

Nationwide college enrollment continues to slide



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A year after the coronavirus pandemic [hammered undergraduate enrollment](#), many colleges and universities are still reporting a decline in people pursuing degrees this semester, especially schools serving large populations of low-income students.

A snapshot of [fall head counts](#) released Tuesday by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center shows undergraduate enrollment down 3.2 percent since fall 2020, largely mirroring last fall's drop of 3.5 percent. The data capture head counts through Sept. 23 at half of the institutions that report to the Clearinghouse, roughly 1,800 schools, and are a closely watched indicator of sector-wide trends.

Continued erosion of enrollment could have significant impacts on college completion rates in the coming years and raises questions about the [economic trajectory](#) of a generation of students. Some higher education experts had hoped last year's dire enrollment data reflected a temporary blip, but the enduring trend has some worried about whether the most vulnerable students will return to the educational pipeline.

"It seems like a lot of young people are going to work instead of college, especially ... students from low-income families who've been lured away by this temporary hitch in the labor market where wages are increasing," Doug Shapiro, executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, said on a call with reporters Monday.

He added: "Trying to understand how those students might ever get back into the college path is really important. It's important to our future workforce."

From the fall of 2019 to this semester, the number of undergraduate students has now fallen by a total of 6.5 percent, according to the Clearinghouse. Shapiro said if this current rate of decline were to hold up, it would be the largest two-year decline in at least the last 50 years in the United States.

While all sectors suffered declines, the pain largely is felt at less selective schools that tend to enroll high numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Private nonprofits narrowed their head count decline this fall, bolstered by a 4.3 percent growth in enrollment at highly selective schools within the sector. Competitive private institutions have largely recovered from the pandemic.

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this fall than the previous year, down 2.3 percent from 0.8 percent and 12.7 percent from 0.3 percent respectively. Given that only 40 percent of for-profit schools provided the Clearinghouse data to date, Shapiro said enrollment numbers in the sector may change.

Nicholas Kent at Career Education Colleges and Universities said the data is not a comprehensive look at the for-profit industry because it excludes two-year institutions. He says there is a bifurcation in the sector, with some schools suffering and others weathering tepid enrollment.

All the same, the overall two-year decline among four-year for-profits and the community colleges are now very similar, Shapiro said. The sectors serve similar populations of students who are often older. And at the moment, a higher number of older students are sitting this semester out, with head counts among 25- to 29-year-olds down more than 8 percent, according to the Clearinghouse.

“It’s especially hard to be a college student who has a family to take care of and have children,” said Jee Hang Lee, senior vice president at the Association of Community College Trustees. “The pandemic has sharpened the divide because we’re not seeing as much slippage [in enrollment] of traditional-aged students.”

Lee said community colleges must provide more assistance to older students to re-engage them, and many have stepped up support services, emergency aid and forgiveness of unpaid tuition balances. But schools are also competing with low unemployment rates, and a strengthening job market will siphon off would-be students, he said.

Enrollment at the undergraduate level slipped for every racial and ethnic group, but declines were still smaller compared with last fall. The head counts of Black, White and Native American students were down about between 4 percent and 5.1 percent while dipping by around 2 percent for Hispanic and Asian undergrads. Those smaller declines for Hispanic and Asian students, Shapiro said, could speak to an underlying increase in both populations.

Although male enrollment declines were smaller than last fall and female enrollment dipped further this year, over the course of the pandemic, men have lost a lot of ground in pursuit of undergraduate degrees, according to the Clearinghouse. Male enrollment in undergraduate programs has fallen 9.3 percent from 2019 to 2021 while dropping 5.3 percent over the same period for women.

Early data also shows a sharp drop of 8.2 percent in the enrollment of international undergraduate students this fall. Combined with last year’s numbers, the Clearinghouse has tracked an overall decline of more than 20 percent among international undergraduates. Shapiro suspects enduring travel restrictions around the world are a factor in the continued disruption.

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Danielle Douglas-Gabriel covers the economics of higher education, writing about the financial policies that determine a student's access to education and ability to complete a credential. [Twitter](#)

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