

College Enrollment Numbers Continue To Fall

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SPRINGFIELD – In what was expected to be a bounce-back year for college enrollment in Illinois, more students opted out.

According to a report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, undergraduate enrollment is down 1.1% this fall compared to last year, and down 8.1% compared to the fall of 2019.

Nationwide, fewer students went back to school this year, dropping undergraduate enrollment down another 3.2% from last year. Combined with last autumn's declines, the number of undergraduate students in college is now down 6.5% compared to two

years ago making it the largest two-year enrollment drop in the last 50 years, the report found.

Some Illinois universities reported big numbers with the incoming freshman class, but many undergraduates decided not to come back to campus.

Northern Illinois University in DeKalb reported the largest year-over-year increase in freshman in more than 20 years. However, overall enrollment for the fall semester at NIU was down 3% from last year.

Sol Jensen, vice president for enrollment management at Northern Illinois University, said a lot of prospective sophomores didn't come back.

"Those students who were first-year students last year were never really connected to the campus," Jensen said. "They basically spent the entire first year of their NIU career virtual. They didn't get a chance to meet with professors or meet with classmates."

Jensen said the school has been making an effort to reconnect with those students and helping them re-enroll.

Eastern Illinois University saw enrollment gains for three years before the pandemic. With enrollment numbers down this year, the school has implemented the Local Scholars Program. Families that make less than \$100,000 and live within a 50-mile radius of campus can qualify for free tuition for 4 years.

"What really makes this program special is that it does reach those middle-class families and provides them with an avenue for an incredible education to be accessible," said Josh Norman, associate vice president for enrollment at EIU.

It is a different story for the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. With a freshman enrollment of more 8,000, the total enrollment is now 56,299, the largest in school history. Now university officials are considering reducing enrollment in the future.

"Next year, in order to ensure that we are maintaining our undergraduate enrollment within the bounds of university resources, we are planning to intentionally reduce our target by approximately 600 students to be more in line with previous years," Director of Undergraduate Admissions Andy Borst said in a statement.

Overall, community colleges in Illinois saw slight declines in enrollment numbers, although not as drastic as in 2020. The 2021 Fall Enrollment report for community colleges shows a total enrollment throughout Illinois was down 1.5% compared to close to a 14% drop in 2020.

The data showed 17 Illinois community colleges reported enrollment increases in Fall 2021 compared to just three for the 2020 fall semester.

Steve Fast, director of public information at Heartland Community College in Normal, said fall enrollment was up 2.5% in headcount and there was a 9.1% increase new students.

“To see an increase in new students following a challenging year dealing with COVID-19 is very encouraging,” Fast said. “Many community colleges throughout the country are still struggling with the impact that COVID has had on enrollment. We hope to see more new students in the Spring and Fall of 2022.”