

Data Point

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Shifting Registration Activity During COVID-19

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Introduction

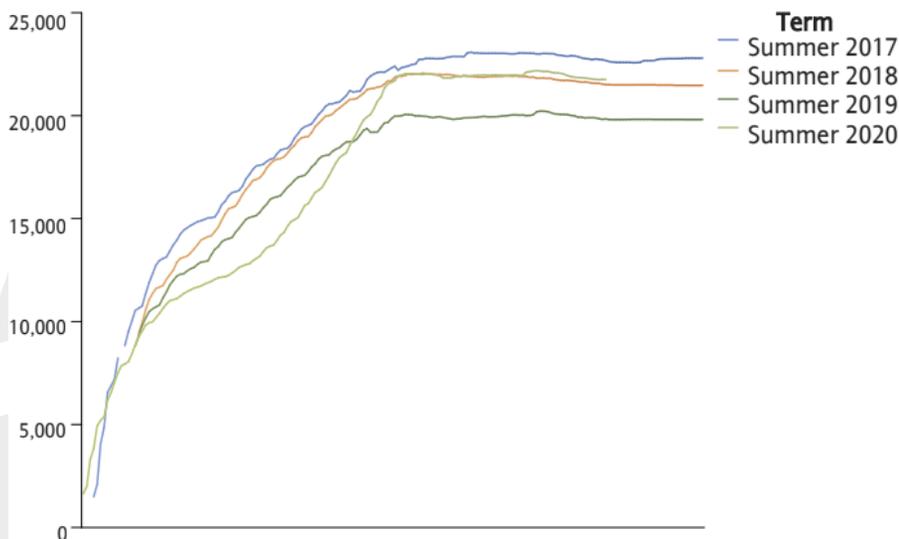
The COVID-19 pandemic has now been a factor during the registration periods of Summer 2020, Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, which, together, span one calendar year. Over that time there has been a marked shift in student registration behavior at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU). In this issue of Data Point, we first describe that shift as compared with historical NEIU trends and then situate these findings within the context of national data.

Part 1 - Northeastern Illinois University

Historically, the registration pattern within a given term has been very consistent. This stability has provided a lot of confidence about how total registrations would look for a given term just a few weeks after registrations begin.

Summer 2020

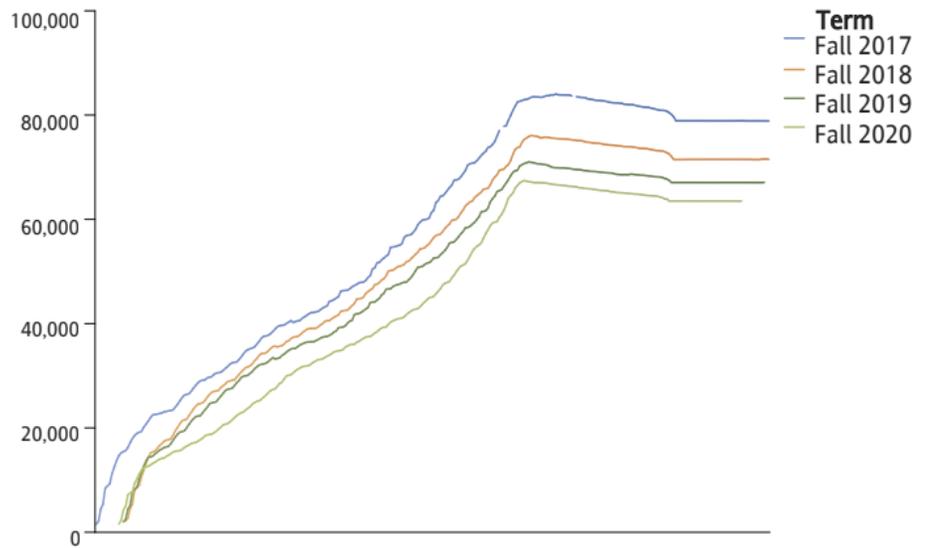
Student online registration for Summer 2020 began in early March, just days before the initial disruption of the pandemic. By April 9, the total number of credit hours students had registered for was down 16.1% from the comparable time the previous year. In prior years, it would have been reasonable to assume registration would remain behind prior years and ask how negative that number was going to be by the end of registration. However, that day turned out to be the low-water mark. From that point registrations increased and by mid-May when the first summer classes began, the total number of credit hours was 7.5% above the previous year. All told, as of the summer census date that number had reached 9.8% after the Second Half of Summer courses had begun, beating both Summer 2019 and Summer 2018. This was an unprecedented turnaround, but the question remained: what would happen for fall?



Fall 2020

Registrations for Fall 2020 began around the same time as those for summer, then continued throughout the summer. The period of time for student online registration activity was almost exactly six months--from early March to early September.

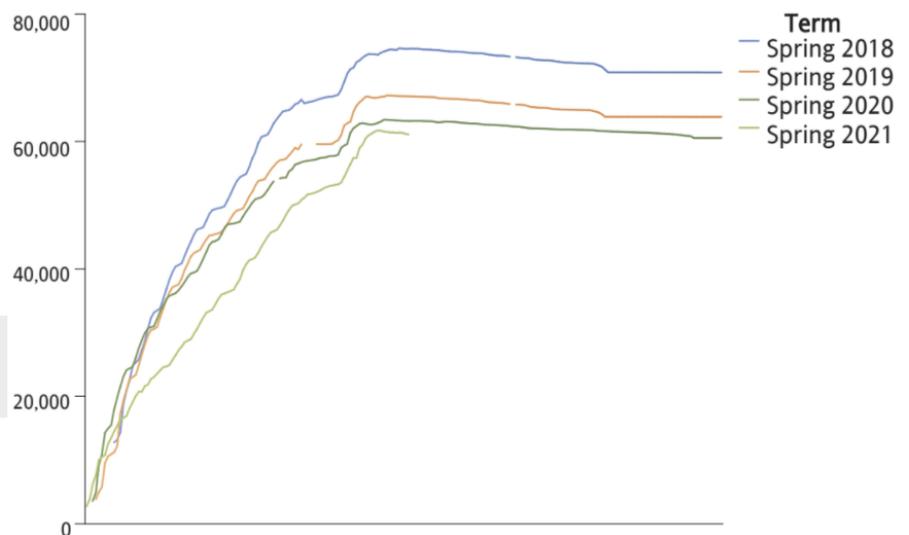
By mid-April total credit hours were down 25.9% but climbed throughout May, reaching -11.2% in early June before dropping down again to -16.1% in mid-July. From this point, registrations climbed fairly steadily and by the end of August were at -5%. Similar to the summer term, a very large deficit turned around as the term approached. Although we did not end up above the previous year as we had in summer, the drop of 5% was better than the drop of about 7% the previous fall.



Spring 2021

The duration of the registration period for spring is a bit more than half that of fall, beginning in mid-October and ending mid-to-late January. Due to the compressed time frame, a slow start resulted in a much bigger difference compared to the previous year. As of Nov. 1, total credit hours were down 30% versus Spring 2020. From there it slowly recovered to -27.1% by mid-November and then -22% by Dec. 1. From that point through the end of the fall term, and even through the winter break, an accelerated pace closed the gap to -8.3%. There has typically been a burst of registrations in early January and this spring there proved to be enough additional activity to narrow the total credit hour gap between Spring 2020 and Spring 2021 to -3.4% as of census day on Jan. 25.

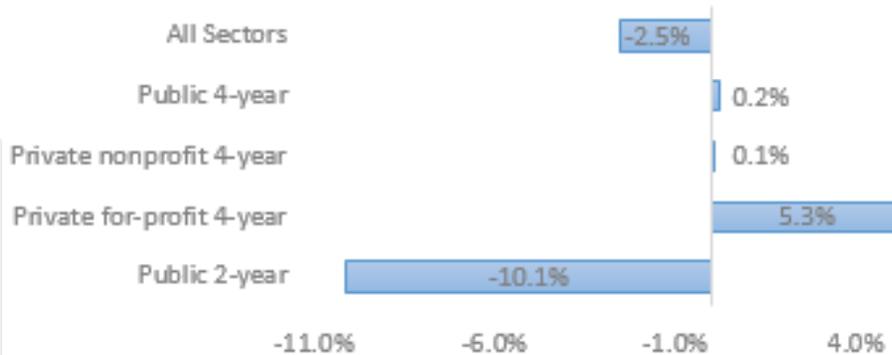
The pattern across the three terms with registrations occurring during the pandemic--Summer 2020, Fall 2020 and Spring 2021-- demonstrates that student course registrations are occurring closer to the beginning of the term than they have historically. The open question is whether this phenomenon will continue once more in-person administrative and instructional activities resume.



Part 2: The National Context

Analysis of national pandemic enrollment trends will focus on Fall 2020, a term fully encapsulated within the pandemic and one in which published data exists. Northeastern under performed for Fall 2020 enrollment headcount during the pandemic when compared with both national and regional data.

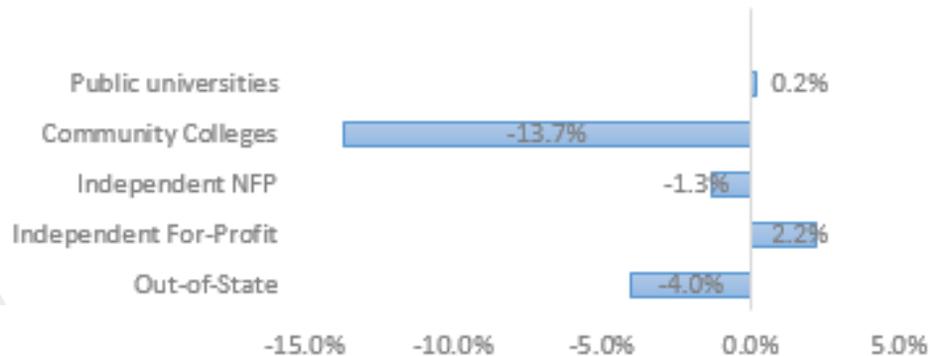
Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 Percent Change in Enrollment Nationally



Northeastern was down 4.1% in headcount from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020. Even though the overall trend nationally for enrollment in all of higher education was down for Fall 2020, public, four-year institutions were able to eke out a slight gain. According to The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, overall Fall 2020 enrollment nationally for all higher education was down 2.5% but up 0.2% for public, four-year institutions.

Regionally, similar patterns for Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 headcount enrollment exist. Based on preliminary data reported to the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), all enrollment in Illinois higher education was down 5.4% but up 0.2% for four-year, public institutions, the same as the national trend.

Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 Percent Change in Enrollment in Illinois



Northeastern made strides in both making up early and drastic declines in enrollment during the pandemic and improving on recent year-to-year declines. However, NEIU did not keep pace with either regional or national trends during the pandemic.

Editor's Note: The goal of this issue was to explore the registration impact of COVID-19 internal and external to Northeastern. The authors intentionally made no mention of strategies to address enrollment declines at Northeastern. Stay tuned for future issues where we highlight collaborations across the University and our use of business intelligence techniques and technologies to address enrollment at Northeastern.

Sources:

- <https://www.neiu.edu/sites/neiu.edu/files/documents/2020/09/10/F2020%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>
- <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates>
- <http://www.ibhe.org/assets/files/Preliminary%20Fall%20Enrollment%202020-21%20Final.pdf>