

National news¹ is warning colleges and universities across the US of a looming enrollment cliff, a slowing in the possible supply of undergraduate students due to such factors as a drop in birth rates and shifts in perceptions of the value of a college degree. For campuses, shrinking enrollments can have negative consequences for faculty, students, programs and budgets. An often-cited lead indicator of college enrollment trends is the predicted trend of students graduating high school. Nationally, the Department of Education (DOE)² projects about a 5% drop in the number of public high school graduates (approximately 158,000) between 2023 and 2031 and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE)³ estimates a 3% drop (approximately 128,000 students) between 2023 and 2031 and a more precipitous drop (@7%) the following 10 years to 2041.

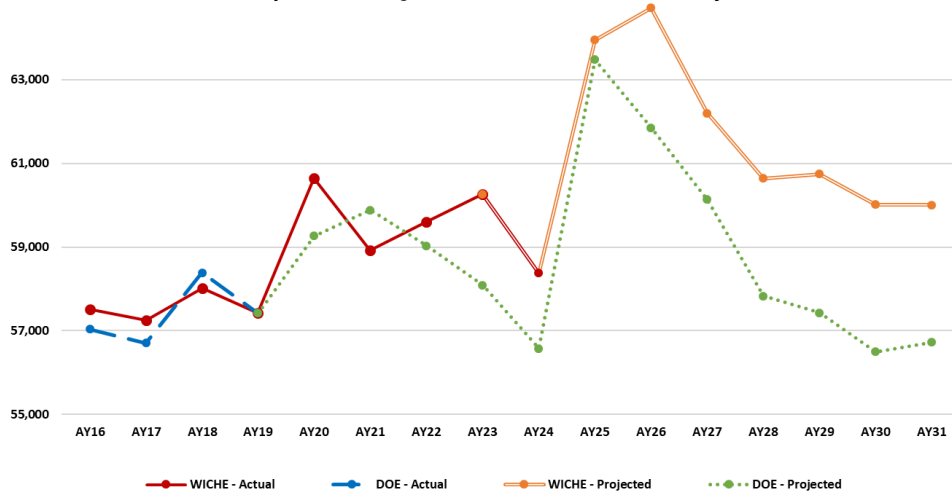
Does Maryland face a high school graduate cliff as well?

The good news is that the federal DOE and WICHE predict that Maryland will not see a precipitous drop of high school graduates over the next decade or more. Maryland does not face a cliff; both the DOE and WICHE project a slight spike (around 11% or an increase of approximately 6,500 students) in the short term and a return to current high school graduates figures between 2028 and 2031.⁵

Are Maryland public high school graduates staying in Maryland to attend college?

Most college-going Maryland high school students stay in Maryland. Data from the Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center (MLDS)⁶ show that the majority of public high school graduates who enroll in college immediately after high school do so at Maryland institutions. Of the approximately 30,000 public high school graduates who attend college immediately after high school each year, around 68% enroll in Maryland institutions.

Maryland Public High School Graduates: Actuals and Projections^{2,3,4}



What do these trends mean for Maryland?

With the predicted flat trend in Maryland public high school graduates and the fact that the majority of college-going high school graduates choose Maryland colleges and universities, there is room for cautious optimism that Maryland college enrollment will stay stable. That said, there are factors to consider as state stakeholders plan for the future.

Maryland's institutions may face increased competition from out-of-state institutions – particularly those in neighboring states - in recruiting traditional freshmen - Institutions in states facing high school graduate shortfalls will be competing for a shrinking supply of possible college enrollees, including Maryland's high school graduates. For example, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and many of the Northeastern states are estimated to have significant drops of high school graduates in the coming decade or more.⁷

The number of adult learners is projected to grow – Per reports from the National Center of Education Statistics⁸, the number of nontraditional students (e.g., part-time, adults) demanding post-secondary education will increase over the next decade.

Attending college can have value even for students who do not pursue a traditional degree – With more pathways for postsecondary education available to Marylanders, the perceptions of the value of a further education after high school can increase. State investments made in workforce “noncredit” pathways can lead to more positive postsecondary outcomes for Marylanders.⁹

High school graduation rates in Maryland have been stable¹⁰ and may increase under changes implemented by the Blueprint for Maryland's Future – investment in K-12 education in Maryland reaps benefits for Maryland's post-secondary institutions as well. More students finishing high school “college ready” can lead to increased postsecondary enrollment and more successful college outcomes.



CITATIONS

[1] Forbes “Who’s going over the enrollment cliff?” February 3, 2024; Brookings “Are colleges really facing an enrollment cliff?” October 17, 2024 <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/are-colleges-really-facing-an-enrollment-cliff/>; The Chronicle of Higher Education “Colleges were already bracing for an ‘enrollment cliff’” February 7, 2024 <https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-were-already-bracing-for-an-enrollment-cliff-now-there-might-be-a-second-one> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidrosowsky/2024/02/03/the-cliffs-of-higher-ed-whos-going-over-and-why/>;
 [2] See https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_219.10.asp?current=yes;
 [3] See <https://knocking.wiche.edu/>;
 [4] WICHE’s annual projections include private high school graduates. However, the above chart and calculations do not include these students, who represent approximately 10,000 additional enrollments (projected).
 [5] It is important to note that Maryland’s Department of Planning projects that public high school 12th grade enrollment will increase by 10% between 2023 and 2031. These estimates are not included in the chart because the values reflect enrollments only, not graduates from high school. Despite this, it can be assumed

the increase in enrollments of public high school 12th graders will result in an increase in high school graduates as well. Maryland’s Department of Planning: Public School Enrollment Historical 2023 and Projected 2024 – 2033 https://planning.maryland.gov/MSDC/Pages/census/school_enrollment/schoolenrollmentprojection.aspx;
 [6] See MLDS dashboard “Maryland Public High School Graduates: College Enrollment by Residency” here <https://mldscenter.maryland.gov/Dashboards.html> under Maryland Public High School Graduates: College and Workforce Outcomes.
 [7] See <https://knocking.wiche.edu/data/knocking-10th-data/> map and https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_219.20.asp?current=yes table for statewide projections.
 [8] High school graduation rates have hovered between 85 and 87 percent for the past five high school cohorts. See <https://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/>;
 [9] The Future of Good Jobs: Projections through 2031 Center for Education and the Workforce. <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/goodjobsprojections2031/>;
 [10] High school graduation rates have hovered between 85 and 87 percent for the past five public high school cohorts. See <https://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/>