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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S EFFECT ON COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATES

Cenee Enriquez | University of Massachusetts Amherst

Policy Brief No. X

Background: This brief is one in a series aimed at providing higher education policymakers and advocates with an evidence base to address how to best serve students in light of the challenges facing higher education. This brief was authored by a University of Massachusetts Amherst graduate student in the Dual Degree Higher Education/Public Policy and Administration Master's program as a course assignment for EDUC 674B: Higher Education Policy and was reviewed for accuracy by Professor Sade Bonilla.

CENTRAL TOPIC

The uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic decrease in college enrollment rates across the country and in the state of Michigan. At the beginning of the fall 2020 semester, enrollment was down a total of 9.2 percentage points at both public and private four-year institutions, as well as at two-year community colleges.

KEY INSIGHTS

Breaking Down the Issue

- Before the pandemic, approximately 80 percent of the highest paying jobs in Michigan required education beyond a high school diploma.
- The pandemic did not disrupt the existing trend of outsized job growth for occupations requiring a college education.
- Economic experts predict that education is one of the most important factors in the upcoming economic recovery that Michigan faces.

Recommendations

- Michigan should also maintain an up-to-date database of information of postsecondary institutions in the state that is easy to access and easy to navigate.
- Michigan should consider providing information to students regarding average cost of an institution, average debt to income ratio of an institutions graduates, and average amount of aid received by students.
- Finally, Michigan should implement an outreach program in addition to providing information to students to ensure understanding and to provide direction.

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ISSUE

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Michigan has seen a dramatic decrease in college enrollment, resulting in a change of -9.2 percentage points in fall 2020 enrollment at both private and public four year institutions, as well as two-year community colleges.¹ This decline can be attributed to a multitude of factors, including the challenges that come with remote instruction, uncertainty around the pandemic, and the financial hardships that families have faced and are still facing.² Education is one of the most important parts of the economic recovery that Michigan faces. Before the pandemic, 80 percent of jobs in Michigan that had the highest potential for growth and the highest wages required education beyond a high school diploma. As the state begins the long road to economic recovery, all signs point to the jobs created post-pandemic requiring certificates or degrees.³

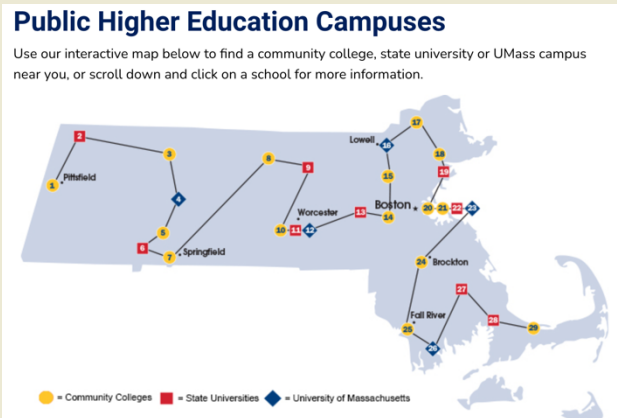
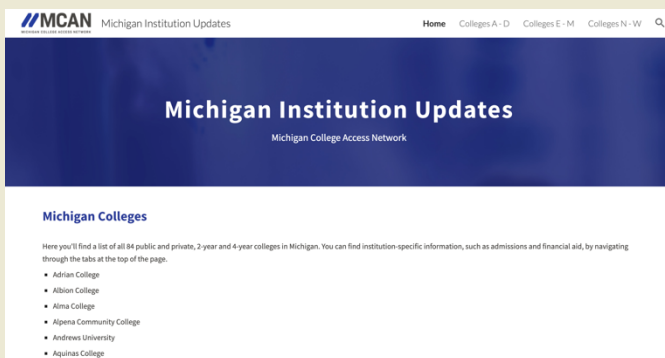
CASE STUDIES

Michigan

In collaboration with Governor Whitmer's office, the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN) launched the Michigan Institution Updates website in hopes of boosting postsecondary enrollment rates by providing students with comprehensive information and data on all public and private universities in the state. The Michigan Institution Updates website is one of many resources provided to students during Michigan College Month, which is dedicated to providing every high school senior with the resources they need to apply to college and to fill out the FAFSA.⁴ The Michigan Institution Updates website provides information on all 84 public and private institutions in the state, including admissions and testing requirements, financial aid application deadlines, what kind of grants and scholarships are available to students, academic programs, contact information, and COVID-19 policies, if applicable.⁵ The state hopes that by providing this information in one place, students will be able to choose a college that is the best fit for them.

Massachusetts

Similarly, the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education has released an online interactive map with information about community colleges, state universities, and UMass campuses as a part of the Go Higher! campaign. The goal of this campaign is to educate students about their options when it comes to choosing a postsecondary institution in the Commonwealth to ensure that they are making the choice that is best suited for them.⁶ The Go Higher! interactive map provides links to each specific institution's website, as well as where the institution is located, the number of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at the institution, the cost of tuition and fees for in-state students, and the average high school GPA of incoming students.⁷ The Commonwealth hopes to promote a college-going culture by informing students of the opportunities that await them at Massachusetts' public colleges and universities.



POLICY LOGIC

Michigan sees providing students with comprehensive data and information about its postsecondary institutions as a way to combat falling enrollment rates.⁴ Providing accurate and up-to-date information about colleges and universities in the state would ensure that students have the best information available, therefore potentially expanding the schools they might apply to.⁸ When students enroll at a college that is the best fit for them, they are more likely to graduate and be successful.⁹ Students are faced with an incredible amount of information when it comes to choosing where to go to college, and it can be difficult to know where to start. By compiling all of the information into one place, MCAN is working to take some of the burden of searching for colleges off of the student, and present it in a manner that makes it more accessible and less overwhelming.⁴

Michigan is specifically targeting students who identify as being low-income, first generation, and students of color with this policy.⁴ Students from these population groups may have very little prior knowledge on how best to navigate the college application process, especially students who are first generation college students. By compiling comprehensive information on institutions in the state, Michigan is ensuring that those students have the resources they need on not only how to apply to the institution itself, but also on how to apply for scholarships and financial aid.

EVIDENCE

The Michigan Institution Updates website was created in October of 2021, there is not any data available as of yet to suggest if students are actually accessing the website. and if the information that has been compiled is actually helpful to students. However, there is data to suggest that similar websites and programs make some kind of difference in the college outcomes among students who access them, albeit a very small difference. The Michigan Institution Updates website is a very similar type of intervention as the Obama Administration's College Scorecard. Both of these interventions aim to change student behavior by providing information to students meant to aid them in choosing a college or university.⁸ Research shows that while the introduction of the Obama Administration's College Scorecard did produce more google searches for keywords associated with lower cost colleges, higher salaries, and high graduation rates, the effect was very small.¹⁰

Hurwitz and Smith found that the impact on SAT score sends to institutions were driven almost entirely by students at well-resourced high schools, indicating that students who are already at an advantage are more likely to utilize these types of interventions. Additionally, Hurwitz and Smith found that students who are high-achieving and lower-income would benefit the most from these types of interventions.¹¹ Many higher education accountability policies consist of a link posted online without an outreach component, potentially making them less effective.¹² In similar fashion, the Michigan Institution Updates website does little to ensure that students who would benefit from this information are actually being impacted by it. For example, research shows that low-income students are less likely to have regular, consistent access to internet in their homes. Without access to the internet, this resource becomes obsolete for those students and becomes a resource that they are unable to access.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Michigan College Access Network is providing important information to students so that they can make the best decision based on their needs and wants from a college or university. MCAN should keep the Michigan Institution Updates website, but should make a few changes to provide even more in-depth information about the colleges and universities in the state. First, they should continue to update it year after year so the information remains current for each cohort of students who accesses it. If the information is out of date, students would be making decisions based on data and numbers that aren't accurate anymore. Next, MCAN should also consider adding additional information to each institution on the website, such as average cost after aid, the amount of average student debt upon graduation, and average salaries of the institutions graduates. Seeing as how financial limitations may be one of the reasons Michigan has seen a decline in enrollment rates, providing more comprehensive information related to finances would allow students to decide if the benefits of a college degree outweigh the cost.

Finally, MCAN should implement an outreach component in addition to their website. If students were provided with more instruction and direction when utilizing this resource, a more significant impact may be felt.

CITATIONS

¹ *Covid-19: Stay informed*. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2021). <https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/>.

² Nadworny, E. (2021, June 10). *Spring numbers show 'dramatic' drop in college enrollment*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/10/1005177324/spring-numbers-show-dramatic-drop-in-college-enrollment>.

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⁴ *Michigan Schools Kick Off Michigan College Month Amid Falling Enrollment Rates and Worker Shortages*. MCAN. (n.d.). Retrieved October 22, 2021, from <https://micollegeaccess.org/news/mcm-2021>.

⁵ Michigan Institution Updates. (2021). <https://sites.google.com/micollegeaccess.org/cavacollegeguide/home>

⁶ *Go higher!* Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. (n.d.). <https://www.mass.edu/gearup/events/goHigher.asp>.

⁷ Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. (n.d.). *Public Higher Education Campuses*. Go Higher! Discover your community colleges, state universities and UMass campuses. <https://www.mass.edu/gohigher/campuses/directory.asp>.

⁸ National Archives and Records Administration. (n.d.). *Fact sheet: Providing students and families with comprehensive support and information for college success*. National Archives and Records Administration. Retrieved October 22, 2021, from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/28/fact-sheet-providing-students-and-families-comprehensive-support-and>.

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¹⁰ Huntington-Klein, N. (2017). *The Search: The Effect of the College Scorecard on Interest in Colleges*. https://nickchk.com/Huntington-Klein_2017_The_Search.pdf.

¹¹ Hurwitz, M. and Smith, J. (2018), STUDENT RESPONSIVENESS TO EARNINGS DATA IN THE COLLEGE SCORECARD. *Econ Inq*, 56: 1220-1243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecin.12530>

¹² Hastings, J., Nielson, C., Zimmerman, S. (2018). The Effects of Earnings Disclosure on College Enrollment Decisions. NBER Working Paper No. 21300.

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