
Regional

Enrollment numbers can mean a lot to universities

Some of the most important statistics in higher education concern enrollment. For private institutions that is their bread-and-butter, because unless they are one of those with gigantic endowments they need the money that comes from tuition and fees to operate. For public institutions the situation is becoming more similar because they are getting fewer funds from their states and increasingly rely on tuition and fees, a process that has been termed “the privatization of public higher education.”

The other reason why enrollment numbers matter is because of prestige. The more and better students an institution can enroll, the more it can claim a level of prestige. And if the numbers of applicants increase – because of the perceived prestige – institutions become more selective in admissions. This, in turn, increases retention and graduation rates. And those numbers are becoming more and more important when time comes to demonstrate educational effectiveness.

Last May enrollment statistics for U.S. institutions of higher education were released by The National Student Clearinghouse. This is a non-profit organization founded in 1993 by the higher education community that provides student data related to enrollment and performance, and the news is not good.

The report, titled “Term enrollments estimates for Spring 2016,” shows that the overall postsecondary enrollment decreased 1.3 percent from the previous spring. The decrease was most pronounced among four-year for-profit institutions (-9.3 percent) and two-year public institutions (-2.8 percent). On the other hand, enrollments increased slightly among four-year public institutions (+0.6 percent) and four-

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year private nonprofit institutions (+0.7 percent). As a whole, public sector enrollment (two-year and four-year combined) declined by 0.9 percent this spring.

There is also a great deal of variation in enrollment on a state-by-state basis. The two states showing the largest increases in enrollment are New Hampshire (11.6 percent) and Utah (8.5 percent). On the other hand, the ones with the largest decreases are Nebraska (-5.1 percent) and Illinois (-4.4 percent). The case of Illinois is particularly troubling because this dramatic decrease is on top of a -3.8 percent decrease the year before, and a -3.1 percent the year before that. In fact, from 687,305 students enrolled in higher education in Illinois in 2014, two years later it was only 631,965. That is roughly 56,000 fewer students.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a branch of the U.S. Department of Education, nationwide the total number of students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities was just over 21 million in 2010 (the peak year). Today that number is 18,343,655, roughly two and a half million fewer students in our colleges and universities.

What is behind this decline? There are several factors influencing this trend. The first one is the fall in the number of high school graduates in many states. This is due to plain demographics. Ten states have seen stagnation (less than one percent increase per year) in their population growth and Illinois is one

of them. The other cause is the high cost of college in for-profit institutions. No wonder that those are the institutions seeing the largest decline in enrollments, which is not all a bad thing. Students from those institutions are the ones who graduate with the highest levels of debt and an education not always of the highest quality.

When it comes to two-year public institutions (community and technical colleges) the decline in their enrollments can be attributed to the improving economy and the decline in unemployment rates. In other words, the more jobs out there, the less people feel that a two-year degree will increase their employment opportunities.

What is interesting is that those schools showing the highest increase in enrollment are the four-year nonprofit, private colleges. And that is interesting because these are among the most expensive college choices. On the other hand, they are the ones that on average offer a better quality education. They also are the ones that emphasize a liberal arts education, i.e., providing skills such as critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and problem solving, that will always be useful regardless of what career path their graduates follow.

The other factor is that budget cuts in many states have meant less financial aid for prospective students while the fear of those institutions actually closing has led fewer students to enroll. It is simply too much of a risk.

What should colleges and universities be doing to deal with the issue of declining enrollments? Several things. The first and most important is to offer quality education in innovative programs for which there

is demand. For example, at the present time there is a huge demand for specialists in cyber security, yet that industry claims that they only have about 40 percent of the employees with the technical education they need.

Another is to increase the number of international students. Their numbers keep increasing nationwide, but simply relying on happenstance won't ensure that they come to a specific institution. Schools need well-developed strategies, policies and practices to attract and retain them in a highly competitive environment.

Finally, institutions of higher education need to become more savvy in trying to attract the only population sector in this country that is showing a sustained increase: Hispanics. To that end, they need to develop strategies aimed not only at the students but also at their families, because decisions like where to attend college usually take place at the family level among Hispanics. Colleges and universities need to create welcoming environments for them. Some of those schools that have been successful have made small changes that have had great consequences, such as having bilingual signs on their campuses.

It is time, especially for public institutions, to become shrewder and start developing programs and strategies aimed at those sectors of the population that can cover for the undeniable effects of demographic changes.

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