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Greg King, IWU Dean of Admissions, on the Enrollment Exodus at Colleges and Universities

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Greg King, September 23, 2019

Charlie Schlenker: Illinois colleges and universities have been under pressure for years from smaller graduating classes out of high school, out of state competition and changing demographics. Private higher education institutions in the state face the same challenges public schools do and a couple extra. In this part of our series, enrollment exodus we open on how private colleges and universities in central Illinois cope. They are competing for pieces of a smaller pie. The number of high school graduates in the state has fallen for years. Justin Ball is the vice president for enrollment management at Bradley University in Peoria; He says it's going to get worse.

Justin Ball: I mean in 2026, you see it literally just fall off a cliff, I mean, we'll lose eight to nine percent of our entire high school graduating population over the course of one year.

Schlenker: Ball says the great recession had a big impact on family side and there's no rebound past 2033. Colleges and universities in other states had also eaten Illinois' lunch. Study shows Illinois government has under invested in need based student aid over many years – private colleges also have more challenges. The high sticker price on a selected private institution can scare off the rising number of first generation and low income kids.

Greg King: Absolutely there's a possibility, the sticker price keeps families from engaging in the process.

Schlenker: Greg King is the dean of admissions for Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington.

King: All schools, we are going to have to communicate differently, we are going to have to get out in front of that cost conversation or we're going to see applications... dry up.

Schlenker: Bradley, Eureka, and Illinois Wesleyan are private schools with a historic emphasis on the liberal arts. A generation into a national conversation about the lack of graduate in science, technology, engineering and math or STEM. King says is a tougher story to tell.

King: More and more students are really just learning about liberal arts in their conversations with us. The conversation around liberal arts isn't what it was 10-15 years ago.

Schlenker: Some schools are deciding they cannot be all things anymore. They are keeping programs in two or three strengths and ditching the rest. Justin Ball at Bradley University does not think that's wise.

Ball: When we have a young men or women who comes here to be a mechanical or electrical engineer, we know that there is a really high probability that they will end up being a part of our music programs.

Schlenker: Over at Illinois Wesleyan University, Greg King says schools who cut that deeply will know by 2030 or 2035 weather the gamble paid off. This is not to say that any institution is standing pat. They are doing strategic assessments of efficiency, quality, and enrollment across areas of study. Since they know for a decade the enrollment crunch was coming, you might think they would have done this earlier. Justin Ball admits most didn't get on it.

Ball: Colleges and universities no one would ever say "We are really nimble" [Laughs]

Shlenker: Private schools are tweaking how and where they recruit too. When the number of first generation students started trending upward a decade ago. Eureka college jumped on board with special mentoring and assistance programs. College president Jamel Wright says the school is now more than half first generation, a higher proportion in most.

College president: And because that now our first generation program is a four year program so students have an opportunity to participate in first generation programming for the entirety of their time at Eureka college.

Shlenker: Bradley University finds students from rural areas tend to have good outcomes in its engineering programs. Justin Ball says Bradley works the small town angle.

Ball: It does take more time and energy and so it—it takes more boots on the ground.

Shlenker: Schools look for community ties to share recruitment too. Bradley works cities with strong presence of workers for komatsu and caterpillar native to Peoria. Illinois Wesleyan University recruits in Sunbelt cities that have some state farm insurance hubs. Ronald Reagan alma mater Eureka College finds Reagan organizations in California and Washington D.C important. But Illinois Wesleyan's admission's Dean, Greg King, says most students come from Illinois.

King: We have to take care of our backyard, I mean 80 to 90 percent of enrollment is coming to you from within 2 hours.

King: Illinois Wesleyan has even offered a separate scholarship to entice high school graduates from McLean county to enroll. With at least 14 more years of declines in the number of high school graduates, admissions officers nationwide acknowledge some schools won't make it. I'm Charlie Shlenker.