Today’s Student and the Rising Costs of Higher Education

BY SUNNY DEYE

College enrollment has dipped significantly since the beginning of the pandemic. Between 2019 and 2021, total national college enrollment decreased by 5.1%, and the nation’s fall 2021 freshman class was 9.2% smaller compared to pre-pandemic levels in fall 2019, according to new data from the National Student Clearinghouse.

Experts point to a variety of reasons students are choosing other options, including concerns about in-person learning during a pandemic, the economic disruption of the pandemic forcing some to delay or drop out of school, concerns about the increasing cost of college—not just tuition and fees but also housing, food, childcare, and transportation—and a national discussion about rising student debt.

Even before the pandemic, college enrollment was declining nationally as the number of college-age students leveled off. In fact, the most dramatic increases in college enrollment are in older students, with more than one-third of college students now aged 25 or older. Today’s college students are more diverse than any previous generation by age, race and income level. They are increasingly mobile, many live off campus, and they often have work and family responsibilities in addition to their educational goals.

State Action

College tuition and fees are just a portion of what most students spend to attend public two- or four-year institutions. Helping today’s student navigate...
available assistance with non-tuition costs such as housing, food, childcare, and transportation is a growing area of state legislative activity. Strategies include creating homelessness liaisons, affordable housing initiatives, assistance connecting to public benefits and short-term emergency financial assistance.

Housing

Arkansas House Bill 1462 (2021) allows a state-supported two-year or four-year institution of higher education to designate from among current staff members of the school a homeless and foster student liaison.

California Senate Bill 330 (2021) requires the governing board of the Los Angeles Community College District to develop and implement a pilot program to provide affordable housing to students or employees of the Los Angeles Community College District, and to report to the Legislature with findings and recommendations on the success of the program. It requires that homeless students have priority accessing the affordable housing.

Illinois Senate Bill 190 (2021) requires higher education institutions, including business, technical or vocational schools, to designate at least one employee to serve as a liaison between the institution and homeless students to assist in accessing resources.

Hunger

Connecticut House Bill 7257 (2019) requires the Board of Trustees of The University of Connecticut and the Board of Regents for Higher Education to study the policies affecting and data regarding students experiencing food insecurity at the public institutions of higher education under each board’s jurisdiction.

Illinois Senate Bill 1641 (2019) requires the Student Assistance Commission to annually include information about the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in the language that schools are required to provide to students eligible for the Monetary Award Program grant. It also provides that the language shall direct students to information about eligibility criteria for SNAP and to the Hunger Coalition’s Hunger Hotline.

Maryland House Bill 891 (2021) establishes a Hunger-Free Campus Grant Program to connect eligible students with SNAP application assistance and local SNAP retailers.

Benefits Coordinator

Oregon House Bill 2835 (2021) requires each community college and public university to hire a benefits navigator to assist students in determining eligibility and applying for federal, state and local benefits programs. The bill creates a statewide consortium to enable coordination and develop best practices among benefits navigators across institutions.

Emergency Aid

California Assembly Bill 943 (2019) authorizes the use of funding for the Student Equity and Achievement Program for the provision of emergency student financial assistance to eligible students to overcome unforeseen financial challenges that would directly affect a student’s ability to persist in their course of study, if the financial assistance is included in an institution's plan for interventions to students.

Tennessee House Bill 6 (2021) creates a pilot program for completion grants for Tennessee Promise students with financial hardships. It requires the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) to establish a four-year pilot program that awards grants to Tennessee Promise scholarship students who are eligible for and are receiving services as part of the college coaching initiative delivered by partnering organizations and who have an immediate financial need or who are experiencing financial hardships that may prevent the student from completing a postsecondary degree or credential.

Federal Action

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the U.S. Department of Education allocated $76 billion to institutions through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund. Institutions were required to distribute at least 50% of their allocations as emergency grant aid to students. Students were able to use the emergency aid to cover any expense related to their cost of attendance, including covering basic needs such as food, housing, and childcare.

The Department recently announced more resources for students and institutions to help reduce barriers to success in higher education, particularly those created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These include an additional $198 million in American Rescue Plan funds that will primarily support community colleges and other institutions with the greatest needs; new guidance on how colleges can use these new and existing federal funds to meet students’ basic needs such as housing and food security; and guidance on how colleges can use existing data to connect students to other federal benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.