

CHANGES IN THE PIPELINE

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INTRODUCTION

Enrollment in undergraduate institutions is in the midst of major change. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a smaller cohort of undergraduate enrollees, with significant enrollment loss for students from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Without an end in sight, the pandemic's long-term effect on URVM students is unclear. The veterinary medical school pipeline also will be shaped in the late 2020s by fewer undergraduate students thanks to smaller birth cohorts starting in 2008. The data below and the subsequent analysis, provide a broad overview of a myriad of changes to the veterinary medical school application pool.

2020 High School Graduation Progression— 1st time College Enrollment

- Enrollment of low-income high school graduates dropped by 29%.
- High poverty student enrollment dropped by 32.6%
- Enrollment of high school grads from high minority schools dropped by 26.4%
- Enrollment from urban high school grads dropped by 25.1%

Pandemic Impact on General Undergraduate Enrollment

- Undergraduate institutions saw a 4.9% decline in overall enrollment during the pandemic as of spring semester. This is the largest decline in a decade.
 - Enrollment of college-aged students declined by 5%.
 - Men experienced the largest gender drop in enrollment: 5.5%. Women decreased by 2%.
 - White and Asian students (with strong grades/continuing generation), students from affluent backgrounds and students with higher grades were most likely to sit out of enrollment during the pandemic while other URVM students at 4-year institutions were retained.
 - Major losses in URVM (racial, low income, first gen) enrollment among 2-year institutions. Community colleges saw a 9.5% decline.
 - Pre-veterinary students typically present in the application phase with approximately 32 community college credit hours.
 - Enrollment of low-income students dropped by 29% during the pandemic.
 - Significant geographic differences across enrollment; some states, including New Mexico, Michigan and Kansas, saw enrollment decreases of 6-11%. By comparison. New Hampshire, Utah and West Virginia saw increased enrollment between 3-10%.
 - 42% of students who withdrew from classes in Fall 2020, did so because of changes in income due to the pandemic.
- 2021-2022 FAFSA completion dropped 4.8%; Class of 2021 URVM (race & low income) high school graduates were less likely to complete FAFSA this year.
- Black and Latinx students are less confident about the end of the pandemic. Black students are less likely to have received a COVID vaccine.

Other Undergraduate Enrollment Phenomena

- Age of first-time college attendees is increasing (>50% are over 25).
- Nearly 50% are working at least 30 hours per week.
- 2008 birth cohort is smallest in decades; it will impact high school graduations 2025-2032.
 - 25% of public universities are projected to see 9%+ enrollment declines beginning in 2025.
 - 75% are expected to see negative growth from 2020-2028.
- 2018 birth rates were the lowest in 32 years; CDC reports that birth rates are still falling. Birth rates fell another 4% in 2020.
- Only 8 states are currently projected to see growth in college-going students through 2029.
- Pre-COVID, enrollment declines were projected for the NE, increases were projected in the SE (due in large part to immigration trends), and in Mountain states.
- Doubts in the value of higher education continue to rise; a spring 2021 survey showed that 65% of students have increasing doubts that higher education is not worth the growing financial investment.
- 18% of 2021 high school graduates indicated that they were less likely to enroll in post-secondary education this fall.
- Asian, Black, and Latinx first-time college enrollments are expected to see drops of 10-13% in the 2029 academic year.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Although US veterinary schools, and other graduate and professional programs, experienced a surge in applicants and applications to programs in the fall of 2020, we cannot expect that this trend will be sustainable. During economic downturns, students close to completing undergraduate education often apply to a graduate program as it provides a sense of stability. As we emerge from the pandemic, we can expect to see the veterinary school applicant pool return to a slower rate of growth.

It is important to note that the *return to normal* is likely to be hampered by reduced racial, economic, geographic, and gender diversity in the applicant pool because of the COVID pandemic. Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), low-income students and men have been most impacted by the pandemic and have experienced the greatest losses in undergraduate enrollment. Uneven regional enrollment patterns are likely to exacerbate the losses, as is the lack of confidence among communities of color regarding the value of higher education as it relates to escalating costs. Many undergraduate institutions are attempting to lure these students back to post-secondary education, though it is likely that they will enroll in 2-year institutions rather than 4-year programs due to costs and accessibility. It is possible that we see these groups return to the pool before the late 2020s, when the smaller cohorts of undergraduate students begin to enroll but given rising costs and acute uncertainty; it is hard to predict their general return to higher education.

As noted, the late 2020s will bring a potentially smaller pool of veterinary school applicants. The smaller cohorts are expected to be more racially diverse as BIPOC birth rates are slightly higher than their White counterparts. Only 40% of undergraduate completers pursue graduate education; we can expect competition for applicants across graduate education will increase due to a smaller cohort of available applicants. It is possible we will see an increase in non-traditional/older students, but that also will be dependent on several factors including educational costs and personal economic stability. Given how birth rates continue to fall, we may expect tightening of the potential veterinary school applicant pool into the mid-to-late 2030s.

SELECTED SOURCES:

- <https://allaccess.collegeboard.org/new-report-examines-impact-covid-19-fall-2020-college-enrollment-and-retention>
- <https://www.ncan.org/news/573024/FAFSA-Completion-Declines-Nearly-5-Nation-Loses-270K-FAFSAs-Since-2019.htm>
- <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/tpb?tid=300>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr012-508.pdf>
- <https://www.cupahr.org/issue/dept/interactive-enrollment-cliff/>
- <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/one-year-later-covid-19s-impact-on-current-and-future-college-students>