

In a surprise, U.S. colleges saw higher enrollment last fall

Warm-up question: Do you think getting a college degree is necessary for success, or are there other paths that can lead to a good career?

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MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

News today from the world of higher education - after college enrollment in the U.S. fell during the pandemic, new data out today shows the numbers have finally rebounded. At a time when many Americans are questioning the value of a college degree, the numbers show a growing number of students willing to make the investment. NPR's Elissa Nadworny has this report.

ELISSA NADWORNY, BYLINE: During the first two years of the pandemic, colleges and universities around the country lost more than 1 million students. But finally, this past fall, college enrollment in graduate and **undergrad** programs has rebounded - in total, up 4.5%. The new data comes from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. **Higher ed** experts welcomed the news.

TOLANI BRITTON: The fact that students are both seeing the value in college and enrolling, I think, is really great news. It actually, you know, points to a recovery.

NADWORNY: Tolani Britton studies higher education at the University of California, Berkeley.

BRITTON: So much of the conversation was, OK, you know, we see this, you know, decline in the likelihood of enrollment during the pandemic. Will it ever recover? And what we've seen is the answer to that, in some ways, is yes.

NADWORNY: Freshman enrollment grew more than 5%, mostly at **community colleges**, which saw the biggest losses during the pandemic. Many of last fall's first-time college students were older adults coming from the workforce. Britton says that tells her that people still believe **upskilling** - getting **credentials** to improve a salary or get you a better job - is still worth it.

BRITTON: I think it's really individuals recognizing that this is a necessity in both the current labor market and the future labor market.

NADWORNYY: For the 18-year-olds - those coming right out of high school - the numbers grew but more slowly, not quite hitting 2019 numbers. But that's still impressive given concerns about the Biden administration's **botched** rollout of the federal financial aid application, or FAFSA, in which many students last year were unable to fill out the form for months. Preliminary data from the clearinghouse released last fall had an error and **erroneously** showed freshman enrollment down. But numbers today confirm the federal aid program's **snafus** didn't play as big a role. And that's important, says Nicole Smith, a labor economist at Georgetown University, because of the jobs those students will eventually be needed to fill.

NICOLE SMITH: The way the jobs are being created now, you're going to find a lot more people needing some type of credential to be able to do those jobs adequately.

NADWORNYY: And it's not just credentials. Smith says she often worries about upcoming labor shortages due to retirements. The U.S. has a pretty old workforce, especially in **trade jobs**.

SMITH: For some time, we've been saying, hey, do we have enough? Do we have enough? Are we getting - are we running as quickly as the jobs are being created or as quickly as people are retiring and creating new opportunities?

NADWORNYY: The clearinghouse data shows that two-year public colleges are working hard to fill that gap. They saw double-digit growth in their **vocational** programs for trade jobs. Smith says all of this positive data signals some relief.

SMITH: We are hoping that by increasing enrollment, that a number of people will be better prepared to take those jobs in the future.

NADWORNYY: The only question she still has is, will all these new students be able to graduate and actually get those credentials?

Elissa Nadwornyy, NPR News.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Undergrad:** A student who is pursuing a bachelor's degree at a college or university.
2. **Higher ed:** Short for "higher education," referring to education beyond high school, including college and university programs.
3. **Community college:** A two-year school that offers associate degrees and vocational training, often serving as a more affordable alternative to a four-year college.
4. **Upskilling:** Learning new skills or improving existing ones to advance in a career or gain better job opportunities.
5. **Credentials:** Qualifications, certificates, or degrees that prove a person has the necessary skills or knowledge for a job or profession.
6. **Botched:** Done badly or with mistakes; mishandled.
7. **Erroneously:** Incorrectly or based on a mistake.
8. **Snafus:** Situations that are chaotic, confused, or full of mistakes, often due to poor planning.
9. **Trade jobs:** Skilled jobs that usually require hands-on work, such as electricians, plumbers, welders, and mechanics.
10. **Vocational:** Related to training for a specific job or trade rather than general academic education.

Comprehension Questions:

1. What does the new data show about college enrollment in the U.S. after the pandemic?
2. Why did community colleges see the biggest increase in new students?
3. How did upskilling influence older adults to return to school?
4. What problems did the FAFSA financial aid system face, and how did it impact students?
5. Why is the increase in vocational program enrollment seen as an important development?

Discussion Questions:

1. If you could go back to school, would you choose a traditional four-year college, a community college, or a vocational program? Why?
2. How important do you think credentials are when applying for a job? Do you think experience can sometimes be more valuable?
3. What do you think about the trend of more adults returning to school to upskill? Have you or anyone you know done this?
4. Do you think trade jobs and vocational programs should be promoted more as an alternative to traditional college degrees? Why or why not?
5. What challenges do you think students today face when deciding whether to pursue higher education?