

Declines in College Enrollment Continue Unabated in 2021

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Higher education enrollment fell to its lowest levels in 2021. In San Diego, more than 2,100 fewer students opted in to college compared to five years ago. Such a decline poses a serious risk for many students, especially those students who rely on a college degree to become upwardly mobile. And yet, simply enrolling in college is no panacea to upward mobility, students must actually attain a college degree, which is no small feat given that fewer than 25 percent actually do. Because of these historic declines in enrollment, we face a monumental problem: *We currently have fewer students in the pipeline to attain a college degree* –potentially losing 500 degree earners from the Class of 2021 alone—and this problem has the potential to further erode a fundamental purpose of K-12 education, our higher education institutions, and our economy at large.

Decisions about attending college were challenging enough prior to the pandemic. Students often questioned their readiness for the rigor of college work and the financial costs. The pandemic has layered other concerns that make college-going decisions even more unstable for students.

There is no doubt that many students need a college degree to attain their professional aspirations and to achieve economic mobility. San Diego also needs degree earners—the relationship between economic growth and educational attainment are undeniable. We need to act on these complex problems now and address them with long terms solutions, and in the short term, we must continue to improve our understanding of our college-going data and use this information to mitigate students’ fears and hesitations about attaining a college degree.

We created this annual report for the purpose of increasing our understanding and decisions about college access and completion. Instead of relying on self-reported information about how many students go to college, we use the National Student Clearinghouse’s StudentTracker service, a nationwide source of college enrollment and degree data from over 3,600 colleges and universities. The StudentTracker data provides our community with a reasonably accurate representation of the number and percentage of students who enroll, persist, and complete college annually. This report helps guide our efforts to get our students back into college and keep our economic outlook bright.

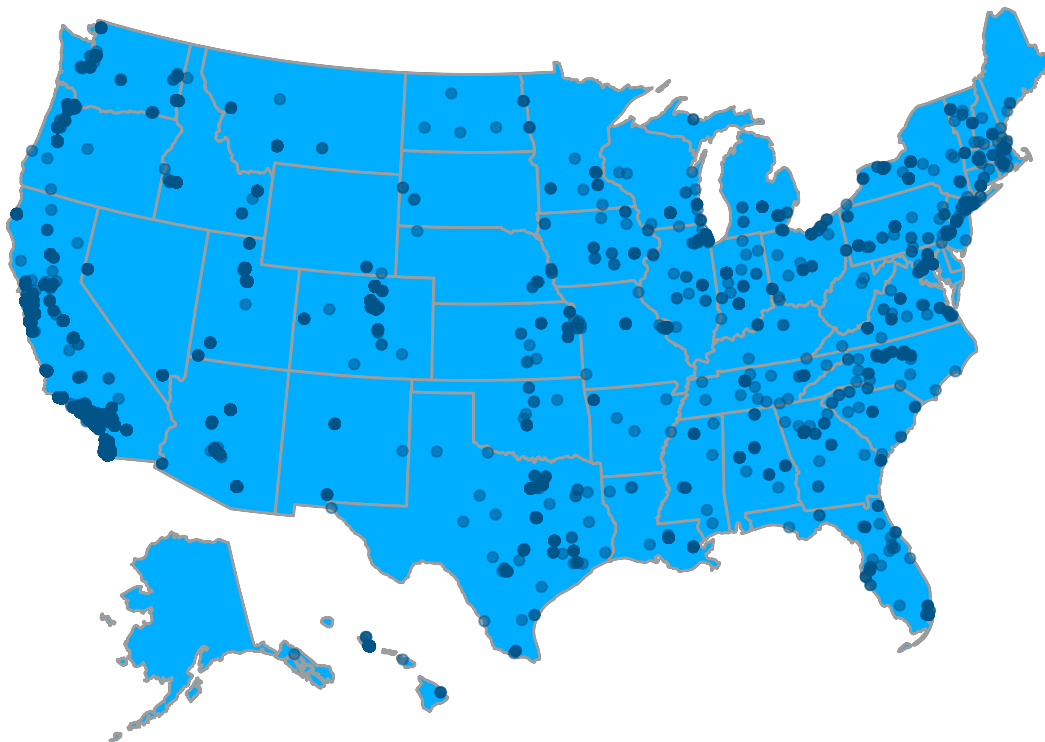
College Enrollment

In 2021, the National Student Clearinghouse reported 14,129 students enrolled in college right out of high school, a substantial decline from the year before. College enrollment patterns in the Clearinghouse may vary from year to year for a variety of reasons including an overall decline in college going, fluctuations in the size of 12th grade cohorts, and the timing of when local high schools submit their graduates to the Clearinghouse. For that reason, our fall report is a preliminary report that is updated in late spring.

The map below locates the nearly 1,900 colleges and universities where students enrolled in 2021. Most students (83%) attended colleges and universities in southern California, while the remaining 2,200 attended institutions in all other 49 states.

FIGURE 1

While Most College Students Stay Close to Home, Graduates Enroll in Colleges and Universities Across the Country



SDCOE

Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report.

Note: We used geospatial data to identify the location of each college or university where graduates from the Class of 2021 enrolled. We mapped each student to his or her respective college or university, darker dot patterns represent areas where more students attend college.

Top Ten Colleges and Universities Attended

For the first time in eight years more students enrolled in four-year institutions (8,725) compared to 2-year (7,285). Some local community colleges suffered enrollment losses upwards of 25% in 2021, while the University of California-San Diego reported a 33% increase in enrollment. These variations in enrollment patterns have the greatest impact on lower-income students whose enrollment declines were double other student groups according to the National Student Clearinghouse.

TABLE 1

More High School Graduates Opted for a Four-Year College Experience in 2021

Community colleges still have a big enrollment footprint in San Diego

	Level	Number Attending
College Name		
San Diego State University	4-year	1303
University of California-San Diego	4-year	1116
California State University-San Marcos	4-year	721
University of California-Los Angeles	4-year	252
Southwestern College	2-year	1901
Palomar College	2-year	1294
San Diego Mesa College	2-year	932
San Diego Miramar College	2-year	829
San Diego City College	2-year	624
Grossmont College	2-year	320

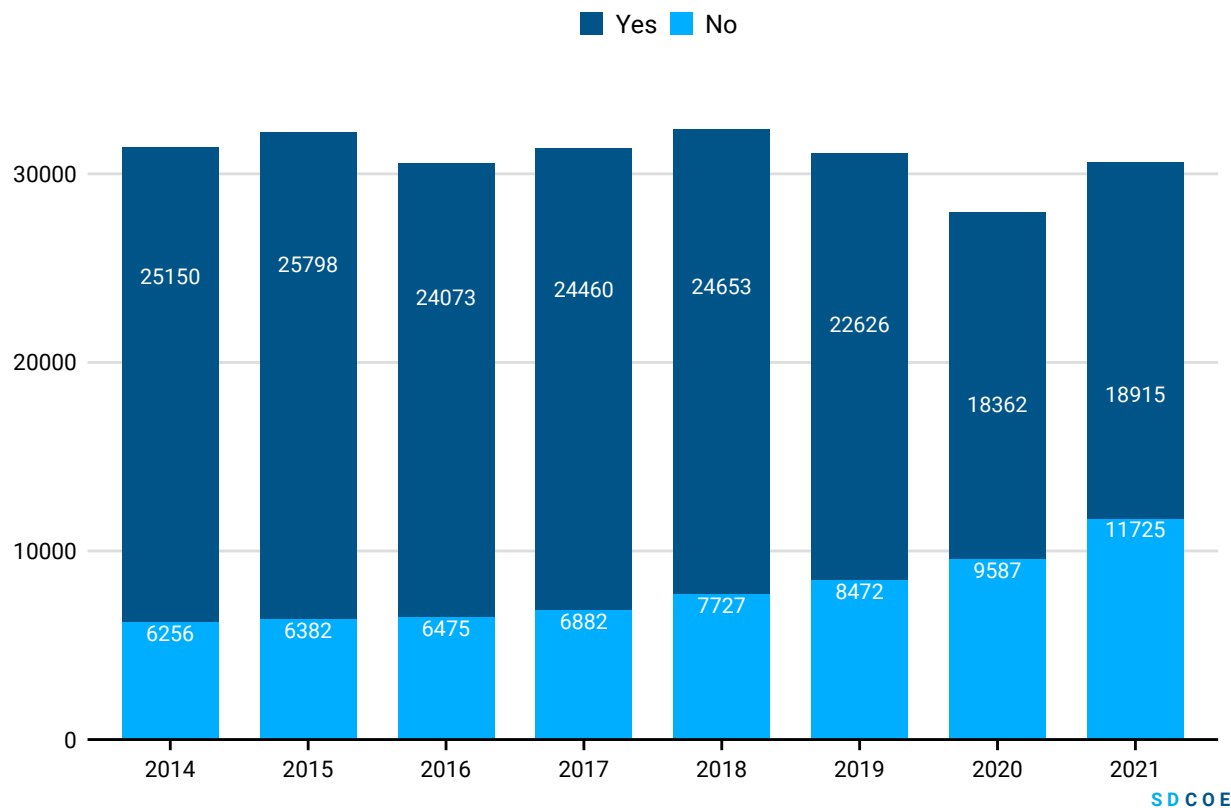
Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report.

College Enrollment by Cohort

The overall number of students enrolled in college continued to decline in 2021. Current enrollment figures may adjust upwards slightly after we update the report using spring enrollment data. We should caution the reader in making comparisons between the current and prior years given the preliminary nature of the data. However, as indicated in the chart below, college going rates have declined from 78% percent of the Class of 2014 (39,988 students) attending college to only 65% percent of the Class of 2020 (40,285) attending. Additionally, the number of students not enrolled in college has increased by 50 percent over that same time frame.

FIGURE 2
Early Enrollment Figures Show Another Steep Decline in College-Going

Number enrolled



Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report.

Note: We calculated enrollment number for each graduating cohort using data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse data file supplies informatin on whether a student enrolled in college or not with a 93 percent matching rate.

Persistence and Retention

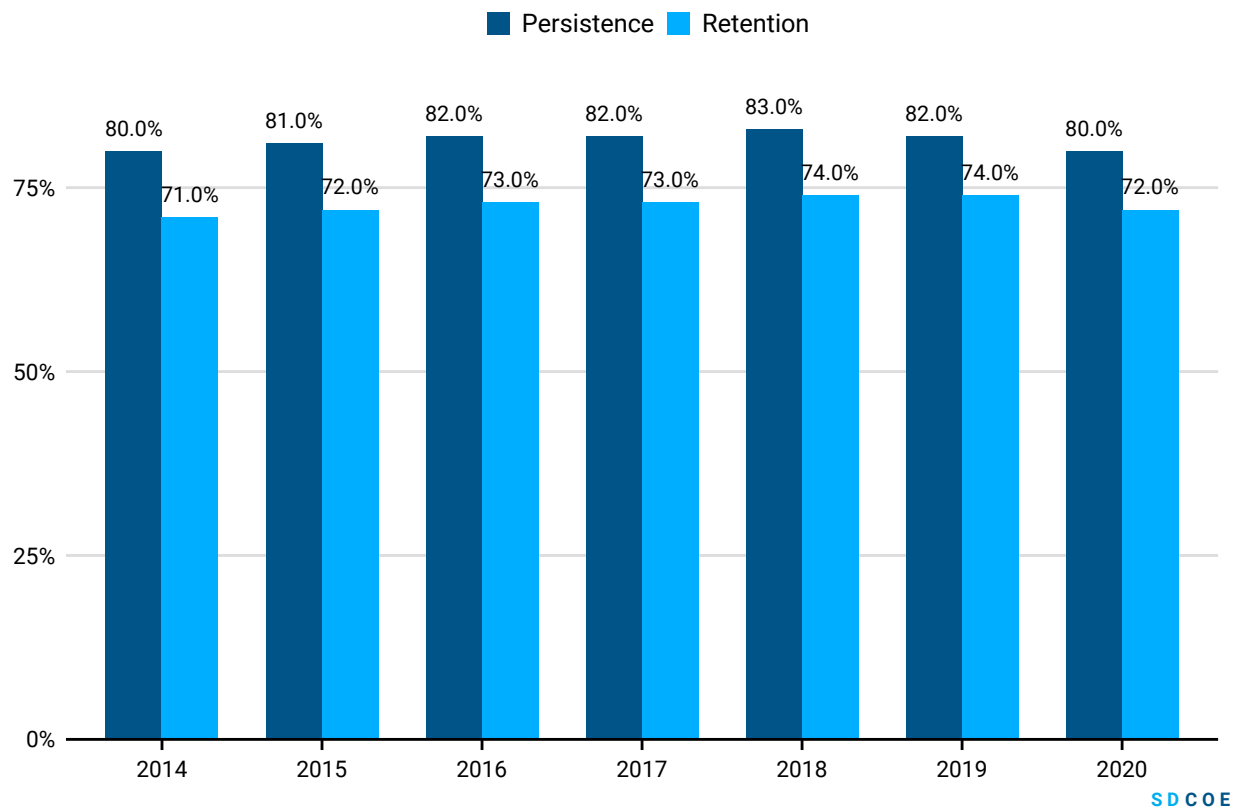
Despite the pandemic, students who enroll in college tend to stay. Some stay at their original institution (retention) while others opt to attend college elsewhere (persistence). Similar to other recent trends, the persistence and retention percentages declined for the Class of 2020. About 4 in 5 enrolled students remained enrolled from year to year.

FIGURE 3

Slight Declines in College Persistence and Retention Continue

How the number of students that remain in college compares to those staying in the same college

Percent persisting and retained



Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report.

Note: We calculated persistence as the percentage of students enrolled in college in the first year after high school graduation who then returned to any college for a second year. We calculated retention as the percentage of students returning to the same college from the previous year.

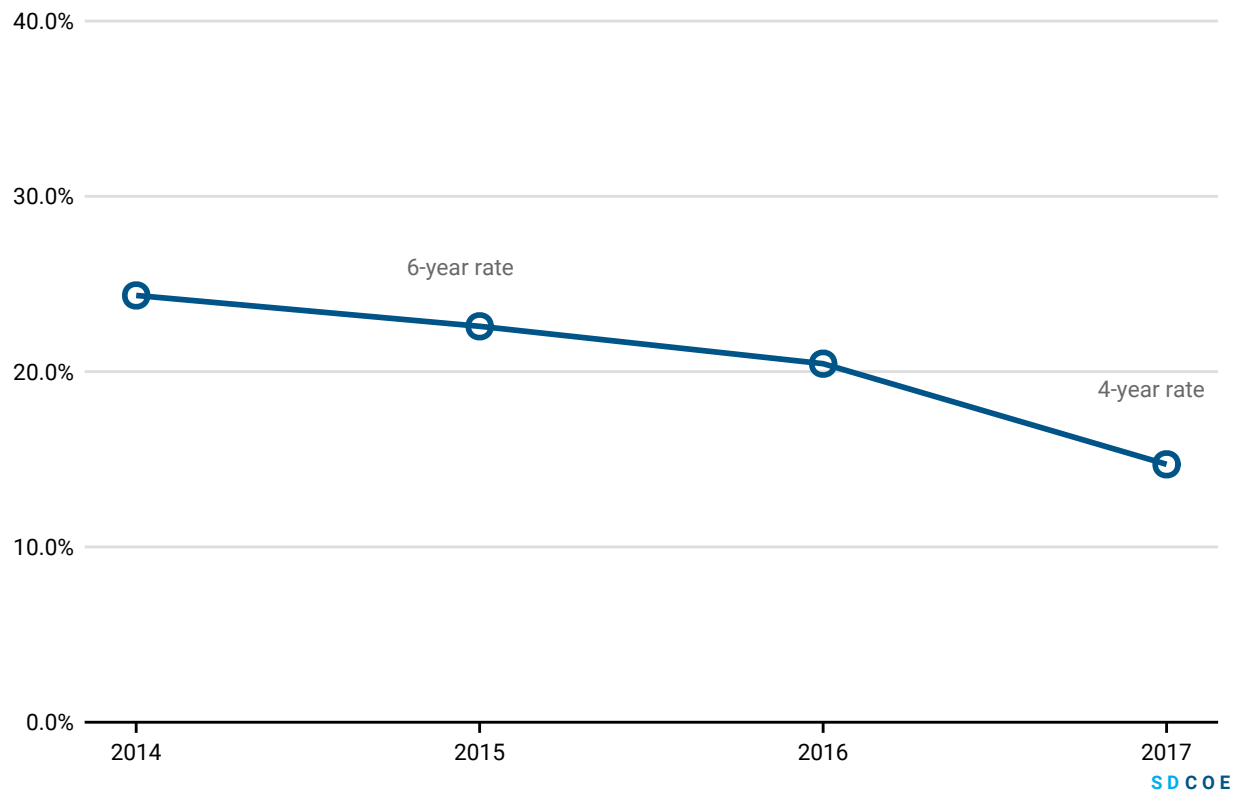
Completion

While the pandemic has made no discernible difference on college completion rates yet, only a small number of students actually earn college degrees. About 18% of the Class of 2017 has earned a college degree, while 25% of the Class of 2015 earned a degree. We know that degree completers earn more on average than non-college graduates, and that we need a certain level of degree completers for our economy to thrive. While the percentage of students earning degrees compared to those enrolled may not change much in the coming years, we might have significantly fewer students earning degrees in the future based on our current enrollment levels.

FIGURE 4

Only 1 in 4 San Diego Students Earn a College Degree

The percentage of students completing degrees in four and six years remains low



Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report.

Note: Colleges report graduation rates many different ways. We calculated graduation rates by cohort or year of high school graduation. The 2015 cohort represents the 6-year graduation cohort and the data point reflects the percentage of students from that cohort who earned a degree.

Degrees Earned

Business Administration degrees top the list as the most popular college choice followed by Psychology and Computer Science. Because earnings vary based on the type of degree students get, several organizations including [College Scorecard](#) and [Salary Surfer](#) provide valuable information linking college degrees to the median salaries of graduates. Surprisingly the average salary for some Associate's degrees are as much if not more than comparable Bachelor's degrees. Using earnings information can help reduce some students' fears and hesitations about enrolling in college.

TABLE 2

2014 Graduates Earned Nearly 7500 Degrees

Many students earn two-year degrees in same time some students earn four-year degrees

	# Obtained	Time to Completion
Degree		
Certificate	321	4 years
Associate's	333	4 years 1 month
Bachelor's	3062	4 years 6 months
Master's and beyond (with Bachelors)	376	5 years 7 months
Unreported	3380	4 years 6 months
Majors		
Business Administration	731	
Psychology	529	
Computer Science	440	
Political Science	259	
Sociology	259	
Economics	247	
Mechanical Engineering	207	
Communication	202	
Biology	181	

Source: National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker Report.

Note: We calculated degree information and time to degree from the National Student Clearinghouse StudentTracker report using the Class of 2014. Many colleges and universities choose not to report degree titles or degree majors opting instead to report a graduation date only. For those students, we have identified their degree as "unreported."

Final Thoughts

Imagine you are one of the 40,648 graduating seniors from one of San Diego's 175 high schools. Going to college may have been an aspiration of yours for as long as you can remember. How do you feel right now? Perhaps you were already worried about how to pay for college, making friends, or failing a class. Now you may also be anxious about how the pandemic has changed your college dreams. What would it take to allay your fears and get you back on track for postsecondary options?

The fact is that Omicron or Covid-19 will have an impact on college-going for some time. We cannot end the pandemic as a solution to improving college access. The best chance we have of ending this enrollment crisis is to build stronger relationships with students and to provide them with information about their college-going options that is informative and keeps them progressing in the process. Additionally, we need to continue to understand the social and emotional stressors they experience in the process and work to mitigate these challenges. Going to college is not something we can leave to chance.

Everyone reading this report is an important decision-maker in his or her organization—many are directly responsible for college access. I urge you to stay informed about shifts in college enrollment patterns and invest in strategies that address students' fears and hesitations about enrolling in college. This group of high school graduates may be the most resilient of any other cohort before them. We must honor their experiences because they have truly paid a much greater price to achieve their aspirations than any of us every have or possibly will.