



## Effect of the Pandemic on College Enrollment, Persistence, and Graduation: Evidence from National Student Clearinghouse Data for Connecticut's Public High School Graduates

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In the spring of 2020, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the lives of millions of students nationwide. It had an impact at every stage of their academic careers, affecting their attendance, course grades, and performance on standardized assessments in K-12 as well as college enrollment, persistence, and graduation in postsecondary. The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) estimates that nationally, first-time college enrollment was down in 2020 almost 14% over the prior year, representing a decline of approximately 325,000 student enrollments.<sup>1</sup> According to NSC, overall enrollment in Connecticut postsecondary institutions was down 3.5% in fall 2020 from the previous fall. Using NSC and CSDE data, this report sheds light on the impact of the pandemic on college enrollment and progress towards a degree of Connecticut high school graduates.

Each year, the NSC provides detailed data files and written reports showing when and where students matriculate, when they graduate, in which majors they earned a degree, and which type of degree they earned. It also describes the type of college the student attended: public or private, 2-year or 4-year, and in-state or out-of-state. CSDE combines these data in the EdSight data warehouse to provide college-going data by high school, by district, and by student groups.

College enrollment in the year after high school graduation had been relatively stable in recent years at about 72 percent of each graduating class, but fell by 4.4%, from 71.8% for the class of 2019 to 67.4% for the class of 2020, the lowest rate in more than a decade. This decline represents 1,915 fewer high school graduates enrolled in college than were enrolled from the class of 2019.

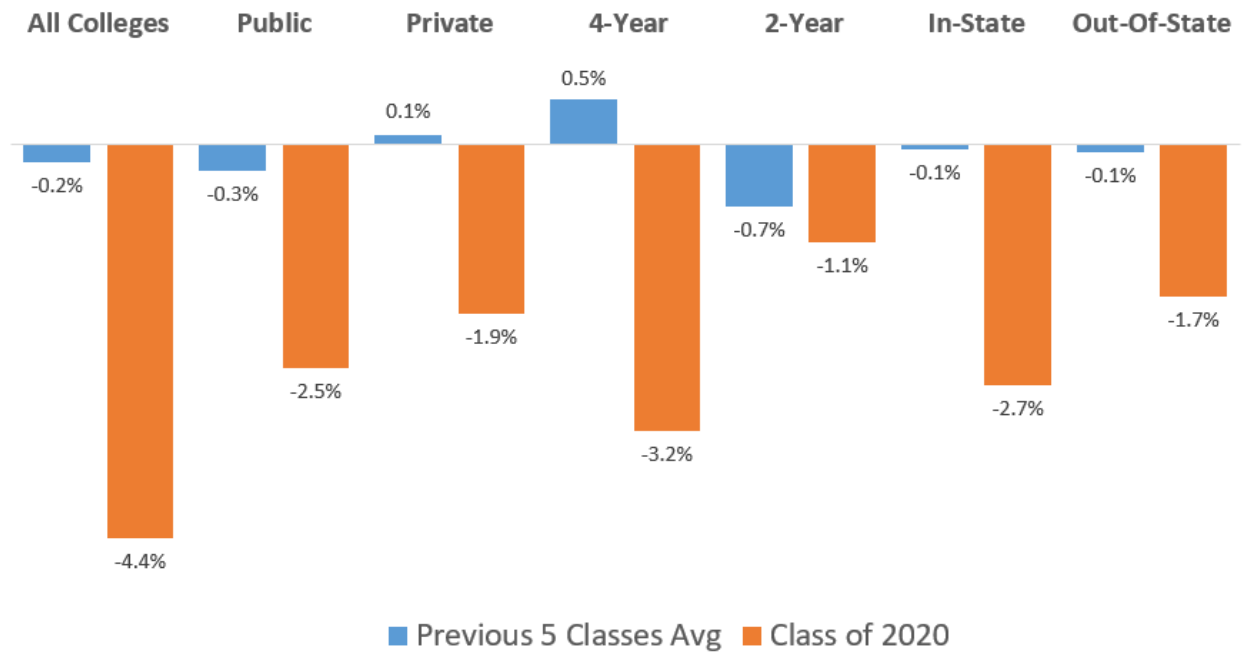
Figure 1 shows the change in college enrollment rates within the first year after high school graduation for the high school class of 2020 compared to the average of the last five classes. The decline in enrollment rates for the class of 2020 greatly exceeded that of the last five graduating classes across all college types, except for 2-year colleges, where enrollment rates declined only slightly more. The 2020 declines in enrollment rates were felt differently across most college types. They were more severe for CT graduates enrolling at in-state colleges (2.7 percentage points) than at out-of-state colleges (1.7 percentage points), and more severe at 4-year colleges and universities (3.2 percentage points) compared to 2-year institutions (1.1 percentage points). Enrollment rates fell more at public colleges (2.5 percentage points) than at private colleges (1.9 percentage points).

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<sup>1</sup>National Student Clearinghouse, at [https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE\\_Report\\_Fall\\_2020.pdf](https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Fall_2020.pdf)



**Figure 1. College Enrollment Rates: Growth by College Type**



Unlike in prior years, during the pandemic, freshmen did not return for their sophomore year at similar rates. Persistence rates, stable for years at 88% dipped to 84.9%, and dropped most significantly for 2-year college enrollees. Specifically, the sophomore persistence rate at 2-year colleges dropped from 70.3% for the class of 2018 to 63.0% for 2019 high school graduates.

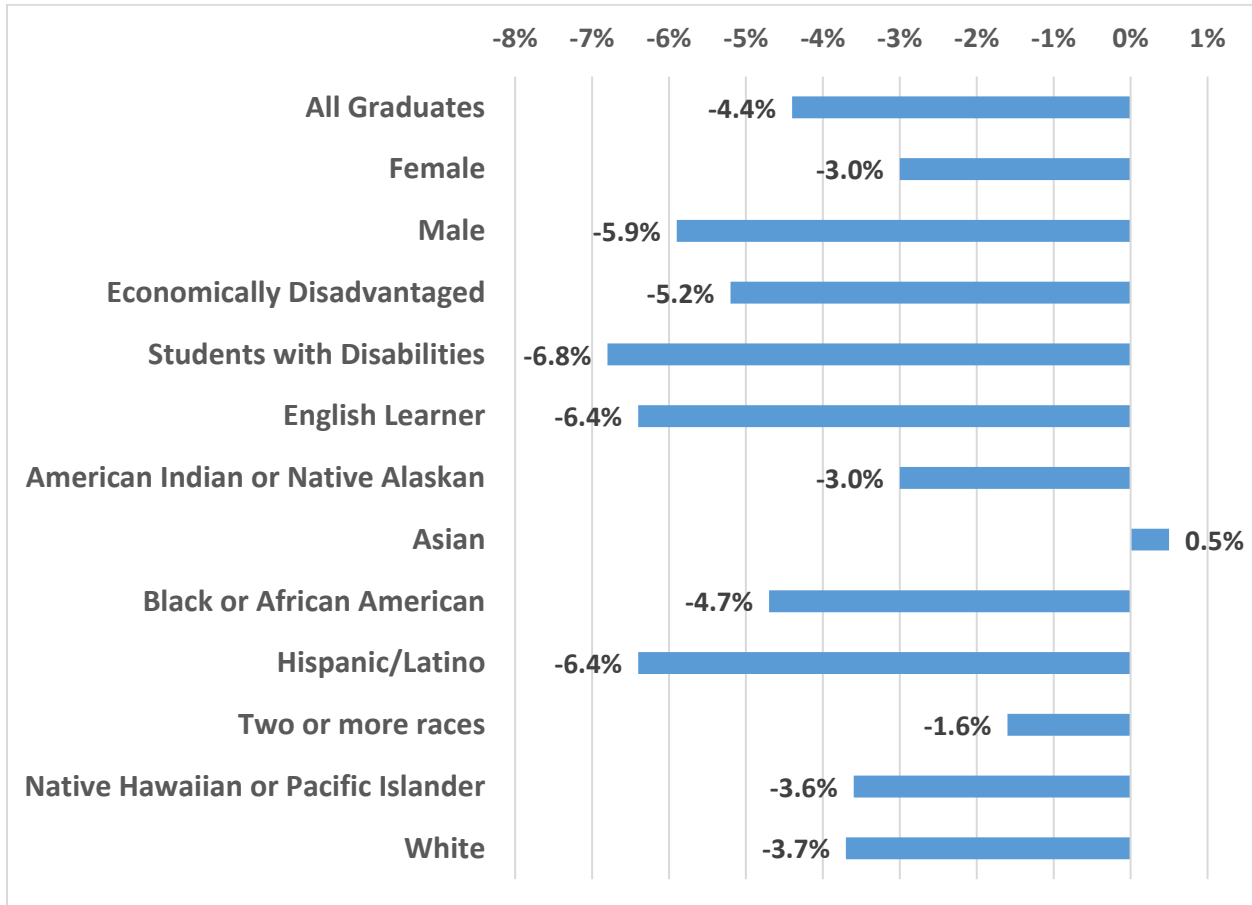
It is also likely that the pandemic slowed credit attainment at various points in students’ college careers, and delayed graduation. Four-year college graduation rates dipped for the first time in several years, declining from 37.9% for the class of 2016 to 35.1% for the class of 2017.

COVID’s disruption of college enrollment and persistence affected some student groups more than others. Students of color, students with disabilities, English learners, and students from low-income families all suffered more significant setbacks compared to their peers (see Figure 2). Notably, college enrollment rates among students with disabilities fell by 6.8 percentage points, the largest decline among all student groups. Enrollment rates among their non-disabled peers fell by 4.4 percentage points. Black and Hispanic students’ enrollment rates declined significantly, while enrollment rates of Asian students inched up slightly. English learner enrollment rates declined 6.4 percentage points compared to 4.2 points for non-English Learners. As the pandemic added to the income insecurity of many households nationwide, the impact on college enrollment was significant, the rate declining 5.2 percentage points for students from low-income families as compared to 3.2 points for non-



economically disadvantaged students. Similar patterns were witnessed for sophomore persistence across student groups.

**Figure 2. College Enrollment Rates of the High School Class of 2020: Change from Previous Year**



As the student-level data are loaded into the EdSight warehouse, more results will be available, including the impact of the pandemic by school, district, and high-needs status. An EdSight Secure report, *College Enrollment, Persistence, and Graduation* will be available to all secure users this fall, featuring student group and college type filters, as well as interactive postsecondary progress charts showing how each graduating class or student subgroup fared in their path toward a college degree.