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Why Students Are Leaving Illinois in Droves — and Why It Matters

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Gov. Bruce Rauner of Illinois engaged in a bruising two-year budget stalemate with the Democratic-controlled legislature that led to furloughs, layoffs, and emergency measures at several public colleges in the state. Some observers say the affair created unease among prospective Illinois students about the long-term health of their home-state higher-ed options. John Gress, Getty Images

For the fourth straight year, the University of Illinois system has [frozen tuition](#) for in-state students at its three campuses.

[Announcing](#) the move in January, the system's president, Timothy L. Killeen, was explicit about its purpose: to stop the hemorrhaging of Illinois residents enrolling at out-of-state colleges and universities.

Many have laid the blame for that exodus at the feet of state leaders. A bruising budget stalemate between Illinois's Republican governor, Bruce V. Rauner, and the Democratic-controlled legislature, stretching from 2015 to 2017, led to furloughs, layoffs, and emergency measures at several Illinois public colleges. Some observers say the affair created unease among prospective Illinois students about the long-term health of their home-state higher-ed options.

Sure enough, since the impasse began, enrollments at many Illinois public universities have [slid](#) precipitously from year to year. (Just this fall, freshman enrollment at Western Illinois University fell by 21 percent.) And preliminary data indicate that a greater number of freshmen sought higher education outside the state, while fewer out-of-state students chose to study in the Land of Lincoln. In 2016, the state experienced a net loss of 19,195 students, a 15-percent increase from 2014's 16,000-student gap, and second only to New Jersey's 29,000-freshmen deficit. The deepening loss was largely driven by more Illinois residents seeking to study in other states.

But the fact is that Illinois has been losing students long before its budget mess. In both 2012 and 2014, before Governor Rauner's election, around 33,000 Illinois residents attended college as freshmen outside the state. The state filled only about half of that deficit with the enrollment each year of about 17,000 out-of-staters. Over the last decade, Illinois has averaged a net loss of

8,000 freshmen in each of the five years that data were collected. (The federal government surveys colleges about freshman-migration patterns only in even-numbered years.)

In fiscally stable times, that migration deficit might have been problematic, but it wasn't dire. But the budget stalemate exposed and exacerbated a long-running problem: Without regular and certain state funding, public and private colleges needed to enroll more Illinois residents to raise much-needed tuition revenue. However, the uncertainty created by the impasse led more students to take their dollars elsewhere. Hence, as a last resort, the years of tuition freezes.

The feedback loop of uncertainty that Illinois has been stuck in is relatively new, and pressing. But researchers say the broader phenomenon of freshman migration has been present for decades.

"You can trace it back to the 1960s," said Eric Lichtenberger, deputy director of information management and research at the Illinois Board of Higher Education. "It's nothing new. It's been going on for the past 50 years or so."

'Very Strong Interest'

Why does Illinois have such difficulty retaining students? First and foremost, the state offers out-of-state colleges a deep and lucrative recruiting pool to turn to. It's the most populous state in the Midwest, and many of its prospective students are appealing to nearby universities. Illinois freshmen who enroll outside the state are disproportionately likely to belong to wealthier, suburban families, and to earn above-average test scores in high school, according to an Illinois Education Research Council [study](#) on which Lichtenberger was a co-author.

With that in mind, neighboring states have built appeals to Illinoisans into their recruitment strategies. In 2016 the University of Iowa [enrolled](#) the most Illinois residents of any out-of-state school. Nearly 30 percent of freshman Hawkeyes hailed from Illinois in 2017, [according](#) to university data. Kirk R. Kluver, director of admissions, said the university's Illinois recruitment strategy leaned heavily on that close-to-home factor.

"We've had very strong interest from students living in Illinois for years," Kluver said. "The University of Iowa is a great choice for many reasons, including being a Big Ten institution where students can receive a high-quality education at a good value that's only a few hours from home."

To [help lure](#) students, the U. of Iowa in 2013 began offering grants of up to nearly \$10,000 to out-of-staters to make up the difference between Iowa's resident and nonresident tuition rate.

Meanwhile, other Midwestern states make it easier for students to establish residency and, by doing so, gain access to cheaper tuition rates. At the University of Missouri, students [must demonstrate](#) that they've lived in-state for a year, earned limited

income, and carry a state driver's license, according to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Roughly one in three Mizzou students hails from out of state.

Lichtenberger's paper found that the No. 1 reason students left the state was that they thought they'd pay more to stay in Illinois. To counteract the perception that Illinois's in-state tuition is too costly, Lichtenberger's paper recommended that policy makers increase the number of affordable in-state options. Better marketing of those options would also be effective, Lichtenberger said.

Another way to mitigate student migration is to ease enrollment for lower-income students. That's where stable government funding would really help, said Jennifer A. Delaney, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Low-income students tend to be less mobile; for them a lack of affordable options means no college, rather than college in another state.

Delaney [pointed](#) to Illinois's need-based MAP grants, which for a time went unfunded by the legislature. "That's going to shape how many Illinois residents state institutions are able to bring in," she said.

Economic Loss

Should public universities be making a concerted effort to lure students from other states? That's a subject of debate in some statehouses. Proponents point to the economic benefit of counting more college graduates as residents; critics argue that institutions should prioritize state taxpayers.

But there's little argument that states would prefer to hold on to

their collegebound students. Of Illinois residents who study in their home state, more than nine out of 10 graduates start careers there. But of the Illinois residents who study out of state, Lichtenberger found, around one-third don't come back to start a career. The study estimated that if those students had completed college in Illinois, they would have earned \$10.1 million in wages three years out — a significant loss of tax revenue for a state in desperate need of it.

More worrisome for Illinois: Graduates with valuable STEM degrees were the least likely to return to Illinois for employment.

So if its net-loss numbers are a problem, what's Illinois to do? There are no easy fixes, Delaney said. One possibility is to the expand opportunities for out-of-state residents to receive in-state tuition rates. In 2016-17, only one Illinois college participated in the Midwest Student Exchange Program, a tuition-reciprocity agreement, through the Midwest Higher Education Compact. Illinois has some innovators in this category, like Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, which has [offered](#) in-state tuition rates to Missouri residents since 2009.

But the potential enrollment and revenue gains promised by tuition-discounting proposals must be weighed against lost revenues for students who would have attended anyway, Delaney said. And Illinois institutions would need to coordinate to solve the migration problem, Delaney said. The impact of any one decision could be diluted if colleges, systems, legislators and other stakeholders don't act deliberately on a shared plan.

The best way for Illinois to keep its students in state might have little to do with tuition discounting or recruitment strategy, said

Larry A. Isaak, president of the Midwestern Higher Education Compact. A year or two without pessimistic headlines about the state of public higher education could make a real difference in Illinois.

“Students are reading newspapers and watching news programs on television,” said Isaak. “They look at what is happening. And so I would advise certainty in budgets and certainty in financial-aid funding.”