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The College Admissions Crash by Kathleen Kingsbury

A major demographic shift is dramatically changing the college admissions game. Kathleen Kingsbury reports on the population dip that means it's easier to get into college this year.

It may be easier to get into college this year than it has been in a decade.

Yes, you read that right. True, more Americans are expected to attend college this fall than ever before. Yet, even as those freshmen begin to move into the dorms this week, admission officers on those very same campuses are bracing for another, very different reality: the start of a long decline in the number of new high-school graduates across the U.S., according to the [Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education](#). Indeed, it could take up to another full decade to reach 2008's peak of 3.3 million again.

If history is any indication, this slump will yield good news for families. Applicants could soon find lower admission standards, a slowing of tuition increases, and fewer college dropouts. Schools, though, face a more difficult task ahead. Already battered by the economic crisis, some won't be able to weather a drop in cash flow if enrollments tumble. What's more, going forward, the high-school seniors that colleges need to attract will look very different from today. Graduating classes will have dramatically larger numbers of Hispanics and Asians, many of whom will be the first member of their families to go to college.



“The well-prepared, affluent college student that has helped fuel the expansion of higher education over the past 20 years will not disappear but will not spur additional growth either,” writes Greg Perfetto, vice president for research and development at Admissions Lab, an education consulting firm, in a recent white paper titled “[The End of Higher Education Enrollment as We Know It](#).”

Schools saw a similar downturn in the mid-1980s and early '90s. “When the Baby Bust generation was graduating high school, it was a very good time to go to college,” says John Nelson, an analyst for higher education at the credit agency Moody's. “Admission standards were much more liberal.”

Not only was it easier to get into college—if you were a particularly desirable candidate, it was easier to get in cheap. Colleges competed harder for the best and the brightest by resorting to tuition discounting, usually through generous financial aid packages. Many then made up for that lost income by upping recruitment of international students—few of whom qualify for financial aid and thus pay full price. With private institutions' endowments tattered and public ones facing lower tax bases, Nelson expects to see both these practices again in coming years. “Definitely the

inflation of tuition will slow as price competition between colleges rises,” he says. “And we’ve already seen an increase in marketing overseas.”

Hardest hit will be small, private colleges in the upper Midwest and on the East and West coasts. New York’s Utica College, for instance, is planning on a 7 percent decrease in enrollment over the next five years. Larger universities are not immune either. As Marc Harding, director of admissions at Iowa State, puts it: “Any university interested in growing—or even stabilizing—its enrollment in the next few years will have to reach out to a more ethnically diverse population.”

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Sure, there are only a handful of states less diverse than Iowa. But Harding isn’t being hyperbolic. When high-school graduation rates do begin to climb again in 2015, there will be 54 percent more Hispanic graduates than 10 years prior, according to WICHE estimates. For Asians, that figure rises nearly one-third. Considering pure demographic data, schools will have to push more students to leave home for college than ever before. (Currently about 72 percent of students enroll in colleges in their home state, according to the College Board.)

So Utica, for example, is pushing its recruitment’s geographical reach into Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Iowa State has begun to expand its efforts in California, Texas, and the Southwest, while also strengthening partnerships with community colleges, which today educate about half of all Hispanic and black students. “Community colleges are some of this country’s most ethnically diverse educational institutions,” Harding says. “We just want to keep opening up the pipeline wider for transfer students.” About one in five students at Iowa State are now either minority or international students.

Nelson notes another creative lure is northern campuses’ considering running programs in summer rather than the winter to cater to students who are from warmer climates. Some smaller colleges, including Bryn Mawr and [Wesleyan](#), have translated their websites into Spanish— still a rarity in higher education. The University of Pennsylvania, with the help of students and alumni, last year translated one of its financial-aid brochures into Spanish.

“In addition to being high-achieving high-school students, the added burden for kids from households where English isn’t their first language is enormous,” says Eric Furda, Penn’s dean of admissions. Add in cultural barriers regarding gender as well as geographic concerns, the effort becomes even harder. “A female Latina from Florida—those are three hurdles Penn has to get over to get her to Philadelphia.”

So last fall Penn launched information sessions in Spanish in both Los Angeles and Miami, manning them with alumni to answer families’ questions. It also now works with students who

need additional assistance every step of the way to enrollment, from financial aid to dorm assignments. Last year the school saw applications from Hispanic students rise 30 percent.

Of course, it is always easier to keep the students you have than to go out and find new ones. Another net-positive of the demographic shift is campuses working harder to stem dropouts. The U.S. Department of Education estimates as many as half of freshmen this year will drop out before collecting a degree. In the past, schools took a rather Darwinian approach to this problem. Today, more offer mentoring programs, tutoring, and extra counseling to help ease the transition. “About 50 percent of our students now are first-generation college-goers,” says Patrick Quinn, vice president for enrollment management at Utica. “We’re doing everything we can to make sure they finish, too.”

Kathleen Kingsbury covers education for The Daily Beast. She also contributes to Time magazine, where she has covered business, health, and education since 2005.