

State colleges trend lower for enrollees

Under 50% of high school grads opt to stay in Arkansas *by Jaime Adame | October 25, 2019 at 2:25 a.m.*

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Arkansas Department of Higher Education Director Maria Markham is shown in this file photo.

FORT SMITH -- The percentage of Arkansas public high school students continuing on to college in the state decreased again, according to data compiled by the state Division of Higher Education.

The latest numbers -- factoring in updated data from previous years -- mark the fourth consecutive year of declines, with a college-going rate of 47.1% for 2018, down from the 2017 rate of 48.2%. In fall 2014, the state agency calculated the rate as 51.6%.

Officials noted the incompleteness of their data but also a need to reverse a trend that an expert said can hurt the state because employers generally seek an educated workforce.

The available data leaves out students who attended private high schools and also those who left the state for college, Sonia Hazelwood, the agency's associate director for research and analytics, said Thursday.

The lack of information means the rate cannot be compared with national data, Hazelwood told members of the state Higher Education Coordinating Board at a meeting at the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith.

But "it's still a problem," Hazelwood said of the declining rate.

The most recent national rate, calculated using a different methodology by the National Center for Education Statistics, showed in 2017 that 67% of 2.9 million people who recently completed high school went on to college by October of that year, a rate "not measurably different from the rate in 2000 or 2010," according to the center.

The state agency's report shows that out of 31,745 Arkansas public high school graduates in 2018, a total of 14,965 began school that fall at a two-year college or four-year university in Arkansas.

In 2014, out of the state's 30,800 public high school graduates, 15,889 continued on to college that fall.

"I think it becomes concerning if you've got almost a 5 [percentage point] drop" over the four-year period, said Greg Revels, a board member from De Queen.

For 2017, out of 31,315 graduates, 15,094 went on to college.

Maria Markham, director for the state agency, told the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* that the college-going rate is "abysmal."

"We have so much opportunity and responsibility to engage a broader population of high school kids and get them thinking about attending higher education at a younger age," Markham said.

A state law, Act 930 of 2017, requires schools to develop a "success plan" for students beginning in eighth grade.

"That helps to align students' eventual college plans with their activities while they're in high school," Markham said. A forthcoming higher education strategic plan will set a goal to increase the number of high school students who apply for federal financial aid. Markham said the percentage now is about 52%.

"It's drilling down, really getting at those kids who are maybe not at the top percentage of their class, and really helping them imagine what college can be," Markham said.

Reasons for the decline in the college-going rate remain uncertain, but Markham said a relatively strong economy in recent years could help explain the decline.

"The disturbing thing about that is the students who choose not to go to college because of the strong economy are usually those students on the bubble socioeconomically," Markham said, explaining these students may come from families that lack resources.

"That's concerning because that's the demographic of students that we really want to target. We want those first-generation students, those low-income students, those underrepresented minority students to make the decisions to go to school," Markham said.

Out of those 14,965 recent high school graduates attending college, 41.5% were white students enrolled at a four-year university, while 10.1% were black students at a four-year school and 4.6% were Hispanic students at a four-year university, according to the report.

The report showed declines both in the rate of those attending four-year schools and also the two-year college rate.

The share of fresh high school graduates attending a four-year public university declined to 28.7% in fall 2018 from 31.9% in fall 2014, according to the report.

The report included private institutions in a separate category, with 796 public high school graduates in the state going on to attend such schools in 2018.

Unlike the steady decline over the past four years in the rate of recent graduates enrolling in public four-year universities, the rate of those attending two-year colleges has seen ups and downs, though the rate of 16% for 2018 was lower than the 16.7% rate for 2014. In 2018, 5,067 students went on from a public high school in Arkansas to an in-state two-year college.

In a phone interview, Michael Miller, a professor of higher education at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, said the share of a population going on to college matters to employers.

"A demonstrated education level is really a prime factor for business and industry to determine where they'll locate," Miller said.

He said a strong economy can lure students to work and delay any college plans.

Miller also said more out-of-state schools offer reduced tuition deals to Arkansans, and there's a trend of students taking a "gap" year between high school and college. He said more students may be opting for online training after high school.

"You've got students, as consumers, having more choices than ever before," Miller said. But if fewer students are choosing education, "that's really troubling," Miller said.

Scott Carrell, an economics professor at the University of California-Davis, said in an email that his research suggests it's "likely that some students are moving from 4-year to 2-year schools and others are moving from 2-year to no college."

The report stated that out of the 14,965 students attending college in fall 2018, 35% were women enrolled in a four-year university while 26% were men starting at a four-year school.

Carrell said factors affecting college enrollment "include academic preparations, family support, financial aid, and other school resources (e.g., guidance counselors)."

Markham referred to changing demographics expected to result in fewer high school graduates, sometimes described as a "cliff" that will pose enrollment challenges for colleges and universities, many of which reported enrollment declines this fall.

"Our demographic is shrinking and aging in this state. But at the end of the day, you've got 53% of kids not going to college. You can mitigate a lot of that 'cliff' just by engaging a bigger percentage of your students," Markham said.

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