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TUMBLING COMMUNITY COLLEGE ENROLLMENT HIGHLIGHTS PANDEMIC'S BROAD IMPACT

Students' limited internet access, financial worries and uncertainty halt longstanding trend of enrollment rising when economy falters.

By Melissa Korn
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Enrollment tumbled this fall at community colleges around the country, flipping a longstanding trend in which people flock to school when the economy weakens and raising concerns about the colleges' financial outlook.

Overall enrollment at public two-year colleges fell 9.5 percent in the fall term, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Enrollment by first-year students plummeted 18.9 percent, indicating that some people who weren't yet on the path to a degree are sidestepping it entirely right now.

Those drops are far worse than what has been reported by four-year public and private nonprofit colleges, which saw small, single-digit declines overall.

"In hindsight, knowing what we know about the pandemic and who was most affected, it perhaps should not have been a surprise," said Thomas Brock, director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Community colleges overwhelmingly serve students of color, those from low-income backgrounds and those who would be the first in their families to attend college. Individuals at the center of that Venn diagram were hit hardest by the coronavirus and its resultant economic blows, losing a disproportionate share of jobs in the service and hospitality industries.

Poor internet connections, wariness about taking classes online, financial strain and the need to care for children or younger siblings are all factoring into the decision-making process of those opting not to enroll, say students and school officials.

The City University of New York's seven community colleges had 78,516 students this fall, down 14.5 percent from a year ago. Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez attributed the decline to the pandemic's outsize impact on people for whom CUNY is a common destination and said the system is looking for new ways to reach out to them.

Freshman enrollment fell 29.3 percent for Native American students at community colleges this fall, 28.4 percent among Black students and 27.5 percent among Hispanic students, according to current Clearinghouse data, which includes tallies from 76 percent of schools that will eventually share information with it. White and Asian students had declines of 18.7 percent and 19.3 percent, respectively.

"Community college enrollment historically tracked uncannily close to the unemployment rate. People lose their jobs, they go and get retrained," said Mike Hansen, president of the

Michigan Community College Association. "What's different this time can be summed up in one word, and that's 'uncertainty.'"

Out-of-work individuals didn't enroll in skills-based classes. And students who college officials had hoped would turn to low-cost options for general-education requirements after four-year schools moved online never showed up. Unofficial tallies show some of Michigan's community colleges keeping enrollment about even with last year, while others plunged by as much as 20 percent.

Head count at Northeast Wisconsin Technical College is off by 6 percent this fall. It was even worse in the summer, plummeting 27 percent.

"We're a hands-on institution," said Aliesha Crowe, vice president of college advancement at the school, which has campuses in Green Bay, Sturgeon Bay and Marinette, Wis. "They wanted to learn face-to-face."

The school moved general-education and many other courses online, but still holds hands-on and lab-based classes in person. It is hard to teach welding or intravenous insertion techniques over the computer, Dr. Crowe said.

A June survey of around 50,000 California community college students found almost 60 percent reported being food insecure, housing insecure and/or homeless. Nearly 20 percent had no or poor internet service, and 12 percent reported not having a reliable laptop or other computing device.

Another factor in the widespread decline is that out-of-work adults don't know what skills to be pursuing for when the economy does rebound.

"There doesn't seem to be a really clear path to what jobs are going to be spared," said Iris Palmer, a senior adviser for higher education and the workforce at New America, a center-left think tank.

Community colleges generally receive state funding based on enrollment, and earn money from tuition. In the past, if state budgets were cut because of a recession, tuition dollars from higher enrollment helped soften the blow. Now enrollments are down right as state funding is also being squeezed.

After investing in protective equipment and upgrading their online course offerings, Ms. Palmer said, some schools are "basically living off their reserves."

Houston Community College set its budget with the expectation of maintaining flat enrollment. But the Texas school has 53,057 students this fall, down 19 percent over last year.

The school already paused most hiring and eliminated travel, said Kurt Ewen, vice chancellor for planning, strategy and institutional effectiveness. Sustained enrollment declines would require more aggressive cuts, he said.

In early August, more than 250 Houston faculty and staff began calling students who attended last year but hadn't yet re-enrolled, urging them to register and offering connections to resources such as the financial-aid office.

"Thousands of phone calls later, the impact of that was minimal," Dr. Ewen said.

The school is offering a range of options, including live or recorded classes and in-person instruction for some hands-on classes. It planned to provide hybrid classes in introductory math and English, where students indicated face-to-face lessons would be beneficial, but after a local rise in Covid-19 cases pushed that back to January.

More than one-third of college students nationwide attend community colleges, according to US Education Department data, and many of the others used community colleges as an on-ramp to bachelor's degrees.

"The \$10,000 question here is, 'Will those students return as things get back to normal?' And we just don't know," Dr. Brock from Teachers College said. "I'm deeply worried this could just be a lost generation."