

CALIFORNIA



PHOTO OP: Occidental students pose with a cutout of President Obama after viewing his January 2009 inauguration. Although Obama attended the college, he graduated from Columbia University.

A bounce from Barack?

A rise in enrollment at Occidental College, where the president spent two years, brings speculation about an Obama effect.

LARRY GORDON

Is it an Obama bump? Is freshman enrollment at Occidental College skyrocketing because a certain young man from Hawaii started college there 30 years ago?

Or is it just the unintended consequence of an insurance plan of sorts by admissions officers trying to protect the 1,868-student campus in uncertain economic times?

Whatever the reason, Occidental College, a liberal arts school in Eagle Rock, is expected to enroll a freshman class of about 560 this fall — up 100 students, or 21% — from last year.

Experts say an increase of that size is unusual during healthy financial seasons, let alone in a recession in which families are more cautious about paying nearly \$50,000 a year for tuition, room, board and fees at a private college.

Many people at the campus and in the wider college admissions world cite the publicity Occidental has received in the last year as the school where President Obama, then known as Barry, studied for two years before transferring to Columbia University.

Oxy has promoted that O-O connection, even creating T-shirts noting the coincidence of the school's address at 1600 Campus Road and the White House location at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

"I don't think there is any doubt Oxy is getting a bump from the president," said Bill McClintick, president of the National Assn. for College Admission Counseling.

McClintick said such enrollment increases have occurred occasionally at various colleges, usually linked to athletics in what he and others call the "Flutie Effect." The term refers to an upsurge in Boston College applications after its quarterback Doug Flutie made a famous Hall Mary pass in the last seconds of a 1984 game against the University of Miami. Boston triumphed and Flutie went on to win the Heisman Trophy.

"There is some sort of rock star effect when something positive happens to a place and they get a bump for at least a year or two," McClintick said.

Occidental Admission Dean Vince Cuseo said he could not quantify any Obama effect.

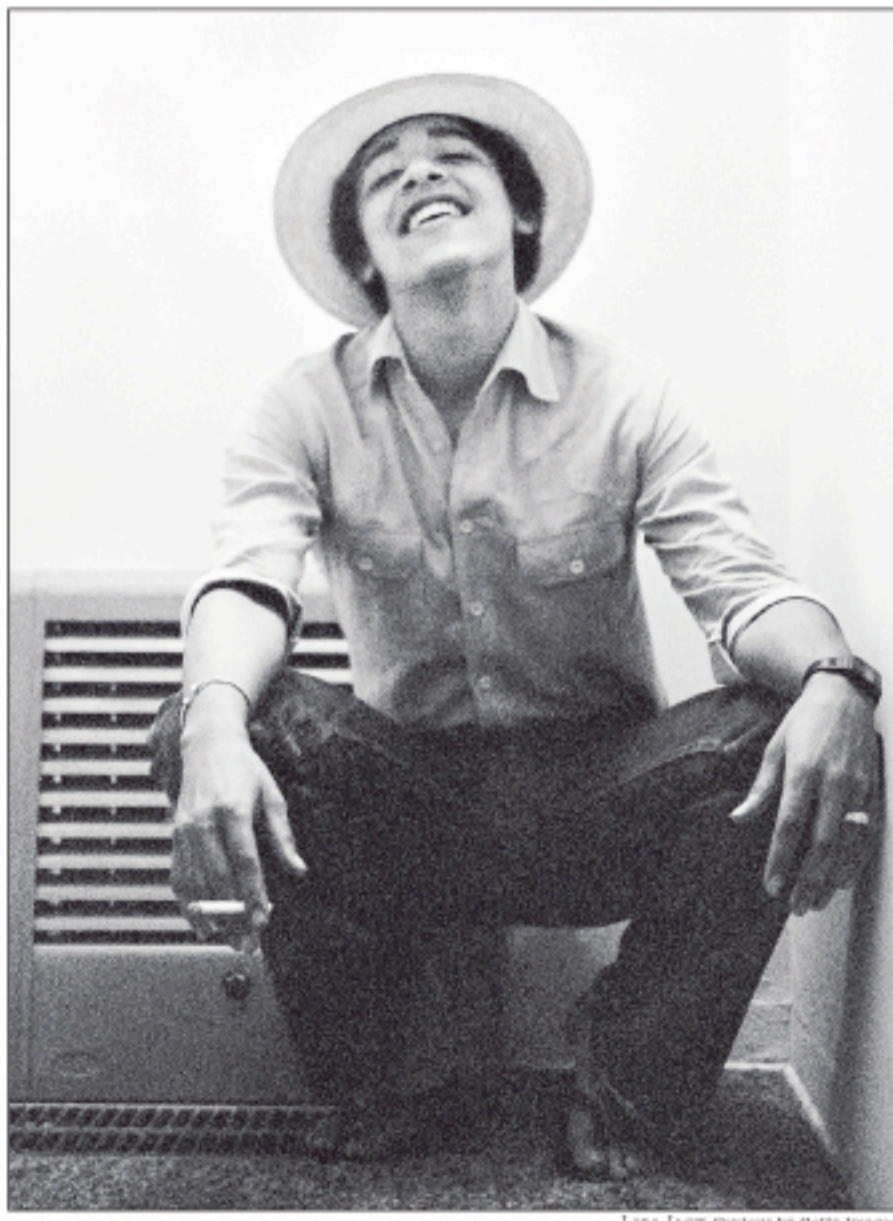
Still, "it certainly hasn't hurt our case," Cuseo said. "I think it raises the image and public relations bar for the institution when you have a recognized figure connected with your college. But the reasons for choosing a school are far more complex than one individual, even if he happens to be the president of the United States."

Various factors may have contributed to the rise, according to Cuseo. First, Occidental received a record 6,013 applications, up 4% from last year, and that may be related to Obama, he said.

Then, as many colleges did this year in case the recession scared students away, Occidental accepted more applicants than usual, 43%, compared with 39% last year. But in a surprise, the college's yield rate — the ratio of accepted students who decide to attend — rose from 21% to 24%.

Many incoming freshmen said Obama's attendance, from 1979 to 1981, helped attract them to the college. (Some from outside California conceded that they hadn't heard of the school before last year, and at first thought mistakenly that it might be a dentistry academy, "Oxy-Dental.")

Zack Del Rosario of New York City said the Obama link boosted Occidental above other schools that accepted him, including the University of San Diego and Clark University in Massachusetts. "Since he has been someone I admired so much, the idea of walking on the same ground he walked on and going to the



LISA JACK COURTESY BY GETTY IMAGES

STUDENT DAYS: While attending Occidental College in 1980, Barack Obama posed for Lisa Jack, who was studying photography.

'The idea of walking on the same ground he walked on and going to the school that he attended is definitely inspiring me.'

— ZACK DEL ROSARIO, Occidental applicant

school that he attended is definitely inspiring me," Del Rosario said.

Timothy Glen of Chicago said the college's Los Angeles location, intimate scale and ethnically diverse student body, along with a chance to play Division III basketball, attracted him. Then, he said, the Obama factor helped him explain to relatives why he chose a lesser-known school over USC and the University of Illinois.

"They think if Barack went there, then they automatically trust Occidental," Glen said. "They think, 'This kid is trying to do something. He is following in the steps of the president of the United States.'"

Robbie Thomas of Washington, D.C., however, said that even though he supports Obama, the president's attendance at Occidental had nothing to do with his choice of the school.

"I think it's a little ridiculous that the college plays it up. He spent two years there but really graduated from Columbia," said Thomas, who was looking for a California liberal arts college with a

strong international studies program.

Meanwhile, over at that other Obama alma mater, a Columbia University spokesman said he did not think the 11% increase in application numbers this year could be attributed to Obama earning a bachelor's degree there in 1983 before heading to Harvard Law School. Columbia, the spokesman said, has had steady increases for the last few years.

Occidental's Cuseo insisted that he did not set out to enroll a much bigger freshman class and said he was worried that the faculty might be angry about teaching more crowded courses.

However, the college will gain a still-undetermined amount of extra tuition and dorm revenue even after it does out more financial aid than usual and hires additional adjunct faculty, officials said. The college is also fortunate to have enough dorm space for the newcomers; it opened a new 274-bed dormitory last year and recently renovated older ones, officials said.

Cuseo and others said any initial disgruntlement about the size of the incoming class eased when professors realized that the money will help avoid the pay cuts and layoffs that some other schools are facing. That should be a relief to the campus' new president, Jonathan Veitch, a former dean at the New School in New York City, as he begins his tenure July 1.

Occidental politics professor Roger Boesche, whom Obama has cited as a mentor, predicts that the school's Obama bounce will last "as long as he is a popular president." Boesche also said the campus was sure to welcome the extra money.

"It's hard in this economy to be very upset about this," he said.

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Data system to curb child abuse is urged

County supervisors will study a new attempt to help agencies share information.

GARRETT THEROLF

Responding to a long-running pattern of child abuse deaths that might have been prevented, Los Angeles County supervisors Tuesday will consider a renewed attempt to ease communication among agencies that deal with troubled families.

The proposal calls for an interlinked computer system that would expand child abuse investigators' ability to access records showing a family's criminal, educational and medical histories, including critical clues about dangers faced by children.

Child advocates have pushed for such reforms for more than 18 years, to little avail. One computerized approach adopted years ago has proved largely ineffective, with even its managers saying few investigators use it. Other proposals have simply languished, with county leaders demanding no follow-through.

The newest proposal, introduced by Supervisor Mike Antonovich, comes two weeks after an article in The Times detailed how communication breakdowns among various agencies played a key role in deaths that had been investigated by child welfare officials.

The story depicted several cases dating as far back as 1991 in which agencies failed to talk to one another about clear warning signs such as domestic violence, criminal convictions, mental illness and parents who themselves were abused as children.

"Child welfare is the shared responsibility of all county departments, non-county agencies and community-based partners serving the family," Antonovich said in a prepared statement.

"Time is of the essence and this automated system will significantly improve the county's ability to identify, prevent and treat incidents of child abuse and neglect," he said.

The improvements, however, are not as sweeping as some child advocates would like.

Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky has balked at changes that he fears would violate families' privacy.

latimes.com
/childdeaths

Times reporters Garrett Therolf and Kim Christensen are examining failures by L.A. County to monitor children in the system who are at risk for abuse. View the entire Innocents Betrayed series, including stories, photos and graphics, online.

As part of a compromise, the new system would not include detailed medical, mental health or school district histories. Instead, it would indicate possible concerns and allow child abuse investigators to call the agency holding the records to request more information.

"Protecting kids from harm and neglect must be our top priority," Yaroslavsky said, "and our ability to do that absolutely depends on full participation by all our departments to ensure that decision-makers can always access the most accurate information available."

The plan lays out a firm 18-month timetable and calls for quarterly reports on its progress.

Information from school districts, private hospitals and law enforcement agencies would be loaded into the system and the information would be aligned with the risk factors that child abuse investigators consider.

Asked if he was confident the plan would save lives, Deputy County Chief Executive Miguel Santana said, "Absolutely."

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Flap over flag

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