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COLLEGE ENROLLMENT DROPS 1.4% AS ADULTS HEAD BACK TO WORK

By Melissa Korn
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Despite aggressive efforts nationwide to boost the number of people who attend college, enrollments declined this fall for the fifth straight year as better job prospects for older potential students and a stalled pipeline of new high-school graduates were compounded by continued woes in the for-profit college sector.

Total fall-term undergraduate and graduate enrollment slid by 1.4% to 19.01 million students as of the beginning of this month, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, a nonprofit education organization.

Enrollment peaked at nearly 20.6 million in 2011.

The undergraduate student count fell by 1.9%, to 16.3 million this term, while graduate-student enrollment rose by 1.5% to 2.71 million.

Students over age 24 account for almost the entire overall decline, as adults who may consider returning to school to boost their career prospects are finding jobs instead. That population of "older" students was about 6.63 million at last count, generally concentrated at community colleges and for-profit schools that offer more flexible and vocational courses.

Rosters at four-year, for-profit colleges shrank by 14.5% to 970,267 this fall. There were nearly 1.64 million people enrolled in those schools at their 2010 height.

Four-year private, nonprofit schools, many of which rely heavily on tuition dollars for revenue, posted a 0.6% decline, with 3.79 million students. About half that decline came among the smallest schools—those with fewer than 3,000 students, and for which each student's enrollment is critical.

"The trend of prices continuing to rise faster than inflation is beginning to have more and more of an impact" on enrollments, especially among low-income and first-generation students, says Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of Lumina Foundation, a nonprofit aiming to increase college attainment. He says affordability concerns are outweighing projections about the economic benefits of a college education.

Adding to the pain at many colleges is a dearth of new students fresh from high school. Schools in mid-Atlantic and Midwestern states reported the sharpest declines this year, reflecting the shift in population centers away from traditional industrial centers and toward the south and southwest. (New Hampshire posted an increase of more than 21,000, or 17.2%, due mainly to increased enrollment at Southern New Hampshire University. The vast majority of that school's students are based in other states and take courses online.)

"These forces show no sign of slowing and will continue to challenge institutions in their planning," said Doug Shapiro, executive research director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Public four-year schools were a relative bright spot, with a 0.2% increase in enrollment to 8.1 million students. And though enrollments at public two-year schools fell by another 2.6% this year to 5.72 million, that enrollment slump may be tempering.

Mr. Merisotis credits public universities with boosting educational quality and posting better graduation rates in recent years, which may be swaying some prospective students. Lower price tags for local students may be another draw, he said.

For the first time, the Clearinghouse report also included a breakdown of enrollments by undergraduate field at two- and four-year schools. The most popular undergraduate majors were business-related, with 1.64 million students, and liberal arts and sciences, with 1.29 million. Engineering, while growing at a healthy 4% clip, remains small with just over 601,000 undergraduate students.

Meanwhile, students at two-year schools were by far most likely to be enrolled in liberal arts, general studies and humanities programs. More than 2.01 million students pursued those majors; the second most popular, health professions, had 827,811 students.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center enrollment report comes out twice a year and covers nearly all of enrollments at U.S. schools that are eligible to receive Title IV federal aid.