



A WCET Closer Look at Higher Education Enrollment Trends

This Closer Look overview provides background information about enrollment trends in higher education due to changes in birth rates, immigration policy changes, and student decisions regarding college. The shift is not only impacting the number of students involved in higher education, but also the types of institutions students are interested in attending. There will be fewer and fewer college-bound students, at least for the foreseeable future, and what does that mean for higher education?

Overview of Topic

The number of college-bound high school graduates is dropping due to lower birth rates and fewer high school students choosing college. Existing enrollments are shifting, for example, away from small, private institutions and for-profit institutions to large, public, nonprofit universities. There is also a gender and racial demographic shift happening with enrollments. In sum, there are fewer college-bound students who are less likely to choose small and for-profit schools and are more likely to identify as women and Latino.

Many small liberal arts colleges and for-profit colleges are at risk of closing due to financial constraints resulting from a drop in enrollment. On the flip side, large, public universities are experiencing a boon of enrollments. However, all enrollment professionals are looking with concern to 2025, which is widely projected to be the year the number of high school graduates will peak before a significant decline for at least twelve years. The enrollment cliff will play out differently in different regions of the United States with the biggest drop expected in the northeast and the smallest drop expected in southern east coast states, mountain states, and the prairie states.

Contents

Overview of Topic

Definitions

How Are Institutions Responding to Declining Enrollments?

Main Takeaways

DEI and Policy Considerations

Featured Authors

More Resources and References

Definitions

Enrollment Cliff

A period from 2025 - 2037 in which the college age population will drop by at least 15%, due to a 20% fall in birth rates between 2007 - 2020. It is unclear if this trend will continue, but the Congressional Budget Office projects the birth rate will rise slightly by 2030 and remain steady through 2053.

Small College

An institution with an undergraduate enrollment of less than 1,000 students.

How Are Institutions Responding to Declining Enrollments?

U.S. Colleges and Universities are responding in a variety of ways to the enrollment shifts. Including:

- Closing,
- Eliminating programs,
- Cutting personnel,
- Mergers or consolidation,
- Resource sharing,
- Expanding online offerings,
- New admissions strategies,
- Additional funding.

See the [new article series on Enrollment Shifts](#) from WCET *Frontiers* for a more detailed exploration of the strategies and other aspects of this topic.

Main Takeaways

1. Institutions must expand assistance and offerings to all student groups.

The demographic shift of students will require institutions to go much further than special programs and scholarships for historically excluded students, who will make up demographic majorities in the coming years.

2. Institutions should consider ways to prioritize career readiness and career services.

Students are increasingly prioritizing career readiness when selecting an institution. Institutions would do well to prioritize career readiness in their programs and services as well.

3. The cost of higher education must be addressed.

The main reason potential students question the value of a college education. Institutions need to find ways to reduce tuition and fees, ensure affordable housing for students, and work with their congressional and legislative allies to increase public funding for higher education.

DEI and Policy Considerations

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

1. Students entering college are increasingly more diverse.

According to the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE), upcoming high school graduating classes are becoming more diverse. There have been increases in the numbers of Hispanic, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and multiracial individuals (Knocking Report, accessed 2023).

The pool of college bound students will, increasingly, become more diverse as we move forward.

2. Representation across college campuses, however, may be shrinking.

New reports from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center show that undergraduate enrollment for both white and Black students fell (again) but some enrollment for Hispanic and Asian students did improve (though not to numbers we saw prior to the pandemic). Black student enrollment at community colleges fell by 44%.

3. Enrollment is one thing; completion is another ballgame.

Degree completion rates remain much lower for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students. For example, of those who started college in 2015, almost 70% of white students completed a degree by 2021. But only 45% of Black students achieve a degree in the same timeframe. Students highlight that juggling school with other responsibilities and funding as major hurdles when it comes to graduating, however many students of color, particularly Black students, consider dropping out because they feel discriminated against frequently or occasionally at their college.

Policy, Regulatory, Accreditation Considerations Related to Enrollment

There are several regulatory and policy elements that relate to this topic.

1. The Free Inquiry Rule.

The Department of Education (The Department) is currently reviewing the *Free Inquiry Rule* to determine if it allows for discrimination against those who identify as LGBTQ. See the proposed revision [here](#). In 2020, The Department issued the “Free Inquiry Rule.” This rule added conditions to receiving and keeping Department grants for direct grant programs and state administered grant programs. As a material condition of receiving the grants, public institutions of higher education are required to comply with the First Amendment, and private institutions are required to follow their stated institutional policies on freedom of speech, including academic freedom.

2. Affirmative Action.

While we can’t completely predict how the decision on Affirmative Action will impact college admissions, many news organizations and research institutions suggest that enrollment of Black, Hispanic, and Native students will drop significantly, particularly for more selective institutions and that without eliminating other admissions programs such as legacy and athletic recruitment, the decision will decrease student diversity (Nadworny, 2023, Meyer & Pita, 2023, Colin & Cook, 2023).

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More Resources and References

[WCET Frontiers 2023 Blog series: Enrollment Shifts](#)

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