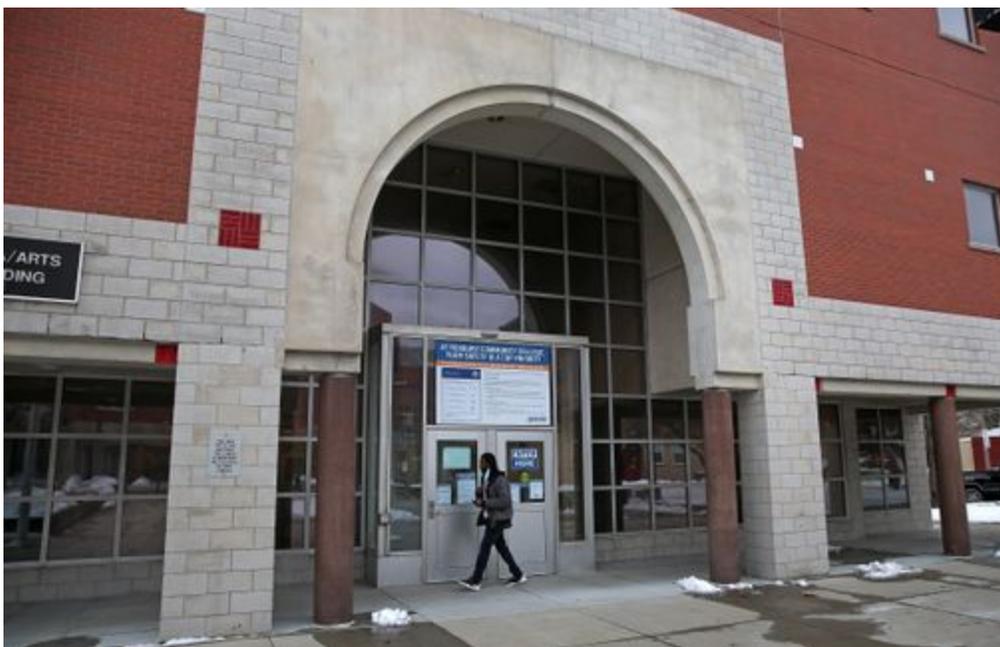


Black and Latino enrollment plummets at Massachusetts community colleges

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By Laura Krantz Globe Staff, Updated February 4, 2021, 8:00 a.m. Email to a Friend Share on Facebook Share on Twitter Print this Article View Comments



Massachusetts community colleges saw enrollment of first-year Black and Latino students decline by one-third this past fall, a stunning drop that underscores the upheaval and economic distress the pandemic has caused in communities of color.

“I don’t think anybody expected the decline, particularly among students of color, to be so large,” said Carlos Santiago, the state’s higher education commissioner.

Enrollment in state colleges has declined across the board during the pandemic, but community colleges, which enroll the greatest proportion of Black and Latino students in the state’s public higher education system, experienced the steepest decline. The nine state universities, not including the University of Massachusetts system, also enrolled 15 percent fewer Black first-year students and 6 percent fewer Latinos, according to new state statistics.

Santiago fears a similar decline this year and said enrollment will largely depend on what high schools can do to make sure, even with many classes being held remotely, that students have the assistance they need to enroll in college. He and officials in the state’s secondary education department plan to work together to reverse this trend, he said.

“I don’t want to be here thinking about a generation of students that we lost because we let this go,” Santiago said.

Public campuses, including UMass, also had fewer white first-year students enroll. Community colleges saw 15 to 20 percent fewer white first-year students, while white enrollment at state universities dropped 15 percent. At the five-campus UMass system, the ranks of Black and Latino first-time undergraduates rose 2 to 4 percent, while the number of first-time undergraduates who are white dropped 10 percent.

Nationwide, first-year college enrollment dropped 13 percent overall and 19 percent at community colleges, with drops of nearly 30 percent among Black and Hispanic students, [according to data](#) from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. College enrollment among Hispanic students had been on the rise, but the pandemic sharply reversed that trend.

College officials said the enrollment decline, while worrisome, was not surprising. People of color have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the economic devastation it has caused. Boston's two community colleges, Roxbury and Bunker Hill, draw students from areas that have been particularly hard hit, including parts of Boston, Chelsea, and Revere. Community colleges draw students who are more likely to juggle full-time jobs, care for children or elderly relatives, and have little financial cushion.

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"All those things are much more prevalent in the populations of color and the populations that we serve," said Valerie Roberson, president of Roxbury Community College. "A lot of our students are making that type of decision where they really don't have a choice."

Roberson, whose campus is opening a new nursing program this year, said the pandemic has underscored how interdependent society is and redefined the meaning of the term "essential."

"If we don't enable those individuals to have and earn a livable wage then we are all in jeopardy," she said.

One major stumbling block for students graduating from high school last year, in Massachusetts and nationally, has been completing [the Free Application for Federal Student Aid](#), or FAFSA, as it is commonly known. The complex forms are difficult to complete in normal times, but in the remote-learning landscape, they have proved even harder, especially for students who are the first in their family to attend college and may have less help navigating the process.

FAFSA completion rates in Massachusetts, as of November, were down 18 percent from a year before, slightly steeper than the national decline of 16 percent, according to [the state](#). At high schools with the highest proportion of low-income students of color, applications declined 25 percent.

State officials have several plans in the works to help students complete the application, said Jim Peyser, who as the state's education secretary oversees secondary and higher public education. Other efforts are underway, including a summer bridge program in coordination with the community colleges that is designed to give students extra preparation, he said.

"We have to have a sense of urgency about this, and we have to make sure we are engaging the folks in K-12, as well as higher education, to try to go the extra mile to bring these young people into higher education," Peyser said.

The elevated number of students putting off college will have lasting impacts on the state's workforce and economy, Peyser said. Those who enroll later earn significantly less over the course of their lifetimes, studies show, and the state will need skilled workers as it emerges from the pandemic, he said.

Beyond the logistical and financial hurdles, many high school seniors have simply lost hope for the future, said Mark Culliton, cofounder and CEO of College Bound Dorchester, a nonprofit that helps students access higher education through a network of mentors.

For students whose parents did not attend college and live in low-income communities, college is a leap of faith, a belief that there is something better out there, he said. Today, it can be hard for young people to feel that way. The mental health challenges associated with the pandemic have been enormous, he said.

"It's almost nihilism," he said. "The economic system is collapsing, there are white supremacists in the street, and this disease is killing people left and right."

While community college leaders worry about the enrollment declines, they are focused on retaining students who are already enrolled, many of whom have had to pause their studies during the pandemic.

Leaders at Bunker Hill Community College in Charlestown have taken a two-pronged approach. They are trying to eliminate barriers in several ways, such as allowing students to pause midway through a course and complete it later, understanding that the extreme circumstances call for flexibility.

Staff are also personally engaging students, calling more than 2,000 over the past year to find out what specific barriers they face to completing college.

While women have lost a disproportionate number of jobs during the pandemic, college officials have found that men are withdrawing from courses at higher rates, often because they must prioritize work, said Arlene Vallie, academic dean for institutional effectiveness.

"For those who do say 'I'm going to jump in this semester, I'm going to get back on that track' . . . then what and how do we help them?" Vallie said.

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