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NEWS: DATA, RESEARCH, & EVALUATION

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Updated NSC Data: Class of 2020 Fall Enrollment Dropped Nearly 7%

Thursday, March 25, 2021

Posted by: Bill DeBaun, Director of Data and Evaluation

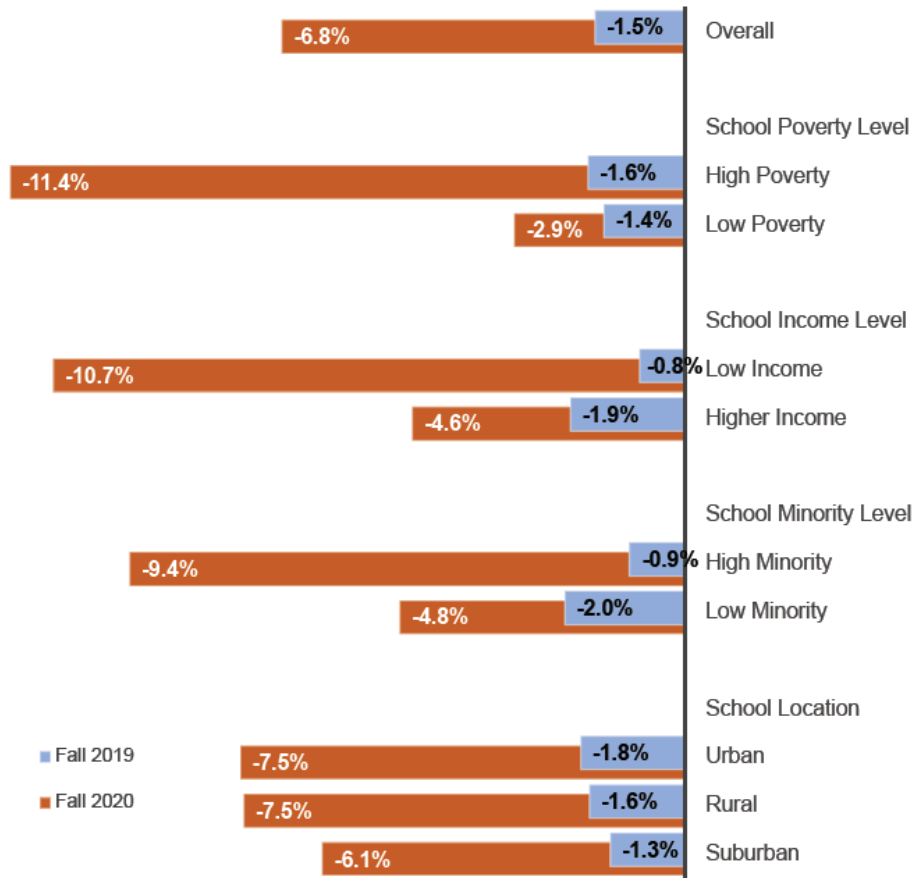
Reading time: 3 min.

There's good news and bad news about the class of 2020 fall enrollment data the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) reported last December (<https://www.nca.org/news/542655/NSC-Report-High-School-Class-of-2020-Shows-Catastrophic-Enrollment-Declines.htm>) that showed a catastrophic 22% decline in recent high school graduates immediately enrolling in college.

The good news is that, after adding 50% more data and correcting for a process error, the NSCRC revised its estimated enrollment decline (<https://nscresearchcenter.org/high-school-benchmarks/>) to 6.8%.

The bad news is that a 6.8% decline is four times larger than the class of 2019's pre-pandemic enrollment decline and that across high school categories significant inequities emerge that disadvantage students from low-income backgrounds and students of color.

Figure 1. Percent Change in Immediate Fall Enrollments by High School Characteristics



(https://cdn.ymaws.com/collegeaccess.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/data/hs_benchmarks2020update_1.png)

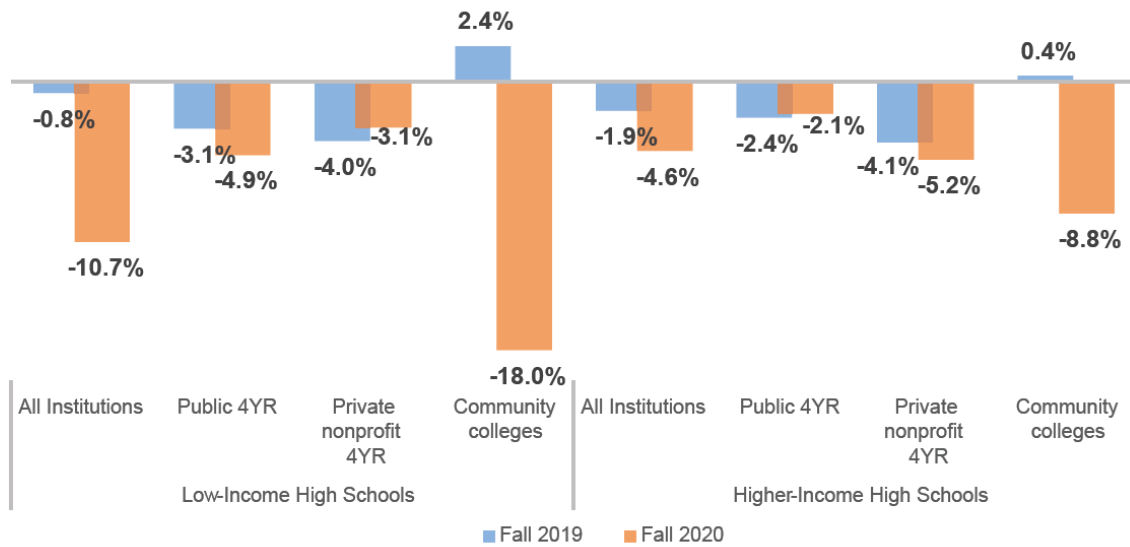
The figure above shows how substantially the class of 2020's enrollment losses outpaced the class of 2019's across all high school categories. Notably:

- Low-income high schools (which have 50+% students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) were down 10.7% for the class of 2020, more than 13 times the decline from the previous year.
- High-poverty high schools (which have 75+% students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch) saw declines of 11.4%, more than seven times the previous year's decrease.
- High-minority high schools (where 40+% of students are Black or Hispanic) saw enrollment declines of 9.4% in 2020 compared to -0.9% in 2019 (a tenfold increase).

Comparing across high school categories in 2020, enrollment declines were 2.3 times steeper for low-income high schools compared to higher-income schools.

Where students enrolled also shifted in 2020 compared to 2019. Community college enrollment dropped the most in low-income high schools, while public, four-year enrollment was unaffected by the pandemic for high-income high schools. The chart below shows how enrollment destinations shifted across low- and higher-income high schools.

Figure 7. Percent Change in Immediate Fall Enrollments by Institution Type and Income Level of High Schools



Note: All Institutions include for-profit four-year and private two-year colleges that are not shown due to small numbers.

(https://cdn.ymaws.com/collegeaccess.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/data/hs_benchmarks2020update_2.png)

In a press release, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Executive Director Doug Shapiro explained, “Students from disadvantaged schools are showing much higher rates of decline in college enrollment than their more advantaged counterparts. These findings further illustrate how the pandemic has reduced access to postsecondary education, particularly for students seeking more affordable options in the public sector.”

These data show the significant work that remains not only to reconnect students from the class of 2020 with a postsecondary pathway but also to ensure that the same outcomes do not befall the class of 2021.

NCAN is watching FAFSA completion data (<https://formyourfuture.org/fafsa-tracker/>) closely. The declines described above came on the heels of a 4.2% decline in high school FAFSA completions nationally for the class of 2020. As of March 5, the class of 2021’s year-over-year decline sat at -9.1%.

This fall will hopefully look much more normal, but students need to complete college-going milestones now to stay on track to make a postsecondary transition. There is no guarantee that those who fall off a pathway now will hop back onto one this summer or fall.

The next four to six weeks will offer a much clearer picture of whether the class of 2021 will see attrition equaling or exceeding that of the class of 2020. Either way, advocates and policymakers need to keep student outcomes front and center, as significant work remains to ensure postsecondary transitions and/or reconnect students with a postsecondary pathway.

NCAN remains grateful for the NSCRC team’s efforts to provide these valuable data illuminating the equity gaps that make postsecondary access and attainment difficult for students.

Read More:

- Full High School Benchmarks Report from NSCRC (<https://nscrcresearchcenter.org/high-school-benchmarks/>)
- NCAN’s Form Your Future FAFSA Tracker (<https://formyourfuture.org/fafsa-tracker/>)

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CONTACT US

National College Attainment Network
 6218 Georgia Ave. NW, Ste 1-405
 Washington, DC 20011-5125

PH: (202) 347-4848
FAX: 844-324-0809

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