



## South Jersey state colleges hit record high enrollment

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Despite decreasing enrollment numbers in colleges nationwide, South Jersey's state colleges are seeing record highs this year with the largest freshmen classes to date.

Both the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and Rowan University have seen huge increases in overall attendance, with Rowan's total enrollment reaching more than 15,000 students and Stockton totaling more than 8,000 students.

"This freshmen class is the largest yet with over 2,200 students," said Rowan spokesman Joe Cardona. "There's a lot of growth going on and [Rowan] is a much different institution than it was just a few years ago."

The Richard Stockton College has also seen an increase of 11.41 percent, bringing the number of freshmen enrolled from 1,069 students in the fall of 2013 to a current total of 1,191 students.

"The college's growth is part of a very positive trend," said Herman Saatkamp, president of Richard Stockton College. "This is the fourth straight year that Stockton has had its largest freshman class in history."

The growing number of students at Rowan University and Stockton College represents a turn away from the national decline, with both colleges experiencing consistently growing enrollment over consecutive years.

"There's a national trend right now where overall enrollment numbers are decreasing nationwide but state colleges are seeing an increase," said Cardona.

He added that more students than ever before are being drawn to South Jersey colleges due to new and more prestigious programs of study at a more affordable cost than those offered by out of state institutions.

"A lot of new programs are being offered and that has caused a lot of students who might have gone out of state before to look toward in-state schools," said Cardona. "People are looking for a value in their education. In a student's mind they want a school that's highly rated at a relatively affordable price and state colleges offer that."

Both Stockton and Rowan have earned higher school ratings this year than ever before, according to John Iacovelli, dean of enrollment management at Stockton College.

These higher ratings by third-party organizations such as the Princeton Review determine the ranking of a university, and improved numbers have convinced many students to attend college in-state in an effort to gain the most valuable degree for their money.

"There's a general trend right now where as the cost of a college education continues to rise people grow more leery of student loan debt," said Iacovelli. "The public has been forced to take a look at how they invest in their education. Students and families are weighing the cost of colleges versus what they are getting from the particular university."

In an effort to keep up with the growing student body, both Stockton and Rowan campuses are undergoing extensive redevelopment, including new buildings and programs.

In recent years, Stockton has opened a new Campus Center and a Unified Science Center with plans to expand the college further.

"We are within a few months of building Unified Science Center two and also a new additional classroom building," said Iacovelli.

Rowan University has also seen an influx in expansion, adding new buildings as well as Cooper Medical School. These improvements are part of the university's 10-year plan to increase enrollment and to gain more research funding.

With such large improvements to higher education in South Jersey, Iacovelli remains hopeful that the colleges will continue to grow despite the nationwide decrease in enrollment.

"As we look ahead, and because we are in such a volatile environment of higher education, we can't be sure where the growth trend is going," said Iacovelli. "But in the short term, especially over the next 2 or 3 years, I am optimistic that we can buck the current trend and continue to expand and follow this pattern in order to keep growing."

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