

As the population of high school graduates declines nationwide, Midwest and East Coast colleges are hoping to attract California students to keep their enrollment numbers steady.

By Larry Gordon
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Dory Streett didn't beat around the bush when she spoke to students recently at a high school near downtown Los Angeles about Colby College, a liberal arts school in Maine. It's 3,000 miles from home, there's snow for long stretches and its community of Waterville has only 16,000 residents.

"It's almost as far as you can get," the recruiter told a dozen seniors at Gertz-Ressler High School. The photos she showed of Colby's bucolic campus did seem a galaxy away to many of the mainly low-income students whose school sits beside the Santa Monica Freeway.

But Streett, who also emphasized Colby's small classes and generous financial aid, urged students to consider a college outside Southern California: "It's for kids who want something different . . . who know they will be in urban areas most of their lives and want to try something different for four years."

It's a message heard more often in California these days, as East Coast and Midwest colleges face an anticipated drop in their local applicant pools and cast a wider net for prospective students.

After a decade of campus-crowding growth, the size of the nation's high school graduating class has begun to decline with this year's seniors, and is projected to drop 4.5% by 2014. Then, modest growth is expected to resume.

The change, however, is uneven across the country, with the deepest dips -- up to 20% over the next few years -- forecast for New England and Upper Midwest states, home to numerous colleges.

Schools from those regions are boosting recruiting in California and other populous states, including Texas, Florida and Arizona, and looking for more students overseas, especially from China and India.

The population trend "certainly concerns schools in the Midwest and the Northeast. And it will force many . . . to start recruiting outside of their traditional regions," said Tony Pals, a spokesman for the National Assn. of Independent Colleges and Universities.

Another trend may further reduce the collegegoing population, experts say. A growing portion of U.S. high school graduates are Latinos, who traditionally have lower rates of college attendance than whites. Unless that changes, the drop in potential freshmen may be even steeper.

Uncertainty about the economy and families' abilities to pay also is forcing colleges, especially private ones, to scramble to make sure enough qualified students apply.

"Postsecondary institutions accustomed to filling entering classes with relative ease will likely face greater competition for fewer traditional-age students," declared an influential report, "Knocking at the College Door," released this year by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Felema Yemane, a senior at Los Angeles' Pilgrim School, says she is nervous about applying to college but hopes the demographic decline will boost her chances.

"Just the fact that it's a little bit smaller gives us a little more chance," said Yemane, who is applying to private and public schools on the East Coast and in California.

Admissions officials say the change is unlikely to make it easier to get accepted by the most prestigious universities, such as Harvard and Princeton, which reject 90 percent of applicants. Nevertheless, those schools say they want to keep up their West Coast recruiting and let potential students know of the sweetened financial-aid deals wealthy colleges can offer.

"I think we are all very aware of the demographics and the changing nature of our applicant pool," said Janet Lavin Rapelye, dean of admissions at Princeton.

But for the next few years, students applying to colleges a notch below the top tier may find it a bit easier to land a spot.

Local high school counselors say they are hearing from more schools around the country that want to send representatives. "We are finding schools recruiting in California that we haven't seen in the past," said Helene Kunkel, a college advisor at Palisades Charter High School.

However, Kunkel said Southern Californians may not be attracted to those campuses if they are far away or lack a familiar brand name. "They do have an uphill battle with some of the kids here," she said.

Even so, this year for the first time, Central College in Iowa and Quinnipiac University in Connecticut are sending envoys to Southern California. Others, including Northeastern University in Boston and the Rochester Institute of Technology in upstate New York, have established California offices or placed full-time recruiters here.

Still others, including the University of Vermont, the University of Connecticut, Michigan's Kalamazoo College and Minnesota's College of St. Benedict-St. John's University are coming more often and visiting more schools.

Kalamazoo is boosting recruiting outside the Midwest because of demographics and because Michigan's economic decline makes it difficult for some local families to attend, said Eric Staab, dean of admissions. "It is no longer a time to be a regional college," he said.

The University of Connecticut, where a third of undergraduates are out-of-staters, has sharply increased the time its recruiters spend in California. "As we looked at that receding tide, we decided to have a strategy in place and build our name brand," said Lee Melvin, director of undergraduate admissions.

Central College in Iowa anticipates what admissions dean Carol Williamson calls "incredibly tight competition" from other Iowa schools for students. So she is sending a representative to California for two weeks this fall and again in the spring.

Williamson concedes that Iowa might be an unusual spot for a Los Angeles student, but said the school wants young people who are "willing to step outside their normal box and say, 'I want a different experience.' "

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of high school graduates in the U.S. peaked this spring with about 3.35 million "Echo Boom" youngsters, offspring of Baby Boomers. The number is projected to drop by about 18,000 next spring and continue to decline for the next five years.

New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, Kansas, Montana, North Dakota, Michigan, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania are projected to have significant dips while states such as Texas, Florida and Arizona are slated for growth.

California is in a universe of its own. The "College Door" report estimates that the number of California students graduating from high school peaked at 423,615 in 2008. The state projects a slight decrease for 2009 and a nearly 7% decline by 2017.

However, California's population of young people will remain the largest by far -- about double that of Florida and New York - and will continue to draw recruiters.

That's one reason Colby College, which enrolls half its 1,870 students from New England, sent Streett to California this fall to visit more than 40 schools in two weeks. At a college fair last month at Los Angeles Trade-Technical College, she stood shoulder-to-shoulder with representatives of other East Coast colleges, including Middlebury, Mount Holyoke and Bates.

Southern California is a good place to look for ethnic and geographic diversity, Streett told the Gertz-Ressler students, who were mainly Latino and black. "We want that," she said. "That is very attractive to us and that's why we spend a couple weeks out here."

That was good news to Carlos Ramos, a Gertz-Ressler senior who attended recent presentations by several East Coast schools and expects to apply to some of them. Ramos, 17, said he heard a clear message from the out-of-state colleges:

"They definitely want L.A. kids to be there," he said.

Gordon is a Times staff writer.