UNO struggling to recover since Katrina

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Joy Ballard had a tough decision to make when the University of New Orleans eliminated several degree programs in late 2014 — including hers.

Dwindling state funding, dramatic enrollment drops and a yearslong, multimillion-dollar structural deficit led then-President Peter Fos to put seven programs on the immediate chopping block and target others for restructuring.

Ballard, 24, had earned her master’s in political science at UNO in May 2014, and she was working toward a doctorate. Her program was cut last year.

"It was rough for me after feeling like each spring you, "he said.

Tight state-mandated admissions requirements that have seen its student body shrink by about 750 students could no longer reduce an already low enrollment. He estimates that after feeling like each spring you, "he said.

The uncertain climate has led some of the fall-off has to do with Katrina, of course, but the flood isn’t the only culprit. Enrollment at UNO has fallen by 26 percent since Jindal took office in 2008. It’s the steepest decline recorded by any four-year public school in the state over that period.

Like Louisiana’s other universities, UNO has turned to increased tuition and student fees to fill the gap. But the Freefalling enrollment has made that a challenge, too.

Current and former faculty members and administrators say a variety of factors have stymied UNO’s recovery: annual anxiety over additional cuts and potential layoffs; longer hours and bigger course loads; and a vacuum in leadership marked by a revolving door of top administrators. The school currently is seeking a new president.

During a recent public forum, many faculty members and students told a search committee that UNO needs a "healer," someone who would provide "strong leadership" and work alongside faculty to make decisions.

Budget cuts and a void at the top aren’t UNO’s only challenges. Tighter state-mandated admissions standards also have weeded out hundreds of students in metro New Orleans.

Students enrolled in the city’s public schools have averaged an 18.8 on the ACT in 2014, about a point behind the statewide average. Under the new standards, that’s roughly the minimum score a student can achieve, and a score that low also requires a minimum 2.5 GPA.

The effect of the changes is apparent in the school’s changing demographics. Before Katrina struck, about 1 in 4 UNO students was black; last year, it was roughly 1 in 7.

Setback after setback

Fos, who took over in 2012 and retired this month, was given the unenviable job of shrinking an institution several years too late. He blames his predecessors for not making the hard decisions to reduce UNO’s footprint when enrollment didn’t bounce back after the storm.

The same year Fos took over, the state ordered UNO and several other universities to stop offering remedial courses to freshmen who were not ready for college coursework.

Fos — a New Orleans native and UNO graduate — was appointed to find his alma mater in such disarray.

It wasn’t long before he faced his first budget challenge: In his first year, the state cut its support by more than $9 million. Then, the new admission requirements took effect, further reducing an already low enrollment. He estimates that about 750 students could no longer enroll at UNO in fall 2012.

"You couldn’t have planned a worse scenario for me, to be honest with you," he said.

To cope with less revenue, Fos made a number of controversial cutbacks, deep-sixing academic programs, eliminating hundreds of jobs and closing a popular on-campus day care center.

Mostly through attrition, UNO’s faculty has shrunk considerably, from 199 professors in 2005 to 91 professors in 2015. As colleagues left and weren’t replaced, faculty members who stayed had to pick up added responsibilities — including teaching more classes — after going years without a raise.

The uncertain climate has left some faculty to pack up sooner than they had anticipated. Net long after being hired as a UNO professor in 2005, Rene Ehrenfeucht was named chairwoman of the school’s Planning and Urban Studies department, viewed as one of UNO’s stronger areas. Her research has focused on how environments shape urban life; in post-Katrina New Orleans, she studied disaster recovery and how cities react to prolonged population loss.

Ehrenfeucht, 45, was thriving at UNO and had no plans to look for a job elsewhere. Her outlook changed three years ago, after feeling like each spring ushered in another round of cuts.

"In the last year, with the end less talk of financial exigency being taught by part-time instructors with less experience, “many of whom are good, some of whom are not as good,” he said. But right now, “we’re trying the kind of research agenda and breadth of knowledge,”

At UNO, Baxter has a few things left to finish before retiring, he said, but he’s working on an exit strategy. "I’ve figured out that I can’t outlive this crisis," he said.

Trying new things

Hoping to reverse its recent fortunes, UNO is trying new ideas, including targeting transfer students and people from along the Gulf Coast outside Louisiana. The university also has sought to establish a new School of the Arts in hopes of drawing students to New Orleans’ cultural sector.

Another fix that’s been discussed: overhauling the admissions standards to which they were before the reforms.

Fos had said he’d support such a change, though it would create some political and philosophical blowback.

Fos noted that part of the idea behind raising the standards was that stricter standards would push more students to enroll at a two-year school, like Delgado Community College, and then transfer to UNO. But ultimately, that hasn’t happened. Delgado’s enrollment is down too, he said, and its transfers to UNO have fallen off by a quarter.

"Everybody thought that the year after Katrina, everybody would come back, and it didn’t happen," he said.

As he neared the end of his tenure, Fos had no delusions about his legacy at UNO, where he was chairman of UNO’s history department, had grown increasingly frustrated.

"Basically, I lost my confidence in the institution as a whole," said Fos, who has since left for a similar post at Augusta University in Georgia.

"I have not regretted moving," he added. "I do miss living in New Orleans and miss being part of the UNO experience, but I don’t regret this from the point of view of my career and my job satisfaction."

Those who have stayed at UNO, meanwhile, aren’t necessarily feeling fulfilled.

"I’ve worked harder than I ever have in the last couple of years," said Vern Baxter, the head of the sociology department and a member of UNO’s faculty for more than three decades. "I’m not optimistic, and I’m not pessimistic."

Since 2010, Baxter’s department has shrunk by more than half. That’s led to more courses