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Mizzou's Freshman Enrollment Has Dropped by 35% in 2 Years. Here's What's Going On.

By Sarah Brown MAY 20, 2017 PREMIUM



Bill Greenblatt, UPI, Newscom

Mun Y. Choi, the new president of the U. of Missouri system: "There are perhaps families who are in Missouri and beyond Missouri who believe that the events of the fall of 2015 were much more serious than they were. There was a sense that it was a campus that was in turmoil. That's not true."

This fall the University of Missouri at Columbia will welcome its smallest freshman class in nearly two decades. As of this month, just 4,009 first-time freshmen

had made enrollment deposits, a decline of 35 percent from the 2015 class of 6,191 students.

The precipitous drop is striking for a public flagship with a prominent national brand, one that has seen enrollment grow almost every year since the turn of the century.

In 2015 the student population reached a record high of 35,448. Come August, Mizzou plans to enroll about 30,700 students over all. Seven of its residence halls will be closed temporarily.

What happened during that two-year period is common knowledge: the [November 2015 protests](#) by students of color, who criticized what they perceived as administrative indifference to their concerns about racism. Their demands for change inspired protests that are still reverberating on other campuses today.



Turmoil at Mizzou

Last fall student protests over race relations rocked the University of Missouri at Columbia. Now Mizzou's leaders are striving to meet students' demands while restoring stability and the public's faith in their institution.

After a graduate student's hunger strike and a [boycott by members of the football team](#), Timothy M. Wolfe, then the Missouri system's president, [resigned](#). So did R. Bowen Loftin, the Mizzou chancellor.

Then debates about campus free speech were sparked by [Melissa Click](#), at the time an assistant professor of communication. Ms. Click was infamously videotaped calling for "some muscle" to block a student journalist trying to cover the protests. She was fired last year and [now teaches at Gonzaga University](#).

University officials were bracing for a decline, given the national attention the protests attracted. Other factors have also put pressure on enrollment, such as fewer high-school graduates in Missouri.

But Mun Y. Choi, the [new system president](#), said no one expected the fallout to be this bad.

The Chronicle spoke with administrators, faculty members, and enrollment experts to try to figure out why Mizzou has lost so many freshmen, what it means for the university, and what might be done about it.

A negative public perception of Mizzou is the main reason for the drop, university officials said.

The protests represent something different to each cohort of prospective students, Barbara Rupp, Mizzou's former director of admissions, told the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#) after [last year's enrollment decline](#).

Missouri students from rural areas are often critical of the university's response to the protesters, and express negative opinions about Ms. Click, Ms. Rupp said. Students of color wonder whether the campus will be the right fit for them.

Out-of-state students "don't really have a sense of what's going on, and they are relying on what they are seeing and hearing in the media," she said at the time.

Mr. Choi, who joined the university system in March, said officials had learned important lessons from the upheaval and had taken steps to deal with the concerns of students of color.

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But he said the popular narrative about the protests wasn't entirely accurate, and he pinned much of the blame on "overblown" news accounts. Some news-media coverage, he said, had painted a misleading picture of Mizzou as unsafe and the demonstrations as violent, and had failed to mention that "the campus was in fact safe, was never shut down, classes were being held, and research was being conducted." "There are perhaps families who are in Missouri and beyond Missouri who believe that the events of the fall of 2015 were much more serious than they were," he said. "There was a sense that it was a campus that was in turmoil. That's not true."

Given the number of college options available to prospective students and their parents, said John Gahl, a professor of electrical and computer engineering, it's easy for them to throw out one institution if there's any scandal or distraction.

Not only did the protests probably prompt many high-school seniors to cross Mizzou off of their short list of colleges, Mr. Gahl said, but juniors starting their college search at the time may never have put the university on their list at all.

It's not just the protests. Other factors are playing a role.

Missouri is not projected to grow much in population in the near future, said Pelema I. Morrice, Mizzou's vice provost for enrollment management. Neither are bordering states like Illinois and Iowa, from which Missouri pulls many of its students.

In terms of its number of high-school graduates, Missouri is in the middle of a dip that will last at least a few more years, said Joe Garcia, president of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

The University of Illinois system is making a concerted effort to expand its enrollment, a move that has probably lured away some prospective Mizzou students, Mr. Gahl said.

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Berkley Hudson, an associate professor of journalism, said administrators had been tentative over the past couple of years and had lacked a cohesive strategy to deal with many issues, including enrollment.

"They're afraid Mizzou will lose state money if they don't behave the way the legislature wants them to behave," he said. "Institutionally, there's been a fear of being bold." He noted, though, that he's had a good impression of Mr. Choi so far.

Another problem is not unique to Missouri: a loss of international students who are perhaps wary of the Trump administration and the president's hard-line views on immigration and Islam. Mr. Morrice said Mizzou had "some international markets that we've got some concerns about."

On a positive note, Mr. Morrice said, student retention is good. About 85 percent of the 2015 freshman class enrolled as sophomores, he said, the third-highest rate in institutional history.

At least one member of the Missouri system's board believes administrators got complacent after years of growth.

David L. Steelman, a former state lawmaker and lawyer who's served on the system's Board of Curators since 2014, said he didn't think Mizzou had been proactive about recruitment for some time because it had had little trouble attracting students.

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"Simply, the University of Missouri — it's been over five, six, seven, eight years — got fat and happy," Mr. Steelman told St. Louis's [CBS affiliate](#) this month. Mr. Choi noted that he, Mr. Morrice, and Garnett S. Stokes, the Mizzou provost and interim chancellor, had come to the flagship campus recently, and that what administrators did before 2015 "is not something that we're familiar with."

"It's a new day," he said. "We now know that we have a system in place and a commitment to really focusing on enrollment."

Even for a large research institution like Mizzou, the enrollment drop is a big deal.

The loss of students means \$16.6 million less in revenue for the campus in the 2018 fiscal year, and less tuition money for the next several years as the smaller classes advance. In addition, the state is reducing its funding for Mizzou by \$14.7 million. So the university has to trim its overall budget by 8 to 12 percent.

Tuition will rise by 2.1 percent. In a [memo](#) on Friday, Ms. Stokes laid out a budget proposal that includes the elimination of about 330 positions, mostly through retirements, attrition, and not renewing the contracts of employees such as non-tenured faculty members. The memo says only about 84 employees will be laid off.

As state budget cuts have piled up over the past 15 to 20 years, the university has relied on enrollment growth to prop up its finances, said Mr. Gahl, the engineering professor. He serves as chair of the Faculty Council's fiscal-affairs committee.

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He said Mizzou couldn't fill the entire state-funding gap with additional tuition revenue, as many other universities have done, because a Missouri law prevents public-university tuition from rising faster than the Consumer Price Index. So Mizzou's leaders tried a different approach: "The concept was that we were going to beat this by just growing, growing, and growing."

The strategy seemed to work for a while, Mr. Gahl said. Overall enrollment at Mizzou increased annually from 2000 to 2015, with the exception of 2013.

But universities can't grow indefinitely, he said, and now officials are having to do some right-sizing. "There is a view amongst the leadership that is, Look, for the foreseeable future, we're not getting really big. We're going to be smaller, and that's what it's going to be, and that might be OK."

It's difficult to reverse enrollment declines quickly, said Don Hossler, an emeritus professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Southern California. Institutions have two primary levers to try to bolster enrollment: how selective they are, and how much financial aid they award.

"Improving marketing alone," Mr. Hossler said, "is not going to have much of a short-term effect."

Officials said they have a plan to improve the bleak enrollment picture.

New leadership will help get the university back on track, Mr. Choi said. Mizzou will soon select a permanent chancellor, its first since Mr. Loftin stepped down 18 months ago. The university has also created a committee to foster strategic enrollment management.

Once people hear "our story" about student outcomes, academic offerings, and faculty research, and come to visit the campus, Mr. Choi said, the narrative will shift — and students will come back.

Spreading that message, he said, will involve a mix of ramped-up recruiting, increased marketing, and more engagement with prospective students and families during campus visits and throughout the year.

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"We have a lot of capacity right now," he said, "and so we're going to be very active in recruiting the best and brightest students."

But one expert said treating the enrollment slide primarily as a public-perception problem was misguided. "What are you going to do — deny that these things happened?" said Richard Hesel, a principal with the Art & Science Group, a firm that consults with colleges on enrollment-management issues.

The protests and racial tensions have caused many prospective students to question whether "it's going to be a safe place to be," Mr. Hesel said. The solution? A focus on improving the campus culture, he said, through new programs and investments related to inclusion and safety. (Mizzou officials say they continue to make progress on the campus-climate efforts that began after the 2015 protests, such as increasing faculty diversity.)

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"They don't have an image problem," he said of Mizzou officials. "They have a reality problem."

In the end, it's not necessarily a bad thing that Mizzou is losing certain kinds of students, said Mr. Hudson, the journalism professor. He pointed to people who might criticize the group that led the 2015 demonstrations, a collective named for the year the university admitted its first black students.

"Maybe," he said, "we don't want students who aren't open to the issues that were raised by Concerned Student 1950."

Sarah Brown writes about a range of higher-education topics, including sexual assault, race on campus, and Greek life. Follow her on Twitter [@Brown_e_Points](#), or email her at sarah.brown@chronicle.com.