

CURRENT

Term Enrollment

ESTIMATES
SPRING 2020

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A COVID-19 Supplement

With New Data Submitted in April and May 2020



National Student Clearinghouse™
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Why the Supplement Report?

With ongoing campus shutdowns and online-only classes amid the COVID-19 crisis, uncertainties abound for students and colleges planning for the fall. There is a critical need for real data and reliable information about how students are responding. By leveraging the student-level data that colleges submit multiple times per term to the National Student Clearinghouse, this supplement aims to provide near real-time enrollment information to help institutions, states, and the nation better adapt and plan in the months ahead.

New Focus, New Data

Since mid-March when jobless rates surged and campuses rapidly moved into pandemic mode, many speculations and anecdotes have circulated, reflecting alarm at widespread educational disruptions in the middle of the spring term and fears of worse to come in the fall. Will student withdrawals increase because newly unemployed learners can no longer afford tuition, rent or food? Will students without broadband access or study spaces at home be forced to reduce course loads from full-time to part-time status, or drop out altogether? Will some of the millions of suddenly jobless adults pivot to online college programs? Will students sickened by the coronavirus, or caring for family members, show up as leaves of absence? These kinds of questions motivated a new interest in intra-term enrollment changes, which are the focus of this supplement report.

The *Spring 2020 Current Term Enrollment Estimates Report* published last month (May 2020) showed that as of the start of the term, pre-pandemic, the steady national declines in college enrollment over the last few years had slowed slightly, from about 1.5 percent annually to just 0.5 percent this year. The supplement looks at changes since the start of term, using new enrollment data submitted by institutions in April and May, to create a first-ever analysis of intra-term enrollment status changes. We focus on undergraduate students and indicators of change such as reduced or increased enrollment intensity, withdrawal, leave of absence, and new enrollments. The new focus, enabled by tracking the monthly enrollment statuses of individual students between January and May of 2020, creates a first quantification of the disruptions and changes to student enrollment pattern that may have been induced by COVID-19.

Specifically, we examine shifts in enrollment intensities (full-time, three-quarter time, half-time, less than half-time), as well as undergraduates who were no longer

enrolled by the end of term (leave of absence or withdrawal) and those who newly enrolled, either within the course of a semester-length term or, for institutions on the quarter system, at the start of the third term (typically the beginning of April). To gauge patterns that may be attributable to the pandemic, the two most recent years (spring 2018 and spring 2019) are used as baselines.

New Data Dashboard

Some of the most urgent questions relate not just to the types of enrollment changes we observe, but which institutions, and which students, appear to be most affected by those changes. A new interactive Data Dashboard shows the impacts for different institutions, including Historically Black College and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, rural or urban institutions, high transfer or highly vocational community colleges. In addition, the [Appendix](#) shows intra-term changes by state and by student demographics (age, gender and race/ethnicity) at both undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as for primarily online institutions.

Main Findings

Intra-term changes in enrollment status during spring 2020 were consistent with pre-pandemic years.

In spring 2020 most students maintained the same enrollment intensity from the start to the end of term, regardless of demographic characteristics or institution types. In 2018 and 2019, only 13 percent of students changed their enrollment status during the term. In 2020, this percent dropped slightly, to 12 percent.

Both the overall rate and the pattern (increased or reduced intensity, withdrawals, or leaves of absence) of intra-term status changes in spring 2020 were no different from the average rate and pattern of the prior two years. As in the previous two years, students enrolled in public and private nonprofit four-year institutions in spring 2020 were least likely to have changed the enrollment status intra-term (8% and 6%, respectively, see Figure 1 in dashboard). In comparison, the changed status cases were almost three times greater in the for-profit sector (21%), four-year and two-year institutions combined.

Students who increased enrollment intensity typically did so in January, showing no signs of the pandemic impact. But the peak time for all other types of status changes has shifted this year.

In 2020, as well as in pre-pandemic years, increases in enrollment intensity (part-time to higher or full-time) are most likely to have occurred in January. This means, there was no evidence that significant numbers of newly unemployed adult learners increased their enrollment intensity to full-time after the pandemic began.

However, as shown in Figure 2, over 60 percent of reductions in intensity, such as changes to part-time (67%), leaves of absence (66%), or withdrawals (61%), occurred in March or later. Particularly, the peak time for these status changes shifted this year to the timeline of the pandemic, as described below.

Reduced enrollment intensity peaked in April after the shutdowns, later than in previous years.

The spring 2020 rate of reduced enrollment intensity from full-time to part-time was relatively consistent with pre-pandemic levels (about 6%). Community college students were most likely to have reduced enrollment intensity mid-term, compared to students enrolled elsewhere. About one out of every ten community college students reduced their enrollment intensity in spring 2020.

However, compared to pre-pandemic baselines, students who reduced their enrollment intensity in 2020 were more likely to have done so later in the term, that is, after the campus shutdowns. As shown in Figure 3, for example, among students enrolled in public four-year institutions, March was the most common month for reductions in enrollment intensity in both 2018 and 2019 (39% of all reduced intensity cases, as Figure 2 shows). In 2020, the peak shifted to April, during which 30 percent of reduced enrollment intensity cases occurred (Figure 2). In terms of student race/ethnicity, the peak of students with reduced enrollment intensity at public four-year institutions shifted in 2020 from March to April for all racial/ethnic groups, except for white students (Figure 4).

While overall withdrawal rate remained at pre-pandemic levels, the withdrawal peaks for community college students shifted from March to April.

The percent of students who withdrew during the spring term in 2020 remained relatively stable from the previous two years, 3.7 percent in 2020 and 4 percent in 2018 and 2019. However, in 2020, the peak month for withdrawals shifted to April from March among community college students (Figure 5). It is also notable that public college student withdrawals for the month of April surpassed prior April numbers.

More students appear to be taking approved leaves of absence this year, particularly in March and April.

In 2018 and 2019, leaves of absence taking effect during the spring term accounted for 0.026 percent of all enrollees. The number almost doubled to 0.045 percent this year (about 6,400 students). The leaves of absence spiked in March and April, up 206 percent and 287 percent, respectively, from the baselines (Figure 7).

Notably, the growth was not even across racial and ethnic lines (Figure 8). African American and Hispanic students saw an increase of 206 percent and 287 percent, respectively, compared to whites (70%) or Asians (59%).

Florida, California, New York, and Massachusetts are among the states with the highest increases of spring term leaves of absence in 2020 (Figure 9). This list seems to have some crossovers with the states that initially suffered coronavirus outbreaks. Despite the growth in reported cases this year, data are still limited, reported by a small number of institutions (approximately 600). We will continue to monitor these changes in the coming months.

New enrollments in April 2020 were far below prior years' April numbers.

In 2018 and 2019, approximately 90,000 new enrollments were reported with a start date in April. These are students who had not been enrolled as of January of the same year, not necessarily first-time students. In 2020, the number had fallen to 17,000. As in pre-pandemic years, new enrolled students in April 2020 were largely undergraduates enrolling in primarily online institutions or public institutions.

Typically, many of these students (including stopout students) would have been enrolling in March or April at institutions with quarter calendars or monthly calendars. Particularly this year, following the massive layoffs announced in March, newly unemployed adults may have been expected to flock to for-profit institutions with flexible or monthly terms, such as primarily online institutions. However, across all institutions, even at primarily online institutions, there was no sign of significant new enrollment growth during the course of the spring term in 2020. Rather, data shows far fewer new enrollments reported in April 2020 than in April of previous years.

Conclusions

This supplement report adds the *in-pandemic* enrollment data, from April and May 2020, to the *pre-pandemic* spring 2020 enrollment report released last month. The supplement was designed to identify potential impacts of COVID-19 on college enrollment during the spring term.

Generally, within-term enrollment status changes were uncommon in spring 2020, and for the most part, students who did change status followed the same patterns as in pre-pandemic years. The overall numbers of students dropping to part-time, withdrawing, taking leaves of absence, and other status changes remained unchanged from pre-pandemic levels of 2018 and 2019.

In the aggregate, this is the case regardless of student demographics and institution types, including minority-serving institutions, rural or urban institutions, or high transfer or highly vocational community colleges. Although the vast majority of colleges and universities transitioned to online instruction in mid-March, there are no apparent signs that the pandemic has significantly impacted students' enrollment statuses. Also, there is no evidence for newly unemployed adults suddenly returning to college (particularly online colleges), or switching from studying part-time to full-time. Little or no change in enrollment status metrics is a reassuring sign that most college students were able to stay on course during the first two months of the pandemic.

However, new trends have appeared for a small share of the student population, which may be indicative of broader impacts that are underway. To a small but

discernable extent, the spring 2020 students who reduced enrollment intensity, withdrew, or took an approved student loan leave of absence did so later in the term, on average, after the campus shutdowns. In the years prior to the pandemic, March was the peak time for all intra-term changes (except for the increased intensity that typically peaked in January). But in 2020, the peak time shifted to April. Added to this was a large reduction in new enrollments occurring during the month of April this year. Data also reveals the emergence of small but concerning racial/ethnic patterns, as African American and Hispanic students taking leaves of absence increased fastest among all groups. Finally, at public institutions, the highest number of reduced enrollment changes occurred in April for all racial/ethnic groups except for white students.

Although accounting for a small fraction of the spring term enrollments, the intra-term status changes identified may be early signs of the effect of COVID-19. Because of coronavirus resurgence happening now in many states especially among younger populations, these emergent patterns are likely to accelerate as the pandemic disruptions drag on. We plan to continue issuing enrollment impact updates.

Suggested Citation

Causey J., Liu, Q., Ryu, M., Shapiro, D., & Zheng, Y., (June 2020), *A COVID-19 Supplement to Spring 2020 Current Term Enrollment Estimates*, Herndon, VA.: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Methodological Notes

This supplement report examines all students who enrolled in Title IV degree-granting institutions in the U.S. as either full time, three-quarters time, half time, or less than half time during the spring term in 2020. The report serves as a first look at the effects of COVID-19 on postsecondary enrollments, as measured by intra-term status changes, compared to the two previous years, spring 2018 and spring 2019, as the baselines. Specifically, we analyze enrollment status changes from higher enrollment intensity to lower or vice versa, withdrawals, and leaves of absence to identify any correlation with the timeline of the pandemic.

The analysis for this supplement is based on the following data:

1. Enrollments disaggregated by various subgroups of students and institutions
2. Frequency and rate of intra-term enrollment status changes
3. Effective month of enrollment status change

National Coverage of the Data

As of fall 2019, institutions actively submitting enrollment data to the Clearinghouse account for 97 percent of all enrollments at Title IV, degree-granting institutions in the U.S. Unlike the standard Current Term Enrollment Estimates series, this special supplement does not apply weights to account for the data coverage rates. This is because the emphasis of this edition is on the real-time enrollment updates provided during the pandemic crisis, rather than estimating the true size of postsecondary enrollments.

The enrollment data used in this report provide a headcount of unique student-institution combinations for the spring 2020 postsecondary enrollees. Clearinghouse data track enrollments nationally and are not limited by institutional and state boundaries. Moreover, because this database is comprised of student-level data, researchers can use it to link concurrent as well as consecutive enrollments of individual students at multiple institutions.

Term Definition

For Clearinghouse reporting, institutions provide the start- and end-dates for each enrollment, rather than formally designating fall or spring terms. Spring Terms included in the Current Term Enrollment Estimates are those that:

- a) began between January 15 and March 31, inclusive OR
- b) ended between February 15 and April 30, inclusive OR
- c) began before January 15 AND ended after April 30

Cohort Definition

This supplement report captures all students enrolled in Title IV, degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States during spring 2020 (see Term Definition above), the same student population as in the Spring 2020 Current Term Enrollment Estimates report released in May, 2020. The data are drawn from the latest enrollment files submitted by institutions during the months of April and May. The standard Current Term Enrollment Estimate reports, by contrast, capture enrollment files submitted by the end of March.

With more updated data submitted in April and May 2020, spring term enrollments were slightly larger by the end of May (by less than 3%). The student population with enrollment records showing up on both the end of March and the end of May files was the basis for intra-term analysis, while the three percent enrollments identified from the end of May files were the basis for new enrollment analysis.

Race and Ethnicity

The race and ethnicity categories include Asian, African American (of non-Hispanic origin), Hispanic, White, two or more races, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and non-resident alien. Institutions reported unknown for eight percent of the race and ethnicity data and 16 percent had missing data. The other race/ethnicity category (5%) is inclusive of American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, two or more races, and non-resident alien.

Enrollment Intensity

In this report, students start out with one of the following types of enrollment intensity: full-time, half-time, three-quarter time, and less-than-half-time. We track their status over the course of the spring term.

- Logic behind reduced enrollment intensity calculation:
 - o Full-time ⇔ three-quarter-time, half-time, less than half-time
 - o Three-quarter-time ⇔ half-time, less than half-time
 - o Half-time ⇔ less than half-time
- Withdrawn students are those who ended their term with a withdrawal status
- Leave of Absence are those who have met the requirements for an approved student loan leave of absence and, therefore, is not required to attend classes for a specified period.

Identifying Primarily Online Institutions

Primarily online institutions are identified based on the IPEDS 2018 fall enrollment survey data, specifically, from the distance education enrollment survey items. According to IPEDS, any institution that reports at least 90 percent of its undergraduate and graduate students combined enrolling exclusively in distance education courses is considered a primarily online institution. Following this method, a total of 34 institutions that submit data to NSC in the past three years are identified as primarily online institutions as of spring 2020. For the supplement report, we show undergraduate and graduate enrollments at these 34 institutions from 2018 to 2020. These institutions are largely multi-state institutions.