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America's Colleges Are Hurtling Toward an Enrollment Cliff

Will the 'demographic cliff'—the declining population of 18-year-olds—ease the brutal process? Depends where you go.

By Douglas Belkin and Josh Ulick

Aug. 20, 2026 5:30 am ET



The University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor, Mich. EMILY ELCONIN/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Quick Summary

- College enrollments are forecast to drop 13% by 2041 due to a dwindling pipeline of 18-year-olds, according to a higher education commission.

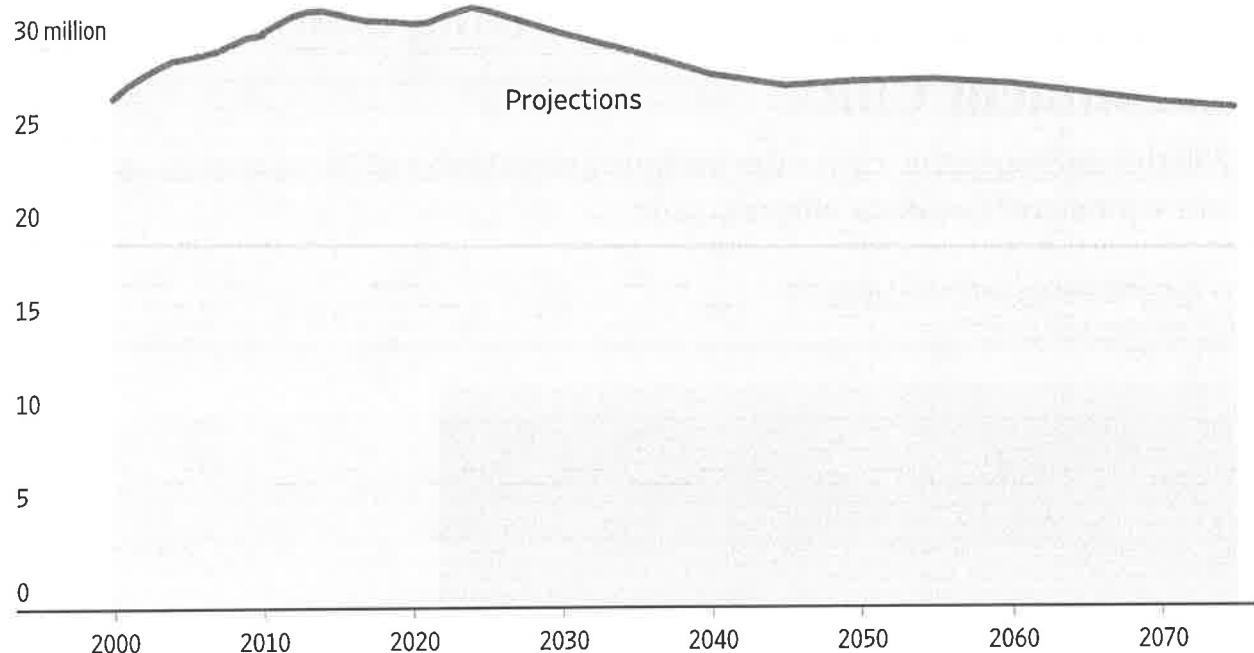
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Higher education is hitting a demographic cliff. After years of growth, the pipeline of 18-year-olds is dwindling—a result of lower birthrates.

The largest number of Americans born in a single year arrived on campus in the autumn of 2025, and now a falloff is looming. College enrollments are

forecast to drop 13% by 2041, according to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. In some parts of the country—especially the Midwest and the Northeast—the declines have already begun.

U.S. residents ages 18–24



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

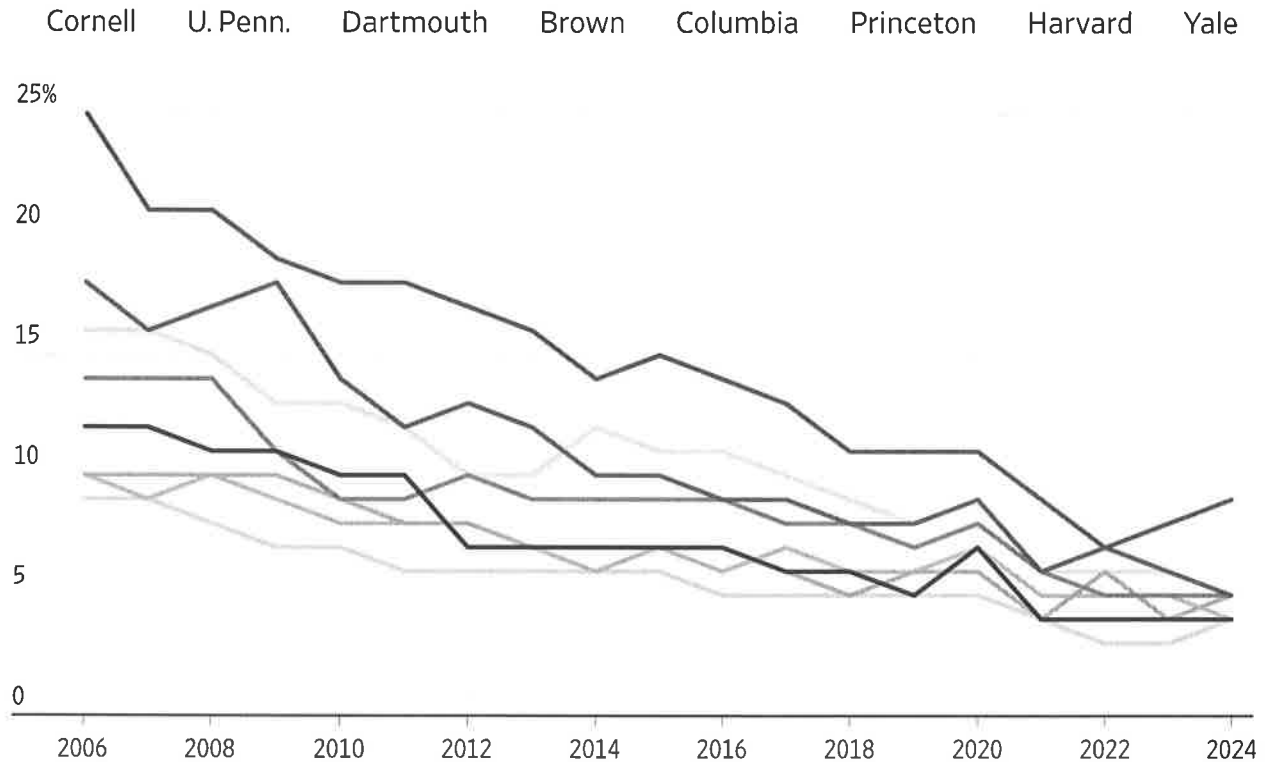
You would think a shrinking pool of students would automatically make it easier to get into college. But that won't necessarily be true everywhere, especially at the most competitive schools, higher-education analysts say.

It is impossible to precisely predict colleges' admission rates in the future as those numbers depend on a lot of things, including the reputations of campus culture, sports team wins and even the weather. But the demographic cliff is hitting just as another phenomenon is coming into play: a flight-to-quality, where the most sought-after schools are attracting an ever-growing number of applicants, while less-attractive schools draw fewer.

Part of the reason is rising skepticism about the value of a college degree. More families reason that if they are going to spend tens of thousands of dollars, the diploma better pay off with a good job—otherwise why bother?

This dynamic has been playing out in the Ivy League, for instance, where admission rates have fallen over the past decade-plus.

Ivy League schools | acceptance rates



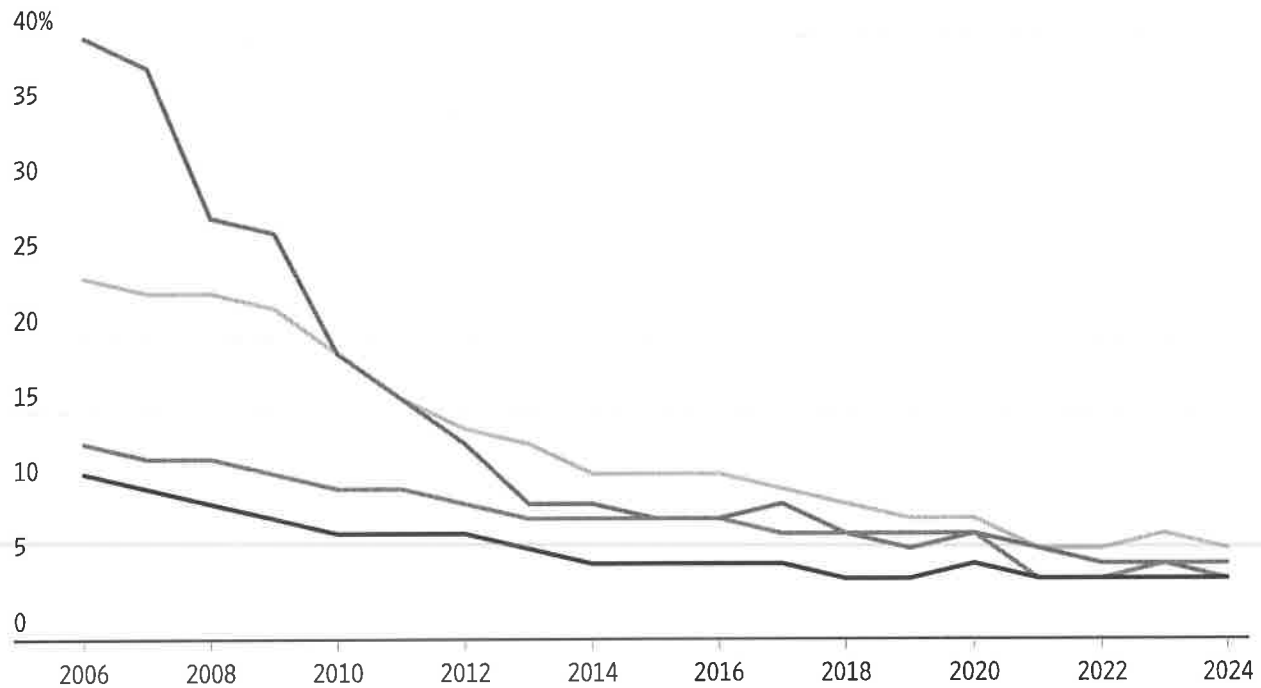
Note: Acceptance rates are for students granted admission for fall enrollment in the year shown

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Coveted schools just outside the Ivies have gotten more competitive as well.

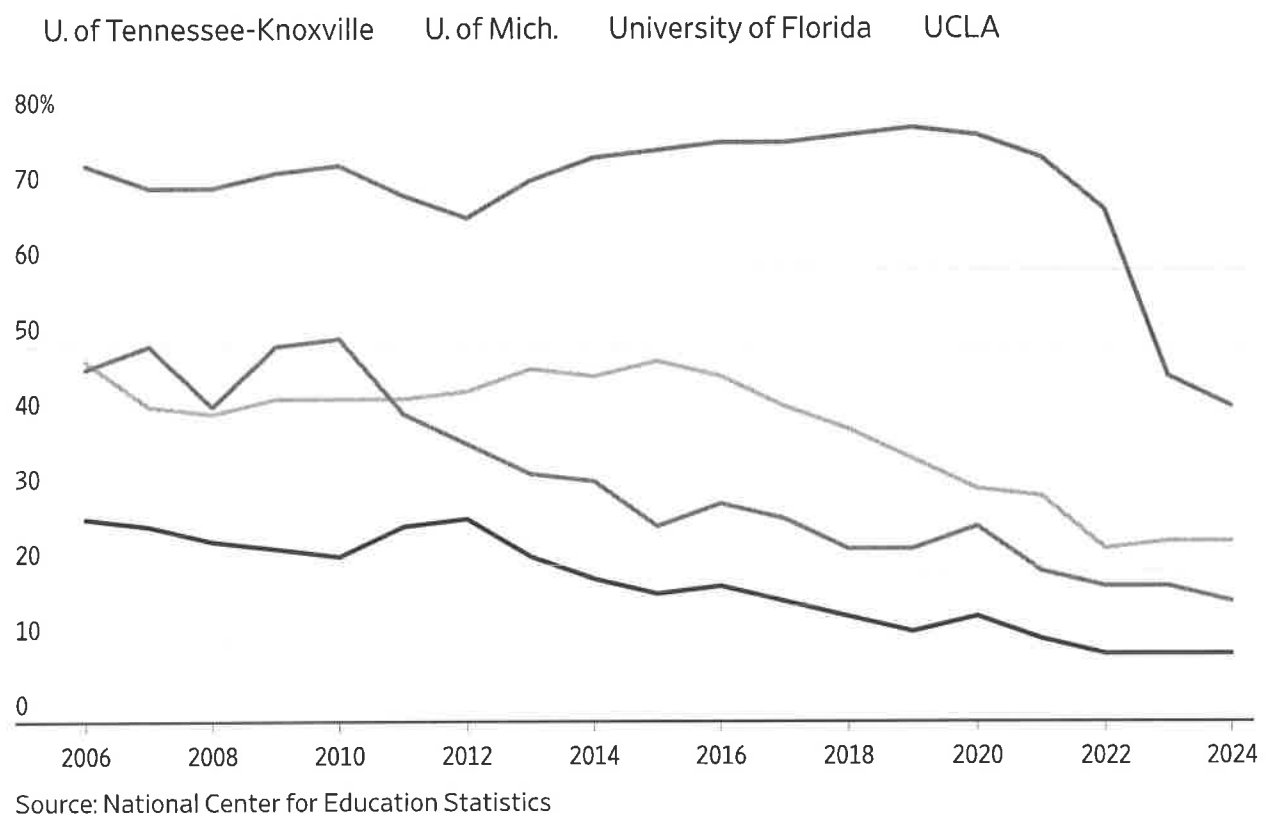
Selective schools | acceptance rates

University of Chicago Duke MIT Stanford



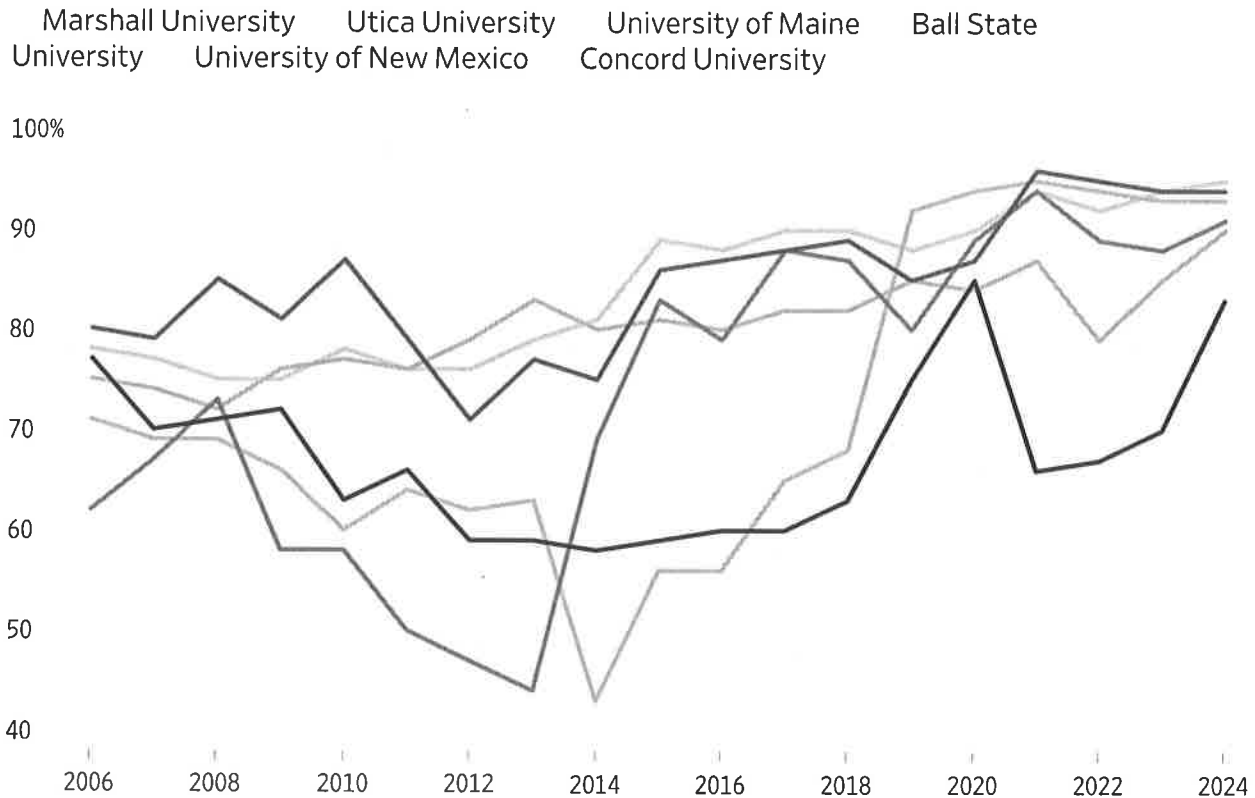
Many big public flagships are also getting more competitive. Some, such as the University of Michigan, have long held prestige. Other state schools have surged in status and are drawing students who want a classic campus experience but at a lower cost than many private schools.

Public universities | acceptance rates



On the other hand, many regional or less-selective schools have become even more accessible.

Less selective schools | acceptance rates



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Teens are hedging their bets by applying to more schools. On average, students now submit nearly seven applications each on the Common App, a rise of 46% since 2015-16, according to a 2024-25 report from the provider.

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