

The Truth About: The 2025 Enrollment Cliff

What is The Enrollment Cliff?

The [enrollment cliff](#) refers to the projected drop in college enrollments beginning in the year 2025. Falling birth rates in the aftermath of the Great Recession and slowing immigration are the [main drivers](#) of this phenomenon. Enrollments in the Midwest and Northeast will be [particularly affected](#) as the number of high school graduates and broader population decline (**Figure 1**). In Ohio, non-metropolitan areas will be particularly affected (**Figure 2**). [Recent research](#) indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic caused more students to drop out of high school or seek work immediately after graduation, meaning the enrollment cliff could arrive sooner than 2025. Early indicators, such as a [stark decline](#) in FAFSA completions, illustrate that Ohio is already facing challenges.

Figure 1: Change in High School Graduate Class Size in Midwest

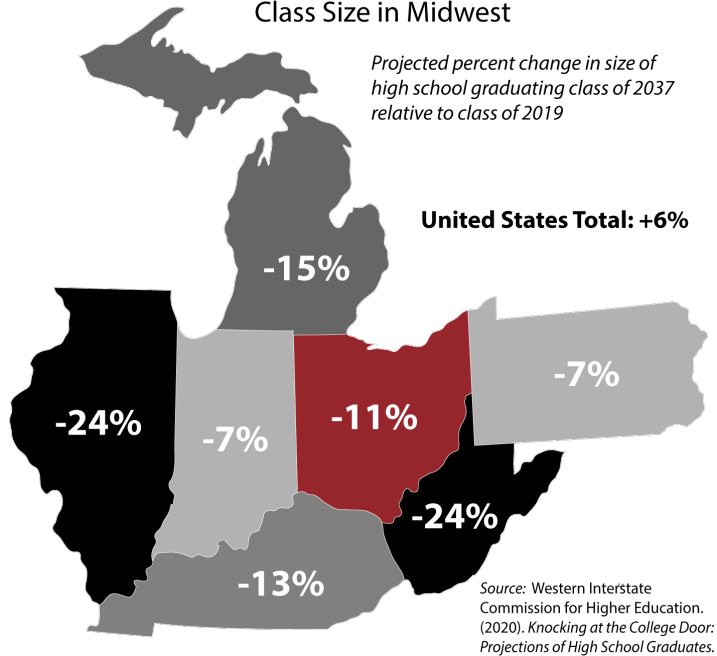
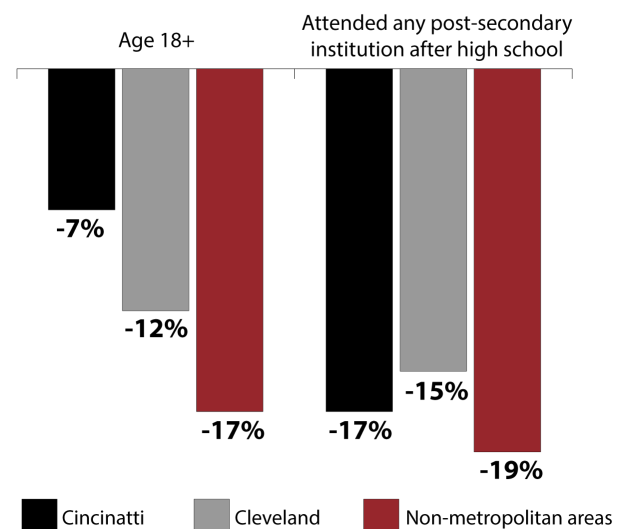


Figure 2: Population Change in Ohio

Forecasted percent change in adult population by metropolitan region, 2018 to 2035



Note: Data for other metropolitan areas in Ohio were not included in the original data set.
Source: Grawe, N.D. (2021). *Updated Higher Education Demand Index Projections* [Data set].

Why Does the Enrollment Cliff Matter for Ohio?

Rural institutions that serve their specific region will be the most [adversely affected](#) by the enrollment cliff. Beyond providing opportunities for local students who would otherwise not be able to access postsecondary education, colleges are [critical local employers](#) and improve community well-being, including [increasing life expectancy](#). Most college graduates [remain in-state](#) after obtaining their degree, which serves a vital function in a state with an [aging population](#) like Ohio. College graduates also [support the Ohio economy](#) by generating additional tax revenue and reducing social services spending. Confronting the enrollment cliff is therefore imperative for local communities and the state of Ohio to support a growing and healthy population.

What is Ohio Doing to Prepare?

Colleges and universities are already adapting to survive the enrollment cliff. One strategy is to sustain enrollment by [recruiting more](#) out-of-state students, particularly from areas with strong projected population growth in western states. [Other institutions](#) are shifting curricula to target in-demand programs and offer more flexible learning options. One particularly important approach is ensuring that students across all demographic groups are [retained and graduate on-time](#), which facilitates public trust in higher education in addition to fostering sustainable enrollment practices. Ohio independents are well-positioned to incorporate these strategies given their already [strong graduation rates](#). The state of Ohio could further implement [tested policies](#), such as investing in FAFSA completion and student grant aid, to advance equitable educational opportunity.