
Regional

College enrollments continue national decline

If there is a statistic that all college administrators look at every year it is enrollments, the bread and butter of higher education for multiple reasons. First, all private colleges – and increasingly public ones – depend upon students enrolling in order to maintain the financial flow to their institutions. Second, many public institutions have their state budget tied to the number of students they enroll. Third, the attractiveness of an institution of higher education is partly based on its enrollment success. No wonder everybody looks at those numbers every year with apprehension.

Enrollment numbers for the spring semester of 2017 have just been released, and they are not good news in most cases. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, which tracks 97 percent of students at federal aid-eligible institutions, found an overall national decline of 1.5 percent for this spring semester compared to a year ago. That means 272,000 fewer students were enrolled nationwide.

And this is not an isolated bump. The year when this country had the largest enrollment in degree-granting institutions of higher education was 2010 when the total enrollment was 21,019,438. Today the number is 18,071,004, a reduction of nearly 16 percent in seven years. Last year the decline was 1.3 percent and the year before that 1.9 percent. A closer look at the whole report gives us an indication of where the problems reside.

First, the decline is most pronounced among older undergraduates at for-profit institutions (10.1 percent decline) and community colleges (2.5 percent decline). In the case of the former the report showed a decrease of 244,000 students over the age of 24. That is actually

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good news. The for-profit sector of higher education is responsible for the greatest amount of student debt in this country, while the quality of the education is not comparable with that of either public or not-for-profit private institutions.

Changes for the other two major types of higher education institutions were minimal. In the case of four-year public institutions there was an increase of 0.2 percent, while enrollment at four-year private institutions went down by 0.2 percent.

When it comes to graduate students we have seen an increase in enrollment of 1.1 percent during the last year across the board with only the four-year, for-profit ones showing a decrease of 1.2 percent.

Across the board the greatest decrease has been seen for students over 24 years old. This may reflect the fact that the economy is doing well and the unemployment levels – the main driving force for non-traditional students to go back to school – is pushing fewer of them to go to college.

When it comes to gender, most of the decrease is among males (2.1 percent). In fact, the U.S. shows a larger proportion of females than males in college (10,352,322 vs. 7,718,682).

When it comes to geography, the state with the largest growth was New Hampshire, with a 16.2 percent increase in enrollment. The state with the largest decline was Alaska, with a 5.8 percent decrease.

Regarding specific subjects, the largest increase

for four-year institutions was in the liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities with a 6.9 percent increase. The biggest decrease for the same category of institutions was in foreign languages, literatures and linguistics, with a 6.7 percent decline.

So, what does all this mean?

First and foremost, many states, particularly in the Midwest, are showing a decrease in the number of high school graduates, the main pipeline for college. No wonder all those states show a decline of enrollment between 1 and 4 percent. In the past these declines have been compensated by the aggressive recruitment of international students, but the jury is still out on whether the level of enrollments of people who are not U.S. citizens or permanent residents will aid enrollments for the upcoming fall semester. The report does not include international students because this organization feels that they do not have robust enough data in that area.

Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the good state of the economy hurts college enrollment. If people feel that they do not need further education in order to get a job, they will not spend time and money going to college.

However, there are other factors that we need to consider as having potential effects on decreased enrollments. One is student debt. So much has been made of this problem that many do not go to college just to avoid long-term financial debt, despite the fact that federal financial aid increased during the Obama administration and that many states have pushed forward the idea of tuition-free college.

Another factor could be the relentless bad press that higher education has been receiving in the last few

years for being politically “too liberal”, or being “irrelevant” to get a good job, despite the fact that multiple studies have shown that a college degree increases significantly one’s lifetime income.

The other aspect we need to consider is that against conventional wisdom not all high school graduates go straight to college. According to figures for 2014 (the last year for which we have statistics in this regard) only 68.4 percent of high school graduates go straight to college.

Although there are no comprehensive studies analyzing the reasons for the gap between graduating from high school and entering directly into college, there is anecdotal evidence that seems to indicate some of the reasons. One is that for many women the only path after high school is college. That is not the case for men, who are usually benefited by gender biases when it comes to job attainment. That could also be the case for students that come from homes where their parents lack a college education. Finally, many complain that there is not good enough information about what to study in college. As pointed out in a previous article in this column, about one-third of college graduates and drop-outs say they would have chosen a different major if they had known then what they know now.

So, yes, colleges and universities need to do a better job informing high school students of their options and the benefit of having a higher education degree.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College-CUNY. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>