In 2021, the National Student Clearinghouse reported 17,640 students enrolled in college right out of high school, a slight 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.

![](data:application/pdf;base64,)

For the first time in eight years more students enrolled in four-year institutions (9,633) compared to 2-year (8,007). Some local community colleges suffered enrollment loses upwards of 25% in 2021, while the University of California-San Diego reported a 26% increase in enrollment compared to the past two years. 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.

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 63% percent of the Class of 2014 (39,988 students) attending college to only 44% percent of the Class of 2020 (40,285) attending. Additionally, the number of students not enrolled in college has increased by 44 percent over that same time frame.

![](data:application/pdf;base64,)

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.

![](data:application/pdf;base64,)

While the pandemic has made no discernible difference on college completion rates yet, only a small number of students actually earn college degrees. About 17% 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.

![](data:application/pdf;base64,)

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](https://collegescorecard.ed.gov/) and [Salary Surfer](https://salarysurfer.cccco.edu/SalarySurfer.aspx) 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.

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.