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## America's 'melt' is swamped by an undergraduate deluge

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By **Jon Marcus**

Fears of mass dropouts prove unfounded as institutions struggle with record intakes. Jon Marcus reports

In a quiet rural corner of New York near the famous town of Woodstock, the public university in New Paltz seems anything but idyllic this autumn.

Throngs of students crowd dormitories three apiece in rooms designed for two. Faculty members occupy temporary trailers. The noise and dust of construction is everywhere.

Like many US universities, the State University of New York, New Paltz, has seen robust enrolment this autumn, in spite of dire predictions that high unemployment, money worries and rising tuition fees - up 15 per cent there - would reduce demand.

The fear of a so-called "melt" of students between the spring and autumn semesters prompted private universities to admit more people than usual, vastly increase financial aid and other incentives to coax students back, and even poach undergraduates from each other.

But while some students have melted away and not returned, many schools report that they have compensated - even overcompensated - for these losses, overburdening facilities to the extent that they have been required to find more housing, hire temporary part-time faculty and extend teaching hours to nights and weekends to accommodate the influx.

"It's a bustling place. We're at capacity," David Eaton, vice-president for enrolment management at New Paltz, said with evident relief.

"Everybody was concerned about being able to predict how this was going to turn out. The whole thing centres on trends and past experience. You develop predictive models. But pinning your expectations on that, given the instability of the economy, would have been foolish, so I think everybody was very cautious."

The stakes were high. "In bad economic times, the worst thing that can happen to an institution is to undershoot your enrolment targets," Mr Eaton added.

"Lower than expected enrolments translate directly into lower than expected revenues."

### **Come back next year**

In fact, the opposite has happened. Ithaca College, also in New York, overshot its goal for freshers by almost 20 per cent. It built a temporary dormitory in just six weeks to cope with the numbers and is paying some students to return next year and others to live off campus.

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, admitted more students than usual, too, and ended up with 115 more than planned in a first-year class that normally numbers about 1,200.

It had to lease a bed-and-breakfast hotel near campus and reopen an old dormitory to house them, as well as hiring temporary part-time faculty to teach them.

While Atlanta's Emory University saw 59 students melt away over the summer out of 1,359 who had paid tuition deposits, it still beat its enrolment target by admitting more students than usual and extending financial aid to more of them.

"We felt we were going to need a pretty big cushion, so we ended up taking more than 100 students off the waiting list," said

Jean Jordan, Emory's dean of undergraduate admissions.

Like other universities, Emory also kept in constant touch over the summer with students who had been admitted. "They were probably tired of hearing from us: 'We hope you're still coming and let me tell you about all the great things we have,'" Ms Jordan said.

"But we really felt like we needed to make sure we weren't going to be under target."

The University of New Haven, Connecticut, kept in touch with students via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, and ended up enrolling its largest-ever incoming class. New Paltz also used Facebook and online chat rooms to communicate with students through the summer.

The American University Washington saw 4 per cent of its students "melt" away, but admitted enough to exceed its target and enrol the second-largest class in its history. Nearly 28 per cent more students than usual fell under the income level that made them eligible for government tuition grants.

### **Mixed blessing**

Enrolment also rose by 600 students at DePaul University, Chicago, to an all-time record of 25,000, thanks largely to its efforts to make it easier for undergraduates to transfer from other institutions. DePaul also significantly increased the financial aid it made available. Eighty-five per cent of students applied for it, compared with 75 per cent last year.

"We saw a higher number of freshmen and their families file appeals after receiving their financial-aid packages, saying that their circumstances had changed," said David Kalsbeek, DePaul's vice-president for enrolment management.

The results are a mixed blessing. Those students who did not return - and even at New Paltz, about 8 per cent of students who paid tuition deposits failed to show up - may have switched to lower-cost two-year community colleges, taken a year off or dropped out permanently. There is no way to tell, and no plan to find out.

Universities cannot continue for ever to shower students with financial aid. But as the economic uncertainty persists, they cannot predict what will happen next year, either.

"It's a year-to-year thing," Ms Jordan said. "You really don't know what's going to happen."

"Last year, I don't think students knew that all of this was coming down. But now that people have been affected by the economy, the question is whether they will even apply."