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FEWER HIGH-SCHOOL GRADS ENROLLED IN COLLEGE LAST YEAR

Labor Department data show lowest college-going rate since 2013, and big drop for men, as job market strengthens

By Melissa Korn
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Fresh high-school graduates are less likely to be enrolled in college than they have been at any point since 2013, as the jobs recovery extends to even teenage workers.

New Labor Department data show that of the 2.9 million people aged 16 to 24 who graduated from high school in 2017, about 66.7 percent were enrolled in college last October – down from 69.7 percent the prior year, and the lowest rate in four years.

Nine in 10 of those new high-school graduates now in college are attending full-time, and about two-thirds are at four-year schools. (Across all ages, the ratio of full- to part-time students is roughly 60-40, and just over 60 percent of college students attend four-year schools.)

Much of the three-point drop in college enrollment for new high-school graduates can be attributed to a decline in recent Hispanic high-school graduates attending college; while in 2016 72 percent of those young adults enrolled in school, that figure fell to 61 percent in 2017. The share of new Asian high-school graduates enrolled also tumbled to 83 percent from last year's record 92.4 percent. The rate for white students fell to 67.1 percent from 69.7 percent.

The only racial or ethnic group that reported an increase in college enrollment straight out of high school was African-American students, edging up to 59.4 percent from 58.2 percent.

Alicia Sasser Modestino, an associate professor of public policy, urban affairs and economics at Northeastern University, attributed the drop to stronger labor markets, as people are more likely to take jobs than enroll in college if that's an option.

"It took a while for the labor-market recovery to reach far enough down to young, inexperienced workers. They're the first to be fired, the last to be hired," Dr. Modestino said.

Asian and Hispanic populations tend to have higher labor-force-participation rates than whites and African-Americans, potentially explaining the sharper enrollment declines among those groups, she said.

Women have outnumbered men as college students for years, and the latest figures on 2017 high-school graduates suggest the gap may continue to grow. Nearly 72 percent of women who just graduated from high school were enrolled in college as of October, roughly flat with the prior year. The corresponding share of men now in school was 61.1 percent, down from the 67.4 percent who were enrolled after high school in 2016.

"It's the manly-man jobs that are finally coming back," Dr. Modestino said. Men who otherwise would likely attend community colleges are now finding employment opportunities in areas like manufacturing.

A tight labor market has helped even those with lower levels of education.

The unemployment rate for young adults aged 16 to 24 without a high-school diploma and not enrolled in school was 15.1 percent for both men and women in October 2017, compared with 24 percent and 20.7 percent, respectively, the prior year. That rate fell to 16.8 percent from 19.3 percent for recent high school graduates not enrolled in college.

Meanwhile, the jobless rate for young adults with at least a bachelor's degree edged up, to 8.8 percent for men and 5.3 percent for women. By comparison, the overall unemployment rate has been flat at 4.1 percent for the past six months.