

Your Question:

You asked for information about changes in enrollment levels during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as efforts higher education institutions have made to mitigate enrollment declines.

Our Response:

Higher Education Enrollment During the COVID-19 Pandemic

According to the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#) — a research entity that creates higher education longitudinal data sets — overall student enrollment as of fall 2020 declined by 2.5% relative to fall 2019. However, enrollment declines were not even across sectors: community college enrollment saw the sharpest declines compared to four-year universities. The [latest report](#) (updated 6/25/21) from the research center shows that this trend *worsened* during the spring 2021 semester, as overall enrollment declined by 3.5% relative to spring 2020, which represents a loss of 727,000 students. Figure 1 provides the latest data broken down by institutional sector.

Overall higher education enrollment declines in spring 2021 were seven times worse than declines we saw in spring

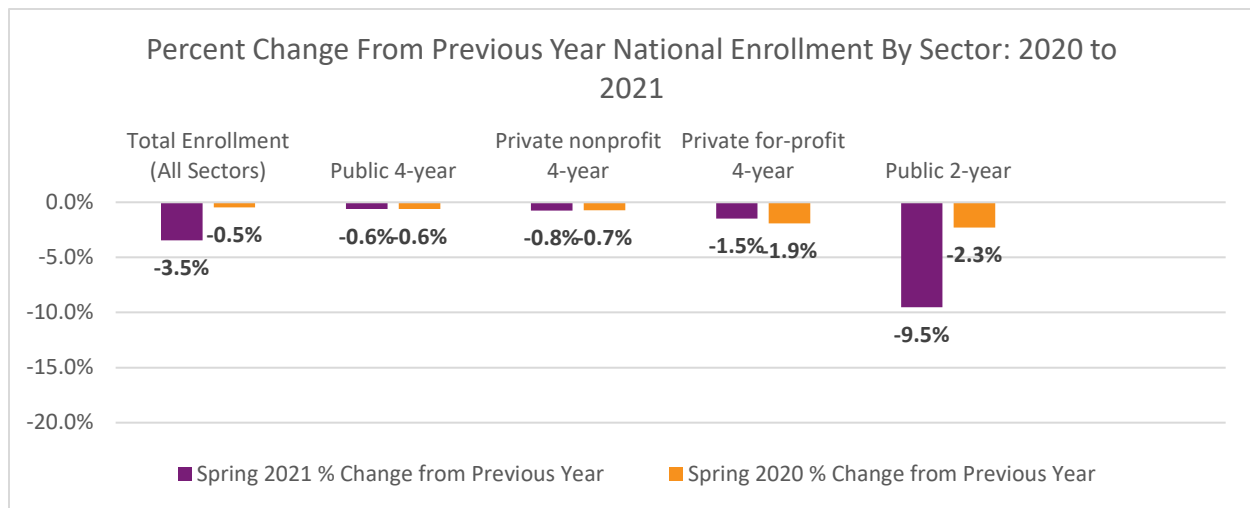


Figure 1

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

2020. Community colleges were hit the hardest with enrollment declines, suffering a loss of 9.5% or 476,000 fewer students. Likewise, enrollment declines by program level were also uneven. As Figure 2 shows, all sectors experienced an overall decline of undergraduate degree-seeking students; conversely, enrollment for graduate and professional degree-seeking students increased. Figure 2 also reveals that a drop in associate degree-seeking students (-10.9%) was the main driver of community college enrollment declines.

Broken down by student demographics, the research center's report found that traditional college-age students (18-24-year old's) saw the largest declines across all age groups (-5%, or 524,000 students fewer relative to spring 2020). Enrollment declines were steeper for male students than for female students across all sectors, with losses of 400,000 and 203,000 students respectively. Again, this trend was explicitly evident for community colleges, which saw a 14.4% decline in male student enrollment compared with a 6% decline in female student enrollment.

From a state-level perspective, the report showed all but seven states — **Idaho, Maryland, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Utah, Virginia and West Virginia** — saw higher education declines. For a breakdown of every state’s enrollment change for spring 2021 relative to spring 2020, see Table 1 at the end of this memo.

Looking Ahead to Fall 2021

While higher education institutions collect and analyze their enrollment figures ahead of the fall 2021 semester, some preliminary data may indicate further enrollment declines. For

instance, FAFSA completion has declined for the second year in a row. Recent analysis from the [National College Attainment Network](#) found that 4.8% fewer high school seniors, or about 102,000 total students, completed a FAFSA. What’s more, fears over the COVID-19 Delta variant have triggered some institutions to delay a return to in-person instruction. Many experts speculate that [students may be less likely](#) to pursue higher education if institutions choose not to offer in-person instruction, however, it is difficult to disentangle that motivation with other concerns students may have — such as affordability. Ultimately, data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center will tell us more about enrollment trends for the upcoming semester.

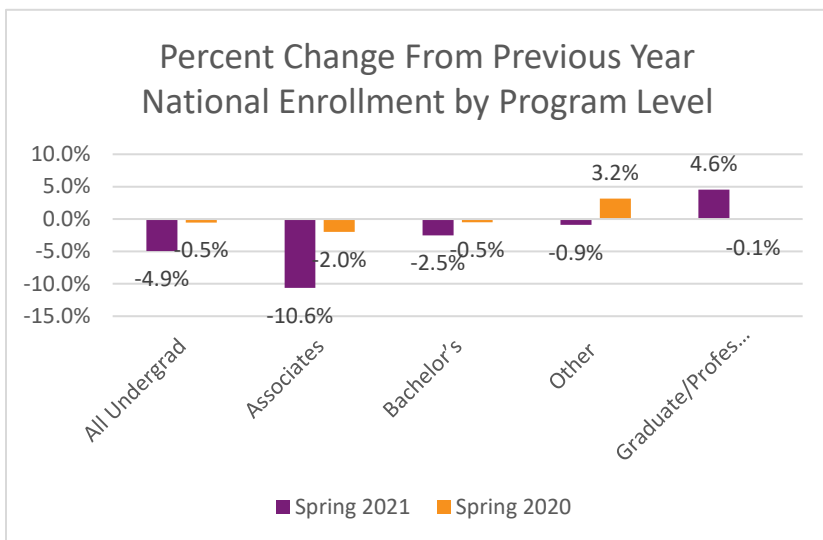


Figure 2

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research

Efforts to Address Enrollment Declines

As higher education institutions grapple with these enrollment declines, a few have offered meaningful responses to retain and attract students. Enrollment managers and researchers have long argued for a renewed focus on admissions, affordability, retention and student transfer issues, as COVID-19-induced declines may obscure the fact that enrollment declines have been [a trend](#) since the 2008 Great Recession. While institutional responses to enrollment declines vary tremendously, we were able to identify institutional actions that fall within a few of those issues.

Admissions

- More than [300 schools](#) extended admissions deadlines to give students more time to decide.
- Many schools have [waived SAT/ACT requirements](#) in response to challenges in administering standardized tests during the pandemic.

Affordability

- Many institutions [froze undergraduate tuition](#) and fees for the 2021-22 school year.
- Some schools offered [emergency financial relief funds](#) and [refunds for tuition and board](#) during online instruction.
- A few institutions are [reducing](#) the [cost of tuition](#) and other big expenses for students, such as [housing](#).

Transfer Students

- Some institutions, like those in [Texas](#), are now required to communicate requisite courses and disclose which credits cannot transfer.
- Some higher education institutions and systems are forming transfer pathway partnerships, like the [New England Board of Higher Education](#).

Education Commission of the States strives to respond to information requests within 24 hours. This document reflects our best efforts but it may not reflect exhaustive research. Please let us know if you would like a more comprehensive response. Our staff is also available to provide unbiased advice on policy plans, consult on proposed legislation and testify at legislative hearings as third-party experts.

- An initiative among western states, called the [Interstate Passport](#), helps students transfer among 59 participating institutions in 17 states and relies on “learning outcomes” rather than credits for transfer.

Other Resources

- State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) [COVID-19 Resources](#)
- [COVID-19 and US higher education enrollment: Preparing leaders for the fall](#) – McKinsey & Company
- [Higher Education Responses to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) - National Conference of State Legislatures

Table 1: Estimated Enrollment by State (Spring 2021)

State	Percent of Change in Enrollment from Previous Year
Alabama	-4.1%
Alaska	-1.3%
Arizona	-1.1%
Arkansas	-5.1%
California	-5.3%
Colorado	-3.3%
Connecticut	-2.9%
Delaware	-7.7%
Florida	-1.1%
Georgia	-1.8%
Hawaii	-1.6%
Idaho	0.4%
Illinois	-5.0%
Indiana	-3.1%
Iowa	-5.2%
Kansas	-6.3%
Kentucky	-2.5%
Louisiana	-3.8%
Maine	-1.6%
Maryland	0.7%
Massachusetts	-3.9%
Michigan	-6.4%
Minnesota	-2.0%
Mississippi	-4.1%
Missouri	-3.8%
Montana	-5.7%
Nebraska	2.4%
Nevada	-4.7%
New Hampshire	10.8%
New Jersey	-5.5%
New Mexico	-11.4%
New York	-5.2%
North Carolina	-3.2%
North Dakota	-1.6%
Ohio	-3.7%
Oklahoma	-3.6%
Oregon	-2.9%
Pennsylvania	-3.8%
Rhode Island	-4.8%
South Carolina	-3.0%
South Dakota	-4.3%
Tennessee	-4.1%
Texas	-1.5%
Utah	4.7%
Vermont	-5.8%
Virginia	1.3%
Washington	-3.8%
West Virginia	2.8%
Wisconsin	-4.7%
Wyoming	-6.2%

Table 1

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center