

College enrollment declining in Massachusetts

Sunday

Posted Dec 11, 2016 at 9:03 PM

Updated Dec 12, 2016 at 12:08 AM

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Since hitting a peak in 2013, enrollment at Massachusetts public colleges and universities has decreased for the third consecutive year, posing challenges that education leaders are working to address.

"This was predictable. All you had to do was go back 17, 18, 19 years ago and look at birth rates," state Higher Education Commissioner Carlos Santiago said. "We knew it was coming ... But we don't want to just sit back and let those demographic trends take shape."

After more than a decade of growth, public undergraduate enrollment in Massachusetts has declined by 10,744, or 5.5 percent, since 2013. There are an estimated 186,103 undergraduate students on public campuses in Massachusetts for the fall 2016 semester.

The trend correlates to demographic shifts being experienced elsewhere in the country. In a Dec. 6 report, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education projects that nearly two decades of growth in the number of students graduating high school has come to an end. After a 30 percent national increase in high school graduates from 1995 to 2013, WICHE projects no growth through at least 2023.

Due to demographic and population shifts, the Northeast and Midwest are expected to experience the largest declines in the number of high school graduates in the coming years, with the West seeing a slight increase and the South experiencing the largest increase.

In Massachusetts, where roughly 50 percent of the population has a post-secondary degree, the economy is particularly dependent on an educated workforce. With declining public higher education enrollment and a large segment of the current workforce nearing retirement age, Santiago is concerned about potential economic impacts.

"The reality is if you mix in decline in college-going students because of demography and the decline in individuals 55 years and older, who are going to be retiring, that 50 percent could go down," he said. "That's a concern to an economy that requires more and more skilled workers."

Another demographic trend is that black and Hispanic students are comprising an ever-increasing portion of the high school population. Santiago, the state's first Hispanic higher education commissioner, said those minority groups have historically been "underserved" by higher education.

By increasing the numbers of minority students attending college, the state could not only better serve those students, but could also offset some of the enrollment decreases caused by an overall decline in high school graduates, Santiago said.

"We want to focus on getting more students who have not traditionally gone to college to go to college," Santiago said. "That requires us to look back to K-12 to ensure these students are college ready."

Nationally, colleges need to do a better job of enrolling and supporting populations of students who haven't historically pursued post-secondary education in great numbers, according to the WICHE report.

"Higher education institutions can no longer rely on an ever-increasing pool of high school graduates to fill their classrooms," Peace Bransberger, senior research analyst at WICHE and a co-author of the report, said in a statement. "They also must rethink how they equip their institutions to support a new majority."

In Massachusetts, community colleges account for a significant amount of the decreasing enrollment. During the Great Recession, as high school student populations continued to expand, enrollment at community colleges spiked, hitting a peak in 2012. Since then, Massachusetts community college enrollment

has dropped by 13 percent. Education leaders say it's common for enrollment in community colleges to decrease as the economy improves.

In recent years, the University of Massachusetts system has increasingly relied on international students to boost its enrollment. Since 2013, the UMass campuses have increased in-state enrollment by 0.7 percent, while the number of out-of-state students has decreased by 0.7 percent. Enrollment of international students, however, rose by more than 12 percent during that span.

Jennifer Poulos, executive director of the Boston-based nonprofit Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, said expanding opportunities for students to take dual enrollment courses could bring greater numbers of students to college. In dual-enrollment, a high school student takes a community college course that counts both toward a high school diploma and as college credit.

Affordability remains an issue.

"With the price tag attached to college, a lot of students are faced with the challenge of needing to balance work and school," she said. "It needs to be financially sustainable. Families and students are constantly making tough choices on where college fits in based on the price tag attached to it."

State education officials said increased tuition and fees are likely in the near future. That is mainly due to a tight state budget that restricts the amount of funding devoted to public higher education, but declining enrollment could also be a factor at a handful of community colleges that have seen particularly steep enrollment dropoffs.

Poulos discussed the challenge of better preparing students for success in college. Too many, she said, end up in non-credit-bearing remedial courses in their freshman year. Reducing the number of students in remedial courses, she said, would improve retention rates and affordability.

"Making sure we have strategies that do effectively work with low-income and first-generation college students seems like a pretty good bet," she said.

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