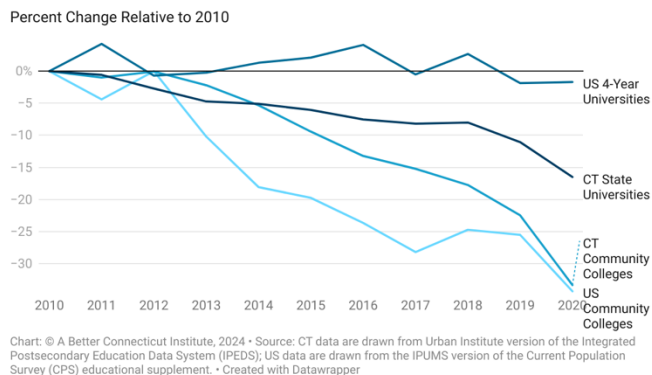# ENROLLMENT DECLINE IN CONNECTICUT STATE COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES IS NOT INEVITABLE: IT IS A POLICY CHOICE

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The four state universities and 12 community colleges that comprise the core of the Connecticut State Colleges & Universities (CSCU) system are in crisis. [1] Enrollments are declining, operating deficits are soaring, tuition is increasing, essential degree and certificate programs are being cut, and student-facing faculty and student services are decreasing. Plans are in place for even more dramatic disinvestment and downsizing. The CSCU administration places much blame on a shrinking pool of college-age students. This presumption is wrong and ill-informed: Connecticut's college-age population remains stable. Furthermore, enrollments are up at comparable colleges and universities in Connecticut, most notably at UConn's regional campuses.

Figure 1: Community College and 4-Year College and University Enrollment Since 2010

Percent Change Relative to 2010

Chart: © A Better Connecticut Institute, 2024 • Source: CT data are drawn from Urban Institute version of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS); US data are drawn from the IPUMS version of the Current Population Survey (CPS) educational supplement. • Created with Datawrapper
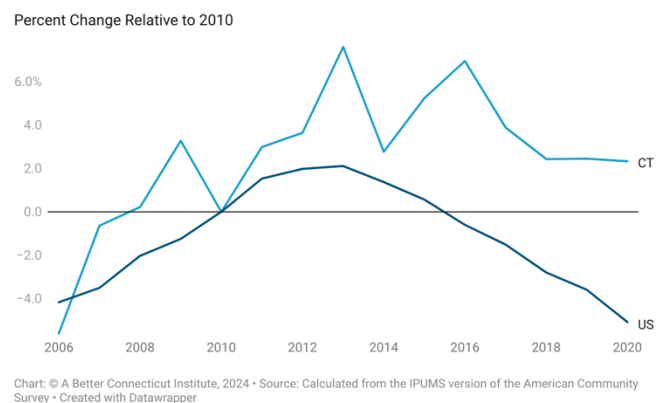
Enrollment across the CSCU system has declined over the last decade (see Figure 1). Between 2010 and 2020, Connecticut community college enrollment declined by 33%, which closely mirrors a 35% decline in community college enrollment nationally. Enrollment in the four state universities declined much less (-17%). This decline contrasts with a nearly zero national change in four-year college enrollment (-2%). Note that enrollment at all campuses of the CSCU system declined, with the smallest decline for Central Connecticut State

University (-15%) and the most significant decrease for Quinebaug Valley Community College (-49%).

The CSCU system consistently argues that the enrollment decline is due to a smaller pool of college-aged students. If this is just an easy trope to justify austerity, it must be confronted. Figure 2 shows that while the national college-age (18-23 [2]) population declined by 7% from 27,126,582 to 25,359,580 between 2010 and 2020, Connecticut's college-aged population *increased* by 2.3% from 287,645 to 294,347 between 2010 and 2020. [3] The critical takeaway is that the CSCU enrollment crisis cannot be due to a decline in college-age residents since that population is increasing. Indeed, to the degree that college enrollment is linked to the college-age population, CSCU enrollment should have slightly increased over the last decade.
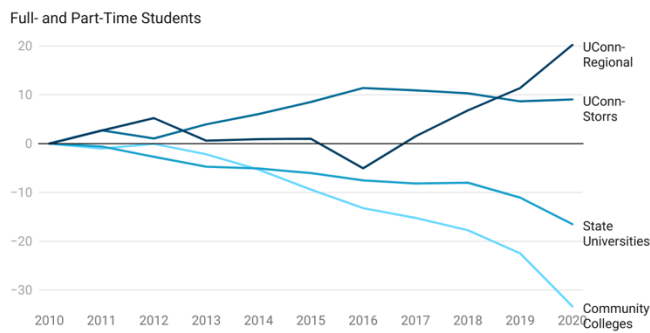

Figure 2: Change in College-Age (18-23) Population Since 2010

Percent Change Relative to 2010

Chart: © A Better Connecticut Institute, 2024 • Source: Calculated from the IPUMS version of the American Community Survey • Created with Datawrapper

Additional data implies that the enrollment decline in the CSCU system has been a choice – deliberately or not - by Connecticut's executive and legislative branches together with the CSCU administration. Figure 3 shows that while CSCU enrollments are declining, enrollment at UConn's main and

regional campuses is increasing (by 9% and 20%, respectively). The comparison with the regional campuses is apt since they offer similar programs and serve similar students. Another informative comparison is with one of the state's largest for-profit colleges: Goodwin College in East Hartford, Connecticut. Its enrollment has increased by 15% while competing with community colleges in the Hartford region for students seeking professional training in two-year programs, such as nursing.

Figure 3: Change in Connecticut Public College and University Enrollments Since 2010

Full- and Part-Time Students

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These facts suggest that factors such as legislative and executive branch priorities and the inability of the CSCU administration to secure additional state investment in the system in line with investments in UConn's regional campuses are the cause of CSCU's enrollment crisis. One might also question whether the decade-long transition of the state's 12 community colleges and four state universities into one system, along with its current structure and policies, has also hurt enrollment.

CSCU's enrollment decline is not inevitable; it appears to have been a choice. The solution to the CSCU crisis lies not in budget cuts to "right-size" the system but in leaning into the importance of state universities and community colleges for economic mobility and vitality, identifying why CSCU enrollments are declining in comparison to similar colleges and universities both in Connecticut and nationally, and investing in policies that address these factors. From this perspective, there is room for growth through investment in Connecticut's state universities and community colleges, a change that will have meaningful fiscal, social, and economic benefits.

NOTES

[1] In 2023 – after a prolonged, costly, and contentious transition – the 12 previously independent community colleges merged into one system with 12 campuses (CSCC). CSCC is part of the larger Connecticut State Colleges & Universities (CSCU) system, including the four state universities and Charter Oak College. This system does not include the University of Connecticut.

[2] While many students, especially at community colleges, are older than 23, the accepted definition of the college-age population is 18-23 because even at community colleges, most students fall in this age range.

[3] Calculated from the IPUMS version of the American Community Survey (ACS).). See similar values from the Census Population Estimates program at https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-state-detail.html.