

Impact of COVID on Students' Postsecondary Trajectories

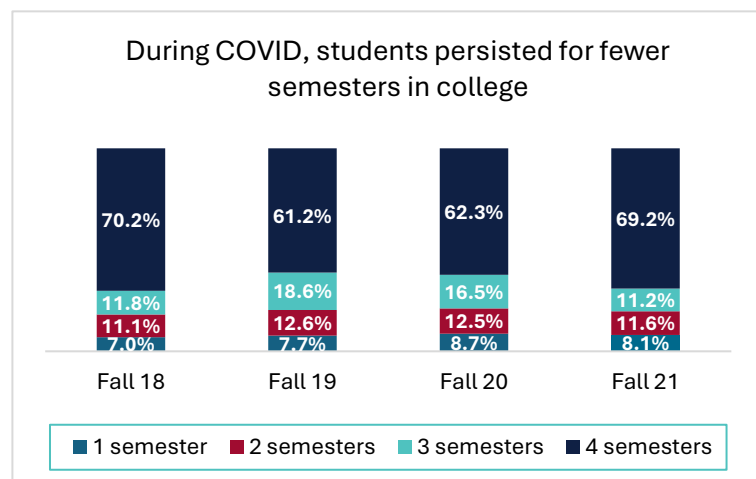
Key Takeaways and Implications:

- Students' postsecondary enrollment declined during the COVID-19 pandemic. For four-year institutions on average, that decline was short-lived. For two-year institutions, the decline was larger and has persisted.
- During the pandemic, students persisted for fewer semesters in college. This issue was particularly prominent for students who enrolled in college in the fall of 2019.
- It will be important to provide educational or workforce training opportunities for students whose educational enrollment and persistence were disrupted by COVID-19.

Context and Study Overview: The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant changes in students' educational experiences. This study uses statewide administrative data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the National Student Clearinghouse to look at the extent to which students' postsecondary enrollment patterns were impacted by COVID. We looked at outcomes for students who graduated high school in 2020, 2021, and 2022 and compared their performance to the enrollment trends for students in the 2016-2019 high school graduation cohorts. We looked at overall enrollment, enrollment by educational level, and their persistence in postsecondary education.

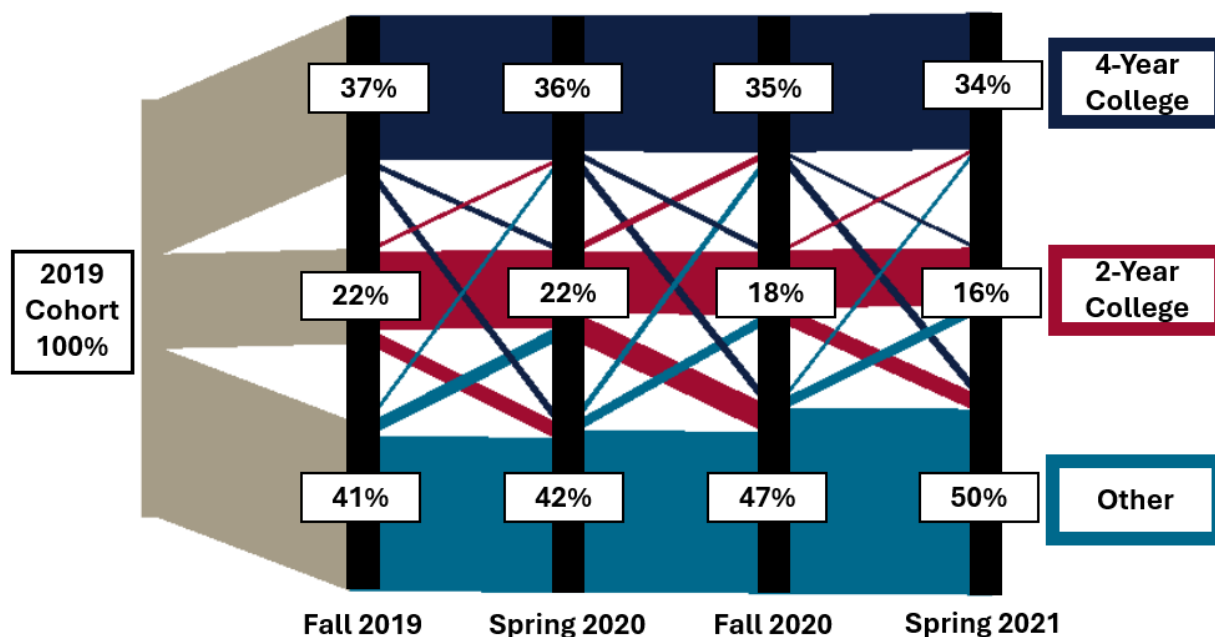
Results:

- Students' enrollment in postsecondary education declined for the 2020 and 2021 cohorts. Overall enrollment for the 2022 cohort was higher than pre-COVID trends. However, trends were very different by sector.
 - Enrollment in two-year institutions decreased substantially for the 2020 and 2021 cohorts. There was a slight rebound for the 2022 cohort; however, enrollment is still below pre-COVID levels.
 - In contrast, enrollment in four-year institutions showed a significant decline for the 2020 cohorts. Enrollment for the 2021 cohort rebounded to pre-COVID levels and enrollment for the 2022 cohort increased when compared to pre-COVID trends.
- The trends suggest that certain populations—Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students—shifted their enrollments from two-years to four-years during the height of the pandemic.
- Students who started college in the fall of 2019 and 2020 completed fewer semesters of college in their first two years. (See chart.)



- Students who graduated from high school in the spring of 2019 exhibited a significant change in their postsecondary trajectories over the first two years, with the largest disruption occurring between the Spring of 2020 and the Fall of 2021 between the two-year college pathway (red) and the “other” pathway (blue).

Figure 1: Postsecondary Trajectories for the 2019 Cohort



More about this study: This project is supported by the North Carolina Collaboratory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with funding appropriated by the North Carolina General Assembly via the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (H.R. 1319) (federal award identification number SLFRP0129).

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