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Kerr Has Positive News For University

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University people are "far too pessimistic" about their future with declining student enrollment and tight money, former University of California system President Clark Kerr said Friday.

Kerr predicted the national drop in college and university popularity will be neither as deep nor last as long as many educators fear.

He told a luncheon audience following the dedication of UCSC's new Clark Kerr Hall that a whole new group of students — women, minorities, and people from the Southern U.S. — will take up much of the slack.

Kerr, who help found the Santa Cruz campus of the university, also called UCSC "a success, where the majority of experimental campuses in the U.S. have failed." He said it will survive well as a liberal arts campus.

"We get some scenarios of a 40 percent decrease in the college population in the next couple of decades. That, of course, would decimate higher education."

It won't happen, he predicted. Instead, the decline is likely to be closer to 10 percent and

perhaps only 5 percent for many schools of higher learning.

Some specialty colleges and universities will go out of business, but even the now-ignored liberal arts colleges will not only survive, but grow in desirability as the years shift student interest.

In less than 20 years, the shift in student majors went from 38 percent in professional fields to 68 percent in 1976, "an almost phenomenal shift in the usually stable mix of education," Kerr said. "Many students even use their elective classes for a second major so they can get a job."

This, he said, is temporary. The "baby boom" of the '40s led to a swelling peak of enrollment in colleges in 1957, the same year the number of live births in the U.S. reached record heights, and in California, another 400,000 persons were moving in.

College and university planners and educators then were planning on continued growth, with huge campuses, and were concerned the "tidal wave of students would engulf us and lower our standards."

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Former chancellor Clark Kerr at UCSC dedication.

(Sentinel photo by Bill Lovejoy)

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While campuses throughout the UC system were planning an "upper limit" of 27,500 students on the average (the same for UCSC), that was the end. Births fell to the "bare replacement level" for the population, and California's in-migration dropped to one-tenth what it was at peak.

But as time goes on, and the job-hunting graduates of the last few years grow older, "employers will be seeking more young people, and the fact it pays less to go to college today than ever before will turn around," Kerr said.

"I expect the 'rate of return' on college costs to rise again—maybe not to where it was in the 1960s, but enough to lure back many white, male students.

"Attendance by women will rise above that of white males, though. It used to be 60 percent men to 40 percent women. Now it's almost 50-50, and it will become close to 60-40 women. It's important for women to get a good education for a job, since they don't have the parental job background men have.

"The rate of college attendance by blacks will rise above the white level, not to the extent perhaps of Chinese and Japanese families where

college attendance is phenomenally high, but it will rise. The number of Hispanic students will rise in California, Florida, and New York. The Southern states will provide more and more students as that area of our country becomes more affluent, and it will come up to the national level."

By the year 2000, Kerr predicted, college attendance will be back at current levels, and "probably rise beyond that."

New faculty hired in the '60s and '70s will be retiring about then, creating a "wonderful opportunity" for the new grads.

Community and junior colleges hardly will be hurt at all, since they depend much on adult classes as well as high school graduates, and people attending adult classes "usually have considerable education to start with. Education leads to a hunger for more education."

So the current cutbacks and enrollment drops are really an opportunity for colleges and universities to catch their breath "and see what's best for them."

He did sound a mild note of warning, saying the last line in the song, "On Top of Old Smoky" has a lesson in it for educators. It goes, "I lost my true lover — for courtin' too slow."