



How Might COVID-19 Affect Fall 2020 Higher Education Enrollment?

Modeling the Effects of Different Enrollment Scenarios

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When asked about their most pressing concern for fall 2020, 65 percent of college presidents surveyed in early summer identified enrollment numbers as a key issue for their campuses.¹ Enrollment in higher education is an issue not only on individual campuses but for the country at large. As many schools consider a return with virtual or limited face-to-face coursework, this fall could dramatically change college enrollment patterns. Although students have submitted their deposits and colleges have maintained connections with students over the summer, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will still affect both undergraduate and graduate enrollment.

These changes will not be fully understood until well into the fall semester, but we can begin to understand how different sectors and geographic areas may be affected by modeling the effects of a given change across a student population, such as a decline in the number of international students or a reduction in the share of enrolled students receiving Pell grants. The effects of these changes will be felt differently across sectors and geographic areas. Federal and state policymakers can use the information from these scenarios to anticipate which states and areas may need support in the face of broad declines or changes in student population. Modeling these scenarios yields the following conclusions:

- **If enrollment changes resemble changes from the 2008 recession, for-profit institutions would see the largest percentage increases in enrollment.** This pandemic-induced recession is different than the 2008 recession, but if enrollment follows the same pattern, we would see large increases in for-profit higher education enrollment. Community college enrollment would experience smaller percentage increases, but, by head count, these increases would be larger.

- **International student enrollment declines would hit graduate schools the hardest.** Public and nonprofit graduate schools enroll a large share of international students and would see the steepest decline in enrollment if some international students do not return to campus.
- **East Coast and Midwest states would lose a larger share of students if enrollment declines among residential students.** If some students opt out of colleges offering a residential experience, we may see sharper declines in overall higher education enrollment in certain states. If this enrollment decline is less likely to occur in highly selective colleges, some states would see these losses mitigated.
- **A decline in in-person enrollment would harm the two-year and less-than-two-year sectors.** Many two-year and less-than-two-year schools offer in-person technical training. If students avoid programs that are offered entirely in person, these sectors would experience disproportionate enrollment declines.
- **If students from low-income backgrounds do not enroll in the fall, Sun Belt states would lose the most students.** If students from low-income families, or students who receive Pell grants, do not enroll in the fall, this would be a substantial loss, particularly in Sun Belt states, where higher shares of these students are typically enrolled.

Understanding Uncertainty in Fall 2020 Enrollment

There are many reasons to model the potential effects of broad changes in higher education enrollment in fall 2020. For an institution, the number of students who show up in the fall affects faculty and staff needs and affects planning around the tuition revenue that institutions may expect. Enrollment in higher education can also give us a sense of the level at which people are investing in additional skills during a period of high unemployment. Enrollment in higher education is typically countercyclical—the opportunity cost of college declines when employment prospects decline, pushing many people to “shelter” in higher education. But the uncertainty of the pandemic-induced economic downturn, and the uncertain prospects for on-campus learning in the fall, mean that changes in enrollment are hard to predict.

Even more important than the short-term questions of individual institution finances and potential individual upskilling, however, is the need for a broader framework to understand how enrollment changes may have long-term effects on certain higher education sectors, geographic areas, and American education levels. If higher education enrollment slumps in certain areas or grows in other areas in fall 2020, we could see ripple effects in enrollment and attainment that could last for years.

Higher education analysts have discussed several enrollment scenarios, such as the loss of international students,² the loss of low-income students (DeBaum 2020), and delayed entry into higher education.³ Many of these changes will happen at the same time, and it is difficult for institutions to estimate who will (or will not) show up to a physical or virtual campus in the fall. But while researchers have discussed these trends, the extent to which each enrollment change may affect different types of institutions and geographic areas has not been fully explored. This brief summarizes and discusses how

changes in different student subpopulations might affect individual sectors across the United States and within each state.

BOX 1

Notes on Data and Comparability across Different Scenarios

This brief uses the most recent enrollment data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to assess the implications of declines in different student subpopulations. IPEDS enrollment data are reported by institutions annually. Institutions typically report both a fall enrollment count and a 12-month enrollment count. This brief uses the fall enrollment count, which is a snapshot of students enrolled at a given fall date. The 12-month enrollment count is an unduplicated count of the number of students at the institution over the course of the year. Using the fall enrollment count allows for the development of more comparable data on different types of students but may underestimate enrollment at nontraditional programs, particularly those that provide short-term programs.

For this analysis, I look at all institutions that

- are in the United States,
- were active in the most recent year of data (2018–19), and
- are Title IV institutions in the most recent year of data, meaning that students may apply for federal financial aid.

For this brief, I report projected changes by institution sector (control and level). But the IPEDS definition of these categories classified some community colleges as four-year institutions.^a To adjust for this, I build a modified version of the IPEDS sector variable, using the classification suggested by the Community College Research Center for public institutions and retaining the IPEDS sector variable for other institutions.

When identifying selective institutions, I use the 2018 Carnegie classification for an institution's undergraduate profile, labeling colleges as “highly selective” if the classification is “four-year, full time, more selective, lower transfer-in” or “four-year, full time, more selective, higher transfer-in.” This method identifies 110 public, 296 private nonprofit, and 8 private for-profit institutions.

For all analyses, I look only at students who are enrolled in a program that leads to a credential (i.e., a degree or a certificate). In some analyses, I look only at first-time, full-time students. These students are enrolled for at least 12 credit hours and have not previously enrolled in higher education. This categorization excludes a substantial share of students, particularly those enrolled in two-year and less-than-two-year institutions.^b

^a John Fink and Davis Jenkins, “Shifting Sectors: How a Commonly Used Federal Datapoint Undercounts over a Million Community College Students,” *The Mixed Methods Blog*, Columbia University Teachers College, April 30, 2020, <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/easyblog/shifting-sectors-community-colleges-undercounting.html>.

^b National Center for Education Statistics, PowerStats table beecapmn9e, https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/index.aspx?ps_x=beecapmn9e.

Modeling Changes in Higher Education Enrollment

Even though students have already paid their deposits for the fall semester, some students may change their plans and not matriculate in the fall. This happens even in nonpandemic times. The phenomenon of “summer melt”—when students commit to attend college in the spring but fail to show up in the fall—is well documented. Roughly one in five high school graduates who are committed to attending college do not enroll in the fall.⁴ Summer melt is especially prevalent among low-income students.

And even if colleges manage to get students to their first day, the risk for early stop out is potentially high this fall, especially if classes are held virtually or if students feel restricted in their ability to make social connections to other students and to form an emotional connection to the college community. Leaving school midsemester is more common among those in distance education than among those in brick-and-mortar classrooms. In fall 2015, 2 percent of students who were enrolled full time or part time in September were no longer enrolled by November, and, of students who were enrolled in online-only coursework, nearly 6 percent were not enrolled.⁵

Enrollment Changes Similar to the 2008 Recession

Enrollment in higher education typically increases in an economic downturn, as unemployment increases (Betts and McFarland 1995). Enrollment in higher education increased sharply in the wake of the 2008 recession, with enrollment in two-year institutions increasing by 13 percent from 2007 to 2010, and four-year public enrollment increasing by 8 percent (Barrow and Davis 2012). Enrollment increases were steepest between the 2008–09 and 2009–10 school years (Dunbar et al. 2011).

I project what might happen to institutions if they experience a surge in enrollment similar to what institutions experienced between fall 2008 and fall 2009. To do this, I estimate the percentage change each institution experienced in part-time undergraduate, full-time undergraduate, and graduate fall enrollment between these years. I use students who are enrolled for credit (seeking degrees or certificates). For institutions that were not operating in either fall 2008 or fall 2009, or that had fall enrollment below 20 students in the given enrollment category, I estimate the aggregate growth rate of enrollment for similar institutions (percentage change, estimated as total enrollment in the sector in fall 2009 divided by total enrollment in the sector in 2008).⁶ I multiply this percentage change by the institution’s fall 2018 enrollment (the most recent available) to project overall changes in enrollment.

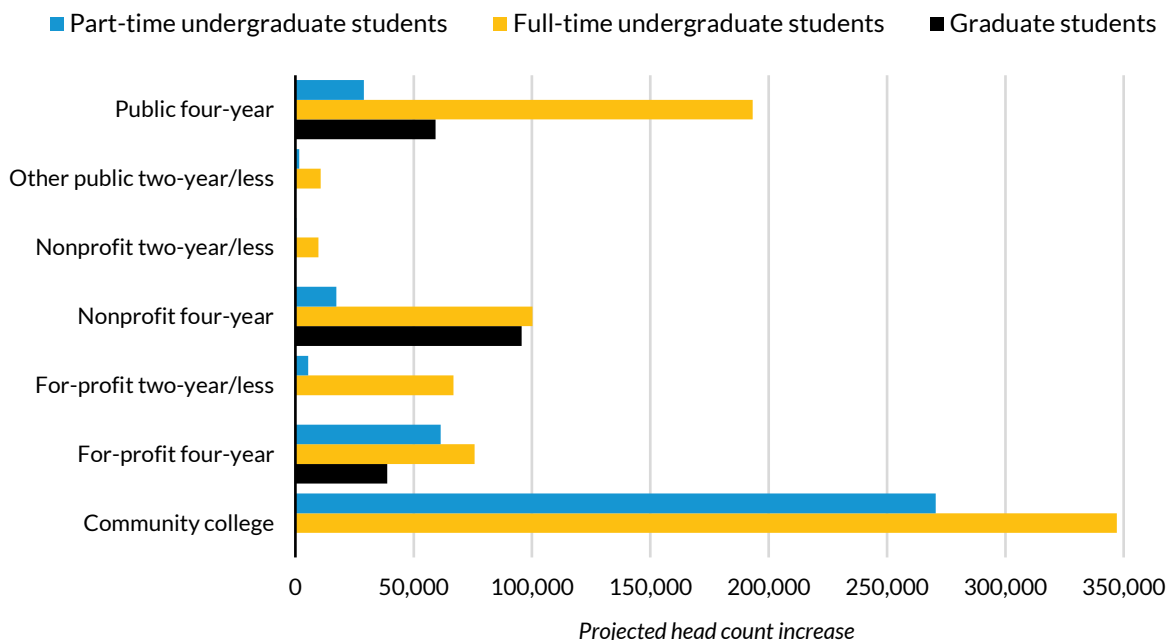
COMMUNITY COLLEGES WOULD SEE THE LARGEST INCREASE IN HEAD COUNT

If the pandemic-induced economic downturn caused changes in enrollment similar to what happened in fall 2009, we would expect the largest increases in student head count to occur in community colleges, where full-time fall undergraduate enrollment could increase by roughly 345,000 and part-time fall undergraduate enrollment could increase by 270,000 (figure 1). In terms of head count, this calculation projects that public four-year institutions would also see an increase in full-time undergraduate head count of about 195,000.

FIGURE 1

Estimated Changes in Enrollment, Based on Enrollment Changes between Fall 2008 and Fall 2009

Head count among undergraduates would rise most in public institutions



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Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

Although these public sectors are projected to have the largest increases in head count, for-profit institutions are projected to have the largest percentage increase in enrollment. For example, if institution- and sector-level enrollment changes from the 2008 recession were projected on fall 2020 enrollment, for-profit four-year institutions would see a 16 percent increase in graduate students, a 22 percent increase in full-time undergraduate students, and a 28 percent increase in part-time undergraduate students. In contrast, the increases in enrollment for four-year public schools constitutes a 4 percent increase across the three categories.

GEOGRAPHIC INCREASES IN ENROLLMENT MAY NOT MIRROR 2008 RECESSION CHANGES

If changes in fall 2020 enrollment mirror changes from the last recession, some states would see larger increases in overall college enrollment than others. Changes in college enrollment during a recession could be influenced by local economic conditions (e.g., higher local unemployment may be associated with higher enrollment levels) or by institution capacity constraints in physical capacity (e.g., number of classroom seats) or staffing capacity caused by state funding declines.

If we look at trends from the 2008 recession, split out by part-time and full-time undergraduate students, as well as graduate students, we see that some states are projected to have larger increases than others. In particular, Arizona, Minnesota, Utah, and Virginia have high projected increases, should the pandemic-induced recession have the same impact as the recession in 2008.

TABLE 1

Estimated Enrollment Increases, Based on Enrollment Changes between Fall 2008 and Fall 2009

Part-Time Undergraduate Students			Full-Time Undergraduate Students			Graduate Students		
State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected increase	State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected increase	State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected increase
AZ	158,155	25%	UT	224,229	20%	WV	21,428	23%
WV	43,408	21%	AZ	273,095	16%	UT	51,004	19%
CT	48,367	15%	OR	118,294	13%	KY	50,046	17%
AK	8,117	15%	NM	52,767	12%	VA	100,420	16%
GA	128,308	15%	CO	178,121	11%	WA	37,257	15%
MN	76,512	15%	GA	291,134	11%	VT	6,111	12%
OH	131,823	14%	VA	286,283	11%	AZ	98,966	12%
VA	111,772	14%	WA	201,683	10%	CT	36,941	11%
NM	34,626	14%	FL	554,810	10%	MN	115,125	11%
IA	28,513	13%	TN	206,077	10%	NM	13,119	10%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

Of course, the 2020 recession is markedly different from the 2008 recession. It remains unclear what, if any, bump in college enrollment this economic downturn may produce.

Changes in International Student Enrollment

International students are at higher risk of not enrolling at US colleges in the fall, relative to domestic students. COVID-19 travel restrictions may make it difficult for prospective and returning students who are outside the US to enter. Recently enacted work visa restrictions do not affect international students, and restrictions on international student visas for returning students taking online coursework were rescinded, but these regulations may produce a “chilling effect” for international students considering higher education in the US.⁷ Aside from the cultural and academic contributions international students bring to a campus, international students tend to pay a larger share of their tuition costs out of pocket (rather than through institutional grants), so the loss of these students can also cause a disproportionate financial loss to the institution.

In this scenario, I project what might happen if fewer international students enroll in higher education in fall 2020. I estimate the total number of enrolled international students using data on enrollment for undergraduate and graduate students by race and ethnicity. Students classified as “nonresident aliens” in these data are deemed international students in my analysis. One drawback of this approach is that students who have Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals status are also included in this category.

NONPROFIT AND PUBLIC GRADUATE SCHOOLS

WOULD SEE THE LARGEST DECLINES IN ENROLLMENT

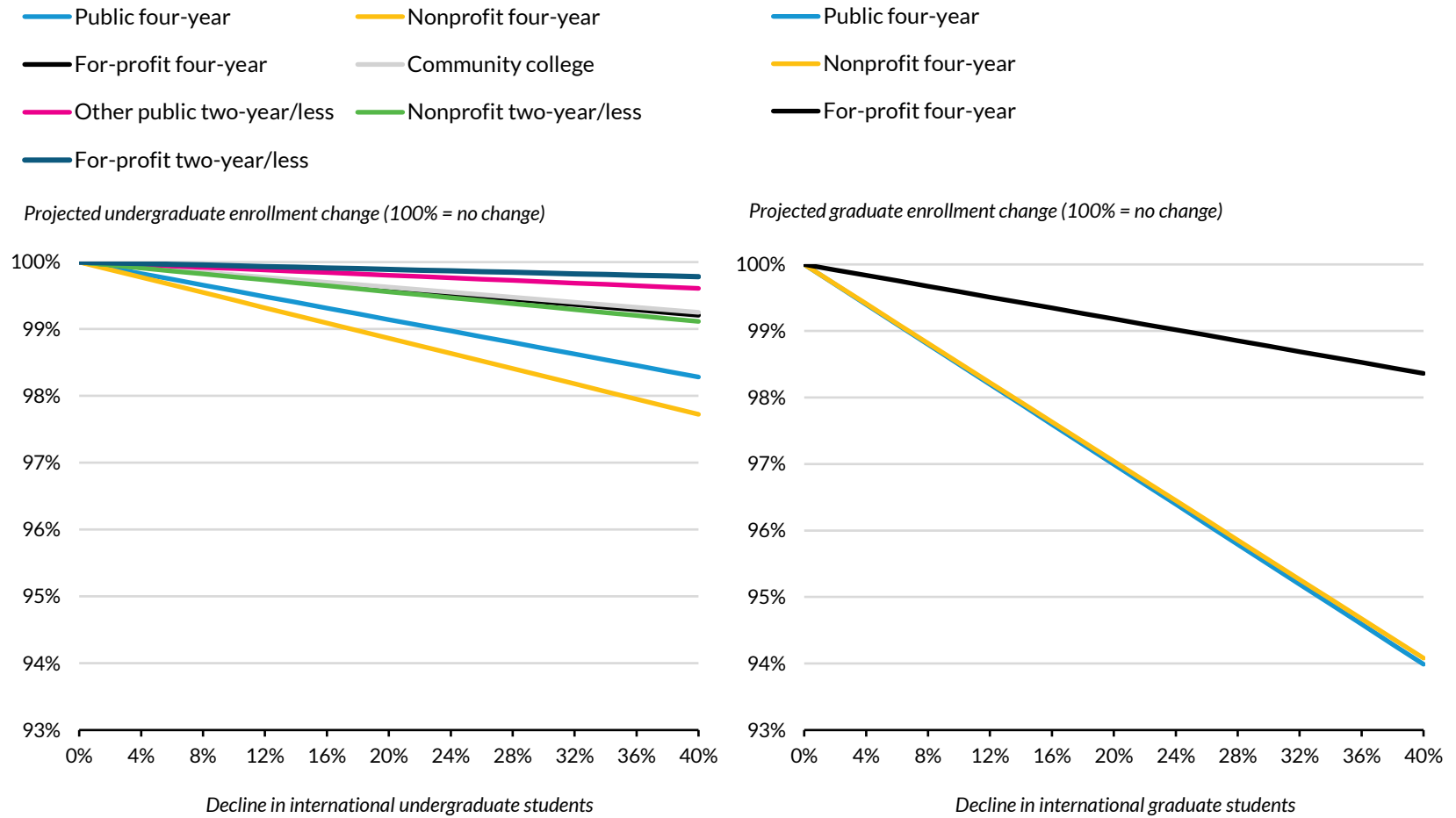
All sectors would experience a loss if international students do not return in the fall, but graduate schools would feel the largest loss. For example, if the number of international undergraduate students

enrolled in higher education decreased 20 percent, this would reduce overall enrollment in nonprofit four-year institutions and four-year public institutions by about 1 percent. But a change of similar magnitude among graduate students would cause a 3 percentage-point decline in enrollment in both the nonprofit and public sectors.

FIGURE 2

Estimated Changes in Enrollment, Based on a Decline in International Students

Decreases in overall enrollment would be greatest in public and nonprofit graduate schools



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Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education System data.

A DECLINE IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENROLLMENT WOULD HARM MANY STATES

Although the total number of enrolled students is highest in high-population states such as California, New York, and Texas, the same percentage change in overall international student enrollment across states would yield a wide range of percentage changes in overall enrollment because of differences in the share of students who are international.⁸ A 20 percent decline in international student enrollment would disproportionately harm states like California, New York, and Texas, but it would also significantly reduce overall undergraduate enrollment in Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, and Washington, DC. A similar decline in enrollment among graduate students would cause the largest overall enrollment decrease for Delaware, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, and New York.

TABLE 2

Estimated Enrollment Decreases, Given a 20 Percent Decrease in International Enrollment

FTFT Undergraduate Students			Undergraduate Students			Graduate Students		
State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected decrease	State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected decrease	State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected decrease
MA	73,306	-1%	DC	50,647	-2%	DE	11,221	-6%
DC	10,833	-1%	MA	337,485	-1%	KY	50,046	-5%
CA	398,907	-1%	HI	45,501	-1%	MA	142,453	-5%
NY	196,767	-1%	KS	149,881	-1%	NY	244,936	-4%
HI	8,690	-1%	ID	91,345	-1%	MI	79,944	-4%
PA	122,029	-1%	NY	928,294	-1%	IN	59,989	-3%
MD	45,753	-1%	WA	256,093	-1%	CA	302,037	-3%
IN	65,749	-1%	IN	294,134	-1%	TX	192,982	-3%
RI	15,845	-1%	IA	153,070	-1%	PA	144,550	-3%
CT	34,181	-1%	CA	2,258,086	-1%	RI	11,474	-3%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

Note: FTFT = first-time full-time.

Changes in Residential Student Enrollment

Colleges, particularly those with a large residential population, are beginning to announce their plans for the fall. An increasing share are opting to provide education fully online or in a hybrid model where some students are on campus but others are not. The prospect of being unable to socialize freely while residing on campus, or of taking classes virtually while living at home, could deter residential students, particularly first-year students, from showing up in the fall. Conversely, some residential students may, because of health and safety concerns, opt not to start in the fall if their campus is planning to hold face-to-face classes.

The decision of whether to defer (if the option is available) or to wait a year and reapply is likely partially dependent on the selectivity of the residential institution. A student with a reserved place at a highly selective school may decide to stay enrolled, even with online classes or stringent COVID-19 distancing restrictions, as colleges may limit the number of student deferments and readmission may not be guaranteed because of a potential glut of 2021 applicants. Further, highly selective institutions may be more likely to fill in vacant spots using wait-listed students.⁹ But at residential schools, where

admission is less competitive, more incoming freshman may wait a year, even if readmission is not guaranteed, and see if they can start their experience fully in person in fall 2021.

To model this scenario, I estimate a decline in the share of first-time full-time (FTFT) degree- or certificate-seeking students who lived on campus. IPEDS reports two measures of on-campus students, relative to those living off campus or with family: the count of those who receive Title IV aid (e.g., Pell grants or federal loans) and the count of those who receive any grant aid (e.g., Pell grants, state grants, or institutional grants). To project the overall share of residential FTFT students, I use the estimated share of residential students from the more representative sample (higher number of students represented) and apply that share to the overall number of FTFT students. Because first-year students are more likely to live on campus (and may be more likely not to show up in the fall, given that they have no previous connection to campus), my estimates of FTFT changes in enrollment are likely higher than they would be for the overall full-time undergraduate population.

To model a reduced impact for highly selective schools, I estimate that the reduction in residential enrollment will be 25 percent of the size of the overall percentage decrease in residential enrollment. In my model, highly selective schools are categorized using the Undergraduate Profile Classification from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. These institutions are four-year schools that are categorized as “more selective” —in the 80th to 100th percentile of selectivity—with at least 80 percent of students enrolled full time.

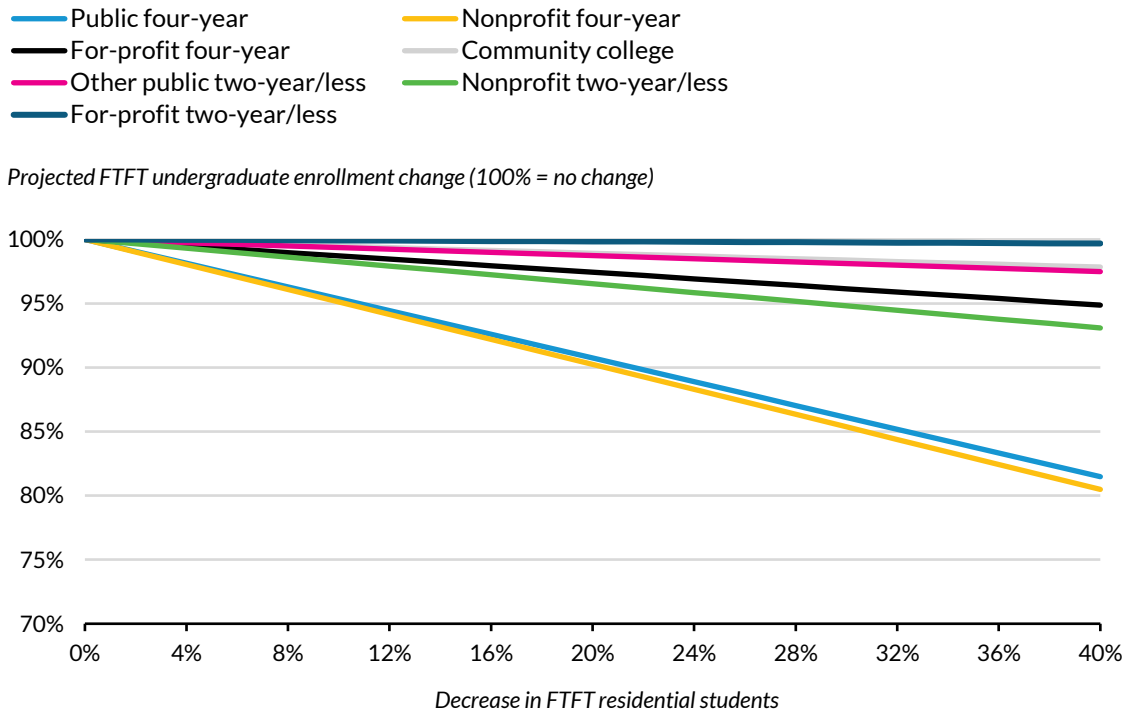
DECLINES IN RESIDENTIAL STUDENTS PRODUCE THE MOST RISK FOR FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC AND NONPROFIT INSTITUTIONS

Some media outlets have focused on the pandemic’s impact on enrollment in residential schools, but the decline of residential students will have a small impact on two-year schools, less-than-two-year schools, and for-profit four-year institutions. Among four-year public and nonprofit institutions, a severe reduction in residential enrollment (i.e., a 20 percent decline) yields a 9 and 10 percent decline in overall FTFT enrollment. The muted effect of these projected residential enrollment declines, even at these four-year institutions, is because of both the “save” provided for highly selective institutions and the fact that a minority of first-year students live on campus, even at four-year institutions.¹⁰

FIGURE 3

Estimated Changes in Enrollment, Based on a Decline in Residential FTFT Undergraduates

Assuming a smaller decline for highly selective institutions



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Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

Note: FTFT = first-time full-time.

SOME STATES COULD SEE LARGER ENROLLMENT

DECLINES IF RESIDENTIAL ENROLLMENT DECREASES

Some states have higher shares of their students in residential colleges than others, which means these states could see a larger effect on FTFT enrollment if incoming residential students do not show up in the fall. A 20 percent residential decline, without a reduced effect for highly selective institutions, would produce large drops in overall FTFT enrollment in states such as Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Wisconsin and in Washington, DC. But if we assume that students are more likely to show up on campuses where there is substantial competition for spots, the list of states changes. Some East Coast areas (e.g., Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC) move out of the top 10 because they have high concentrations of selective institutions. But states with larger geographic areas, such as Montana, North and South Dakota, and Wisconsin, are more at risk of enrollment decreases. This may be because these states have large flagship state institutions with high shares of residential full-time students.

TABLE 3

Estimated Enrollment Decreases, Based on a 20 Percent Decline in Residential FTFT Undergraduates

FTFT Undergraduate Students			FTFT Undergraduate Students, Reduced Impact for Highly Selective Institutions		
State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected decrease	State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected decrease
DC	9,735	-18%	ND	8,169	-13%
VT	6,468	-18%	SD	8,064	-12%
WI	43,397	-15%	ME	10,839	-11%
MA	65,726	-14%	MT	7,526	-11%
ME	10,839	-14%	VT	6,468	-11%
SD	8,064	-14%	WI	43,397	-11%
NE	16,807	-14%	WV	15,714	-11%
PA	109,033	-13%	RI	14,814	-10%
RI	14,814	-13%	MS	30,650	-10%
ND	8,169	-13%	KS	27,369	-9%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

Note: FTFT = first-time full-time.

Students traveling to attend school in the fall will expect their campuses to provide a safe residential experience. If they feel their campus cannot provide that experience, these students may not show up in the fall. In this case, some states will face larger gaps in enrollment than others. Although I have focused on states that have the most to lose from this trend, some states would see little impact. California, which has a robust community college system, would experience just a 6 percent decline in FTFT enrollment overall in the face of a 20 percent decrease in FTFT residential enrollment and a 3 percent decline if there is a reduced impact for highly selective institutions.

Changes in Distance Education Student Enrollment

One of the key challenges for colleges has been translating in-person classes into an online format. A recorded lecture or a class discussion via Zoom may be a poor substitute for face-to-face learning. But a large share of institutions already have some academic courses or programs available in an online format. Before the pandemic, 16 percent of higher education students were enrolled exclusively in distance education.¹¹ Distance education is most popular among graduate students (Blagg 2019), among whom nearly a third were enrolled exclusively in distance courses,¹² while about 14 percent of undergraduate students were enrolled exclusively in distance courses at two- and four-year institutions.

It is possible that students, in considering whether and where to enroll in the fall, may opt for higher education experiences that were already designed to be online. Such programs or courses may have more structured online interactions or coursework, appealing to prospective students. Further, colleges with preexisting online programs may be marketing their institutions to students in the hopes of boosting enrollment.¹³ And students currently enrolled in institutions or programs offering entirely in-

person coursework may shift toward institutions or programs with virtual options or opt not to return to an in-person setting until the pandemic has abated.

For this analysis, I use data on the number of degree- or certificate-seeking students who are enrolled in a distance education program at the institution (i.e., coursework is typically completed entirely online), the number taking at least one distance education course, and the number enrolled only in face-to-face instruction. There are many ways to model a shift away from face-to-face instruction toward distance education. For simplicity, and in keeping with the other models, I will estimate the effects of a percentage decline in enrollment among students who do not take any distance education courses (i.e., who attend face-to-face courses). I assume that enrollments of students taking at least one virtual course, or an entire virtual program, stay the same. Sectors or states that experience the smallest declines in overall enrollment under this scenario—those that had the largest shares of online enrollment before the pandemic—might have the most to gain if more students enroll in distance courses or programs.

LESS-THAN-TWO-YEAR INSTITUTIONS WILL LIKELY LOSE THE HIGHEST SHARES OF STUDENTS IF IN-PERSON ENROLLMENT DECLINES

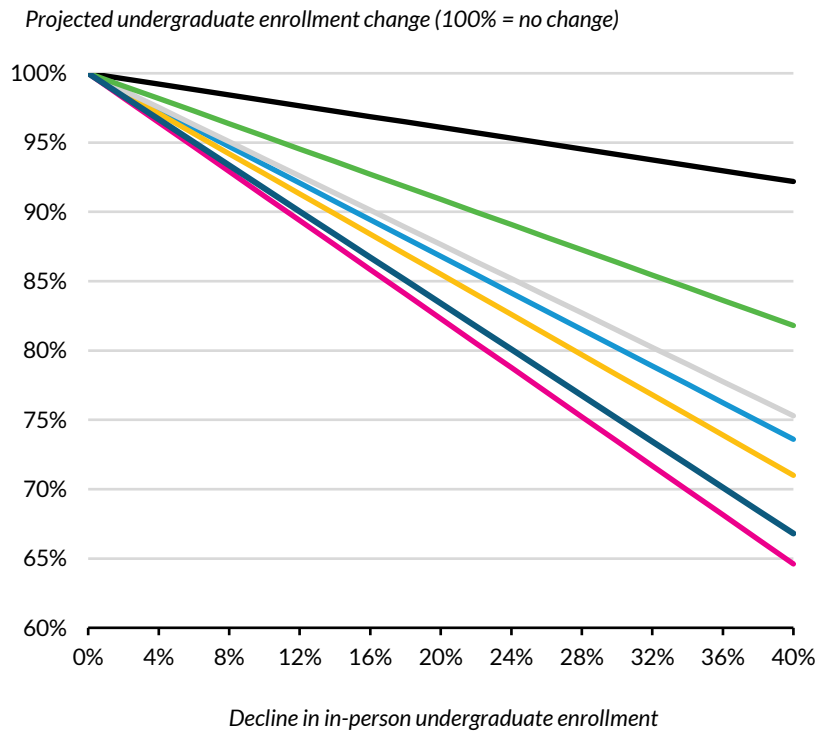
If there are substantial declines in students who are enrolled only in in-person classes, less-than-two-year institutions, which tend to be vocational or occupational programs that involve a high level of in-person interaction, will see the largest percentage declines in undergraduate enrollment. A 20 percent decline in face-to-face enrollment results in a nearly identical change in overall enrollment (an 18 percent reduction in enrollment in public less-than-two-year schools and a 17 percent reduction at for-profit institutions). Community colleges and public four-year institutions will see some decline in overall enrollment (a 20 percent decrease in face-to-face courses would mean a 12 and 13 percent decline in overall undergraduate enrollment), while for-profit four-year institutions would see relatively little decline (just 4 percent with a 20 percent decrease in face-to-face enrollment).

FIGURE 4

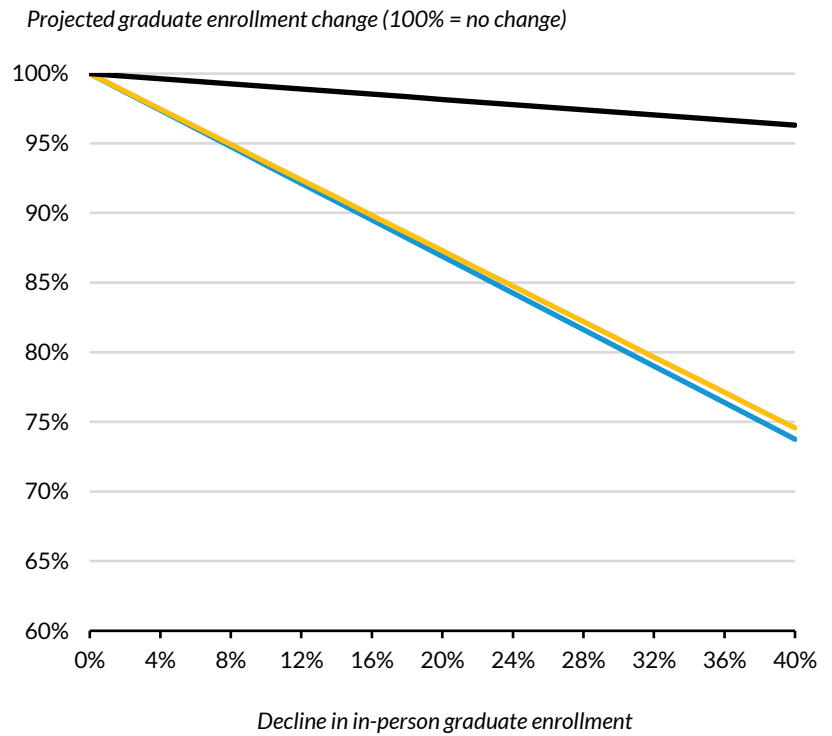
Estimated Changes in Enrollment, Based on a Decline in In-Person Enrollment

Two-year and less-than-two-year institutions would see the largest declines

- Public four-year
- For-profit four-year
- Other public two-year/less
- For-profit two-year/less
- Nonprofit four-year
- Community college
- Nonprofit two-year/less



- Public four-year
- Nonprofit four-year
- For-profit four-year



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Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

For graduate enrollment, public and nonprofit institutions could see a 12 and 11 percentage-point drop if in-person enrollment drops 20 percent. But for-profit graduate programs would be largely unaffected, experiencing just a 2 percentage-point drop.

EAST COAST STATES ARE MOST AT RISK IF STUDENTS

MOVE AWAY FROM IN-PERSON ENROLLMENT

Although the model of changes in face-to-face enrollment for degree- or certificate-seeking undergraduate and graduate students produces substantial drops in most sectors, the aggregate change in enrollment by state looks similar in magnitude to our simulation of a 20 percent drop in residential FTFT students (albeit, on a broader population of students). East Coast states such as Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island would lose the highest share of undergraduate students if face-to-face enrollment declines. This is likely because residential higher education institutions are more likely to offer coursework entirely in person and because of the higher market share of residential institutions in these states.

For graduate student enrollment, East Coast states still lose substantial shares of students, but states such as Hawaii, Montana, Nevada, and Washington would also see substantial declines in overall graduate enrollment if face-to-face enrollment declines 20 percent.

TABLE 4

Estimated Enrollment Decreases, Based on a 20 Percent Decline in In-Person Enrollment

Undergraduate Students			Graduate Students		
State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected decrease	State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected decrease
RI	66,732	-17%	RI	11,474	-17%
NY	911,472	-16%	WA	37,257	-17%
MA	332,899	-16%	NY	244,936	-16%
VT	31,871	-16%	HI	6,496	-16%
DC	50,094	-16%	NV	11,799	-16%
CT	152,647	-16%	CT	36,941	-15%
PA	528,300	-15%	MA	142,453	-15%
MT	39,322	-15%	NJ	63,277	-15%
NJ	327,088	-15%	MI	79,944	-15%
MI	414,118	-15%	MT	5,556	-14%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

Changes in Low-Income First-Time Full-Time Student Enrollment

One of the most concerning summer melt possibilities is that fewer students from low-income backgrounds might enroll in fall 2020. Completion of the renewal Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) among low-income students began to decline after March 15, when many colleges went virtual for the remainder of the school year.¹⁴

There are many reasons to imagine that enrollments of low-income students—particularly first-time students—may be at risk in fall 2020. If their campus transitions to virtual coursework, students from low-income backgrounds may not feel confident that their home environment or their access to technology will enable them to keep up with their coursework. Further, evidence shows that low-income students tend to be more likely to withdraw from online courses, relative to their higher-income peers, and may need additional instructional supports to succeed (Jaggars 2011). Finally, many students from low- or moderate-income backgrounds may have experienced changes in their family finances caused by the pandemic-induced recession, meaning that 2018 income data from their FAFSA may no longer be applicable. Although students may receive a reevaluation of their financial need if they request it, some may not know that this is an option and may feel that their current aid package cannot cover expenses.

To estimate how changes in low-income student enrollment may affect sectors and states, I look at the share of all undergraduate students receiving a Pell grant. I project the effects of a decline in the share of students who received a Pell grant. This measure has drawbacks: some students may be ineligible for Pell grants even though they have low incomes (e.g., because they have other assets or because they fail to meet financial aid eligibility requirements). Further, a substantial share of Pell recipients at some institutions come from a middle-income bracket (households earning between \$30,000 and \$66,000 a year) (Delisle 2017). But the Pell share is representative of the undergraduate population as a whole, as it includes all undergraduates.

I also build an alternative measure of low-income enrollment based on enrollment data on the family income levels of FTFT students who applied for financial aid. Because I can conduct this analysis only on this limited sample of FTFT students who applied for aid, my results are imprecise. It is possible this is an underestimate of the enrollment declines among low-income students, as low-income students may be more likely to enroll part time or be enrolled in higher education a second time. It is also possible this is an overestimate in schools where a larger share of students do not submit the FAFSA because they may not have financial need.

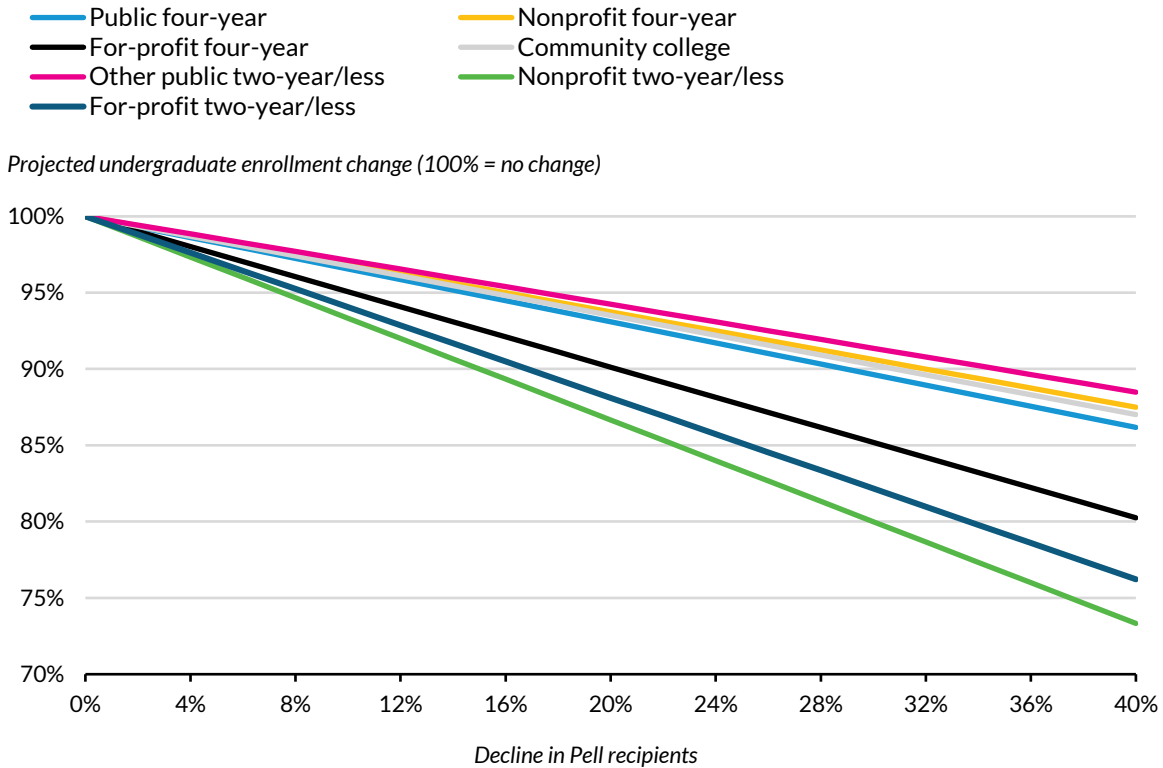
DECLINES IN THE NUMBER OF PELL STUDENTS WOULD HAVE A LARGER EFFECT ON FOR-PROFIT INSTITUTIONS AND NONPROFIT TWO-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

For-profit institutions disproportionately enroll students from low-income backgrounds (Fry and Cilluffo 2019). Thus, if the share of Pell students enrolled in higher education declines in fall 2020, for-profit institutions might be most at risk of seeing enrollment decline. If 20 percent of Pell recipients do not show up in the fall, this would cause a 12 and 10 percent decline in undergraduate enrollment at for-profit two-year and four-year institutions.

FIGURE 5

Estimated Changes in Enrollment, Based on a Decline in Pell Recipient Enrollment

For-profit and less-than-two-year institutions would see the largest declines



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Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

SUN BELT STATES WOULD EXPERIENCE LARGER UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT LOSSES IF STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS DO NOT RETURN TO CAMPUS IN THE FALL

States where students largely come from the Sun Belt—including Arkansas, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Mexico—would be more likely to experience declines in undergraduate enrollment if students from low-income families decide not to show up in the fall. This larger effect may be because of lower average income overall in these states but could also be because of a dedicated push by institutions in these states to enroll more low-income students.

TABLE 5

Estimated Enrollment Decreases, Based on a Decline in Low-Income Students

Financial Aid Cohort of Undergraduates, 20% Decline in Pell Grant Recipients			FTFT Undergraduate Financial Aid Applicants, 20% Decline in Students from Households Earning <\$30K			FTFT Undergraduate Financial Aid Applicants, 20% Decline, Households Earning <\$48K		
State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected decrease	State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected decrease	State	Fall 2018 enrollment	Projected decrease
MS	154,808	-9%	MS	18,022	-12%	NM	8,444	-16%
GA	468,554	-9%	NM	8,444	-12%	MS	18,022	-16%
FL	1,040,555	-8%	FL	87,358	-12%	FL	87,358	-15%
LA	226,312	-8%	LA	25,243	-11%	NV	7,572	-14%
AR	147,559	-8%	AL	23,729	-11%	AZ	26,969	-14%
TN	301,039	-8%	AZ	26,969	-11%	LA	25,243	-14%
NJ	381,148	-8%	NV	7,572	-10%	CA	151,031	-14%
NH	120,715	-8%	CA	151,031	-10%	AL	23,729	-14%
NY	1,052,990	-8%	TX	115,900	-10%	TX	115,900	-13%
SC	225,909	-8%	AR	15,430	-10%	AR	15,430	-13%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

Note: FTFT = first-time full-time.

There are differences in the states most at risk of seeing enrollment decline, depending on whether we look at decreases in Pell recipients among overall undergraduate enrollment or look at decreases in FTFT undergraduate financial aid applicants with family incomes in the lowest (up to \$30,000) and second-lowest (\$30,000 to \$48,000) income categories. This could be because of differences across states in such factors as the share of FTFT undergraduates and in eligibility for Pell.

How Policymakers Can Respond to Changes in Enrollment

In this brief, I have modeled several scenarios for what enrollment could be like when students return in the fall. In all likelihood, we may see some element of each scenario play out as students return. But when we look at the effects on certain sectors (appendix table A.1) and on states (appendix table A.2), we see a broad distribution of risks. Some sectors and states face substantial decreases in enrollment if international students do not return, for example, while others would see a smaller impact. And some sectors and states face risks from multiple fronts. The four-year nonprofit and four-year public sectors, for example, could experience larger shifts under the scenarios I have modeled.

Institutions might not report official enrollment numbers—and the shares of students who stay enrolled—for several months after the fall term starts. But policymakers can use evidence of broad trends to think through options for supporting the higher education sector. Potential policy options include the following:

- **Provide additional financial support for institutions to weather fall 2020.** Colleges, particularly open-access public or nonprofit colleges, which may be more vulnerable to enrollment changes this fall, can be economic and cultural anchors for communities. State and federal funding can be a safety net and ensure that institutions that might typically have stable finances can stay open.
- **Provide supports for low-income students.** The CARES Act provided emergency aid, administered through institutions, for students who experienced disruption to their spring 2020 semesters. Such disruptions will likely continue into the fall, and policymakers should be prepared to provide additional supports for students. To supplement any campus-based financial supports, policymakers should consider extending any additional broad federal supports (e.g., additional stimulus checks, eligibility for social safety net benefits) to low-income college students.
- **Anticipate and support an increase in 2021 enrollment.** Most of the scenarios I have modeled envision a decline in overall college enrollment. This scenario seems increasingly likely, as colleges make plans for virtual or severely curtailed semesters. Policymakers should anticipate that fall 2021 enrollments will likely increase as a response and should support students and institutions in building temporary capacity on campuses and in ensuring that high school students who opted to delay a year still have access to application supports (e.g., help filling out the FAFSA or access to their guidance counselor).
- **Develop new ways of tracking institution performance.** In the 2008 recession, increases in enrollment also meant increases in student debt levels. Some students enrolled in programs that did not pay off and have been unable to make a dent in their debt. Policymakers need to be vigilant for programs that do not offer return on investment for students. New measures of accountability—ones that allow for declines in student outcomes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic but do not excuse institutions or programs with long-standing patterns of poor outcomes—are necessary to support students and ensure the investments they make now pay off in the future.

Appendix

TABLE A.1

Effects of a 20 Percent Decline in Enrollment Subgroups, by Sector

	Int'l under- graduate students	Int'l graduate students	Nondistance under- graduate students	Nondistance graduate students	FTFT residential under- graduate students	Pell recipients
Community college	-0.38%	0.00%	-12.35%	0.00%	-1.08%	-6.49%
For-profit four-year	-0.40%	-0.82%	-3.90%	-1.85%	-2.57%	-9.87%
For-profit two-year/less	-0.11%	0.00%	-16.60%	0.00%	-0.16%	-11.89%
Nonprofit four-year	-1.14%	-2.96%	-14.50%	-12.72%	-9.76%	-6.25%
Nonprofit two-year/less	-0.44%	0.00%	-9.10%	0.00%	-3.46%	-13.33%
Other public two-year/less	-0.20%	0.00%	-17.70%	0.00%	-1.26%	-5.76%
Public four-year	-0.86%	-3.01%	-13.20%	-13.12%	-9.26%	-6.91%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

Notes: FTFT = first-time full-time. Darker shades of blue indicate larger declines.

TABLE A.2

Effects of a 20 Percent Decline in Enrollment Subgroups, by State

State	Int'l undergraduate students	Int'l graduate students	Nondistance undergraduate students	Nondistance graduate students	FTFT residential undergraduate students	Pell recipients
AK	-0.32%	-1.23%	-9.16%	-6.00%	-6.60%	-4.44%
AL	-0.41%	-1.36%	-11.34%	-7.96%	-6.71%	-7.45%
AR	-0.52%	-1.64%	-12.15%	-9.33%	-7.97%	-8.12%
AZ	-0.53%	-1.50%	-7.49%	-5.38%	-6.98%	-7.18%
CA	-0.83%	-3.33%	-13.98%	-13.86%	-3.47%	-6.67%
CO	-0.55%	-1.38%	-12.38%	-10.53%	-5.88%	-6.18%
CT	-0.63%	-3.18%	-15.57%	-15.41%	-7.69%	-7.57%
DC	-1.57%	-2.80%	-15.80%	-13.84%	-6.12%	-5.51%
DE	-0.69%	-5.59%	-13.78%	-11.18%	-4.27%	-6.27%
FL	-0.64%	-2.36%	-10.44%	-11.75%	-4.37%	-8.35%
GA	-0.52%	-3.13%	-13.21%	-11.20%	-8.25%	-8.64%
HI	-1.29%	-2.36%	-12.82%	-16.11%	-5.12%	-5.80%
IA	-0.88%	-2.88%	-13.05%	-12.00%	-7.45%	-5.48%
ID	-1.20%	-1.42%	-8.41%	-10.12%	-7.36%	-5.87%
IL	-0.65%	-3.11%	-13.81%	-12.75%	-6.07%	-6.68%
IN	-0.90%	-3.48%	-12.64%	-12.21%	-7.42%	-6.21%
KS	-1.22%	-1.96%	-11.26%	-9.25%	-8.93%	-5.85%
KY	-0.32%	-5.46%	-11.10%	-6.56%	-7.52%	-7.40%
LA	-0.38%	-1.98%	-12.31%	-12.14%	-5.61%	-8.25%
MA	-1.50%	-4.77%	-16.28%	-14.82%	-7.83%	-6.01%
MD	-0.78%	-2.89%	-12.48%	-10.76%	-6.92%	-6.11%
ME	-0.44%	-0.58%	-13.29%	-10.22%	-11.48%	-6.75%
MI	-0.67%	-3.52%	-14.82%	-14.50%	-7.81%	-6.75%
MN	-0.72%	-1.00%	-12.06%	-5.35%	-7.26%	-6.03%
MO	-0.57%	-2.26%	-12.04%	-11.97%	-7.30%	-6.59%
MS	-0.23%	-1.42%	-11.15%	-10.95%	-9.66%	-9.20%
MT	-0.40%	-1.48%	-14.90%	-14.01%	-11.43%	-6.30%

State	Int'l undergraduate students	Int'l graduate students	Nondistance undergraduate students	Nondistance graduate students	FTFT residential undergraduate students	Pell recipients
NC	-0.41%	-2.64%	-11.78%	-13.20%	-8.26%	-7.74%
ND	-0.62%	-2.59%	-10.24%	-9.60%	-13.39%	-4.56%
NE	-0.76%	-1.37%	-10.85%	-9.32%	-8.81%	-5.72%
NH	-0.21%	-1.05%	-6.25%	-4.89%	-8.15%	-7.82%
NJ	-0.63%	-3.00%	-14.87%	-14.65%	-4.93%	-7.90%
NM	-0.35%	-2.12%	-10.60%	-11.53%	-5.54%	-7.44%
NV	-0.29%	-1.31%	-11.33%	-15.68%	-3.89%	-6.60%
NY	-1.18%	-4.24%	-16.33%	-16.26%	-5.10%	-7.77%
OH	-0.72%	-2.82%	-12.30%	-12.54%	-7.50%	-6.39%
OK	-0.76%	-2.11%	-12.07%	-12.44%	-7.02%	-6.67%
OR	-0.76%	-1.97%	-12.97%	-13.86%	-6.89%	-6.60%
PA	-0.83%	-3.25%	-15.24%	-13.36%	-8.75%	-6.47%
RI	-0.74%	-3.19%	-16.96%	-17.29%	-10.20%	-6.31%
SC	-0.23%	-1.88%	-13.15%	-12.75%	-7.33%	-7.74%
SD	-0.46%	-1.97%	-13.15%	-8.69%	-12.31%	-5.70%
TN	-0.37%	-1.36%	-12.18%	-12.81%	-6.31%	-7.91%
TX	-0.52%	-3.26%	-12.49%	-12.55%	-6.12%	-7.00%
UT	-0.35%	-0.73%	-7.93%	-5.48%	-3.57%	-6.28%
VA	-0.51%	-1.62%	-12.22%	-9.14%	-7.98%	-6.34%
VT	-0.77%	-0.81%	-16.05%	-12.66%	-10.92%	-4.89%
WA	-1.04%	-2.80%	-13.97%	-16.65%	-6.12%	-5.30%
WI	-0.54%	-2.40%	-14.08%	-13.46%	-10.81%	-5.63%
WV	-0.48%	-1.18%	-7.63%	-7.68%	-10.67%	-6.87%
WY	-0.52%	-2.85%	-11.23%	-10.47%	-6.51%	-4.26%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data.

Notes: FTFT = first-time full-time. Darker shades of blue indicate larger declines.

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