

EDUCATION

NJ community colleges will likely see surge in enrollment as students reconsider fall plans

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Published 4:39 a.m. ET May 13, 2020

Months of virtual classes. Study abroad trips cut short. Canceled sports seasons. Depression-level unemployment.

College is stressful, but add a global pandemic, and the result is confusion, chaos and disappointment.

The coronavirus outbreak has left New Jersey students' plans to live on campus at four-year colleges in jeopardy. As the summer approaches, most graduating high schoolers and current college students have no picture of what to expect in the fall – but the four-year college experience will unlikely return to normal.

Community colleges across the nation say they're ready to meet the moment. And New Jersey's 18 community colleges on 19 campuses could be critical to bolster the state's post-coronavirus economy while helping sidelined students continue their education, experts said.

“Community colleges have always been a place for people to go to upgrade their skills,” said Aaron Fichtner, president of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges, a nonprofit that links the two-year schools and serves as their voice in the state Legislature. “They do whatever they can to serve as many people as possible.”

Sinking economy, rising enrollment

During normal years, community colleges consistently account for roughly half of undergraduate enrollment at public institutions.

Community colleges also see a far greater share of part-time students than their four-year counterparts.

Story continues below chart

It's unclear how the pandemic will affect those figures. But history indicates that demand for community colleges rises when the economy struggles, experts said, and New Jersey has seen more than 1 million unemployment claims during two months of coronavirus closures.

“There is this real ironclad relationship between the unemployment rate and enrollment,” said Larry Hlavenka Jr., community relations director at Bergen Community College in Paramus, which topped the state’s list of community colleges for fall 2019 enrollment.

“In every type of economic downturn, community colleges are counter-cyclical to the economy,” said Steve Rose, president of Passaic County Community College in Paterson. “I’m relatively certain that our enrollments will skyrocket at some point.”

During the Great Recession, Rose said, Passaic’s enrollment went up around 10% a semester. But the economic toll of the COVID-19 outbreak, he added, “is not your typical recession.”

The uncertainty is immediate: Summer session is just a few weeks away, but county colleges have no idea what numbers might look like in June and July, much less in the fall.

Come home campaign: NJ colleges to New Jerseyans studying out of state: 'Come home'

When will NJ reopen?: Gov. Murphy says he may share details, dates later this week

Passaic typically sees 2,000 students during the summer, but many delay enrollment until they see their spring semester grades – and ultimately register late, Rose said.

Hundreds of those enrollees are students at four-year colleges who go away to school but take a few credits while they’re home for the summer, he added.

Those students could also reconsider returning to their four-year campuses after the summer ends, fearing close quarters in campus dormitories — or hesitating to pay full tuition for a less-than-complete four-year university experience that might remain online during the fall semester.

“We may see a real surge in enrollment from these types of students,” Rose said.

Story continues after chart.

Students whose “plans have been upended in terms of educational pathway can look to community colleges and know they’re getting the same quality for a third of the price,” said Martha Parham, a spokeswoman with the American Association of Community Colleges. “They won’t have to disrupt their journey in terms of higher education attainment.”

The turbulence and uncertainty caused by the pandemic has also led some students to reconsider their education timeline completely. Some high schoolers are weighing whether to take a gap year before enrolling in college, while some current four-year college students might be forced to take a break from school.

“A lot of people will be tempted to put their lives on hold,” Fichtner said. “This is a time for people to take stock of where they are and make those investments in their own futures.”

Credits earned at community colleges typically transfer to four-year institutions, Fichtner said. And community colleges are open-door institutions with non-competitive admissions policies.

“We don’t choose our students,” Hlavenka said. “Our students choose us.”

The budget factor

Community colleges are far from immune from the outbreak’s negative financial implications. But the economic effects hit two-year schools differently, experts said.

“We don’t have dorms. We don’t have meal plans,” Hlavenka said. “We are not facing that challenge.”

Roughly 70% of BCC's budget comes from student tuition, he said. But the institution can't "reliably count on that revenue coming in, even for students that do register," he added.

For county colleges across the state, that revenue varies. In-county tuition during the 2018-2019 academic year ranged from \$105 per credit hour in Gloucester County to \$208 in Union County. Full-time students typically take 30 credit hours annually; part-time students take 15, according to the state Office of the Secretary of Higher Education.

Story continues after chart.

Essex County College announced last week it would allow essential workers operating on the front lines of the pandemic to take free summer courses. The program is open to county residents who furnish an employer letter confirming their essential status.

"This is our way of saying thank you to all our brave neighbors who have been putting their lives on the line every day keeping us safe and healthy," said Anthony Munroe, Essex County College president. "This is the least we can do for them."

Last year, the state started the Community College Opportunity Grant. The program offers free tuition to students who are enrolled in at least six credits at one of the state's community colleges, do not have a college degree and have no more than \$65,000 in household income.

"We hope that will continue," Fichtner said.

Community college students are among the most vulnerable in the higher education community – and, in turn, are feeling the pandemic's economic challenges most acutely, experts said.

Community colleges account for an outsize share of part-time undergraduate students. And they can be older, non-traditional students. It's common for up to 40% of students at one of those institutions to be older than 25, Fichtner said.

"Our students were working," Rose said. "They worked locally. Now, they're unemployed."

Many community college students are first-generation students. Some are first-generation Americans. And around 1,800 students at Passaic are single parents – mostly single mothers, Rose said.

New Jersey's community colleges received \$89.5 million from the higher education portion of the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, known as the CARES Act. Institutions are required to give about half of their CARES Act funding directly to students.

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Using its federal CARES Act funding of \$5.5 million and the school's own foundation, Passaic hopes to give around \$3 million to students during the next few months, Rose said. A call for aid applications from the school's students generated 600 requests during the first two days it was open.

He added: "We want them to come out of this, hopefully, stronger — at least, certainly not damaged."

State recovery

New Jersey's county colleges are inextricably linked to their communities — a model that experts say will make them critical to training workers for the post-coronavirus economy.

"By design, they reflect the needs of their local community," Parham said, adding that they'll "feed that local workforce pipeline."

Experts pointed to the 9/11 aftermath as an example. As communities began to heal, students went to county colleges in droves to pursue public service careers.

"The next 10 to 15 years were defined by that kind of mentality," Hlavenka said. "Students flocked to those kinds of programs."

Hlavenka expects a similar reaction after this crisis abates, particularly toward health care careers such as nursing and respiratory therapy. The crisis could also send burnt-out health care workers back to school in search of a new career path, Rose added.

But community colleges must balance the expected demand increase for hands-on health and safety programs with the uncertainty about reopening their doors in the fall.

"Nursing, firefighting, allied health — a lot of those can't be done 100% remotely," Parham said. "Those pose an additional challenge that the four-year universities maybe don't

have.”

And even if students can go back to the classroom at the beginning of the fall semester, authorities haven’t ruled out transitioning back to virtual learning if the outbreak resurges.

Passaic, in response, is considering allowing nursing students to do their two-year program slightly out of sequence, Rose said. If the institution can open in the fall, they’ll frontload hands-on clinical work that might normally be spread across the semester.

For now, county colleges — much like four-year universities — are preparing for a variety of scenarios that include in-person learning, virtual education or, more likely, some combination of the two.

“We can deliver classes in any one of those modalities,” Hlavenka said. “We have the capacity to do so. It’s more about taking the [state] guidance, and once we have that guidance, deploying the strategy.”

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