William Wischusen teaches Biology 1201 to a class of 900 students inside the auditorium in the LSU Cox Communications Academic Center in August. LSU's ratio of students to faculty has been rising steadily amid budget woes.

Budget cuts derail plans to improve national standing

BY REBEKAH ALLEN
rallen@theadvocate.com

Since the late 1800s, LSU's status within Louisiana has been secure. It's the unchallenged big dog, easily the largest and best-performing public university in the Pelican State.

But the Tiger brand has less cachet elsewhere. Across America, LSU is best known for its perennially formidable football team and its dependable ranking as one of the nation's top "party schools." Academics? Research? Not so much.

A dozen years ago, the university's leaders took a long look in the mirror and decided it was time to change all that. They envisioned a flagship institution that scholars would take seriously. They dreamed LSU would one day join the ranks of the Association of American Universities, a who's-who of top research institutions that includes elite private schools such as Harvard, Yale and Duke, as well as celebrated public peers like the University of Florida, the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M.

The resulting multiyear "Flagship Agenda" was focused on boosting LSU's prestige. The No. 1 priority of the oft-quoted blueprint was that the school would hire a minimum of 150 top-notch faculty. "There was an excitement...." Sources: College Measures, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics

Starting salaries for graduates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Starting salary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. 20</td>
<td>$49,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 33</td>
<td>$2,818</td>
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</table>

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By the Numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Student headcount</th>
<th>Average ACT score for freshmen</th>
<th>Percent on TOPS</th>
<th>Student to faculty ratio</th>
<th>Graduation rate*</th>
<th>Tuition and fees</th>
<th>Total funding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LSU</td>
<td>31,527</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>52.9%</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>$9,660</td>
<td>$528.9 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ULL-Lafayette</td>
<td>17,508</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
<td>$8,244</td>
<td>$143.6 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNO</td>
<td>8,423</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>$8,154</td>
<td>$101.3 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Graduation rates lag by 6 years, so the 2014 graduation rate reflects the fall 2008 cohort.

Note: Figures are for the most recent year available (2014 or 2015).

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Flagship continued from page IA

...of where we could go and what we could do," said William Jenkins, who has served as LSU chancellor and as system president and is now retired. "It was a wonderful spirit."

But the goals were never met, in part because cuts in state aid became a rite of spring starting in 2009. Over the past few years, instead of trying to buoyish LSD's brand, university officials have spent much of their time trying to simply contain the damage to it.

Compared with its fellow Louisiana schools, LSU has little to complain about. Enrollment is up; average ACT scores are up; spending is up.

Among the state's 14 four-year public universities, LSU is the only one that has seen its overall revenue go up appreciably since 2008, thanks to dramatic increases in tuition and fees. A handful of its peers have been gashed.

But while spared the ax, relatively speaking, has hardly led to a celebratory mood in Tiger Town.

On LSU's graceful campus, with its distinctive Spanish-style architecture and sprawling live oaks, talk often turns to the dozens of top researchers and faculty members who have left for greener pastures amid the uncertainty of recent years, taking with them millions in research grants and contracts.

The hope that LSU might shoot up in the prestige sweepstakes seems quaint today: LSU is now ranked No. 129 on U.S. News & World Report's often criticized but still coveted annual list of the nation's best universities. That's one spot up from where it was in 2008.

"Have our goals been realized? I don't think anyone can honestly say they have been," said Jenkins, who came out of retirement in 2012 to serve as interim chancellor and president again for a year before F. King Alexander was hired.

"We could have been so much further ahead."

An ambitious vision

The Flagship Agenda was unveiled in 2003, with the expectation that hiring and academic benchmarks would be met by 2010. Part of the plan was to keep enrollment below 30,000 students to make LSU more selective.

But instead of steadily growing budgets — and higher and higher student spending — LSU saw its state support start to shrink in 2009 amid a national recession. The cuts would become an annual ritual, and instead of ticking off steps on its to-do list, LSU's administration had to focus on playing defense. And administrators started increasing enrollment to offset state budget cuts with tuition.

"While it was very important for us to think about where we wanted to be in the future, the budget cuts were so drastic that it wasn't realistic to spend your time planning," said John Maxwell Hamilton, who served as LSU provost and executive vice chancellor from 2010 to 2012, when the school absorbed huge cuts in state aid. "It wasn't possible to spend your time thinking about where you would go when you were really thinking about where you could preserve."

Since the cuts began, state appropriations to the flagship have been cut by more than half, from $250 million to roughly $120 million in the last fiscal year. (That number was boosted slightly in the current year.)

Like every other institution in the state, LSU has made up most of the difference with tuition hikes. Seven years ago, LSU got 58 percent of its money from state taxpayers, with most of the rest coming from fees and tuition. Now, the state contributes only about a quarter of LSU's budget.

Stafford Palmieri, who was deputy chief of staff and then commissioner of administration for Gov. Bobby Jindal, said the state's cutbacks reflect national trends. She categorically rejected the notion that LSU has been hurt.

"It's wrong to argue that the state has somehow given up on the Flagship Agenda or that LSU is in worse shape than it was, based on the fact that they're graduating more students now," she said.

With the school relying so much on tuition, LSU had to abandon the idea of capping its enrollment and becoming more selective.

"Institutions have never been more important ... because campuses such as ours are watching the state ultimately dwindle on its overall long-term support of the university," Alexander said, adding that it's a balancing act to make sure the school doesn't take in more students than it can handle.

Less bang for buck

It's debatable whether the cuts in state aid have diminished LSU's overall quality.

But it's undeniable that LSU