

Community College Enrollment: The Ripple Effect

Declines in community college enrollment over the last decade have revealed significant repercussions. When fewer students are enrolled in community colleges, access to higher education for lower-income students and students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds is limited and the transfer pool for many four-year institutions is diminished.

Subtle enrollment declines across higher education have percolated for the last two decades, with an even more pronounced drop since the beginning of the pandemic. [Overall enrollment, including undergraduate and graduate students](#), decreased by 4.1% from 2021 to 2022, and community college enrollment dipped by 7.8% — on top of declines from the previous year as illustrated in figure 1.

The effect has been unequally distributed among specific populations. [Male students 18 to 24 years of age](#) experienced the largest losses, with [enrollment rates for Black men](#) falling by 14.8% across all higher education institutions and 23.5% among those enrolled in two-year colleges. For [Latino men](#), the declines were 10.3% and 19.7% respectively.

Taming the Headwinds

In addition to the exit from higher education that the above statistics represent for men from underrepresented groups, the loss of a reliable enrollment pipeline is an added pressure for four-year institutions.

Community College Enrollment Declines

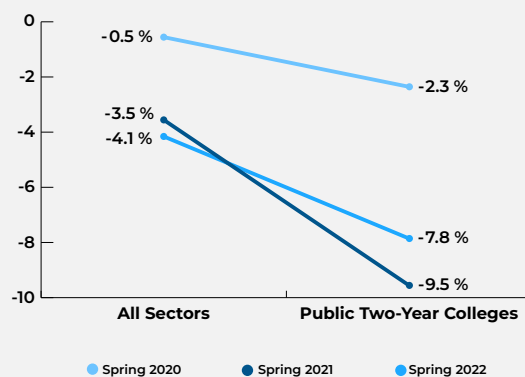


Figure 1. Year-over-year enrollment declines by percentage

Credit: [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#)

As institutions struggle with increasing skepticism about the value of a college degree, the expiration of Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) funding that buoyed college coffers, and ambiguity on student loan debt forgiveness, many are also bracing for the enrollment cliff around 2025, which is expected to drive the applicant pool down even further.

While the way ahead may not be entirely clear, there are lessons to be learned from colleges and universities adopting new approaches, including:

- **Demonstrating the value of higher education:** Show how each institution's distinct college experience is important to a lifetime of success.
- **Using data to inform the big picture:** Strengthen operations and analytics to provide another lens for guiding decision making.
- **Collaborating with other colleges and universities:** Consider clarifying overly strict or confusing articulation agreements that make it difficult for community college students, many of them first-generation students without prior knowledge of the process, to transfer to another two-year college or matriculate to a four-year institution.

- **Refining the curriculum:** Align existing degree programs and tailor new ones to market needs.
- **Rethinking the admissions process:** Make it easier and faster for students to [apply and be accepted to college](#).
- **Supporting transfer students:** Develop [agile approaches to attracting, retaining, and supporting](#) community college graduates seeking a bachelor's degree.



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