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From the Buffalo Business First:
<https://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/news/2021/07/26/advanced-education-trends-shift-during-pandemic.html>

These advanced education enrollment, interest trends shifted during the pandemic

Jul 26, 2021, 6:00am EDT

After nearly a year and a half of disruption, local colleges are considering how the pandemic affected students' interests.

Many in the advanced education field say it's too soon to know for sure, but some have noticed shifts in graduate program enrollment trends. From accelerating already growing interest in some degrees to perhaps having long-term impacts on the local job market, the health crisis likely had wide-reaching effects.



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Kevin Miller, interim dean,
Buffalo State College Graduate
School

SUNY Buffalo State has seen overall enrollment in its graduate school go up, according to [Kevin Miller](#), interim graduate school dean. The school had 994 graduate school students in spring 2019, 1,003 students in spring 2020 and 1,053 students in spring 2021.

Typically, when the college adds graduate programs there's a corresponding bump in enrollment but there were no significant programs launched in fall 2020, he said.

The number of graduate students enrolling full time also has increased. While four more students signed up for full time schooling from 2018 to 2019, an additional 31 went full time from 2019 to 2020.

Miller said it's too early to attribute shifts in trends to the pandemic, but he suspects there were graduate students who had more time available during the health crisis. Perhaps some weren't working and wanted to finish their degrees faster.

Awareness of mental health issues also increased as kids learned remotely, people spent home time indoors and many felt isolated. Medaille and Canisius colleges reported upticks in interest in their mental health counseling advanced degrees.

[Helena Boersma](#), Medaille's clinical mental health counseling program director and clinical assistant professor, said the college had been seeing increased interest in counseling programs prior to the pandemic but the health crisis highlighted mental health issues and the need for more professionals. Experts projected national counselor shortages prior to 2020.

For its counseling certificate program, applications so far in the enrollment process have more than doubled from last year and the school expects the number to increase. Its master's in clinical mental health counseling's busiest enrollment season starts in July or early August, but officials think interest will be up about 30% compared to last year.

Thanks to mental health awareness growing prior to 2020 and the pandemic accelerating that trend, Boersma expects interest in mental health counseling programs to continue beyond 2021.

Canisius College's master's in clinical mental health counseling, which had previously had consistent enrollment numbers, saw a slight increase this year and a "high level of interest" in the program, according to Michael Rutter, associate professor of counseling and program coordinator for clinical mental health counseling.

Canisius did not provide specific application or enrollment numbers.

While Rutter hopes the pandemic's impact on the importance of mental health will continue long-term, he believes the uptick in mental health programs might be a spike, not a continuing trend. However, the jump will still have a lasting impact.

"Even if increased interest and awareness is transient, the increased numbers of mental health professionals and increased numbers of people who will benefit from mental health providers will be much more durable," he said.

Meanwhile, the University at Buffalo reported an uptick in interest, perhaps the most expected during the pandemic, in some health care-related programs. Applications to the doctor of medicine program at UB's school of medicine and biomedical sciences are up about 40% compared to 2019.

SUNY's other medical schools at Upstate Medical University, Stony Brook University and Downstate Health Services University are also up, reflecting a nationwide trend, according to UB. Medical school applications increased by about 18% from late 2019 compared to late 2020, the Association of American Medical Colleges reported.

UB has seen its master of public health program enrollment triple since 2017. Many of its more than 200 students helped agencies during the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile,

applications to the public health undergraduate program increased 70% this year compared to last year.

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