.

Tuition increases at schools that responded to Business Journal inquiries ranged from 2.8 percent to more than 6 percent. From 2009 to 2010, the Consumer Price index grew by 2.7 percent.

So what’s working, then? Each college and university has a theory about what makes it attractive in tight times. [W Regis College](#), for one, is starting its fourth co-ed class this fall.

“My personal feeling is that one reason we’re up significantly this year is that the public is beginning to recognize us as a true co-ed institution,” said Paul Vaccaro, Regis’ vice president of admissions and marketing.

The Weston campus, which expects 300 freshmen in the fall, will see a 30 percent increase in male students this year compared to last year, Vaccaro said, and the total enrollment is approximately 26 percent male. Regis also has made an \$8.5 million investment in an outdoor athletic complex.

[W Babson College](#)’s admissions jump coincides with its high standings on rankings and surveys, particularly for entrepreneurship programs, and more national and international exposure for the school’s president, Leonard A. Schlesinger, said Grant M. Gosselin, dean of undergraduate admissions.

“There’s been a lot of attention put on Babson and the students we enroll talk about those things,” Gosselin said.

Recruiting more students from mid-Atlantic states and other regions of the country is the way [W Stonehill College](#) is building its masses, expecting 725 freshmen in the fall, up from 683 the previous year, said Eileen O’Leary, assistant vice president of student financial services. The college built a new \$20 million dormitory to accommodate the growth. It’s set to open this fall.

Regis is recruiting in Florida, home to many Massachusetts transplants and offering direct flights into Boston.

When it comes to higher education, Massachusetts has a certain something, particularly with its high four-year graduation rates, said Richard Doherty, president of the [W Association of Independent Colleges and Universities](#) in Massachusetts.

“That’s of value to people,” Doherty said. “That’s one of the items that pops up as a differentiator. It’s a proven commodity.”