

Community colleges see double-digit declines in enrollment as students struggle to return to their pre-pandemic studies

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Even as many four-year college campuses this fall are brimming with activity once again, enrollment at the state's 15 community colleges reflects how many students still face steep barriers to their education that in many cases have only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Some community colleges are missing a quarter or more of their students compared to before the pandemic. The sharpest drop in enrollment among community colleges statewide came at Roxbury Community College, which is down 35 percent from the fall of 2019. Eleven other campuses also saw double-digit declines.

Community colleges are not the only sector of the public higher education system that has lost students because of the pandemic. Enrollment across the entire public system in the state has suffered, with much of the system seeing the lowest enrollment in 20 years this fall. The five-campus UMass system is experiencing its first significant decline since 2004, according to state data. Enrollment at eight of the nine state universities is also down by double digits compared to fall 2019.

The trends in Massachusetts reflect what is taking place across the country. Community college enrollment nationwide has been declining slowly for years, but the pandemic has caused a sharp 15 percent drop since 2019, according to data from the National Student

Clearinghouse. That is a much steeper decline than the rate for all undergraduate students, which fell 8 percent.

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“The pandemic has disproportionately hurt low-income people and people of color, comparatively, and that is who happens to be our students,” said Nate Mackinnon, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges, a group that advocates on behalf of the campuses.

Administrators aren’t sure when these students will return, or how to draw them back, because the hurdles they face are so steep. And if the students never return, they say, it could have long-term ripple effects on the state’s workforce and economy.

“I’m hopeful that as our economy starts to equalize a bit more... that we will start to see a recognition of the importance of education to provide a pathway towards upward mobility,” Mackinnon said.

RCC president Valerie Roberson said certain subsets of her students, especially men of color, are even less likely to return, so the college is strategizing ways to reach them specifically. RCC serves a student body that is 62 percent Black and 22 percent Latino. The community college student population as a whole is 14 percent Black, 21 percent Latino, and 49 percent white, according to state data.

RCC is also trying to publicize their partnerships with businesses, like the CVS pharmacy technician program, which can lead students directly into jobs after graduation.

The situation at community colleges today is the inverse of what took place after the 2008 economic collapse, when enrollments swelled as people returned to school. The public health aspect of the current crisis makes this situation unique, experts said, but there are also other differences.

Community colleges do not enjoy the same level of federal political support that they had back then, said Erin Doran, an education professor at Iowa State University who specializes in community colleges.

During the last recession, Barack Obama championed the ways in which community colleges could help train or retrain workers, Doran said.

On the campaign trail Joe Biden, whose wife is a community college professor, pitched a plan for tuition-free two-year schools, but that plan was cut from the social safety net bill passed recently by the US House of Representatives.

The campuses around the country that have had the best luck enticing students to return to school, or stay enrolled, are those that have found ways to allow students to attend for free, she said. Going even further, the Alamo Colleges District in San Antonio secured city and

state money that allowed them to pay students \$450 a week to learn a new skill during the pandemic.

“You see individual colleges that are doing this but not at the same sort of coordinated level,” Doran said.

In Massachusetts community college students can access state and federal aid that sometimes covers much of tuition, but bureaucratic hurdles often make it difficult to access that aid.

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One major challenge is meeting the basic needs of students. Even before the pandemic, many community college students struggled with food and housing insecurity as well as transit and child-care challenges.

Before the pandemic, Soelma Silva, 32, had a carefully orchestrated system of work, child care, and classes at Bunker Hill Community College. Then the lockdowns and school closures threw everything off and suddenly she was at home, trying to supervise her children’s online schooling while also completing her own coursework.

Soon she switched her hours working as a home health aide to weekends, relying on her mom for backup child care. Mentally it was almost too much, but in August the struggle finally became worth it: She graduated with a certificate in surgery technology and now works in the operating room at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, assisting surgeons on a host of complex procedures.

“I don’t know how I managed to juggle everything but I somehow did it,” she said.

For students like Silva who managed to stay in school over the past two years, the stress has taken a toll on their mental health.

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Kyra McLean, 20, said she had to repeat a psychology course several times at Northern Essex Community College because she suffered from so much stress and anxiety during the pandemic.

This year she completed the course and for her final project [made a video](#) about how her own struggles and how other students can access mental health resources on campus.

“It’s more than feeling sad one day; it affected and hit people deeper than we realize at this moment,” she said.

The community college offered a perfect alternative to a four-year university because it was cheaper, close to home, and allowed her to earn credits and build her confidence. This spring she plans to transfer to Southern New Hampshire University.

“I loved going [to Northern Essex,]” she said. “It saved me, in a way.”

Despite the enrollment losses overall, most campuses have seen gains in the number of new first-time students who entered this fall, compared to the incoming class in the fall of 2020 during the height of the pandemic.

Leaders said they believe this is because the pandemic has erased some of the stigma of community college. High school graduates increasingly view it as an attractive, practical option, they said.

“Culturally in Boston there is certainly a bias that has said in the past ‘the best alternative is a private four-year school,’ ” said Roberson, the Roxbury president. “I see that changing a lot as a result of the pandemic.”

Some of the growth is a result of targeted efforts the colleges made last year as they worried that, amid the chaos, some students would simply not attend college at all. Indeed in fall 2020, community colleges saw enrollment of first-year Black and Latino students decline by one-third, a stunning drop that mirrored national trends.

Related: [Black and Latino enrollment plummets at Massachusetts community colleges](#)

Northern Essex Community College saw hundreds of new students enroll this year after they sent staff to work with high schools in Lawrence, Methuen, and Haverhill, aiding students as they filled out complex financial aid forms.

Northern Essex president Lane Glenn said it felt crucial to reach those students because he is concerned about the impact that losing them could have on the workforce.

“Many of these students, if they don’t start college now, will not start,” he said.

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