



How Did the Pandemic Impact College Access?



As the era defined by the coronavirus pandemic recedes into history, a new study highlights yet another educational impact of that fraught period: increased inequities in college access.

An [article](#) about the study, which was conducted by Scott Carrell, Kramer Dykeman, NEPC fellow Michal Kurlaender, and Paco Martorell, all of the University of California, Davis, was published last month in the peer-reviewed journal, *Educational Researcher*. It tracks the trajectory of students who graduated from California high schools in 2020, while most of the nation was hunkered down at home to avoid contracting COVID.

The study finds that college enrollment declined by 7.6% between 2019 and 2020. Underneath such top-line numbers, the study revealed clear patterns showing that the pandemic hit hardest on the most marginalized. For instance, the decline was bigger among community colleges, which saw the enrollment of new high school graduates decline 12.6%. Yet enrollment actually increased in the UC system, the state's most se-

lective and expensive public, postsecondary option.

By spring 2021, enrollment had declined twice as much for students from low-income families (10.3%) as for students from higher-income families (4.8%). Enrollment declined more for Black students (13.3%) and Hispanic students (9.3%) than for Asian students (2.3%) or White students (6.8%). High schools that historically sent a smaller share of their students to college experienced steeper declines than did schools with a history of sending a larger share.

The study also examined student survey results in an effort to explore potential causes of the declines. Compared to students from higher-income families and White students, students of color and students from low-income families scored higher on a research-based “worry index.” The index assessed pandemic-related concerns such as financial hardships, personal health, caring for family members, and the necessity of engaging in remote learning during campus closures.

The researchers note that California has since taken steps to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on college access. These measures have included requiring all college seniors in the state to submit financial aid forms, expanding the state’s financial aid program, and providing additional resources to community colleges to help them recover from their enrollment loss.

They conclude:

Nevertheless, it is clear that the declines in college enrollments for the class of 2020 will likely have important short- and longer-term consequences on individuals and families’ livelihoods and broader economic and social impacts on society. A college degree remains a key vehicle to economic security, better health outcomes, and greater social mobility . . . Moreover, the need for skilled jobs continues to rise, and thus, fewer college degree earners may have serious consequences on the economy at large.

NEPC Resources on Higher Education

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