

SIDEBAR

Higher Education and COVID-19: Effects on Student Participation, Plans, and Enrollment

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education at all levels throughout the United States, and researchers are beginning to understand its short- and longer-term impacts on students' learning and educational progress. In spring 2020, most undergraduates (87%) reported that they had experienced disruptions and changes in their enrollment as a result of the pandemic (Cameron et al. 2021). In particular, 84% of students reported that some or all of their in-person classes moved to online-only instruction, 4% reported that they withdrew from their institutions, and another 4% took a leave of absence in response to pandemic disruptions.

The pandemic also affected potential students, including postbaccalaureate students. In its summer 2020 interviews of 2015–16 bachelor's degree recipients, the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B:16/20) follow-up survey asked these college graduates about the effects of the pandemic on their participation in postsecondary education. Compared to all 2015–16 bachelor's degree recipients, lower shares of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degree recipients reported that they had either delayed or pursued additional education or training because of the pandemic. Whereas 13% of all bachelor's degree recipients reported that they delayed enrolling in additional education or training due to the pandemic, 9% of STEM degree recipients delayed enrolling (Thomsen et al. 2022). Among all bachelor's degree recipients, 14% pursued additional education or training because of the pandemic, compared with 12% of STEM degree recipients.

Despite many institutions and students returning to in-person instruction and the reduction in illness achieved through vaccination and other measures, the pandemic has continued to affect postsecondary enrollment, student learning and well-being, institutional finances, and workforce development. Data on spring enrollment in postsecondary education from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) indicate that total postsecondary enrollment fell 4.0% (685,000 students) from spring 2021 to spring 2022 (NSCRC *Current Term Enrollment Estimates 2022: Table 1*). This represents an additional decline beyond the 3.5% decrease observed between spring 2020 and spring 2021. Undergraduate enrollment dropped 4.7% between spring 2021 and spring 2022 on top of a 4.9% loss between spring 2020 and spring 2021. In all, there were nearly 1.4 million fewer undergraduates in 2022 than there had been before the pandemic, a 9.4% decline (NSCRC *Current Term Enrollment Estimates 2022: Table 2*).

Community colleges' enrollment fell by 7.8% (or 351,000 students) between 2021 and 2022, and these institutions have now lost over 827,000 students since spring 2020 (NSCRC *Current Term Enrollment Estimates 2022: Table 2*). The California Community Colleges system alone lost nearly 300,000 students over this period, with the largest enrollment reductions among Black and Hispanic students (Bulman and Fairlie 2022).