**College enrollment numbers stay even across S.D.**

University officials say economy might be luring more teens to workplace

**Sep. 25, 2013   |  Written by** [**Steve Young**](mailto:sxyoung@argusleader.com)

**By the numbers** Fall enrollment for each of South Dakota’s six public universities the past two years:

| **School** | **Fall 2012 headcount** | **Fall 2013 headcount** | **Percent change** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Black Hills State | 4,407 | 4,464 | +1.29% |
| Dakota State | 3,110 | 3,129 | +0.61% |
| Northern State | 3,622 | 3,343 | -7.7% |
| School of Mines | 2,424 | 2,640 | +8.91% |
| South Dakota State | 12,583 | 12,554 | -0.23% |
| University of South Dakota | 10,284 | 10,235 | -0.48% |
| Systemwide | 36,430 | 36,365 | -0.18% |

Enrollment at South Dakota’s six public universities remains stagnant for a third year in a row, though school officials are pleased that students are taking more courses and the system is cranking out more graduates.

The 36,365 students enrolled this fall is 65 fewer than a year ago — a result, perhaps, of smaller high school graduating classes in the state and region, and of more people returning to the workforce, said Jack Warner, executive director of the state Board of Regents.

But the fewer students are taking heavier courseloads, Warner added. That is evidenced by an increase in full-time equivalent students, which is the total credit hours being sought by all students enrolled in the system divided by 15. A student has to average 15 credits a semester to graduate in four years.

Full-time equivalent students in the system increased by 313.3 from last year.

“Full-time equivalent students are an important indicator of growth for us,” Warner said. “Students who take a heavier courseload, we find, are more likely to graduate.”

The rise in full-time equivalency dovetails off numbers released by the regents a week ago that show the total number of students graduating with associate or bachelor degrees from the six universities increased by 33 percent since 2005.

“At the end of the day, the number of graduates we produce is the really important indicator because it helps South Dakota attain educational attainment rates, and it fuels workforce and economic development needs for the state,” Warner said.

The biggest decline in the headcount was at Northern State University, where the school dropped from 3,622 last fall to 3,343. James Smith, school president, attributes much of the drop to part-time students who found employment opportunities when the economy improved.

“We need to analyze that,” Smith said. “But I think we do have the supposition ... that some of our students who were with us three to six hours are working full time now. We spent a lot of dedicated energy on retention to graduation. Maybe by happenstance, we didn’t recruit as hard for part-time students.”

Warner said slight declines at South Dakota State University and the University of South Dakota also were caused largely by declines in part-time undeclared students who presumably are back in the workforce.

Most of the schools reported that their retention rate of full-time students between their freshmen and sophomore years had improved in the past year. USD President Jim Abbott said his school was at 76 percent this year — short of its 80 percent goal but several percentage points ahead of the previous school year.

“We are expending significant amounts of dollars in academic and professional advising. We have beefed up our number of advisers, particularly for those students who have not declared a major,” Abbott said. “I think that is definitely showing in the freshmen to sophomores who are staying.”

Last fall, the regents reported that an additional 1,277 students were enrolled in distance learning education from the year before. This autumn, the increase was only 116 — from 11,210 in 2012 to 11,336 this year. Among students on campus who take a course or two online, and adults who pursue distance learning as a matter of convenience, the leveling off of interest this year isn’t surprising to Warner.

Part of that could be the uptick in the economy, and people are just busier with work, he and others say.

“I think nationally, we’re looking at kind of a leveling of distance learning enrollments,” Warner said. “I would project growth there at probably a slightly slower rate.”

**STI’s enrollment drops**

Southeast Technical Institute’s fall enrollment number dropped 101 students over a year ago, a reality school officials tie into an improving economy.   
**ENROLLMENT:** 2,632 last year, an all-time high, consisting of 1,901 full-time and 731 part-time students. This year, there are 1,815 full-time and 716 part-time students.   
**JOBS FACTOR:** In a robust economy, the need for available workers increases — in many cases beyond 40 hours per week — and makes going to school difficult, Southeast Tech President Jeff Holcomb said.   
“It is very difficult for any student to maintain two fronts,” he said. “They tend to make a choice between going to school or working, earning money or spending money. It is a short-sighted plan, but the demand for workers, particularly trained or semi-trained workers, makes it difficult for education to compete.”

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