Enrollment numbers can mean a lot to universities

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Some of the most important statistics in higher education concern enrollment. For private universities that are dependent on tuition and fees, they need the money that comes from tuition and fees to operate. For public institutions, enrollment is becoming more similar because they are getting fewer funds from states for tuition and fees, a process that has been termed the “privatization of public higher education.”

The other reason why enrollment numbers matter is because of geography. The more and better students an institution can enroll, the more it can claim a level of prestige. And if the numbers of applicants increase—because of the perceived prestige—the institutions become more selective in admissions. This, in turn, increases retention and graduation rates. And those numbers become more and more important when you think about it when the time comes to demonstrate educational effec-

Lost May enrollment statistics for U.S. institutions of higher education were released by The National Student Clearinghouse. This is a non-profit organization founded in 1993 that provides student data related to enrollment and persistence, and the news is not good. The overall drop in enrollment between the fall of 2015 and the spring of 2016, shows that the overall postsecondary enrollment decreased 1.3 percent from the previous year.

The decrease was most pronounced among one-year for-profit institutions (-10.2 percent), community colleges (-4.5 percent), and two-year public institutions (-2.8 percent). On the other hand, enrollment increased slightly at four-year public institutions (+0.5 percent) and four-year private nonprofit institutions (+0.9 percent). As a whole, public sector enrollment (two-year and four-year combined) declined by 0.8 percent this spring. There is also a great deal of variation in enrollment on a state-by-state basis. The two states showing the largest increases in enrollment are New Hampshire (3.6 percent) and Utah (8.5 percent). On the other hand, the states with the greatest losses are Nevada (-5.1 percent) and Illinois (-4.4 percent). The case of Illinois is particularly troubling, because this dramatic decline is on top of a -3.8 percent decrease the year before, and a -5.3 percent year before that. In fact, from 687,305 students enrolled in higher education in Illinois in 2014, two years later it was only 650,885. That is roughly 5% fewer students.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a branch of the U.S. Department of Education, national total of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions fell to 20.9 million in 2015, a decrease of 2.1% from the prior year, 21.3 million in 2014. The overall postsecondary enrollment in 2015, is down from 21.1 million in 2012.