

UTAH'S AGING POPULATION

The Demographic Dip

Updated Projections and Strategies for Higher Education

Authored By: Heidi Prior, Senior Public Policy Analyst; Andrea Thomas Brandley, Senior Education Analyst; and Phil Dean, Chief Economist and Research Director

September 2026

An aging Utah population will drive consequential demographic, economic, and fiscal changes over the planning horizon. Utah's future population will include a larger share of residents 65 and older, smaller shares of children and young adults, and a growing population of Utahns in their prime working years. From a fiscal perspective these changes create a demographic dividend as state and local government shoulders primary responsibility for

funding services provided to children and young adults, particularly K-12 and higher education. The federal government assumes primary responsibility for programs aiding older Americans, including Social Security and Medicare. This data series provides information Utah policymakers can use to carefully balance Utah's demographic dividend with the clear risks of federal fiscal challenges.

Utah's growing college-age population fueled steady enrollment growth in the state's public colleges and universities during the last decade, but that trend now nears its end. Updated projections show Utah's 18-to-24-year-old population increasing through 2028 before declining for nearly two decades.

Lower college-going rates and changing public perceptions may further challenge higher education enrollment. Recent policy changes and system initiatives help Utah institutions adapt to changing demographics while expanding educational opportunity and supporting the state's workforce.

Key Findings

- **Utah approaches a college-age population decline –**

Updated projections show Utah's population ages 18 to 24 growing through 2028 before declining for nearly two decades. With an earlier, longer, and deeper demographic dip than previously projected, nearly every Utah county experiences declines.

- **Enrollment challenges extend beyond demographics –**

College-going rates remain well below historical highs. Public perception of higher education also remains a challenge. If not reversed, these trends may further constrain enrollment beyond the effects of population change alone.

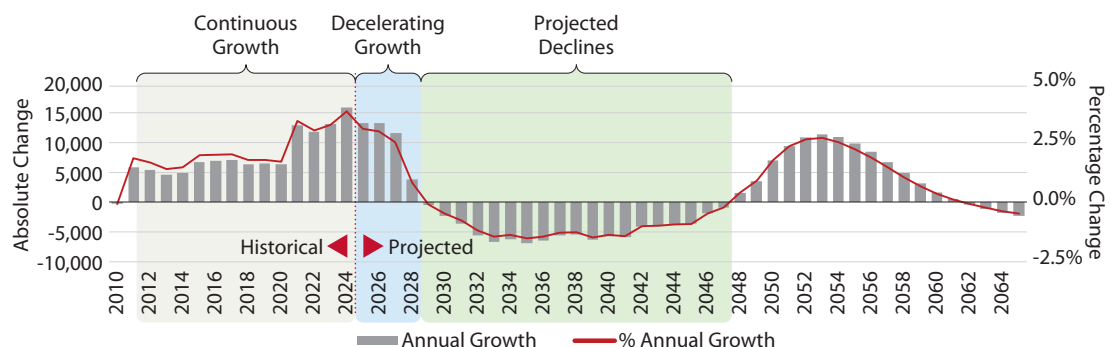
- **Impacts vary across institutions –** The demographic dip will not affect all institutions equally. Some institutions may experience greater enrollment and financial pressures due to differences in student age demographics and funding structures.

- **Recent actions prepare Utah to navigate demographic change –** Newly enacted legislative and system initiatives support stronger long-term planning, more strategic resource allocation, and greater institutional collaboration.

- **Utah can build on existing efforts –** Continued progress in system-wide coordination, student retention and completion, and support for adult learners can help institutions adapt to demographic changes while strengthening Utah's workforce and economy.

Figure 1: Annual Absolute and Percent Change in Utah's College-Age Population, 2010–2065

Note: College-age reflects population ages 18 to 24.
 Source: Utah Population Committee State and County Estimates 2010–2024, Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute State and County Projections 2025–2065



INFORMED DECISIONS™

Introduction

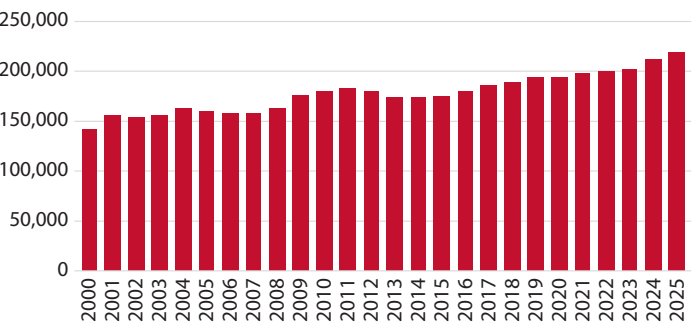
Utah's growing college-age population supported steady enrollment growth at the state's public colleges and universities over the past decade (Figures 1 and 2). However, updated projections show this population growth trend now nears an end, with the population ages 18 to 24 expected to decline beginning in 2029. Lower college-going rates may also intensify future enrollment pressures. Proactive planning and changes in how institutions attract, retain, and serve students can help Utah's public colleges adapt while expanding educational opportunities and supporting the state's workforce.

Projections Show Approaching College-Age Population Declines

Utah's College-Age Population Projected to Begin Declining before 2030

Population projections show Utah's traditional college-age population (18-to-24-year-olds) continuing to grow through 2028 and then declining for two decades. After experiencing annual growth rates above 3% for the past five years, projections indicate that growth in the 18-to-24-year-old population will slow in the coming years. Around 2029, this population will begin a period of decline expected to last about 20 years. Utah's college-age population will decrease by approximately 85,000 young adults over this period (a 17.9% decrease from 2028), returning the state's college-age population to its 2021 level before growth resumes in the late 2040s (Figure 1). During these years of decline, Utah's higher education institutions will have a smaller pool of Utahns to recruit from within the traditional college-age group.

Figure 2: Utah Enrollment in Public Degree-Granting Institutions, 2000–2025



Note: Data reflect the total number of individual students enrolled at the end of fall term, regardless of course load.
Source: Utah System of Higher Education

Updated Projections Revise the Demographic Outlook

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute released its 2025-2065 Long Term Planning Projections in the fall of 2025.¹ New information, input data, and assumptions in the 2025 projections result in the college-age population following a similar overall trajectory to the previous projections but differing in the depth and timing of the decline (Figures 3 and 4).

Updated projections show the following:

- **Larger current college-age population** – A larger population of college-age Utahns from 2025 to 2029 than previously projected.
- **Earlier start to decline** – Utah's college-age population begins declining sooner (around 2029 vs. 2032 in previous projections).
- **Longer and deeper decline** – College-age population declines last longer (19 years instead of 13) and are deeper (85,000 fewer college-age residents rather than 53,000).
- **Smaller 2060 college-age population** – Updated projections show a smaller college-age population in 2060 than the previous version (almost 40,000 fewer 18-to-24-year-olds).

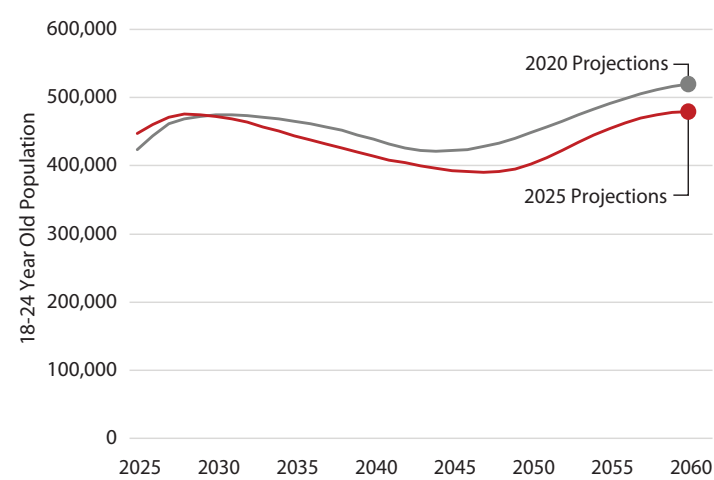
Most Counties Experience Substantial Declines

Projections indicate 28 of Utah's 29 counties will experience a "dip" in their traditional college-age population during the coming decades, though the depth varies by county (Figures 5 and 6). Between 2028 and 2047 (the low point in Utah's college-age dip), the college-age population will decrease by over 20% in 18 counties. The largest rates of decline occur in smaller-population Daggett (-64%) and Morgan (-47%) counties, where decreases amount to about 60 and 800 college-age residents, respectively.² Projections show the college-age population decreasing by over 25% in Davis and Salt Lake counties, resulting in a combined loss of over 45,000 total residents.

Wayne County is Utah's only county projected to gain college-age residents between 2028 and 2047, with projected growth of about 60 residents (a 30% increase). Projections also show smaller declines in Sanpete (-1%), Tooele (-6%), and Utah (-7%) counties.

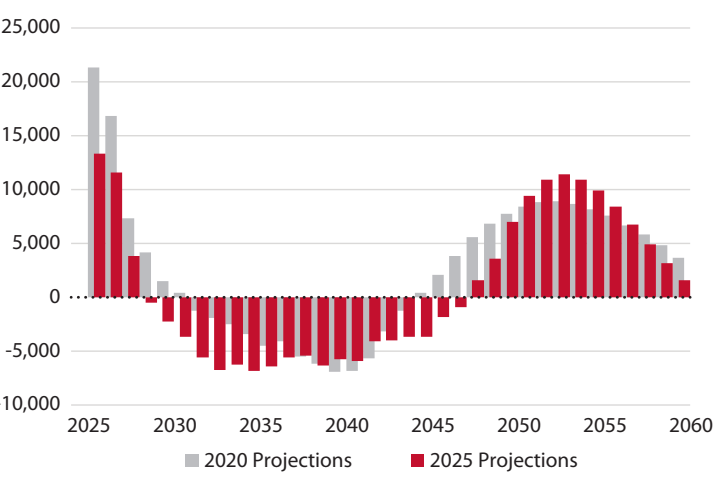
Updated projections show the college-age population resuming growth around 2050 in many Utah counties. By 2065, 11 Utah counties will have more college-age residents than they did in 2028, effectively rebounding from their population dips (Figure 7). Larger population counties expected to experience this shift back to growth include Utah, Cache, Washington, and Tooele. Wasatch Back counties (Summit, Morgan, and Wasatch) are also projected to recover, along with Carbon, Grand, Wayne, and Sanpete counties.

Figure 3: Utah's Projected College-Age Population in 2020 and 2025 Projections, 2025–2060



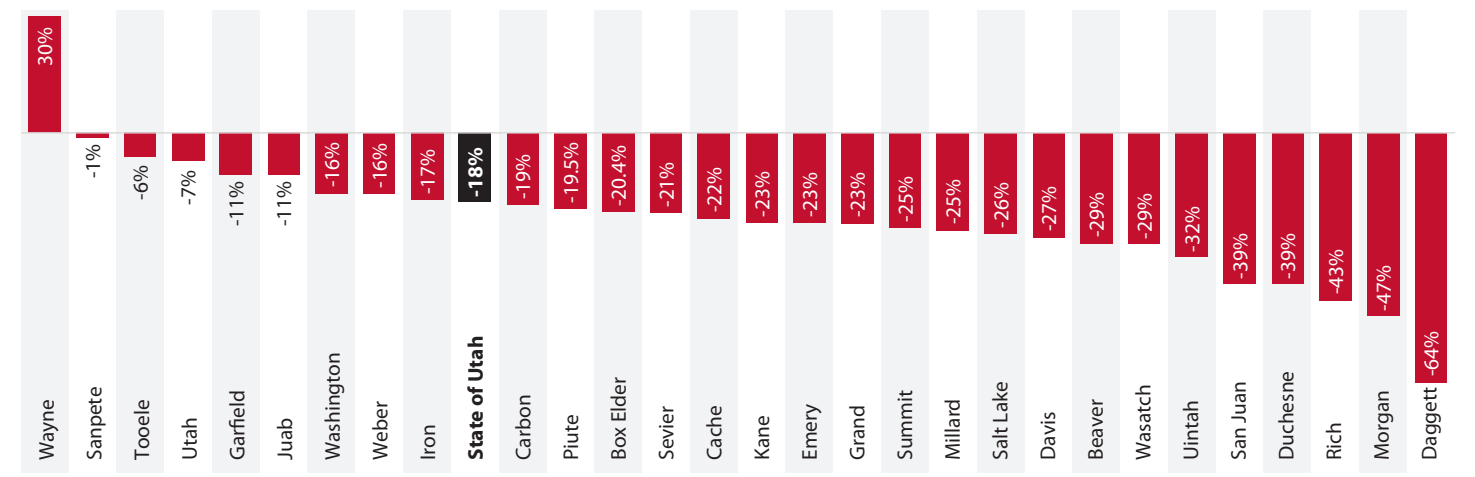
Note: College-age refers to residents ages 18 to 24.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, 2020-2060 Projections, 2025-2065 Projections

Figure 4: Projected Annual Change in Utah's College-Age Population in 2020 and 2025 Projections, 2025–2060



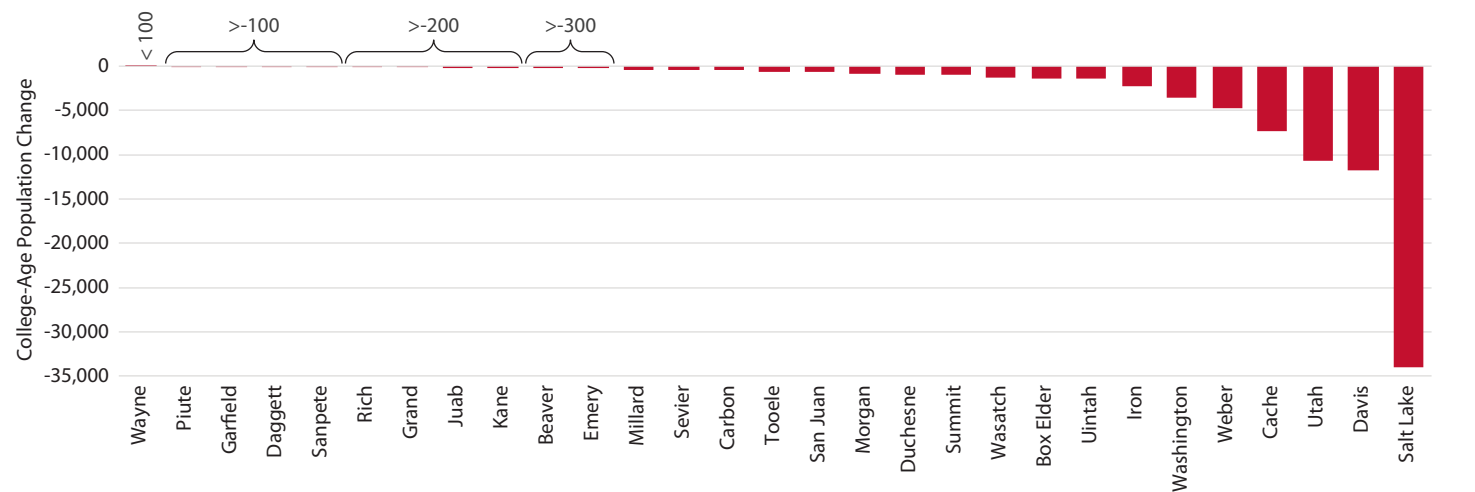
Note: College-age refers to residents ages 18 to 24.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, 2020-2060 Projections, 2025-2065 Projections

Figure 5: Projected Percent Change in Utah's College-Age Population by County, 2028 to 2047



Note: Percent change across the years of projected statewide college-age population decline (2028-2047). College-age refers to residents ages 18 to 24.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, 2025-2065 Projections

Figure 6: Projected Change in Utah's College-Age Population by County, 2028 to 2047



Note: Change across the years of projected statewide college-age population decline (2028-2047). College-age refers to residents ages 18 to 24.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, 2025-2065 Projections

National Trends Differ from Utah

According to U.S. Census Bureau projections, the U.S. college-age population will also decline for about two decades. However, national declines began in 2025, while Utah’s decline is expected to begin around 2029. Over the next 20 years, the Census Bureau expects the U.S. college-age population to decline by 3.5 million (11.2%). While Utah projections show its college-age population resuming growth and eventually exceeding its projected 2028 level, Census Bureau projections show the national college-age population remaining smaller through at least 2065. These national declines could also increase competition for students, as out-of-state institutions may recruit more aggressively in Utah while Utah institutions face a shrinking pool of prospective students from other states.

These declines result from multiple factors. First, total fertility rates have steadily declined since 2008 and are now impacting the college-age population (Figure 8).³ Second, the population of women of childbearing age fluctuates in size, directly affecting projected births and youth populations.

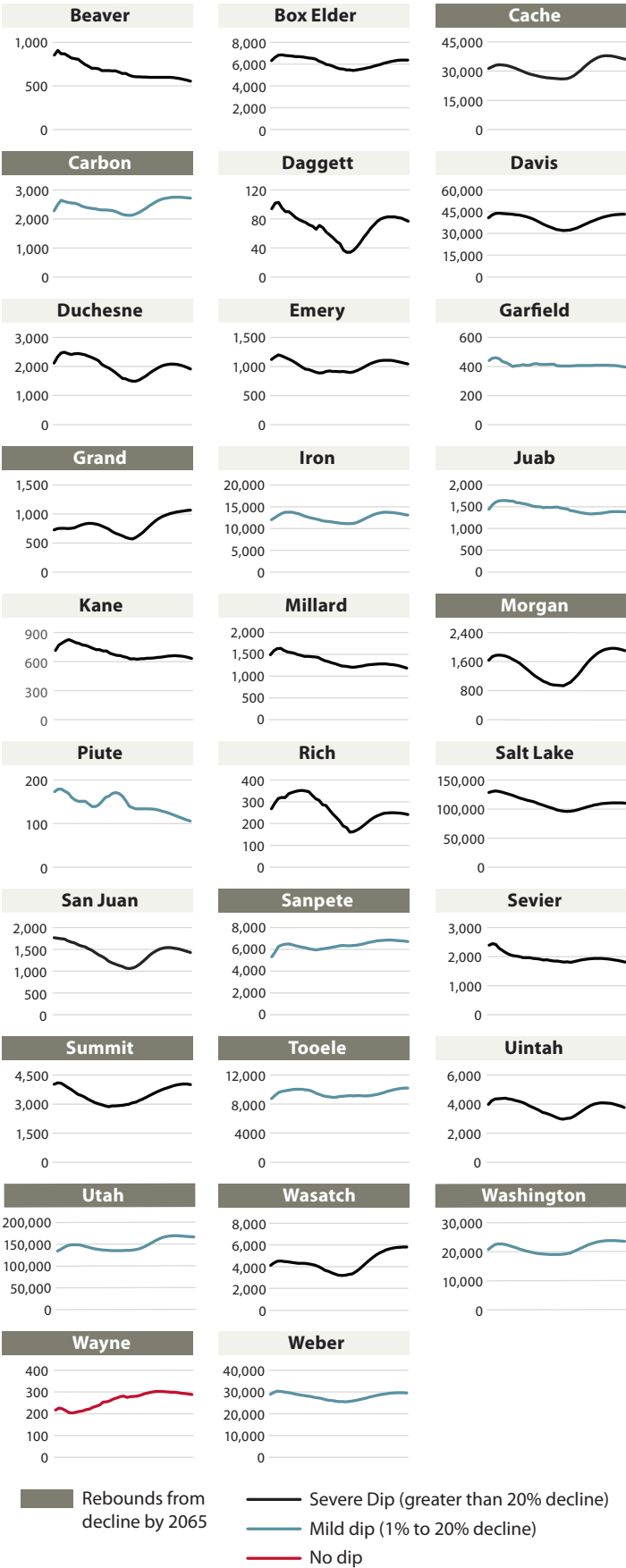
Enrollment Challenges Extend Beyond Demographics

Fewer High School Graduates Enroll in College

Nationally, the share of recent high school graduates enrolling in college peaked in 2009, when 70.1% enrolled in two- or four-year colleges the following school year.⁴ The rate declined to 61.4% in 2023, then increased modestly to 62.8% in 2024 (Figure 9). Despite this recent improvement, immediate college enrollment of high school graduates remains well below its peak and marks a departure from the steady increases observed during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.⁵ If this pattern continues, it may further compound expected demographic changes and create additional challenges in enrolling traditional college-age students.

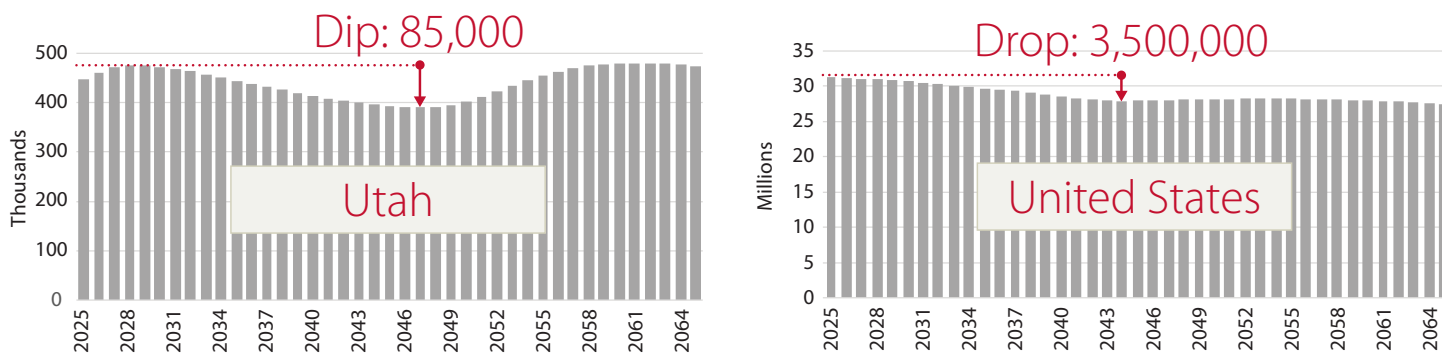
Utah’s three-year college enrollment rates, which account for high school graduates who enter religious service after 12th grade, align with national data. In 2025, 63.3% of Utah high school graduates enrolled in college within three years of graduation (Figure 10). Enrollment rates at Utah’s public higher education institutions declined from 2019 to 2025, while enrollment at out-of-state schools and Utah’s private colleges slightly increased.

Figure 7: Utah Projected College-Age Population by County, 2025–2065



Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, 2025-2065 Projections

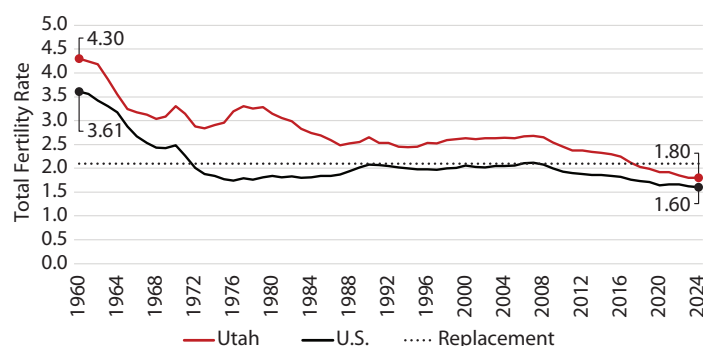
Figure 7: Utah and U.S. Projected College-Age Populations, 2025–2065



Note: College-age represents population ages 18 to 24. Dotted lines show period of decline in college-age population. Utah's college-age population will fall 85,000 from its 2028 peak. The U.S. college-age population will fall 3.5 million from 2025 to 2044 low.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2023 National Population Projections; Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, 2025-2065 Projections

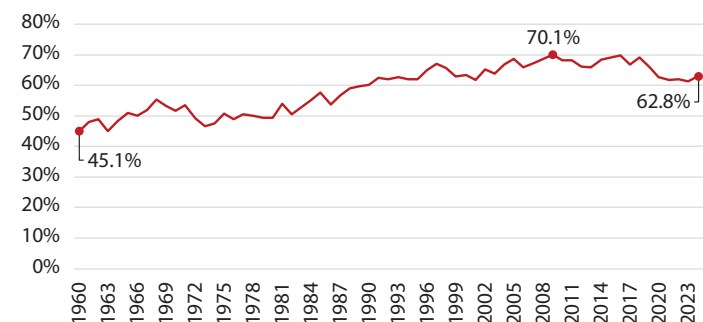
Figure 8: Total Fertility Rate for Utah and the United States, 1960–2024



Note: Replacement (total fertility rate of 2.1) represents the theoretical fertility level at which the current population is replaced.

Source: National Center for Health Statistics

Figure 9: U.S. Share of Recent High School Graduates Enrolled in College, 1960–2024



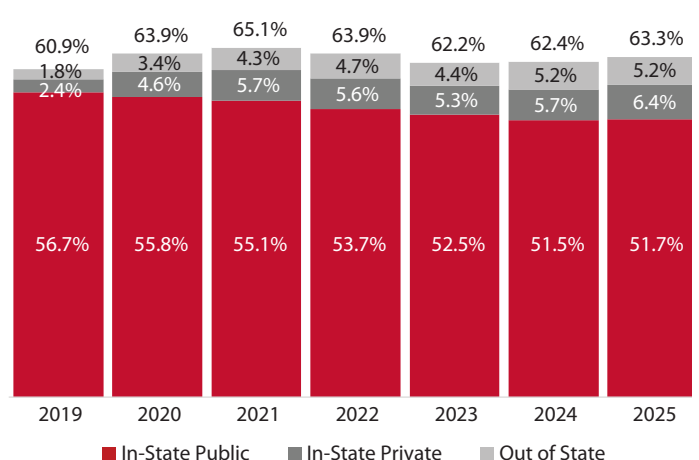
Note: Enrolled in college the fall after high school completion.

Source: National Center for Educational Statistics Table 302.20

Public Confidence in Higher Education Remains a Challenge

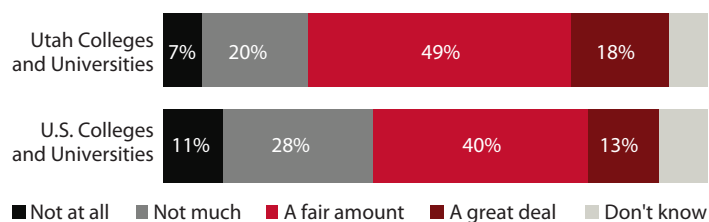
Changing public sentiment concerning higher education places further pressure on enrollment. Less than half of Americans (42%) report confidence in higher education, according to a 2025 Lumina Foundation-Gallup survey—declining from 57% a decade ago.⁶ A Pew study found that 7 in 10 Americans say higher education in the United States is “going in the wrong direction,” with 55% of participants rating

Figure 10: Share of Utah High School Graduates Who Enroll in College Within 3 Years, 2019–2025



Source: Utah System of Higher Education Strategic Plan Attainment Goals

Figure 11: Utahns’ Confidence in Colleges and Universities, 2026



Note: Poll conducted by Morning Consult, March 6-10, 2026, of 800 registered Utah voters.

Source: Deseret News/Hinckley Institute of Politics survey

universities fair or poor on “preparing students for well-paying jobs in today’s economy.”⁷

Utahns feel similarly about higher education overall, though they hold more positive views of Utah schools. About half of Utahns surveyed in a 2026 Deseret News/Hinckley Institute of Politics poll expressed a “great deal” or “a fair amount” of confidence in U.S. colleges and universities.⁸ When asked about Utah’s higher education institutions, 67% indicated confidence (Figure 11).

The Demographic Dip Will Affect Institutions Differently

Age Demographics Buffer Some Colleges from Declines

The Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) comprises eight degree-granting institutions and eight technical colleges. During the 2025-26 school year, these institutions served almost 219,000 students, or nearly 1 in 16 Utahns.

USHE enrolls more than 162,000 adult students.⁹ Of these adult students, about 71% are between ages 18 and 24, while about 29% are 25 and older. Several USHE schools enroll noticeably higher shares of adults age 25 and older, with technical colleges, Southern Utah University, and Salt Lake Community College enrolling the highest shares (Figure 12). The diverse age demographics at these schools may lessen the impact of the projected decline in Utah's 18- to 24-year-old population. Conversely, Utah's research universities, along with Snow College and Utah Tech University, primarily serve 18-to-24-year-olds and may experience greater impacts.

Funding Structure Shapes Institutional Exposure

Higher education funding comes from multiple sources and varies widely by institution. As a result, the budget structure may insulate some institution budgets from the effects of demographic shifts while others may face risk.

Revenue at Utah's 16 public higher education institutions totaled \$6.7 billion in FY 2025 (excluding the University of Utah hospitals and integrated health system and component units with independent operations). Of this total, state tax funds supplied 26.8%, tuition and fees accounted for 16.8%, capital appropriations and gifts made up 4.3%, and "Other Revenue" sources including research grants and contracts, gifts and contributions, and sales and services (e.g., athletics, arts, and other events) accounted for the largest share of higher education revenue at 52.1%. Capital and "Other" funds often carry restrictions that limit their budget flexibility compared to state funds and tuition revenue.

Revenues vary widely across institutions and institution types (Figure 13). Utah's regional colleges rely more on tuition and fees (24% to 29% of total revenue). Community colleges and technical colleges generally receive most of their funding from the state. As research universities, the University of Utah and Utah State University receive most of their funding from "Other" sources.

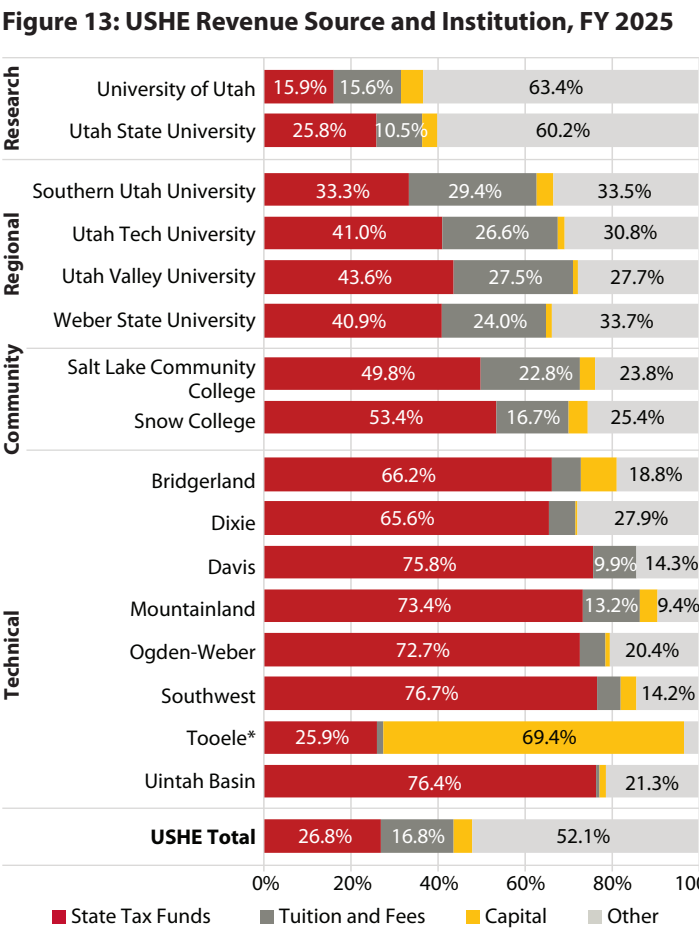
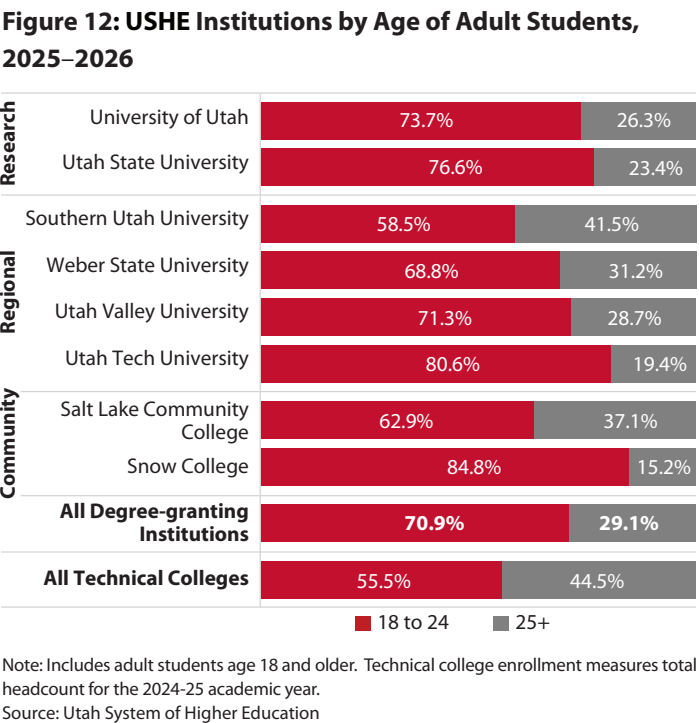
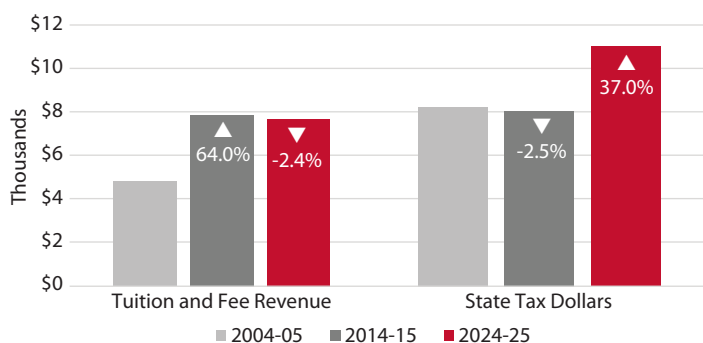


Figure 14: Utah Real State Tax Dollars and Average Tuition and Fee Revenue Per Full-Time Equivalent Student, 2004–05 to 2024–25

FY 2025 Dollars



Source: Utah System of Higher Education

Tuition and Fees

Enrollment declines at Utah's higher education institutions directly affect tuition and fee revenue. Over the past decade, statewide total tuition and fee amounts per full-time equivalent student at USHE schools remained fairly stable, falling 2.4% after accounting for inflation (Figure 14). These statewide totals reflect the effects of net tuition after discounts and will vary by institution, including by tuition rates and composition of the student body (full-time, part-time, graduate, undergraduate, etc.). If tuition rates remain constant but fewer students enroll, Utah's institutions could see lower revenue from this funding source. Regional universities (Southern Utah, Utah Tech, Utah Valley, and Weber State) may experience the greatest relative impact, as they derive 24% to 29% of their total revenue from tuition and fees. Technical colleges would be less affected, as all but one receive less than 10% of their revenue from student payments.

State Funding

State appropriations account for 26.2% of higher education funding in Utah, but the University of Utah's large operating budget—largely supported by other sources—lowers the systemwide average. Most USHE institutions receive a higher share of state funding. For example, state appropriations provide about two-thirds of technical college funding and about half of community college funding.

The state funds higher education primarily through an annual legislative appropriation process that builds on prior-year funding. This process includes incremental adjustments for enrollment, performance, compensation, and other legislative priorities. In recent years, less than 1% of total state appropriations tied to enrollment growth, limiting the direct effect of enrollment changes on institutional budgets. While SB 216 (2026) established a mechanism to adjust funding for both enrollment growth and decline, enrollment-based funding remains a small share of overall state appropriations.

Other Funding Sources

Other funding sources include sales and services, gifts and contributions, federal grants, and other revenue streams. Demographic declines affect these sources less than tuition revenue. Sales and services revenue may decrease if fewer students enroll, and smaller graduating classes could limit future alumni giving.

Research universities also receive a significant share of funding from federal and other research grants. Because these grants depend primarily on research activity, demographic change has little direct effect on this revenue source. That said, changes to federal research funding may create financial pressures independent of enrollment trends.¹⁰

Utah Can Prepare for the Demographic Dip

State and institutional leaders can adopt a variety of strategies to maximize the opportunities and reduce the strain associated with Utah's changing demographics. In a previous analysis, the Gardner Institute provided a range of responses grouped into three broad categories: transform, conserve, and realign.¹¹ Transformational strategies involve more fundamental or innovative changes; conservation strategies preserve financial health and existing strengths; and realignment strategies adjust resources and operations to match new realities (Figure 15).

Current Initiatives

The Utah Legislature, the Utah Board of Higher Education, and USHE institutions have advanced many of these strategies, as well as others, that may help mitigate the effects of the demographic dip. Examples include:

- **Optimizing facilities and infrastructure** – State leaders took several steps to encourage efficient use of existing higher education facilities by initiating a statewide assessment of space utilization, creating a space utilization task force, centralizing utilization reporting, and formalizing new requirements that link capital funding requests to facility utilization.^{12,13,14}
- **Strengthening financial planning** – The Utah Board of Higher Education partners with the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute to conduct budget stress tests on degree-granting institutions.¹⁵ These analyses, now underway, will help institutions evaluate the financial implications of changing enrollment and identify strategies to improve long-term fiscal resilience.

- **Investing in Utah-focused research** – The Legislature established the Higher Education Innovation Pilot Program in 2026 and appropriated \$45 million to launch the initiative. The program provides competitive funding to all USHE degree-granting institutions for research with strong potential to advance Utah’s workforce, economy, public policy priorities, commercialization, and student engagement.¹⁶
- **Improving resource allocation** – HB 265 (2025) required USHE degree-granting institutions to reallocate resources toward high-priority programs aligned with workforce needs and student outcomes. In 2026, the Utah Board of Higher Education extended a similar strategic reinvestment process to technical colleges, encouraging institutions across the system to evaluate programs and better align resources with changing demands.^{17,18}
- **Adjusting funding mechanisms** – The Legislature adopted a new enrollment funding model in 2026 that links a small share of state appropriations (less than 1% in recent years) to both enrollment growth and declines. The model uses a five-year rolling average of full-time equivalent students, better aligning funding with changing enrollment patterns.¹⁹

Utah Can Build on Existing Efforts

Three areas stand out as opportunities to build on existing momentum while helping institutions adapt to changing enrollment patterns, expand educational opportunity, and support Utah’s workforce needs. These include:

- Strengthen systemwide coordination
- Improve student retention and completion
- Attract and serve learners 25 and older

Strengthen Systemwide Coordination

Utah’s public colleges and universities operate within a coordinated statewide system. However, as the traditional college-age population declines and competition for students increases, enrollment growth at one institution may increasingly come at the expense of another. Continuing to strengthen policies and incentives that support systemwide coordination can help institutions collectively improve student access, increase operational efficiency, and meet Utah’s workforce needs.

Several recent Utah initiatives focus on improving system collaboration. SB 152 (2026) establishes a statewide data-sharing framework to support expanded direct-admission opportunities and other coordinated enrollment initiatives.²⁰ Institutions also collaborate on shared administrative services, including employee health benefits, payroll, procurement, information technology, and other operational functions, to improve efficiency.²¹

Figure 15: Demographic Dip Response Strategies



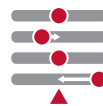
Transform

- Coordinate a systemwide mission-based strategy
- Aggressively increase student retention and completion
- Recruit “last mile” students
- Increase traditional college-age enrollment rate
- Expand beyond traditional college-age students
- Increase private sector partnerships like apprenticeships
- Attract the best and brightest national researchers, faculty, and students
- Invest in locally impactful research



Conserve

- Augment budget buffers
- Seek alternative revenue streams
- Exercise prudence with new ongoing spending commitments
- Address enrollment barriers
- Carefully consider impacts of material expansions in physical campus footprints



Realign

- Optimize personnel and infrastructure to align with smaller student counts
- Tie instructional funding more closely to student body size

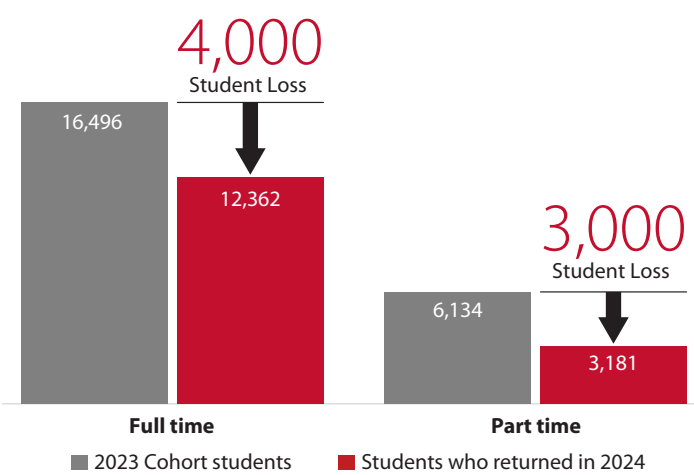
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute

The Legislature reinforced this systemwide approach through HB 352 (2026), which directs the Utah Board of Higher Education to organize institutions into regional partnerships, expand transfer pathways, explore shared services, and identify opportunities to align institutional missions and academic programs better.²² USHE has since released a regional framework that encourages collaboration between institutions with different missions to reduce program duplication and streamline student mobility.²³

Improve Student Retention and Completion

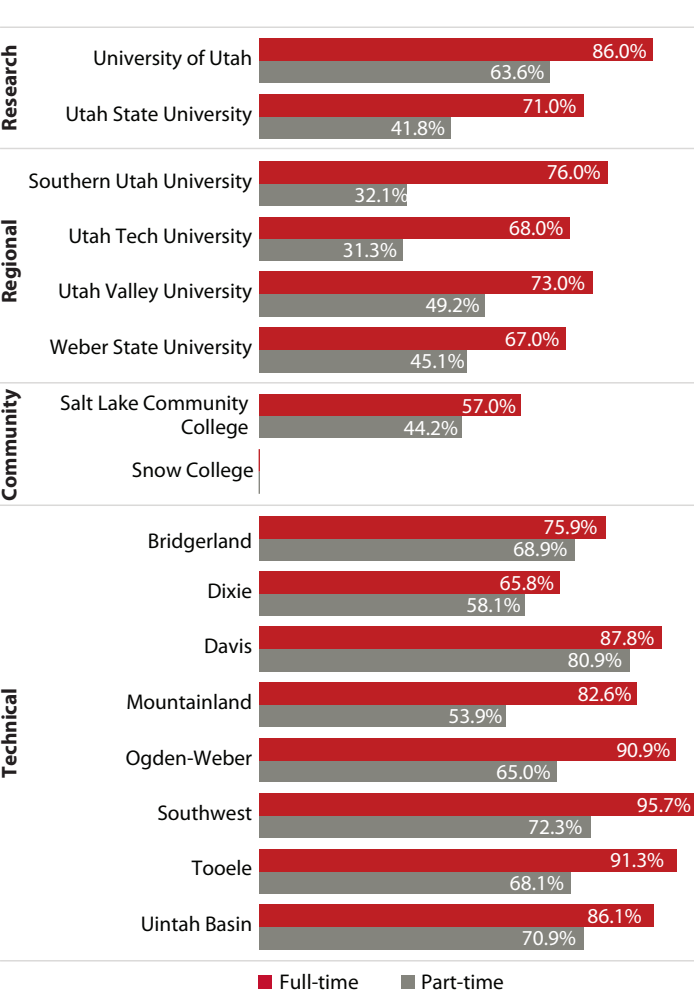
Ensuring the success of enrolled students will become increasingly important as the number of 18-to-24-year-olds declines. Improving retention and graduation rates not only benefits students through higher educational attainment and earnings but also helps institutions offset potential enrollment declines. In other words, the easiest student to recruit may be the one already enrolled.

Figure 16: First-Year Student Retention at USHE Institutions by Full and Part-Time Status, 2023 to 2024



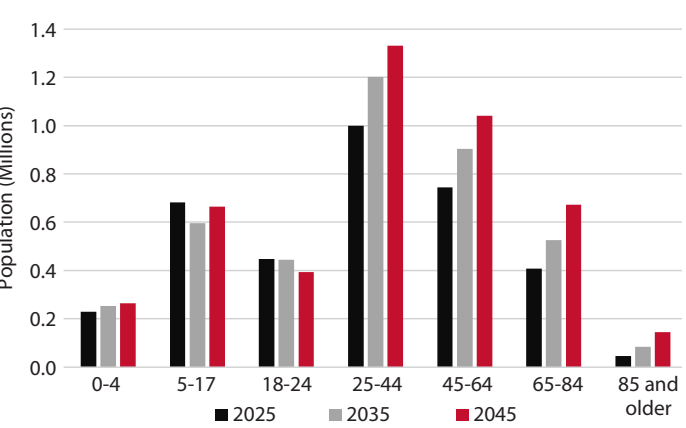
Note: Fall 2023 first-time undergraduate enrollment at 15 USHE schools and retention to Fall 2024. Data unavailable for Snow College. Excludes transfer students, continuing students, graduate students, and many non-traditional students.
Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS)

Figure 17: First-Year Student Retention by USHE Institution and Full- and Part-Time Status, 2023 to 2024



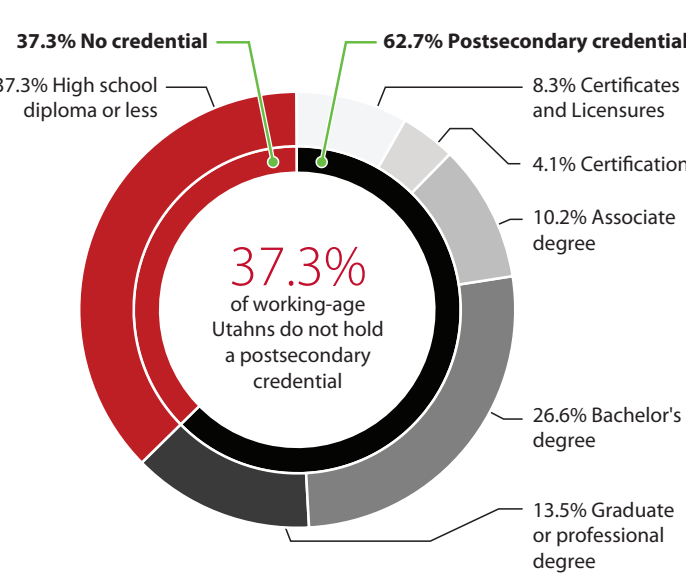
Note: Fall 2023 first-time undergraduate enrollment and retention to Fall 2024. Data unavailable for Snow College. Excludes transfer students, continuing students, graduate students, and many non-traditional students.
Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS)

Figure 18: Projected Utah Population by Age Group, 2025, 2035, and 2045



Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, 2025-2065 Projections

Figure 19: Educational Attainment for Utahns Ages 25 to 64, 2024



Note: Certificates and licensures represent college-level credentials (e.g., electrician, culinary arts) while certifications represent industry-recognized certifications that meet high-value criteria for employment, earnings, and learning (e.g., cybersecurity, or project management). Many individuals in health-related careers hold both a certificate and industry certification (e.g., pharmacy technicians, nursing assistants).
Source: Lumina Foundation

Systemwide, USHE institutions retained 68.7% of first-year students between 2023 and 2024, with about 4,000 full-time and 3,000 part-time students not returning the following fall (Figure 16). Retention rates vary substantially across institutions and between full- and part-time students, reflecting differences in student populations, institutional missions, and other factors (Figure 17). Even incremental improvements could retain hundreds or thousands of additional students each year. Because these figures capture only first-time undergraduate students and their first year of persistence, they represent only a portion of the potential enrollment gains from improved retention systemwide.

Recently adopted performance measures encourage USHE institutions to focus on helping students persist from enrollment through graduation. Beginning with the 2027 performance funding cycle, institutions will be evaluated using metrics that place greater emphasis on student progression and completion, including first-year credit accumulation, timely completion, and awards per full-time equivalent student.²⁴ A growing body of research identifies a range of effective student retention and completion strategies—including better coordination among advising, academic affairs, financial aid, and student support services; proactive, data-informed advising; timely academic and financial support; and early interventions for students at risk of leaving school before completion.^{25,26}

Attract and Serve Learners Age 25 and Older

As Utah’s traditional college-age population declines, adults age 25 and older represent one of the state’s greatest opportunities to sustain higher education enrollment. The number of Utahns age 25 and older is projected to grow substantially over the coming decades, expanding the potential pool of learners in this age group (Figure 18). More than one-third of working-age Utahns (ages 25–64) do not hold a postsecondary credential—a substantial population that may benefit from additional education, training, and credentialing opportunities (Figure 19). The growing use of artificial intelligence may also increase the need for workers at all educational levels to reskill and upskill. Expanding access for adult learners can boost college enrollment while supporting Utah’s workforce and economy.

USHE’s 2024–2027 strategic plan identifies expanding access for adult learners (students age 25 and older) as a key strategy to improve participation in higher education. To support this work, the Commissioner’s Office established dedicated leadership for adult learners and expanded initiatives, including credit for prior learning, flexible course delivery, the Adult Learner Grant Program, and the Veterans Tuition Gap Program.^{27,28,29} Select USHE institutions have also introduced adult-learner advising, coaching, and other targeted supports. However, the availability of these services varies considerably across campuses, and existing resources can be difficult for working adults to locate and use.³⁰

Strengthening and standardizing support for adult learners across the system could improve access and increase enrollment while helping institutions serve learners throughout their lives. A national scan of adult learner strategies highlights flexible coursework pathways and comprehensive navigation and coaching support as effective strategies for increasing adult learner access.³¹ Ensuring that every campus provides visible adult-learner resources and clear pathways to degree completion and workforce upskilling could help translate these strategies into broader statewide access.

Table 1: Projected College-age Population, 2025-2065

Year	Ages 18-24	Year	Ages 18-24	Year	Ages 18-24
2025	446,959	2039	420,158	2053	434,174
2026	460,238	2040	414,435	2054	445,093
2027	471,821	2041	408,538	2055	454,979
2028	475,669	2042	404,424	2056	463,422
2029	475,212	2043	400,433	2057	470,150
2030	472,932	2044	396,742	2058	475,042
2031	469,293	2045	393,112	2059	478,181
2032	463,717	2046	391,245	2060	479,801
2033	457,013	2047	390,359	2061	480,346
2034	450,752	2048	391,946	2062	479,974
2035	443,894	2049	395,493	2063	478,814
2036	437,469	2050	402,478	2064	477,013
2037	431,893	2051	411,907	2065	474,724
2038	426,464	2052	422,788		

Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, 2025-2065 Projections

Conclusion

Projections show that Utah’s college-age population will begin declining for nearly two decades beginning in 2029. This decline will create a smaller pool of traditional college-age students from which the state’s colleges and universities can recruit. Combined with lower college-going rates and changing public perceptions of higher education, these demographic shifts could create meaningful enrollment and financial challenges for many institutions.

That said, demographic trends do not determine outcomes on their own. Utah has already begun preparing for this transition through policy changes and other initiatives that strengthen the state’s higher education system. Continued progress in systemwide coordination, student retention and completion, and support for learners age 25 and older can help institutions adapt to changing enrollment patterns while expanding educational opportunity and strengthening Utah’s workforce. While population trends will influence Utah’s higher education landscape, Utah leaders can shape how those changes affect students, institutions, and communities throughout the state.

Endnotes

1. Utah 2065: Long-Term Planning Projections (Vintage 2025) Summary <https://gardner.utah.edu/utah-demographics/population-projections/utah-2065-long-term-vintage-2025/>
2. Accuracy Analysis conducted by the Gardner Institute reveals an inverse relationship between the size of a population and the percent error of its projections. Larger counties and the state typically have low percent errors, while smaller counties receive higher errors. Projections for less populous counties should be interpreted with caution, as smaller populations are more difficult to model. <https://d36oiwf74r1rap.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/PopProjAcc-Jun2022.pdf>
3. For more on fertility rate declines, see <https://d36oiwf74r1rap.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/DecliningFertility-Apr2025-Revision-Sep2025.pdf>
4. National Center for Educational Statistics Table 302.20
5. National Center for Educational Statistics Table 302.20
6. Jones, J. M. (2025, July 16). U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises From Recent Low. Gallup.com; Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692519/public-trust-higher-rises-recent-low.aspx>
7. Beshay. "Growing Share of Americans Say the U.S. Higher Education System Is Headed in the Wrong Direction." Pew Research Center, 15 Oct. 2025, www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/15/growing-share-of-americans-say-the-us-higher-education-system-is-headed-in-the-wrong-direction/.
8. Swensen, Jason. "Poll Reveals Most Utahns Trust Their Colleges & Universities." *Deseret News*, 17 Mar. 2026, www.deseret.com/utah/2026/03/17/utah-higher-education-poll/. Accessed 28 Apr. 2026.
9. Another 55,000 USHE students are younger than 18- mostly concurrently enrolled high school students.
10. Agarwal, K. (2026, June 5). OMB Proposes Major Changes to How the Federal Government Funds Scientific research. Association of American Universities. <https://www.aau.edu/newsroom/leading-research-universities-report/omb-proposes-major-changes-how-federal-government>
11. Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. (2024). Navigating Utah's Demographic Dip: Strategically Positioning Utah Higher Education Amid College-age Population Declines. <https://d36oiwf74r1rap.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Navigating-HigherEd-Oct2024.pdf>
12. Smithgroup. (2025, October 15). Utah Statewide Higher Education Space Utilization Master Plan. <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2024/pdf/00003626.pdf>
13. Utah System of Higher Education. (2026, May 14). Space Utilization Task Force Report Memorandum. <https://public.onboardmeetings.com/Meeting/%2FL5G8Lkpc1%2F4yulAsJTMwS5I2H2T2%2FNPJqb2sKFM33AA/f3qhulyZKFclpdG67cFvOUFc6kgqCaLiD4mvvT0UyWA/i9i9kC3BJtsDN-v8agfuU2ehXBitvMAnfPmE%2FloCL11A/MfkYxpskAmBQUcRj4N-43LdUYsaQiRY0eluNR3r0eTrYA/Agenda%20Document>
14. Utah State Legislature. 2026 General Session. H.B. 508: State Facilities Modifications. <https://le.utah.gov/Session/2026/bills/static/HB0508.html>
15. Utah System of Higher Education. (2025). 2025 GS Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee. <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2025/pdf/00000247.pdf?>
16. Utah State Legislature. 2026 General Session. H.B. 373: Higher Education Innovation. <https://le.utah.gov/Session/2026/bills/static/HB0373.html>
17. Utah State Legislature. 2026 General Session. H.B. 265: Higher Education Strategic Reinvestment. <https://le.utah.gov/~2025/bills/static/HB0265.html>
18. Utah System of Higher Education. (2026, March 26). Utah Board of Higher Education expands strategic reinvestment to technical colleges. <https://ushe.edu/utah-board-of-higher-education-expands-strategic-reinvestment-to-technical-colleges/>
19. Utah State Legislature. 2026 General Session. S.B. 216: Higher Education Performance and Enrollment Funding. <https://le.utah.gov/~2025/bills/static/HB0265.html>
20. Utah State Legislature. 2026 General Session. S.B. 152: Public and Higher Education Collaboration. <https://le.utah.gov/Session/2026/bills/introduced/SB0152.pdf>
21. Utah System of Higher Education. (2025). 2025 GS Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee Presentation. <https://le.utah.gov/interim/2025/pdf/00000247.pdf?>
22. Utah System of Higher Education. (2026) Regional Framework for a Reimagined Utah System of Higher Education. <https://public.onboardmeetings.com/Meeting/%2FL5G8Lkpc1%2F4yulAsJTMwS5I2H2T2%2FNPJqb2sKFM33AA/Xu2CpDdwmtNBtv9P1QpFmP8KXYpQVfetTmBDWIIAAMJmSJJu4w9YUqil7sbrnl2Hpt81ugU7CaAP8gF26i0pMA/7wPLzsa2g6Z8yvVbsOL-CiX9bm918fZRgMcvNd7dpXTWA/Agenda%20Document>
23. Utah System of Higher Education. (2026) Regional Framework for a Reimagined Utah System of Higher Education. <https://public.onboardmeetings.com/Meeting/%2FL5G8Lkpc1%2F4yulAsJTMwS5I2H2T2%2FNPJqb2sKFM33AA/A9Xu2CpDdwmtNBtv9P1QpFmP8KXYpQVfetTmBDWIIAAMJmSJJu4w9YUqil7sbrnl2Hpt81ugU7CaAP8gF26i0pMA/7wPLzsa2g6Z8yvVbsOL-CiX9bm918fZRgMcvNd7dpXTWA/Agenda%20Document>
24. Utah State Legislature. 2026 General Session. S.B. 216: Higher Education Performance and Enrollment Funding. <https://le.utah.gov/~2025/bills/static/HB0265.html>
25. U.S. Department of Education. (2024). Raise the Bar: Attaining College Excellence and Equity. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/2024-09/RTB-Holistic%20Advising%20and%20Wraparound%20Services.pdf>
26. Shanks, L. (2026). A decade of success: Findings from 10 years of APLU's Degree Completion Award. Association of Public & Land-grant Universities: Washington, D.C.
27. Hood, S. & Grua, C. (2025). Credit for Prior Learning Utah System of Higher Education. https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/reports/2025/2025-Credit-for-Prior-Learning-Issue-Brief.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
28. Utah System of Higher Education. Adult Learner Grant Program. <https://ushe.edu/adult-learner-grant-program/?>
29. Utah System of Higher Education. Veterans Tuition Gap Program. <https://ushe.edu/adult-learner-grant-program/?>
30. Gonzalez, Richard. (2026, May 15). "USHE Institutional Scan: Adult Learner Initiatives and Support Structures." Utah System of Higher Education General Report.
31. Gonzalez, Richard. (2025, October 31). "State-by-State Adult Learner Access Report." Utah System of Higher Education General Report.

Partners in the Community

The following individuals and entities help support the research mission of the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute.

Legacy Partners

The Gardner Company
 Christian and Marie Gardner Family
 Intermountain Health
 Clark and Christine Ivory Foundation
 KSL and Deseret News
 Larry H. & Gail Miller Family Foundation
 Mountain America Credit Union
 Salt Lake City Corporation
 Salt Lake County
 University of Utah Health
 Utah Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity
 WCF Insurance
 Zions Bank

Executive Partners

The Boyer Company
 Clyde Companies

Sustaining Partners

Enbridge
 Salt Lake Chamber
 Staker Parson Materials and Construction
 Utah Chamber
 Wells Fargo

Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute Advisory Board

Conveners

Michael O. Leavitt
 Mitt Romney

Board

Scott Anderson, Co-Chair
 Gail Miller, Co-Chair
 Doug Anderson
 Deborah Bayle
 Roger Boyer
 Sophia M. DiCaro
 Cameron Diehl
 Kurt Dirks

Lisa Eccles
 Spencer P. Eccles
 Christian Gardner
 Kem C. Gardner
 Kimberly Gardner
 Natalie Gochmour
 Brandy Grace
 Jeremy Hafen
 Clark Ivory
 Eric Liston
 Ann Marie McDonald
 Derek Miller
 Ann Millner

Sterling Nielsen
 Jason Perry
 Ray Pickup
 Gary B. Porter
 Taylor Randall
 Jill Remington Love
 Josh Romney
 Charles W. Sorenson
 James Lee Sorenson
 Becky Utz
 Vicki Varela

Ex Officio (invited)

Governor Spencer Cox
 Speaker Mike Schultz
 Senate President
 Stuart Adams
 Representative
 Angela Romero
 Senator Luz Escamilla
 Mayor Jenny Wilson
 Mayor Erin Mendenhall

Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute Staff and Advisors

Leadership Team

Natalie Gochmour, Associate Dean and Director
 Jennifer Robinson, Chief of Staff and Associate Director
 Mallory Bateman, Director of Demographic Research
 Phil Dean, Chief Economist and Research Director
 Shelley Kruger, Director of Accounting and Finance
 Colleen Larson, Associate Director of Administration
 Nate Lloyd, Director of Economic Research
 Maddy Oritt, Director of Public Finance Research
 Laura Summers, Director of Public Policy Research
 Nicholas Thiriot, Communications Director

Staff

Eric Albers, Senior Natural Resources Policy Analyst
 Samantha Ball, Dignity Initiative Research Director
 Parker Banta, Public Policy Analyst
 Melanie Beagley, Senior Health Research Analyst
 Marina Berlin, Public Policy Analyst
 Andrea Thomas Brandley, Senior Education Analyst
 Kara Ann Byrne, Senior Health and Human Services Analyst
 Moira Dillow, Housing, Construction, and Real Estate Analyst
 John C. Downen, Senior Research Fellow
 Dejan Eskic, Senior Research Fellow and Scholar
 Kate Farr, Monson Center Maintenance Specialist
 Chance Hansen, Communications Specialist
 Emily Harris, Senior Demographer

Ethan Hepworth, Economic Analyst
 Michael T. Hogue, Senior Research Statistician
 Mike Hollingshaus, Senior Demographer
 Madeleine Jones, Dignity Initiative Field Director
 Jennifer Leaver, Senior Tourism Analyst
 Levi Pace, Senior Research Economist
 Praopan Pratoomchat, Senior Research Economist
 Heidi Prior, Senior Public Policy Analyst
 Megan Rabe, Senior Demographer
 Natalie Roney, Senior Public Finance Economist
 Shannon Simonsen, Research Coordinator
 Paul Springer, Senior Graphic Designer
 Gaby Velasquez, Monson Center Special Events Coordinator
 Cayley Wintch, Monson Center Building Manager
 David Witt, Dignity Initiative Program Associate

Senior Advisors

Jonathan Ball, Office of the Legislative Fiscal Analyst
 Ari Bruening, Community-at-Large
 Silvia Castro, Suazo Business Center
 Gary Cornia, Marriott School of Business
 Beth Jarosz, Population Reference Bureau
 Dianne Meppen, Community-at-Large
 Pamela S. Perlich, Community-at-Large
 Chris Redgrave, Community-at-Large
 Juliette Tennert, Community-at-Large

INFORMED DECISIONS™