

# Downward Spiral on Enrollments



Drops at for-profit and community colleges and among adult students drive the declines.

December 16, 2015

By [Doug Lederman](#)

The several-year decline in enrollment in American colleges and universities continued and arguably intensified this fall, driven by sharp dips in numbers of students at for-profit colleges, full-time students at community colleges and students aged 24 or more, according to new data from the National Student Clearinghouse.

Given the characteristics and institutions of the students fueling the declines, it seems likely that the slowly improving job market is the major cause, clearinghouse researchers say.

The clearinghouse's research center [began publishing twice-a-year enrollment updates](#) three years ago, and its estimates have become an important, timely source of market intelligence for policy makers. The clearinghouse collects data from institutions that represent about 95 percent of all enrollments at colleges that grant degrees and are eligible to award federal financial aid.

The overall decline in enrollment represented a decrease of about 340,000 students, to 19,280,473 in fall 2015 from 19,619,773 in fall 2014. Of that drop, more than half occurred at four-year for-profit institutions, which experienced a decline of about 180,000 students.

Public two-year institutions accounted for much of the rest of the dip, with community college enrollments falling 145,000 to 5,906,419 from 6,052,069.

Four-year public and private enrollments were essentially flat, fluctuating by less than half a percentage point.

"We judge the improving job market to be the biggest factor, with the unemployment rate dropping to 5 percent this fall," said Jason Dewitt, the clearinghouse's research manager. "As in the previous two years, the decline is driven by students over the age of 24 (the students most likely to be leaving college for an employment opportunity)."

Among other data points:

- The percentage declines were slightly greater for women (-2.0 percent) than for men (-1.4 percent), overall and in most sectors. The exception was at private nonprofit colleges. (The gender data were inputted for about half of all students based on their first names.)
- Only 14 states experienced increases in enrollments from fall 2014 to fall 2015, and only four saw rises of at least 2 percent: Arizona (2.9 percent), Nebraska (2.1 percent), New Hampshire (11.0 percent) and Utah (8.7 percent). Eight states, meanwhile, experienced declines of at least 4 percent: Florida (-4.3 percent), Hawaii (-4.4 percent), Illinois (-4.0 percent), Iowa (-4.8 percent), Kentucky (-4.3 percent), Montana (-4.4 percent), New Mexico (-6.3 percent) and West Virginia (-5.1 percent). (New Mexico's data were explained in part by a reporting change.)