It’s no secret that the pandemic has had far-ranging and potentially devastating effects on higher education. Recent research has indicated that community colleges have been especially hit hard but the pandemic, causing drops in enrollment as well as drops in college persistence.

A pair of recent reports shed more light on the challenges and opportunities that community colleges are facing in the wake of COVID-19.

Recession leads to drop in enrollment

In the fall of 2020, enrollment at community colleges dropped 10% over prior year, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. The report notes that, in previous recessions, enrollment in higher education (particularly at the generally cheaper community college level) increased. However, during COVID-19, which saw mass lay-offs and spikes in unemployment, enrollment in higher education also fell.

The NSCRC examined data from 9.2 million students, or nearly 54% of all postsecondary institutions in the country. Key findings from the report include:

- Overall, undergraduate enrollment was down 4% nationwide in 2020 compared with 2019 and was down at all types of institutions except for private, four-year institutions.
- The upward trend in graduate education enrollment dropped to 2.7%.
- Overall postsecondary education enrollment was down 3% in 2020 compared with 2019.
- First-time student enrollment saw the biggest dip, dropping 16.1% nationally and 22.7% at community colleges. According to Doug Shapiro, Executive Director of the NSCRC, first-time students accounted for 69% of the total drop in enrollment.
- Community college enrollment decline was nearly nine times the pre-pandemic loss rate.

Read more at https://bit.ly/2NxbiOD.

STUDENT INCOMES PLAYED LARGE ROLE IN PERSISTENCE

Students’ incomes were a major factor on student persistence rates at community colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on an analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data conducted by the Community College Research Center at Teachers College of Columbia University. The analysis looked at data from 25,000 people who reported having community college plans.

The analysis found that community college students are canceling their higher education plans at more than twice the rate of their peers attending four-year institutions. Other key findings include:

- As of October 2020, more than 40% had reported canceling community college plans.
- Another 15% of community college students surveyed reported that they intended to take fewer classes for upcoming semesters, or that they had switched their program in response to the pandemic.
- In comparison, less than 20% of students at four-year colleges reported canceling college plans.

- Students attending or planning to attend community college were more likely to cite fears of contracting the COVID-19 virus or caring for someone who has it, over their peers attending or planning to attend a four-year institution.

According to the research, the difference between the two likely comes down to the fact that students attending community colleges are more likely to be of the demographics that have been hardest hit by the pandemic.

- Almost twice as many community college students expressed concerns about affordability or financial aid problems than peers attending four-year institutions.
- The change of college courses to online during the pandemic also had an effect, with a net positive result for students attending four-year institutions (who believed that it would make college safer and more engaging during the pandemic) than for community college peers.

Read more at http://bit.ly/3pZ1gUx.