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Education

## Area colleges celebrate tuition increases as demographic cliff looms



Image: Buffalo Business First

A view of Canisius College.

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Despite a national trend of **declining enrollment** since the pandemic, many colleges and universities in Western New York saw a bump in enrollment this fall.

Several local college presidents say that increase was due to a number of reasons, like more online offerings, better connections in the community, more in-demand graduate programs and transfer students from the now-closed Medaille University.

Still, the increase is an encouraging step for private colleges trying to prepare for a **demographic cliff** – a significant drop in the college-age population – expected to start in 2025. Even with the recent bump in enrollment, institutions are preparing for enrollment declines.

“The cliff is not a secret. It’s already started here in Western New York with a declining number of high school graduates and then Covid on top of it,” said Danielle Ianni, vice president for enrollment management at Canisius University.

## **Canisius University**

Total enrollment went up 2.2% at Canisius to about 2,500 students, largely due to transfer and graduate students. The school had 600 new students this year, the highest that number has been in four years, Ianni said. About 60 new students were from Medaille.

“We are tuition dependent, and we talk about enrollment and revenue at every meeting,” Ianni said. “We hit a low for enrollment during Covid, and we’ve been strategically building back up. We decided that since the enrollment market is incredibly competitive, we would put extra focus on transfer students and extra energy into our graduate recruitment.”

She said the school has also seen success in recruiting out-of-state and international graduates.

## **Hilbert College**

Hilbert’s total enrollment was the highest it’s been in a decade, at 975. That also included the highest number of new students, 340. President Michael Brophy said the school has

seen 30% growth in the last 24 months, and that's not including its recent acquisition of Valley College in West Virginia, since they will operate as two separate schools.

Brophy said the two "big building blocks" for increasing enrollment have been its 200 online programs and its 18 athletic programs. Still, there's reason to prepare for a decline in enrollment.

"Not only is there a demographic cliff coming, but if you look across the country, its most acute in the Northeast, because the most colleges happen to be in the Northeast," Brophy said. "While families value private education, they are less willing to pay more for it, so that has led to extreme discounting."

He said Hilbert has many strategies to build enrollment, like offering dual enrollment programs to Buffalo Public Schools students, working with area employers to offer high-demand programs, and using resources with Valley College to build its catalog of online programs.

"We need to do our best work in the 716 but continue to look beyond the 716 for enrollment opportunities," Brophy said.

## **Villa Maria College**

Villa Maria's enrollment reached 550 this fall, a 14% increase over last year and the highest it's been since the pandemic. The college also brought in the largest class of new students (80) in more than 25 years, with only 18 of them being Medaille transfers.

Executive Vice President Brian Emerson said that was largely due to the increased number of freshman, as the school had more than 1,000 applications this year, its highest ever.

"Our growth this year has been primarily in traditional age, first-year students," he said.

He attributed that growth to getting more exposure in the community and making sure a degree from Villa Maria is valuable by working directly with employers in Western New York.

"We saw one school close this year, which is very sad," Emerson said about Medaille.

"There is intense competition for these students, and schools have to make an

adjustment.”

## **St. Bonaventure University**

St. Bonaventure just welcomed 574 incoming freshmen, its largest class in 20 years. The school’s total enrollment is just over 2,600 with about 1,893 in undergraduate programs, growing 30% since 2015.

“About 25% of our freshmen are in programs that we didn’t have six or seven years ago,” said Bernie Valento, vice president for enrollment. “So we’ve done a good job assessing what the students want and what’s in demand.”

Valento said the school has been preparing for the demographic cliff for the last eight years, by diversifying enrollment streams, adding programs with market demand and adding its School of Health Professions. He said the school plans to “keep the momentum going,” with a goal to reach an enrollment of 3,000 within the next few years.

## **Niagara University**

Niagara’s unofficial enrollment for this year is 4,222, up 9%. The Rev. James Maher, the university’s president, said Medaille’s closing played a significant role, adding close to 400 students, most of them graduate students. Niagara also [became Medaille’s legacy school](#), where all student records and transcripts will be maintained.

“With Medaille, we just tried to do the right thing,” Maher said. “It was really about helping the students finish. We knew these days were going to come when institutions would start to close.”

To prepare for a demographic cliff that could cause lower enrollment and tighter revenue streams, Maher said Niagara is focused on positioning itself as a value school, with connections for students to find paid internships and future careers in the community.

## **Trocaire College**

While enrollment for Trocaire has remained flat this year, at 1,015, the number of transfer students increased by 38.

**President Bassam Deeb** said students struggled during the pandemic, both financially and academically, and many colleges are still working to reverse that trend. He also said the labor market has been very open for employment, which affects enrollment as people choose to work over going to school.

“We’re seeing more people coming back into the higher education space who were probably on the sideline during the pandemic,” Deeb said. “But I see that as a temporary situation, because the demographic cliff is coming.”

He said that while colleges may see a bump in enrollment with added academic programs, new alliances and partnerships and other strategies, it doesn’t change the population trajectories and the decreasing number of students choosing to go to college after high school.

“I do think that most institutions need to be projecting a stable level of enrollment, because being able to do that is substantial given the economic headwinds we’ll be experiencing as a sector,” Deeb said.