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U.S. | EDUCATION

College Enrollment Slid This Fall, With First-Year Populations Down 16%

Early tally shows sharp enrollment declines at community colleges and among men



Social distancing as practiced in August at Ohio State University.

PHOTO: JOSHUA A. BICKEL/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [Melissa Korn](#)

Oct. 15, 2020 12:05 am ET



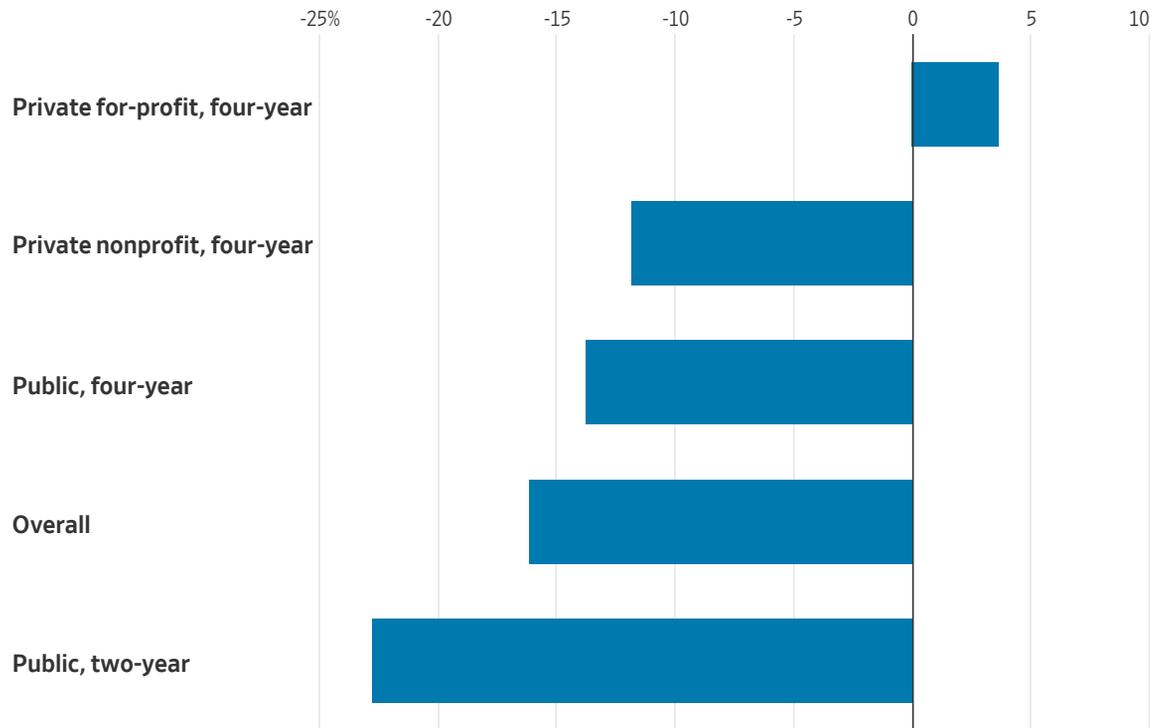
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Undergraduate enrollment tumbled this fall at many colleges and universities around the country, dragged down by a sharp drop in first-year students whose school plans were upended by the coronavirus pandemic.

Overall, undergraduate populations shrank by 4%, and first-year student counts fell by 16.1%, according to new data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Graduate enrollment increased by 2.7%. The tally includes 9.2 million students, from more than half of schools that report data to the Clearinghouse.

Would-be students have interrupted their college aspirations for a range of reasons, including not wanting to take classes online, concern over traveling to places that were considered Covid-19 hot spots and financial strains related to family job losses.

Freshman enrollment, percentage change from previous fall

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

The number of men enrolled in undergraduate programs fell by 6.4%, compared with a 2.2% drop among women, exacerbating a longstanding imbalance in the gender makeup of college students.

By school type, enrollment declines were sharpest at community colleges, off 9.4% overall and 22.7% for first-year students.

That sector generally fares well during economic downturns, with out-of-work adults looking to add skills and younger students trying to save money on tuition. This time, initial discussions of a quick, V-shaped economic recovery may have left unemployed adults thinking it wasn't worth it to invest months or years in a new certificate or degree program, said Doug Shapiro, executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

And, he said, those who steered clear of enrolling as freshmen at community colleges likely did so because of strained family finances or other obstacles, not because of personal preference for a campus experience.

"I fear that many of those students will never get back," he said.

Enrollment at four-year public colleges and universities fell by 1.4% overall, and 13.7% for first-year undergraduates. At private, nonprofit colleges, those declines were 2% and 11.8%, respectively.



Students returned in August to the University of South Carolina.

PHOTO: SEAN RAYFORD/GETTY IMAGES

Furman University, a private school in Greenville, S.C., had been trying to shrink its undergraduate population, becoming more selective in the process.

It set a target first-year class of around 610 students, down from the roughly 650 it enrolled the prior fall, but actual enrollment fell short of the more modest number by 15%.

The school's recent efforts to recruit more students from the Northeast and more far-flung locales proved ill-timed. Many admitted students from the mid-Atlantic and New England turned down their enrollment offers, while the yield remained steady among local students.

"This time last fall, we basically manufactured the worst admit pool possible to deal with a global pandemic," said Brad Pochard, Furman's associate vice president for enrollment and dean of admissions and financial aid.

Families expressed discomfort sending their students far away or needing to get on a plane, Mr. Pochard said. Some deferred for a semester or a year, while others opted for different plans entirely.

The school is aiming to make up the difference next year and bring total enrollment up toward 2,400 from the current 2,315.

"We will likely enroll a larger freshman class," Mr. Pochard said. "Or at least try to."

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Appeared in the October 16, 2020, print edition as 'Enrollment Slides at Universities Nationwide.'

