

## College Enrollment During the Pandemic

JULY 2022

While overall enrollment in postsecondary education has been declining over the past decade, the pandemic appears to have exacerbated this trend, especially at community colleges and among non-traditional students. Enrollment across all sectors has dropped from just over 17 million students in spring 2020 to just under 16 million in spring 2022.

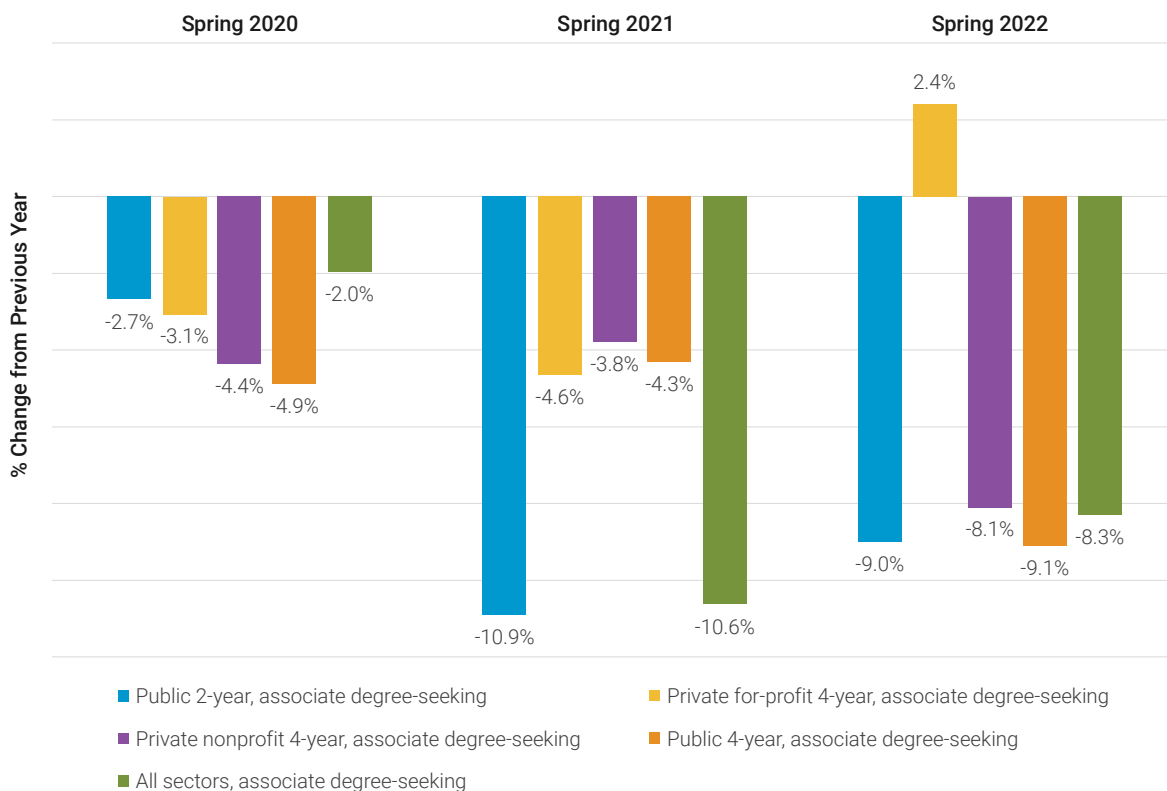
This brief highlights enrollment trends from National Student Clearinghouse’s 2020–22 data.<sup>1</sup> The shifts indicate that two years after the start of the pandemic, students are less likely to pursue associate degrees and attend part time at all institutions.



### Fewer students are seeking associate degrees

Across institution types, fewer associate degree-seeking students enrolled during the past three years. Enrollment percentage changes are subject to large swings due to small enrollment counts, but we can see some patterns. The drop was steepest at community colleges, and nonprofit and public four-year institutions also saw large declines.

**Figure 1. Changes in enrollment of associate degree-seeking students by sector, 2020–22**

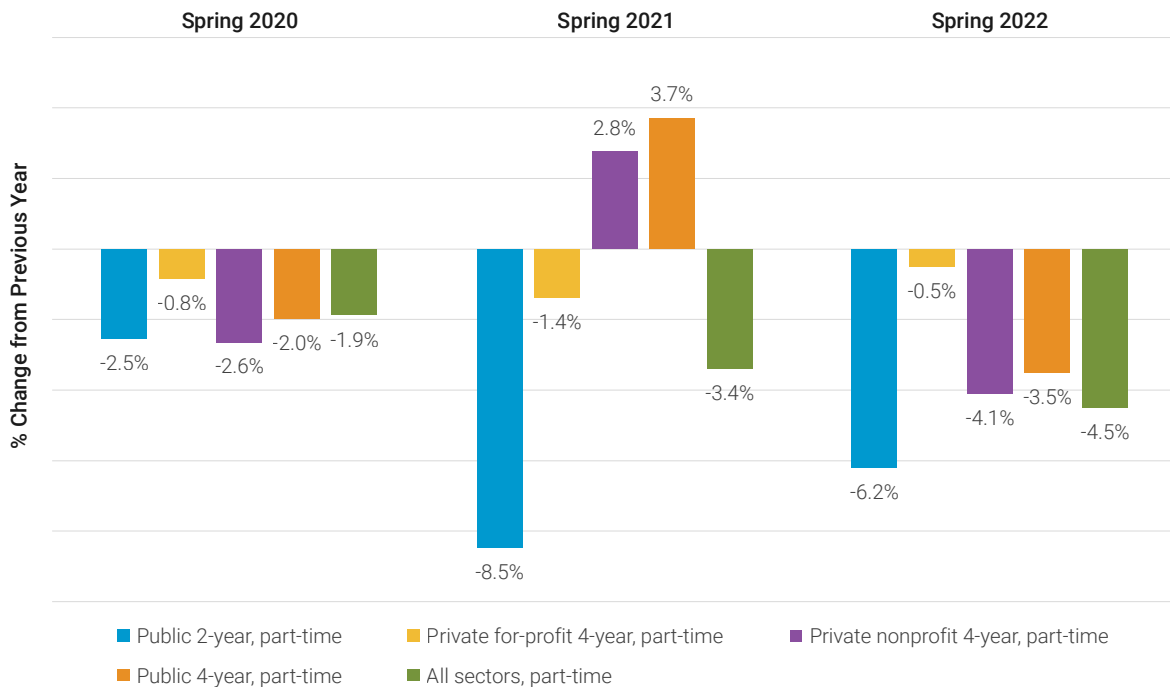


<sup>1</sup> “Spring 2022: Current Term Enrollment Estimates,” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, last modified May 26, 2022, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>.

## Part-time students less likely to enroll

In general, part-time student enrollment has declined during the pandemic. At community colleges, the decrease in full-time enrollment was greater than that of part-time enrollment, but both groups dropped during the past three years. At this point, the short-lived increase in part-time enrollment at public and nonprofit four-year institutions in 2021 does not appear to represent a trend.

**Figure 2. Changes in enrollment of part-time students by sector, 2020–22**



## Policy connections

Students may choose to defer or postpone their postsecondary education for many reasons, such as wanting to pursue well-paying job opportunities, needing to work to cover rising living costs, or needing to care for children. However, deferment has a long-term cost.

Research shows that students who complete credentials earn more over their working lives, are less likely to be unemployed, and are more likely to work in jobs that have benefits such as health insurance. Institutions can help students who have stopped out during the pandemic to reenroll and complete credentials through transfer programs.<sup>2</sup> ACE’s National Task Force on the Transfer and Award of Credit developed best practices and a database of examples institutional leaders have used to make completion possible.<sup>3</sup> The federal government can also help students enroll and persist by increasing financial support to low-income students through the Pell Grant and other programs. ACE and other higher education associations support [doubling the maximum Pell Grant](#) as a quick and effective way to bolster opportunity for millions of low- and moderate-income students.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Ma, Matea Pender, and Meredith Welch, *Education Pays 2019: The Benefits of Higher Education for Individuals and Society*, Trends in Higher Education Series (New York: College Board, 2019). <https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/education-pays-2019-full-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> “Effective Practices That Support Transfer Students,” American Council on Education, 2022, <https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Student-Support/Effective-Practices-Transfer-Students.aspx>.