CT college enrollment declining faster than national rate

By Liz Teitz and Brian Zahn
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Enrollment at Yale University bucks the declining enrollment trend, with enrollment, including all student at 13,433, in 2018-19 school year, and increase from 12,974 in the 2017-18 school year.

Photo: Ed Stannard / Hearst Connecticut Media file photo /

About 3,000 fewer students attended Connecticut colleges this fall compared to last year, as enrollment in the state declined at a slightly higher rate than the national trend, according to a new report released Monday by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.
from the previous fall to 17.9 million students.” This was the first time in a decade that fall enrollment fell below 18 million, the report said.

The number of college students in the U.S. has fallen by about 10 percent since fall 2012. In Connecticut, it's dropped by about 6.5 percent in that time, from nearly 197,000 students to 183,981 students this year.

### Estimated Enrollment by State

That’s due in part to demographic changes: lower birth rates 18 to 20 years ago resulted in fewer high school students now, said Allison Buckley, vice president for Enrollment Management at the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System. That “demographic trough” is a national issue, but is particularly bad in certain pockets, including New England. Connecticut public schools enrolled nearly 20,000 fewer students in 2018 than they did in 2013, according to the state Department of Education.

A strong economy with low unemployment is also a factor. During the recession, college enrollment rose, especially at community colleges, according to a 2018 report from the
High costs of college also deter students: prices at the state’s public and private colleges have risen and Connecticut graduates have the highest average student debt in the country, according to The Institute for College Access & Success. Fifty-nine percent of 2018 graduates from Connecticut colleges had student debt, which averaged $38,669.

Enrollment dropped nationally at both public and private colleges, according to the National Student Clearinghouse report. The largest declines were in the private for-profit sector, followed by public two- and four-year schools and private, nonprofit colleges.

CTEE Report Fall 2019, source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center by Helen Bennett on Scribd
Buckley said the system is working to improve how it serves and retains students. That includes looking to better meet the needs of adult students, redesigning the academic advising system, evaluating the on-boarding process to help students better acclimate to college and working on wraparound services to meet students’ non-academic needs. Addressing issues such as food insecurity can help students focus on school and be successful, she said.

They’re also making plans to launch debt-free community college this fall, after it was passed by the state legislature last spring. The last-dollar program for first-time, full-time students will cover any remaining tuition after federal, state and institutional aid is applied. About 60 percent of current full-time students already pay no tuition and fees due to financial aid.

That program is expected to boost enrollment at the community colleges, though it may cause “a temporary enrollment challenge for the state universities,” Buckley said. “Most of these students will be looking to transfer, because their ultimate educational goal is a baccalaureate degree,” she said, so “that short term dip flattens out very very quickly.”

CSCU transfer programs are intended to help students easily transition from community colleges to public four-year universities, and some private schools are also forming similar transfer agreements.

That includes schools such as Sacred Heart University, Quinnipiac University and University of Saint Joseph, Connecticut Conference of Independent Colleges President Jennifer Widness said.

The private sector hasn’t been hit quite as hard by enrollment declines as their public peers, and many have seen increases in recent years, but they’re not immune from the demographic challenges, Widness said.

**Connecticut's colleges**
Quinnipiac, which for years was known for its growth, made budget cuts this fall due to lower-than-expected enrollment. They attributed it to higher academic standards for admitted students and improved four-year graduation rates, but said that resulted in “budget implications.” The school has “enhanced our recruitment efforts outside the northeast,” spokesman John Morgan said Monday, and has developed “seamless transfer agreements” with three community colleges in an effort to bring in local students.

With the pool of students shrinking, private colleges are providing more aid to be accessible to more students, she said, and they’re evaluating how to support adult learners. CCIC schools have doubled their aid money in the last 10 years, Widness said.

They’re also adding offerings in high-demand fields like health sciences, entrepreneurship, engineering and computer science to attract students, she said.

Despite the declining numbers statewide, some private colleges have continued to grow. Fairfield University and Sacred Heart University said this summer that they were expecting to enroll their largest freshman classes ever this fall.

Albertus Magnus College’s incoming class of about 270 students was more than twice the size it was two years ago, and was also the largest in the school’s history. President Marc Camille said in an interview this fall that the small Catholic school is “expanding the footprint” of where they recruit students from to draw more applicants.

About three-quarters of this year’s new class is from Connecticut, compared to “more than 90 percent” two years ago, he said. More students are coming from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York and New Jersey and from outside the United States. “This was really our first full year of actively recruiting internationally,” he said.
which has helped fill seats left empty by declining in-state enrollment, the school said on its website. Officials at Sacred Heart and Fairfield said this summer that students from outside Connecticut, including Philadelphia and New York, have helped fuel their growth.

Camille said he expects the school to continue to grow, though “we don’t yet know how large.” New athletic programs, including ice hockey, have also brought in new students and broadened the pool of applicants.

The school’s small size is part of what attracts students, something they’ll seek to maintain while also “raising the awareness of an Albertus Magnus College degree and the quality that exists here,” Camille said. Widness pointed to the school as an example of a private college that’s worked to attract and support adult students.

Other Connecticut colleges have changed who they enroll to fill their classes: University of Saint Joseph, a former women’s college, began accepting men last year to attract both male students and female students who want a co-ed experience.

New York and Massachusetts both experienced enrollment drops this year similar to Connecticut’s, by 1.8 percent and 1.3 percent, respectively. Fifteen states saw enrollment rise from 2018 to 2019, including Rhode Island, where it increased by 0.3 percent, and New Hampshire, which saw a 3.4 percent increase.

High schools and scholarship organizations in the state are also working to help more students apply to and enroll in college, and improve their persistence through a degree.

For Connecticut schools, “the real growth is in students of color coming from urban cities,” said Patricia Melton, executive director of the New Haven Promise scholarship program. Wealthier students are choosing elite private schools in other states, while state schools are enrolling more working-class students from urban centers, she said, so attracting and then keeping those students is key.

“If you look at the number of kids going to college and how many drop out in the first year or two, if you retain those kids you don’t have to grow the population,” she said.

Programs such as the Promise, which offers New Haven public school graduates free tuition for four years if they have a demonstrated track record in academics, discipline
average, which she said is a good predictor of whether they’ll pursue a degree for four years.

The program is funded by public and private money and has multiple university partnerships. Frequent messaging about the Promise scholarship in New Haven schools has made students aware of its existence, Melton said.

Officials in Stamford also piloted a public-private partnership to encourage more college attendance this summer.

Four school districts in Connecticut -- Waterbury, Bridgeport, Norwalk and Stamford -- partake in a partnership program called Cradle to Career, a network program of the StriveTogether community network organization. This summer, Stamford debuted a program called Bridge to College designed to combat the “summer melt” when would-be college-goers lose sight of their goal of enrolling for various reasons.

The students targeted by the program, which was modeled after one in Albany, N.Y., are mostly first-generation college students who lack traditional supports at home, according to Coordinator for College and Career Readiness Rebecca Wilson. The majority of these students have not completed their financial aid applications during the school year, and are left to fill it out on their own without the help of a school counselor during the summer months.

With support and funding from the United Way of Western Connecticut and Stamford Public Schools, the program hired two counselors over the summer to assist students so they could enroll in Norwalk Community College in the fall.

“Typically, first-generation kids who say they’re going to go to college don’t end up in college for myriad reasons,” said Bridget Fox, President of Stamford Cradle to Career. “Bridge to College provides supports to offset their not going.”

Wilson said the goal was to have 35 students at risk of “melting” over the summer to work with the counselors to be ready to apply to college by the fall; in the initial meeting, 53 students were in the room, and over 75 percent of them matriculated to NCC.
Wilson said. “NCC was very instrumental in lending us folks out of their financial aid office and student support services office.”

Fox said NCC was a natural partner for the pilot, but Cradle to Career is hoping the Bridge to College program can partner with other schools such as the University of Connecticut in the coming years.

“It demonstrated to us the appetite to go to college, and the needs for supports and the willingness on the part of students to say ‘I need a little extra help to make this happen’,” Fox said.

Frank Costanzo, Norwalk Public Schools chief of school operations, said his district has fairly recently invested heavily in college and career pathways for students. The technical education-focused Pathways in Technology Early College High School graduated its first class recently, where students have the ability to obtain a professional certificate or associate’s degree from Norwalk Community College by the time they graduate high school.

One of the elementary schools, Kendall Elementary School, has a college and career focus, he said.

“Other high school pathways programs are in different stages of development, including a medical academy, a marine science academy, we have a digital media pathway,” Costanzo said. There is also an international baccalaureate program in the district. Most of the programs are nascent and have not yet produced data on the impact they have on college enrollment or persistence.

One thing that makes Norwalk relatively unique among Connecticut districts, Costanzo said, is growing enrollment.

“We think we will be producing college-ready students at a good rate relative to other municipalities in the state,” he said.

Liz.Teitz@hearstmediact.com