

College enrollment drops as people return to work

By Mary Beth Marklein, USA Today

College enrollments declined 2.3 percent this spring compared with a year earlier, a sign that more students are returning to the workforce as the economy recovers, a report out Thursday says.

The biggest drops occurred among adult learners attending for-profit colleges and public community colleges, which are most likely to enroll students in vocation-oriented classes tied to the local job market. Enrollments at those institutions fell 8.7 percent and 3.6 percent, respectively.

For colleges, which saw enrollments peak in 2011 during the recession, the declining numbers represent “a bit of a return to normal,” says Doug Shapiro, executive director of the non-profit National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, which released the report. “It’s reflective of good news for the economy and labor market.”

Numbers are based on data provided by about 95 percent of the nation’s colleges and universities to the National Student Clearinghouse, which offers verification and research services to participating colleges.

Enrollments this spring reached 19,105,651, down from 19,550,391 last spring. A similar decline has occurred during fall semesters, when enrollment figures have historically been higher. Enrollments last fall were down 1.8%, to 20,195,924, compared with a high of 20,556,272 in fall 2011.

Among details between this spring and last spring:

- Four-year public institutions saw a 1.1 percent drop in

enrollments while four-year private colleges saw a slight increase.

- Across regions, the Midwest saw the greatest decrease in overall enrollment, 2.6 percent, while the Northeast saw the smallest decrease, less than 1 percent. The drops were 1.7 percent in the West and 2.2 percent in the South.

- The decrease was steeper for women than men (2.7 percent vs. 1.7 percent) but women still accounted for more than 57 percent of this spring's enrollments.

- Enrollments among students over age 24 fell 3.6 percent, while rates for traditional-age students fell 1.4 percent.

Michael Reilly, executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, says the numbers are consistent with trends showing declines in the size of high school graduating classes and may reflect recent scrutiny on for-profit colleges. Last summer, Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, wrapped up a two-year investigation of the sector that found that students at for-profit colleges on average had lower graduation rates and higher average loan default rates than those enrolled in nonprofit institutions.

Steve Gunderson, CEO of the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities, which represents for-profit institutions, attributed some of the enrollment declines to what he called "right-sizing." But he also said his schools also have grown more selective as federal and state policymakers focus on issues such as graduation rates.

"We as a sector used to practice what we would call open access (admissions). Everyone had a chance," he says. Increasingly, he says, "enrollments are reflecting a better-prepared, less risky student body."