

# State's colleges enroll 141,501, a 3% uptick

UCA's 13% growth is tops; campuses still struggle to hold down dropout rate

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The state's college and university population increased about 3 percent this fall, reaching a largest-ever enrollment of 141,501 students, officials at the state Department of Higher Education announced Tuesday.

The preliminary numbers — driven up slightly by last-minute enrollments of students displaced by Hurricane Katrina — show the University of Central Arkansas had the largest campus growth. The Conway school saw a head-count upswing of about 13 percent to 11,375 students.

Arkansas Tech University in Russellville had the next-largest percentage growth, up 5.5 percent to 6,841 students. The University of Arkansas at Fayetteville reached 17,821 in its preliminary count, a 3.2 percent increase.

Public four-year schools grew 3.2 percent. Enrollment in the state's public two-year campuses increased 3.3 percent to 29,517 students. Private schools in Arkansas experienced growth of less than 1 percent — about 120 students.

The growth continues a

trend that began several years ago. Since 2001, enrollment in the state has increased 16.3 percent, or 19,863 students.

"Increasingly, Arkansas citizens and residents are recognizing the value of a college diploma," said Ron Harrell, the department's assistant director of planning and accountability. "They realize that having a college education helps them achieve higher earnings to support their family."

But increases in enrollment do not necessarily translate to a boost in graduation rates and retention. Arkansas institutions are trying to improve in these areas.

As new students come into the system, administrators are also thinking about what it costs to educate them. Executives at many campuses have complained that they are underfunded by the state and that they don't like increasing the student's burden with tuition increases.

Many said Tuesday, however, that the costs can't deter schools from their mission.

"Whether we have increases

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