

Freshman enrollment appears to fall for first time since 2020

BY ZACH MONTAGUE
NYT News Service

Freshman enrollment dropped more than 5% from last year at American colleges and universities, the largest decline since 2020 when COVID-19 and distance learning upended higher education, according to preliminary data released Wednesday by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, a nonprofit education group.

The finding comes roughly a year after the federal student aid system was dragged down by problems with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form, commonly known as FAFSA, which led to maddening delays this year in processing families' financial data to send to school administrators. That in turn held up the rollout of financial aid offers well into the summer, leaving many families struggling to determine how much college would cost.

By itself, the enrollment data does not establish that errors with the FAFSA form caused a significant number of students to postpone college out of frustration with the process or to choose lower-cost alternatives to four-year schools, such as community colleges or two-year degree programs.

But the numbers released Wednesday highlighted a drop in freshman enrollment, particularly at schools serving students from lower-income families that disproportionately



ANNA ROSE LAYDEN The New York Times

Students walk on the University of Arizona campus on Feb. 12 in Tucson, Arizona. Freshman enrollment dropped more than 5% from last year at American colleges and universities, according to preliminary data released by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

ly depend on federal aid to afford college.

Most significantly, the data indicated that both public and private four-year schools that admit the largest shares of students receiving Pell grants saw freshman enrollment dip by more than 10% from 2023 levels.

Pell grants provide a subsidy of up to \$7,395 per year for low-income students and offer a financial boost for schools that disproportionately enroll lower-income students. The grants generally support families in the lower half of household income distribution — those earning \$60,000 a year or less — but more than half have typically gone to students whose families earn less than \$20,000 annually.

Increasing the maximum size of the Pell Grant for the 2024-25 academic year has been celebrated by Education Department officials as one of the Bi-

den administration's proudest accomplishments. At the urging of department officials, lawmakers increased the maximum award by \$900 total, up from \$6,495 in 2022.

But the steep drop-off in freshman enrollment at schools with the largest populations of lower income students suggested that far fewer incoming students were able to take advantage of the more generous award this year, and that any positive financial impact on those schools was blunted by the decline.

Doug Shapiro, the executive director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, said that a variety of factors, including the Supreme Court decision last year ending race-conscious admissions, anxiety over student debt and a strong labor market may have played a role affecting

individual decisions about college, and it was unclear to what extent problems with FAFSA may have contributed.

But based on observations from the downturn in 2020, Shapiro said that when high school seniors deferred college that year, only an "infinitesimal" number returned in the years after, leaving a permanent dent in enrollment. For that reason, he said, there was little evidence that the numbers would bounce back next year with more students than usual flocking back to college.

"Life happens," Shapiro told reporters during a call. "These students end up with jobs and sometimes families, and they find it harder and harder as time goes on to think about entering college again."

Before the report, the Education Department published its own analysis Tuesday, stating that the total number of students it expects to receive federal student aid has risen by 3% since 2023 and that 10% more students are on track to receive a Pell grant this year.

But in its report, the department acknowledged that it received 2% fewer applications for federal student aid this year compared to the year before and said "that gap is larger for high school seniors and other first-time filers."

Data compiled by the National College Attainment Network, which tracks FAFSA applications, shows that around 212,000 fewer high school seniors applied for federal student aid for this cycle, a nearly 9% decrease from this time last year.

James Kvaal, the undersecretary of education, said it was difficult to ascribe any drop in enrollment this year to a particular cause given larger demographic trends and shifting attitudes about the value of college.

US outlines national security 'guardrails' for AI tools

BY DAVID E. SANGER
NYT News Service/Syndicate
Stories

WASHINGTON

President Joe Biden on Thursday signed the first national security memorandum detailing how the Pentagon, the intelligence agencies and other national security institutions should use and protect artificial intelligence technology, putting "guardrails" on how such tools are employed in decisions varying from nuclear weapons to granting asylum.

The new document is the latest in a series Biden has issued grappling with the challenges of using AI tools to speed up government operations — whether detecting cyberattacks or predicting extreme weather — while limiting the most dystopian possibilities, including the development of autonomous weapons.

The new directive was announced Thursday at the National War College in Washington by Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser, who prompted many of the efforts to examine the uses and threats of the new tools. He acknowledged that one challenge is that the U.S. government funds or owns very few of the key AI technologies — and that they evolve so fast that they often defy regulation.

"Our government took an early and critical role in shaping developments —

from nuclear physics and space exploration to personal computing and the internet," Sullivan said. "That's not been the case with most of the AI revolution. While the Department of Defense and other agencies funded a large share of AI work in the 20th century, the private sector has propelled much of the last decade of progress."

The new memorandum contains about 38 pages in its unclassified version, with a classified appendix. Some of its conclusions are obvious: It rules out, for example, ever letting AI systems decide when to launch nuclear weapons; that is left to the president as commander in chief.

The memorandum requires an annual report to the president, assembled by the Energy Department, about the "radiological and nuclear risk" of "frontier" AI models that may make it easier to assemble or test nuclear weapons. There are similar deadlines for regular classified evaluations of how AI models could make it possible "to generate or exacerbate deliberate chemical and biological threats."

It is the latter two threats that most worry arms experts, who note that getting the materials for chemical and biological weapons on the open market is far easier than obtaining bomb-grade uranium or plutonium, needed for nuclear weapons.



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