

## IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FALL 2020 ENROLLMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic has created major disruptions across all sectors of American society, including colleges and universities. In order to better understand the impact on student enrollment in California, AICCU conducted a survey of admissions and enrollment staff at 80+ member institutions on enrollment patterns for three populations: 1) first-time freshmen, 2) transfer students, and 3) returning students.

Responses indicate that the pandemic has resulted in significant declines in enrollment at institutions for each of the three student populations, especially first-time students. The survey also found that summer melt was higher than usual and that postponements and deferrals were up significantly.

### HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED COLLEGE ATTENDANCE?

When the pandemic hit, colleges and universities were among the first institutions to shift away from in-person activities. Although it is still premature to predict the long-term effects of the pandemic, over the last six months, many have attempted to discern how the ongoing pandemic, its impact on the economy and family financial circumstances, and the shift to primarily online instruction would impact student enrollment.

The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) reported in October that California community colleges saw a 6% drop in student headcount and that course withdrawals increased by 54%.<sup>1</sup> In a July

2020 report on students' plans for Fall 2020 before and after COVID-19, the **California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) reported that students' plans to attend private colleges in California dropped from 6.9% to 5.4% for high school students and 7.3% to 5.4% for current college students.** Equally important, the report found that 9% of high school graduates indicated they planned to delay their college enrollment, and significantly more students indicated they were unsure of their plans.<sup>2</sup>

In October, the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) released national data, finding a 2% national decline in fall enrollment for undergraduates at independent, nonprofit four-year institutions. Breaking this down by student

<sup>1</sup> "The Pandemic's Effect on Community College Enrollment." Public Policy Institute of California, 21 Oct. 2020, [www.ppic.org/blog/the-pandemics-effect-on-community-college-enrollment/?utm\\_source=rss](http://www.ppic.org/blog/the-pandemics-effect-on-community-college-enrollment/?utm_source=rss).

<sup>2</sup> "COVID-19 Student Survey." California Student Aid Commission, July 2020, [https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2020\\_covid19\\_student\\_survey.pdf?1594172054](https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2020_covid19_student_survey.pdf?1594172054).

group revealed that these declines were disproportionately found among first-time student enrollment, which was 11.8% lower than 2019.<sup>3</sup>

## SURVEY OF AICCU INSTITUTIONS

Between September 14<sup>th</sup> and October 7<sup>th</sup>, AICCU administered a short 12-question survey of institutional admission and enrollment staff. The survey focused on the impact of COVID-19 on enrollment for independent, nonprofit colleges in California.

A total of 56 institutions submitted

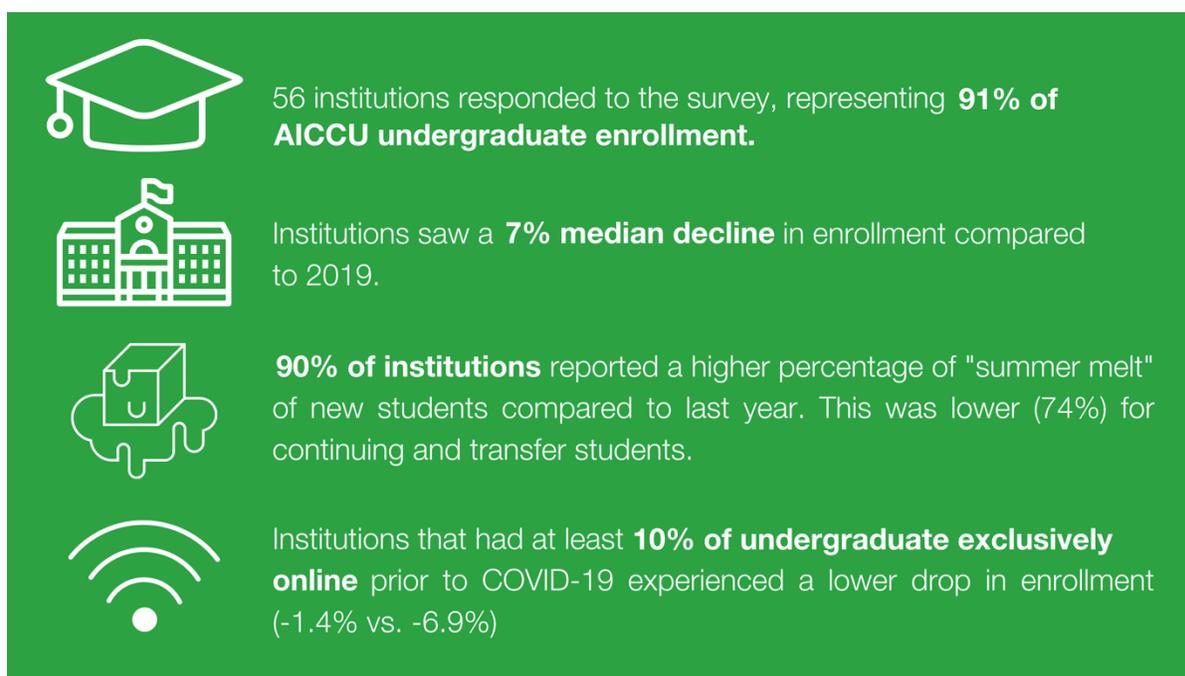
**AICCU institutions.** The data collected provides an early look at how COVID-19 is affecting fall enrollment at AICCU institutions.

## FINDINGS

### *Overall Enrollment*

Institutional data for the fall 2020 term compared to the fall 2019 term reveals that student enrollment and matriculation are lower for new students, continuing students, and transfer students.

While a minority of responding institutions reported growth across these populations,



responses, representing a response rate of approximately 66%. **Collectively, the responding institutions enroll 91% of the 199,000 undergraduates enrolled at**

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<sup>3</sup> "COVID-19: Stay Informed." National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 15 Oct. 2020, [nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/](https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/).

Response (Summer Melt) ■ Much higher (>30%) than fall 2019 ■ Somewhat higher (1 to 30%) than fall 2019 ■ The same (0%) ■ Somewhat lower (-30 to -1%) than fall 2019 ■ Much lower (< -30%) than fall 2019

New Students



Transfer Students



Continuing Students



Figure 1: Reported changes in summer melt (2019-20)

the majority of institutions are witnessing declining enrollment for new and returning students, in line with national trends.

*Summer Melt*

Institutional staff were also asked about summer melt, a phenomenon in which a prospective college student who has indicated they will attend an institution in the fall changes their mind for some reason and instead does not attend. A small number of institutions reported that the summer melt figures for Fall 2020 were about the same as the prior year. Again, across all three groups, the overwhelming majority of institutions reported summer melt that was either somewhat higher (1% to 30%) or much higher (more than 30%) compared to Fall 2019 data.

**The median summer melt was 18% among new students, 8.5% among continuing students, and 18% among transfer students.**

*Postponement and Deferrals*

The survey also asked about the impact of postponements and/or deferrals. The majority of institutions noted that there was a greater trend of students postponing enrollment until Spring 2021 or Fall 2021.

"We heard **many more** comments this fall from prospective students that they're taking a **gap semester/year** because of our remote learning mandate by the county health department."

"We are trending significantly higher (**~50% increase**) in our deferrals compared to FA19. Due to the timing of when we saw most of the deferrals start, we can correlate this to our announcement of pivoting to mostly virtual instruction for Fall 2020"

Some institutions reported the deferral rates were unprecedented.

There was consistent feedback linking the timing of the deferrals to health and safety

"We have about **5 times** as many students deferring to Fall 2021 compared to deferred to Fall 2020. The count is the highest it's ever been by a long shot"

.....  
"The deferral rate is **up about 80%** for the Fall 2020 from Fall 2019"

restrictions or the announcement of shifts to virtual instruction. Some also noted that deferrals changed most dramatically for international students.

In cases where there was not an increase in deferrals, those institutions tended to be specialized (e.g. graduate only or focused on medical programs), primarily online programs, or those serving adult populations. However, impacts have varied, with one institution noting that graduate nursing students were deferring in greater numbers because of work schedule impacts to them as active healthcare practitioners.

## CONCLUSION

While the exact impacts vary by institution, the findings from this survey indicate that enrollment of new, continuing, and transfer students at AICCU member institutions has decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. This trend, while not unique to independent, nonprofit colleges, presents challenges to the state in determining how to best support students in their pursuit of a college degree and upward social mobility and economic security, whether they are enrolling out of high school, transferring from a community college to a four-year institution, or re-enrolling after a break in their attendance. This imperative is especially pronounced for low-income students.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

With 85 institutions throughout the state, offering undergraduate and graduate programs through in-person, hybrid, and online modalities, independent, nonprofit colleges and universities are well-positioned to aid in the economic recovery and prosperity of the state and its residents, both statewide and regionally.

As policymakers consider changes to existing policies or new policies that promote college attendance and degree attainment, **it is critical that these policies support students consistently across all higher education sectors.** Currently, low-income students attending independent, nonprofit institutions are excluded from several components of the state financial aid programs, including:

- Supplemental Cal Grant support for students with dependent children; and
- Additional Cal Grant eligibility for summer enrollment; and
- Emergency financial assistance for undocumented college students.

Lastly, if additional federal relief funds are made available to states, California must consider investing a portion of these into higher education relief and/or support. The financial impacts of COVID-19 have been staggering and have created significant challenges for colleges and universities. Additional support is critically needed for the tireless work of academic and student services staff to support student retention, persistence and success – all of which benefits the students, their families, and the economic resilience and recovery of the state. Students deserve robust support during these challenging times.

*For more information about the survey, please contact Alex Graves, Vice President of Government Relations at [alex.graves@aiccu.edu](mailto:alex.graves@aiccu.edu)*

## **ABOUT AICCU**

The Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities (AICCU) speaks for 85 independent, nonprofit colleges and universities located across the state of California, which collectively enroll 199,000 undergraduates, 71% of whom are California residents. The sector also enrolls over 180,000 graduate students.