

Enrollment

By David Radwin and Laura Horn

More undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges than in any other postsecondary sector, but enrollment has declined after peaking in fall 2010.

Community colleges have long emphasized open enrollment policies as part of their mission to provide broad access to higher education and are generally open to all adults who wish to enroll regardless of their qualifications. This open access policy is reinforced by relatively low tuition and fees coupled with state funding mechanisms that tie appropriations to enrollment (although several states wish to rely more heavily on outcome measures such as graduation rates (Kelderman, 2012)).

The Completion Arch™ features two measures of enrollment—*fall enrollment* and *unduplicated annual enrollment*—each of which is reported by virtually all postsecondary institutions to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) as part of its annual Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) data collection. Fall enrollment, which counts all students enrolled in credit-bearing courses on a specific day in the fall term, is the most familiar and intuitive

indicator of enrollment. It is historically the most prominent and widely reported measure of college enrollment and mirrors the fall enrollment count of public elementary and secondary schools collected by NCES and other government agencies. Fall enrollment is also the basis for the retention and graduation statistics collected by IPEDS, which are limited to first-time students who initially enroll in the fall term.

Unduplicated annual enrollment, also called unduplicated count or headcount, includes all students enrolled within a 12-month period regardless of when they first enroll. Because so many community college students initially enroll in winter, spring, or summer terms, unduplicated annual enrollment is a more meaningful measure of the true number of students who attend community colleges. For example, nationwide, fall 2012 enrollment (6.8 million) represented only 67 percent of students who enrolled in a community college over the entire year 2012–13.

Recent Dip in Fall Enrollment

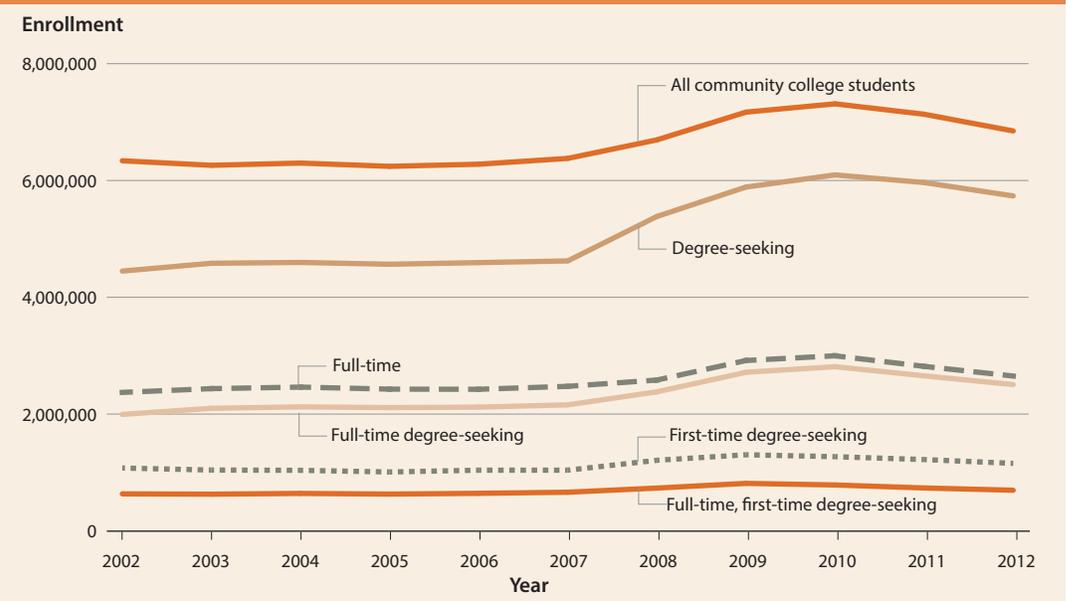
Trends in fall enrollment are illustrated in figure 1, which plots the total fall enrollment in U.S. community colleges over the years from 2002 through 2012. The data reveal a slight drop in total enrollment starting in fall 2011 and continuing in fall 2012, the most recent year for which IPEDS data are available, after rising every year since 2005. This dip reflects an overall decline in undergraduate enrollment across all sectors of higher education—the first such decrease in 15 years (Lederman, 2012)—and the limited evidence available suggests the decline will continue in fall 2014 (Pérez-Peña, 2014).

Observers have offered a number of explanations for the recent decrease in community college enrollment and college enrollment overall, including changes to demographics, policy, and national and local economic conditions. First, the decrease in enrollment may signal the end of the demographic bulge of the children of the Baby Boomers (Barker, 2012; Kerr, 1994). Other things being equal, the fact that there are fewer high school graduates means that fewer students are attending community

college. Next, recent cuts to state appropriations have restricted enrollment at many community colleges, particularly in California, home to one-quarter of community college students nationwide (Fain, 2011; Lederman, 2012; Rivera, 2012). State funding cuts have also contributed to increases in tuition, which continued to rise at a rate faster than the rate of inflation, and new limits on the number of terms that students can receive federal aid have reduced their access to loans and grants (Baum & Ma, 2012; Vedder, 2012).

In addition to these increases in the direct cost of attendance, the improving employment landscape has increased the opportunity cost of attending community college for would-be students in certain locations and sectors of the economy. In Texas, for example, prospective students are postponing college to work in the growing petroleum industry in positions that can pay upwards of \$100,000 per year with no postsecondary education (Hamilton, 2012; Mangan, 2012). State officials are concerned that jobs like these are highly sensitive to cyclical economic conditions and that these workers

Figure 1 Fall enrollment in U.S. community colleges by enrollment status, 2002 to 2012



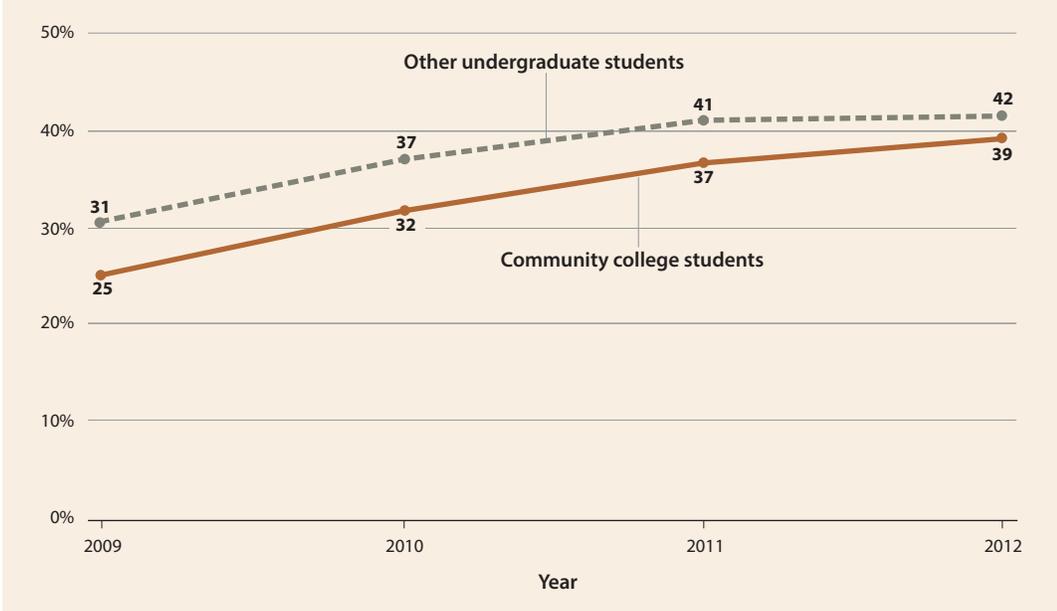
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Institutional Characteristics Survey and Fall Enrollment Survey.

would earn more in the long run by starting college right after high school. Other commentators are less convinced about the economic value of postsecondary education, particularly after a spate of high-profile reports about college students incurring profound debts that they are unable to pay back (Marcus, 2012; Mui & Khimm, 2012; Tuttle, 2012; Vedder, 2012). Perversely, the recent wave of negative publicity surrounding student debt may have tempered the decline in community college enrollment as cost-conscious students have shifted away from for-profit institutions and toward less costly community colleges (Fain, 2012).

The fall enrollment data are also disaggregated by the percentage of students who receive federal grant aid, a proxy for economic disadvantage (figure 2). Most federal grants awarded to undergraduates are need-based Pell Grants,

which are given almost exclusively to low-income students. In fall 2012, 39 percent of community college students received federal grants compared with 42 percent of students in other sectors. Evidence from California suggests that federal grant receipt understates the true proportion of financially needy community college students because many eligible students do not apply for or receive Pell Grants. The reasons that this is so include the relatively low tuition charged by community colleges (particularly after accounting for state and institutional tuition and fee waivers, grants, and other aid) and because of obstacles to applying such as the burden of completing paperwork, lack of familiarity with application procedures, restricted eligibility for part-time enrollment, and limited English proficiency (Berkner & Woo, 2008; Cochrane & Hernández-Gravelle, 2007).

Figure 2 Percentage of students receiving federal grants over time by sector, 2009 to 2012



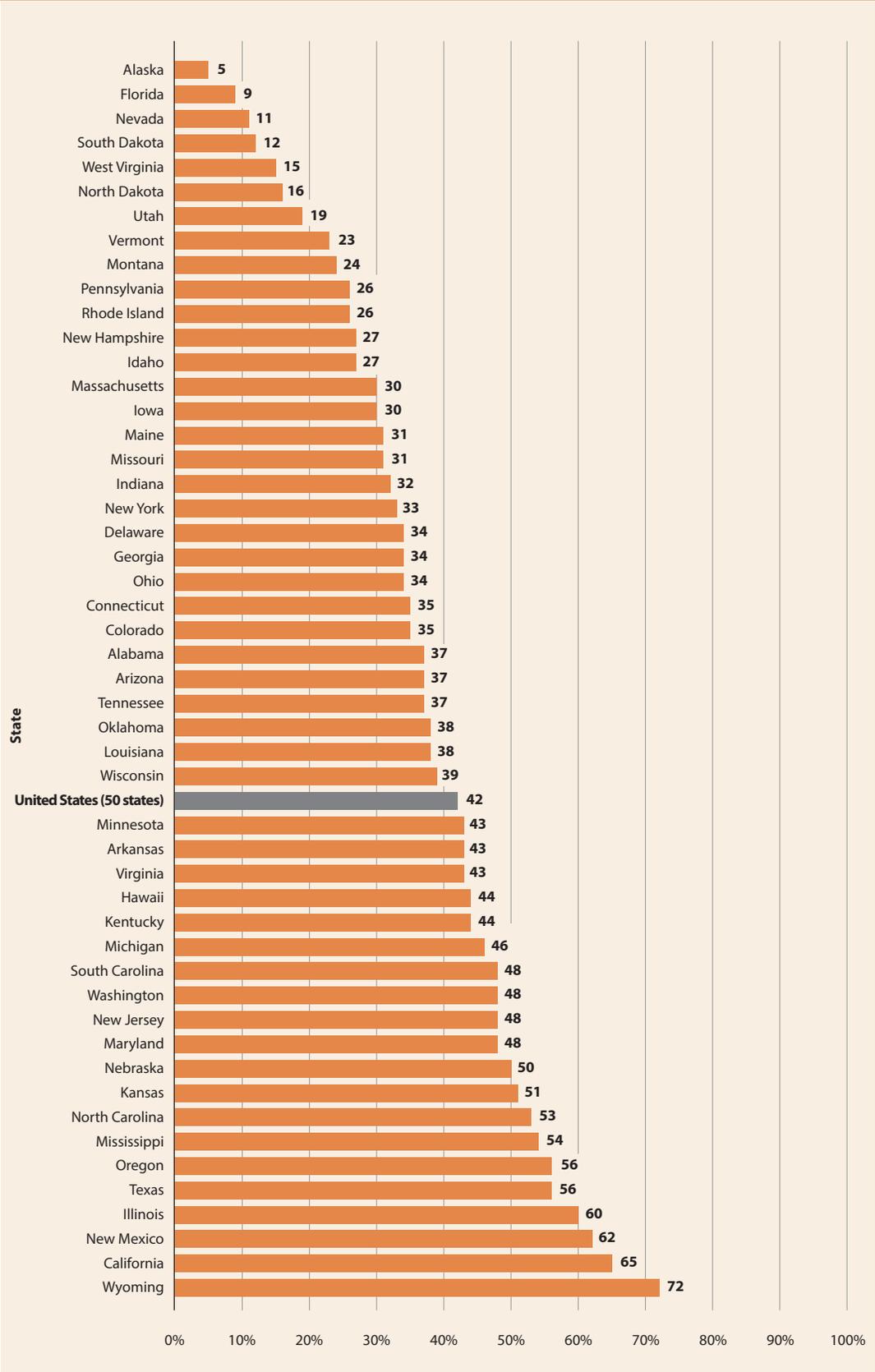
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Institutional Characteristics Survey, 12-Month Enrollment Survey, and Student Financial Aid Survey.

Trends in Unduplicated Annual Enrollment

Nationally, more undergraduates are enrolled in community colleges than in any other postsecondary sector. As shown in figure 3,

community colleges enrolled 42 percent of all undergraduates over the full year 2012–13. This proportion is down slightly from 10 years

Figure 3 Percentage of undergraduates enrolled in community colleges by state, unduplicated annual enrollment, 2012–13



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Institutional Characteristics Survey and 12-Month Enrollment Survey.

earlier, when community colleges enrolled half of all undergraduates. The percentage of Florida undergraduates enrolled in community colleges, shown for sake of comparison, dropped precipitously from 53 percent in 2002–03 to 9 percent in 2012–13. This decline is largely due to the reclassification of community colleges that began awarding bachelor's degrees during that decade.

The share of undergraduates enrolled in community colleges varies substantially across states, driven by such factors as local economic conditions, state postsecondary admissions and transfer policies, geographic accessibility

of community college campuses, the particular assortment of community college courses and programs of study offered, and the availability and relative cost of alternative education providers. The percentage of undergraduates enrolled is also affected by whether the state's community colleges offer bachelor's degree programs. In 2012–13, the percentage of community college students ranged from 5 percent in Alaska, a state with two community colleges and nine other colleges, to 72 percent in Wyoming, a state with seven community colleges and four other colleges (figure 3).

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