

SUNY enrollment increases for the first time in years

Its total enrollment went up by 1.1 percent, the first increase since at least 2013.



BY: KATELYN CORDERO | 11/15/2023 04:32 PM EST



SUNY said enrollment increased, saying it's a sign of new programs and efforts to get more students into the 64-campus system. | Jim McKnight/AP Photo

ALBANY N.Y. — SUNY enrollment increased for the first time in more than a decade, Gov. Kathy Hochul and college leaders said Wednesday.

The 64-campus system saw a 4.3 percent increase this fall in undergraduate first-time students systemwide, a first since 2017. Its total enrollment also went up by 1.1 percent, the first increase since at least 2013.

Enrollment for SUNY has been steadily on the decline, prompting the administration to bolster its recruitment measures, streamline the application process and create automatic admission to a SUNY school for all New York high school students.

And those efforts are paying off. This year, the system saw a record number of students apply to SUNY schools. And that's led to a boost in enrollment.

“We are pleased to see more New Yorkers taking advantage of everything our campuses have to offer — an excellent and affordable education that can empower them to pursue their career and life goals,” SUNY Chancellor John King said in a statement.

In [budget talks for the fiscal year](#) that started April 1, funding for SUNY was a hot issue at the negotiation table. Hochul sought to increase tuition for SUNY schools to make up for deficits, but the Legislature instead opted to include \$163 million in operating aid for SUNY.

The budget also includes a \$75 million transformational fund, in which \$5 million was specifically earmarked by SUNY for enrollment initiatives. Hochul touted the enrollment numbers in a statement on Wednesday.

“I know firsthand that access to higher education is an engine for social mobility,” Hochul said. “That’s why I will continue to make important investments in our higher education systems and take steps to ensure college is affordable and accessible for students of all backgrounds.”

A look at the data

While the systemwide numbers are up, the increases are not consistent across the system.

Of the state operated colleges, Brockport had a 7.9 percent increase in total enrollment from fall 2022 to fall 2023. But Upstate Medical in Syracuse and Fredonia had a 10.1 percent and 7.8 percent decrease, respectively.

As for community colleges, which has had some of the steepest enrollment declines, several such as Columbia-Greene, Broome, Onondaga and Niagara County reported year-to-year increases that ranged from 17.2 percent and 9.9 percent. But on the other end, Dutchess saw the largest decrease with 17.7 percent fewer students year over year, SUNY said.

Dutchess was the recipient of a [\\$1.4 million grant](#) earlier in the year to bolster enrollment, increase retention and expand its offerings.

SUNY also released demographic data, showing slight increases in diversity from fall 2013 to fall 2023.

The number of white students attending SUNY decreased by roughly 10 percent from 61 percent to 51 percent of the total population. The number of Hispanic students went up more than 5 percent from 10.1 percent to 15.8 percent. Black students only increased from 10.1 percent to 10.7 percent of the total campus.

Still work to be done

While the increased enrollment and funding in SUNY is promising, there are still some campuses that are on the brink financially.

The United University Professions, SUNY’s faculty union, has reports that 17 campuses in SUNY are facing multi-million dollar deficits this year. SUNY has declined to share data on the financial deficits of individual institutions.

In a late September interview with POLITICO, Chancellor John King noted that some colleges may have to review the size of their campus operations because they are serving fewer students.

Earlier this year, [Potsdam announced a \\$9 million deficit](#) that forced it to shrink programs with low enrollment, reduce faculty and close several buildings. The union also reported that Fredonia could also be facing a similar situation.

“There are some campuses — Potsdam is an example of this — where they’ve got to make tough decisions to align their offering with a significant change in their student population,” King told POLITICO at the time.

Union president Fred Kowal said he believes the increase in enrollment is an example of what happens when the state puts funding behind its public institutions. But he said he would like to see the state support institutions facing deficits rather than trying to shrink programs.

“I think the worst thing to do on campuses that are under-resourced is to cut programs,” Kowal said. “That’s not going to grow campuses. You need to invest; you need to get out of the deficits.”

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