College administrators in the New Orleans area are jubilant at the start of this semester, even though some might not appear to have much reason to rejoice.

Eight of 10 institutions of higher education are enrolling more students this semester than they did a year ago, when all local colleges and universities were in a post-Katrina slump.

At the other two schools -- Tulane University and the University of New Orleans -- overall registration is down this semester, but officials there and at Xavier University are happy because of big increases in the number of first-year students: 52 percent at Tulane, 50 percent at Xavier and 10 percent at UNO.

"The numbers surprised me," said Earl Retif, Tulane's registrar. "I thought we would do well, but I didn't think we would do as well as we did."

But those numbers won't be enough to offset the lower 2006-07 enrollment at those schools, and many students in that smaller contingent will be around for several more years as they progress toward graduation.

"Clearly, a depressed class in the fall of 2006 creates a smaller continuing cohort," said Ron Maggiore, UNO's dean of admissions. "Where we're dropping is not in new students because students want to come back, but in the continuing student population."

Making things happen
College officials credit aggressive marketing and recruiting for the upswing. University leaders have routinely met with parents of prospective students to allay their fears about storms and safety, and Tulane flew in about 125 high school guidance counselors from around the country to show them the school and the city.

"They went back to their communities and became ambassadors," Retif said. "We had to make sure that . . . the word was going out that the university was back and they could have a great experience."

Another motivating factor, administrators said, was students' desire to participate in rebuilding the region.

"Loyola is in a position to attract students who are in a position to do more than build résumés," said Lori Zawistowski, the interim admissions director. "They'll be in a position to see what social justice means."

Although Zawistowski is optimistic about Loyola's enrollment prospects, she said figures will not be available until the middle of the month.

At UNO, Maggiore said, students want to return after leaving two years ago because of the storm and staying away for the 2006-07 academic year.

"They were able to stay at LSU or the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, but they want to come home," he said.

Vincent Brown said he is noticing the same phenomenon at Xavier University, where he is dean of admissions.

"These students who are coming back are committed to staying here," he said. "They're battle-tested."

Retif, who also is Tulane's vice president for enrollment management, said last year's calm hurricane season played a role in students' deciding to head to the New Orleans area.

"If something had been out in the Gulf, that number would have been diminished greatly," he said.

This year's registration totals represent progress toward regaining prehurricane enrollment levels, college officials said.

Reaching those goals, they said, is still three to five years off.

A new study shows that Hurricanes Katrina and Rita did more than lay waste to much of the Gulf Coast. About 35,000 students -- 26,000 in Louisiana and 9,000 in Mississippi -- who had been in public colleges didn't return to school last year because their lives were still in storm-related flux, according to the report that the Southern Education Foundation, an Atlanta-based education philanthropy, published last week.

"Not since the Great Depression of the 1930s has the United States witnessed so many of its own students thrown out of school," the report's authors wrote.

They also found that nearly 70 percent of the 76,000 students from New Orleans area colleges and universities dropped out for at least a semester after Katrina struck in August 2005 and Rita hit a month later.

Challenges vary

The storms' impact was hardly uniform. While Our Lady of Holy Cross College in Algiers sustained relatively minor damage, Tulane sustained upwards of $650 million in losses, and the campuses of
Xavier, Dillard University, Southern University at New Orleans, Delgado and Nunez community colleges, and Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center were overwhelmed with floodwater.

SUNO is the only local institution of higher learning that still hasn't returned to its campus. Even though it is operating out of a compound of portable buildings next to the Lake Pontchartrain levee, its enrollment jumped nearly 14 percent from last fall's figure, spokesman Harold Clark Jr. said.

In addition to advertising in newspapers and on television, radio and the Internet, Donna Grant, the new enrollment-services manager, promoted SUNO by talking at churches and community meetings and by taking fliers door to door.

"We got even more aggressive," Clark said.

At Dillard, where repairs are continuing, officials expect enrollment to stay around 1,000, the same as last fall -- and 46 percent of its pre-Katrina total.

This year, Dillard recruiters went after transfer students by recruiting at community colleges and by increasing the amount of financial aid available to men and women coming from these institutions, said Toya Barnes-Teamer, the university's vice president for student success.

The most that a transfer student could hope for used to be $2,500, she said, but that was changed to make it possible for people in this category to get a scholarship for full tuition, which amounts to $11,760 per year.

"When we started this initiative, we probably had 45 or 50 applicants" from prospective transfer students, Barnes-Teamer said. "After we got the word out to local community colleges and contacted some alumni, that went to 140 in two months. We were thrilled."

At Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, where enrollment has remained relatively steady, the problem has been recruiting teachers, especially in the School of Nursing, Chancellor Larry Hollier said.

There is a nursing shortage that LSU is striving to eliminate, he said, but the salaries that nurses can command in the private sector are much greater than what they can earn as teachers.

Consequently, Hollier said, "we are pretty much maxed out on how many students we can handle."

There have been enrollment increases this semester in the medical and nursing schools, as well as the schools of Graduate Studies, Allied Health Professions and Public Health, said Hollier, who also is the medical school's dean.

But, he said, "we're talking about relatively small numbers of increases because of the number of teachers we have."

At Delgado and Nunez, where students learn skills they can use in rebuilding the area, there were hefty enrollment increases -- 11 percent at Delgado and 27 percent at Nunez.

Delgado also is responsible for Louisiana Technical College's two Jefferson Parish campuses, where enrollment jumped this semester by 30 percent.

At Nunez Community College in hard-hit St. Bernard Parish, administrators said they were pleased at this semester's enrollment, even though it's less than half of its pre-Katrina total.

"We're not up to where we were before, but I'm impressed," spokeswoman Dorothy Harrington said.

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