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College enrollments becoming problematic.

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Regional

College enrollments becoming problematic

Enrollment has become the main focus of attention for higher education administrators. For private institutions enrollment is the major source of their funding. And due to diminished support from states, it has also become the major source of financial support for most public colleges and universities. This dependence on tuition wasn't always so great for public institutions, but is the result of a process that has been called the privatization of public higher education.

Two reports that got little attention when published recently were the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, known as Wiche. This group released its new projections of high-school graduates in all 50 states through 2031-32. After years of increases in the overall number of graduates, the commission's report says, "the U.S. is headed into a period of stagnation," in which colleges can no longer rely on growth.

This report projects growth in the South and West, and a continuing drop in the Midwest and Northeast. It also projects the nation's high-school graduates becoming more diverse; with the number of white graduates decreasing sharply while the number of Hispanic graduates grows substantially.

The other report was the "Term Enrollment estimates for Fall 2016" by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, also known just as the Clearinghouse.

The major finding in that study is that in fall of 2016, the overall enrollments in U.S. Colleges and Universities decreased by 1.4 percent when compared with the previous fall. This decrease was on top of a 1.7 percent decrease for fall of 2015 and a 1.3 decrease for fall of 2014.

And the decrease was not uniform among different types of institutions. Enrollments among four-year

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

for-profit institutions decreased by 14.5 percent, and for two-year public institutions the decrease was 2.6 percent. Four-year, private non-profit institutions decreased by 0.6 percent. Enrollments among four-year public institutions increased slightly by 0.2 percent. Taken as a whole, public sector enrollment (2-year and 4-year combined) declined by 1.0 percent this fall semester.

Among the states most affected by this decline were New Mexico (-6.3 percent), West Virginia (-5.1 percent), Hawaii and Montana (-4.4 percent), Florida and Kentucky (-4.3 percent), and Illinois (-4 percent). These are states that have been affected, in one way or another, by a combination of lower numbers of local high school graduates and lower financial support by their states.

The few bright spots in this picture are New Hampshire (+11 percent) and Utah (+8.7 percent). Both states have seen an increase of their populations with the case of Utah being spectacular: between 2010 and 2015 the population increased by 8.4 percent.

When it comes to enrollment declines by discipline, we encounter a few surprises. The ones most affected by declines are personal and culinary services (-17.8 percent), engineering technologies and engineering-related fields (-14.5 percent) and legal professions and studies (-10.9 percent). The few ones with significant increases are science technologies/technicians (+15.9 percent), liberal arts and sciences, general studies and humanities,

including undeclared students (+4.7 percent), engineering (+4 percent) and natural resources and conservation (+2.5 percent).

These numbers are telling us several things. The first and more important one is that there are fewer and fewer people going to college overall. That is particularly true in states where the number of high school graduates is declining and/or the state is giving less and less support to public higher education. One way many colleges and universities have tried to deal with these declines is by encouraging an increase in the number of international students who not only help to keep up headcount, but also pay full out-of-state tuition, meaning that they are bringing more money into the college coffers than in-state students.

The problem here is two-fold and has serious implications. The first one is that many public institutions still resist changing their strategies to attract more diverse students in order not to rattle legislators who are not necessarily sympathetic to such efforts. The second problem is that changes in demographics have to do with multiple factors of which the economy is the most salient, but not the only one. States that invest fewer dollars in economic development have historically seen a decline in their economic activities. This decline, in turn, attracts fewer people into the state.

When it comes to immigration, the year after the 9/11 attacks we saw a 25 percent decline in the number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities. Now that we are living in an environment of anti-immigration and xenophobic rhetoric, we can expect an even larger decline in the number of international students applying to study in the U.S.,

particularly those whose ethnicity or religion have been specific targets of that rhetoric. In the meantime, countries such as Canada and Australia are preparing to absorb those international students that will not come to the U.S.

Although a decline in the enrollment of for-profit institutions is a good sign since most of them provide a substandard education and are the major culprits in the increase of student debt nationwide, the fact the public sector as a whole declined by 1 percent is an indication that worse things are yet to come.

The increases in the enrollments in the sciences and in the liberal arts is interesting because to become a scientist was never heralded as a traditional profession like law or engineering for people to get well-paid jobs. And the liberal arts have been subjected to a barrage of unfounded criticisms as to their value from both the right and the left within the political spectrum.

In study after study it has been demonstrated that institutions of higher education are engines of economic development. When states legislatures and governors decide to provide less support for them they are committing economic suicide. And that is done on the basis of ideological commitment and political expediency. They are making poor states even poorer while mortgaging the future by attracting fewer private enterprises that need an educated population to function in those states.

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