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Students flocking to Utah computer school

By Paul Foy, AP Business Writer

SALT LAKE CITY — Enrollment applications have tripled at a school that turns out software developers while traditional liberal-arts colleges are worrying about losing students.

Neumont University of South Jordan offers an intensive 28-month computer-science degree and works closely with major tech companies that hire almost all of its graduates.

Tuition isn't cheap -- \$72,000 for the degree. But the school says it can place graduates almost immediately in jobs at such companies as IBM Corp. and eBay Inc. at salaries averaging \$63,000 a year.

Those claims have been verified by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, which gives Neumont high marks for student retention and placing graduates in their field of study, said Anthony S. Bieda, the council's director of regulatory affairs.

Neumont, with 223 students, says it has received nearly 339 applications for the September quarter, a tripling of the number of applications pending a year ago.

"Americans in 2009 have modified their attitudes about every investment, and education needs to deliver a return," Edward Levine, president of Neumont, said Monday. "Mom and dad want to know what they will get for the tuition, and we are very transparent on that."

Levine, formerly chief strategy officer for Providence, R.I.-based Johnson & Wales University, took over 1{ years ago after the Utah for-profit school hit a "rough patch."

He said the school's original entrepreneurs envisioned quick growth, but expenses outpaced revenues. Boston investors Great Hill Partners, which backed the school from its start, is "hanging in and recently reaffirmed their enthusiasm for Neumont. They're patient guys."

"This is the year we will achieve profitability," Levine predicted.

Some private institutions are bracing for a possible decline in September enrollment if students choose more affordable state or trade schools. The schools will know by May 1, the deadline they generally set for students to accept admission.

The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities says Ivy League and traditional schools are holding down tuition increases to stay more competitive.

"We're on track to see one of the lowest average increases for tuition increases" -- 4.2 percent for the next academic year, said Tony Pals, a spokesman for the national association.

"That's the lowest increase on record back to 1972. It's just a little more than the 3.88-percent Consumer Price Index," he said.

Generally, when the economy tanks, people stay or return to school, but private schools worry that more students will choose public schools for the cheaper tuition.

Neumont says it targets high-school graduates, not adults, in marketing efforts that draw on SAT scores. Its students work on actual software development projects for companies like IBM, which pay the school.

The companies also pledge to hire many graduates -- 94 percent find employment within three months of graduation, the school says.

Neumont operates year-round with breaks of three weeks for the Christmas/New Year holidays and two weeks in spring.

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