

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Students

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### Education-Degree Programs, Once Popular, Take a Nosedive

*By Rebecca Koenig*

Holley Hamilton, a first-grade teacher in Charlotte, N.C., was considering going back to school for a master's degree in education last year. Noticing that younger teachers were coming into classrooms armed with new ideas, she figured teacher-preparation programs had advanced significantly in the two decades since she graduated with a bachelor's in education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"I probably need to reboot and catch up," she thought.

But then the state government [eliminated](#) the automatic 10-percent pay raise given to teachers with master's degrees. So Ms. Hamilton put her plans on hold.

"I just decided not to, because it's silly if you're not going to be rewarded financially," she said.

She's not the only teacher forgoing a master's degree. Enrollment is down in education schools across the country. North Carolina has seen a sharp decline, as the political climate has put unique pressure on the state's education programs. That has led some institutions in the state to get creative, by starting new degree offerings to attract students whose interests lie outside the traditional teaching track.

We dug into the numbers to look at what is going on in education programs and how colleges are responding.

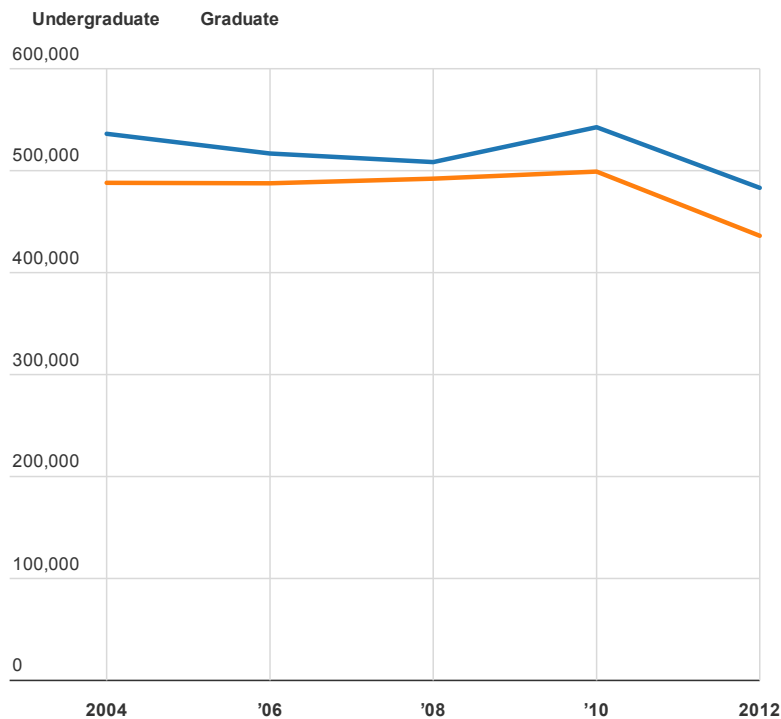
#### **A Nationwide Pattern**

From 2010 to 2012, enrollment in undergraduate education programs at four-year public and private nonprofit universities—traditional mainstays of schoolteacher preparation—declined by

nearly 11 percent, and enrollment in their graduate (master's and doctoral) education programs dropped by more than 12 percent, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

## Enrollments Slide at Nonprofit Universities

Between 2010 and 2012, enrollment fell in both undergraduate (nearly 11 percent) and graduate (more than 12 percent) education programs at traditional mainstays of schoolteacher preparation: public and private nonprofit universities.



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Source: IpedS, [Get the data](#)

The numbers don't match overall enrollment trends.

Undergraduate [fall enrollment](#) at four-year public and private nonprofit universities increased by more than 3 percent from 2010 to 2012. And according to survey results released by the Council of Graduate Schools in September, [graduate enrollment](#) at participating public and private nonprofit universities increased by an average of 0.7 percent annually from 2008 to 2013.

Among survey respondents, education had the greatest percentage decrease of all graduate programs from 2012 to 2013 (down 4.5 percent) and the greatest average annual percentage decline from 2008 to 2013 (down 3.4 percent).

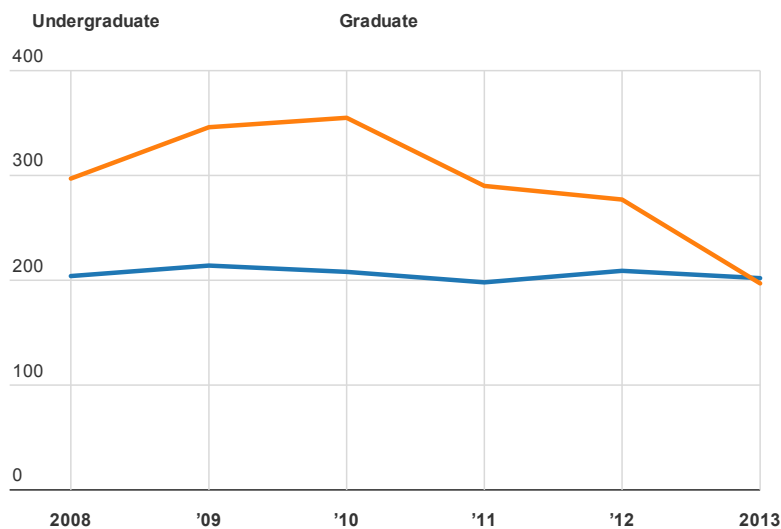
Administrators at the University of North Carolina are especially concerned. From 2010 to 2013, annual fall undergraduate enrollment in the system declined by more than 17 percent, and master's-degree enrollment fell by nearly 18 percent. Thirteen of

the system's 15 universities that offer undergraduate education degrees saw declines in enrollment, and 12 of the 14 that offer master's programs saw declines in graduate enrollment.

The master's program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was particularly hard hit: From 2010 to 2013, enrollment declined by more than 44 percent.

## Fall Enrollments in Teacher-Education Programs at Chapel Hill

Enrollment in the education master's program at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill declined more than 44 percent between 2010 and 2013.



Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Source: U. of North Carolina , [Get the data](#)

"When you lose that many students, it's very hard to maintain the program," said Bill McDiarmid, dean and a professor of education at Chapel Hill. "You're not getting the revenues you need to pay faculty and staff to continue to run that program."

Several factors help explain the nationwide decline in enrollment in traditional education programs:

### Other Options

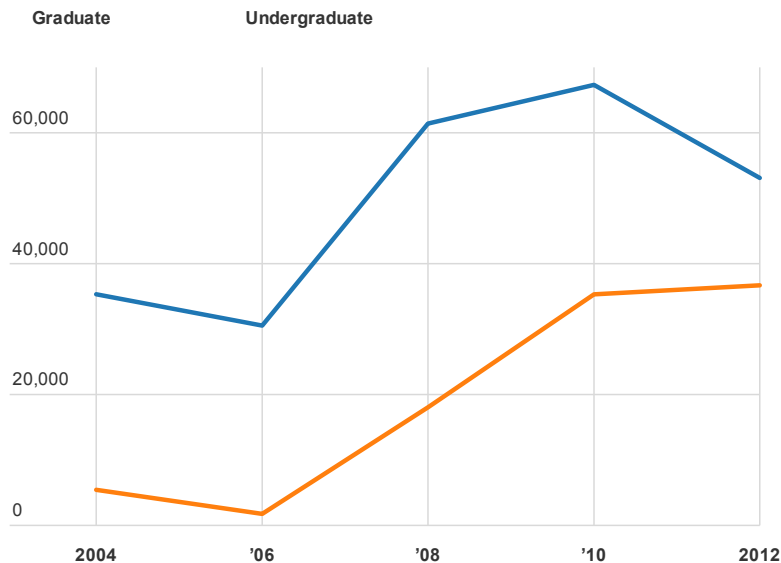
Data show that the paths students take to prepare for the teaching profession are changing. For-profit institutions have gobbled up an increasingly large share of students, as have online degree programs.

Enrollment in education programs at private, for-profit institutions has greatly increased in the past decade. From 2010 to 2012, enrollment in private, for-profit undergraduate education

programs rose nearly 4 percent. Enrollment in for-profit graduate education programs decreased more than 21 percent but was still more than 50 percent higher than in 2004.

## Growing Enrollments at For-Profits

Private, for-profit institutions are gobbling up education students: Between 2004 and 2012, undergraduate enrollment rose more than 575 percent and graduate enrollment rose more than 50 percent.



Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Source: [IpedS](#), [Get the data](#)

Before the law changed, Ms. Hamilton was pursuing a master's degree in an online program offered by Concordia University in Portland, Ore. Although the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill offers online master's degrees, Ms. Hamilton said she did not consider them. She was attracted to Concordia's program, she said, by emails she had received from the university.

"They had a really good reputation online," she said. "I thought it was kind of joke to get a master's online, but it also seemed really convenient," she added, noting that she wasn't eager to go back to a traditional classroom.

### It's the Economy, Stupid

The recession hit many school districts hard, and experts who spoke to *The Chronicle* believe layoffs and decreased hiring may have discouraged students from pursuing teaching careers.

"In the last few years, school districts have been cutting back on the number of teachers. There were layoffs in a number of areas, and hiring diminished, and the job market became less attractive," said Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National

Fellowship Foundation and a former president of Columbia University's Teachers College. "One of the things we've seen is that career changers who were interested in switching to teaching are less likely to do it now. The field seems too uncertain, and holding on to their current jobs seems appealing."

Mark LaCelle-Peterson, vice president for policy and programs at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, believes the numbers will rebound when the economy picks up.

"Enrollment in teacher-education programs has always been cyclical and somewhat responsive to the economy," he said. "In the long term, it will be responsive to the job market. Right now we're still projecting a need for quite a number of new teachers."

A U.S. Department of Education [report](#), released in February, confirmed his prediction: It projects that the number of teachers in public elementary and secondary schools will rise from 2011 (the last year of available data) and 2022, as will the number of new teacher hires in both public and private schools.

Low pay may have made students hesitate even more, considering the state of the economy.

"Relatively low pay has been a problem in teaching for a long time," Mr. LaCelle-Peterson said. "I think it's a problem, but I don't think it's a new problem."

The salary concern may be heightened in North Carolina. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the estimated [average annual salary](#) of public-school teachers in the state declined in value by nearly 14.7 percent from the 1999-2000 to the 2012-13 school years. The state with the next-largest decline was Indiana, with a 10-percent drop. For the 2012-13 school year, North Carolina offered the fourth-lowest average annual public-school teacher's salary: \$45,947.

"I'm making \$10,000 less a year than I was six years ago in Washington State—and they have no state income tax, so I'm probably making even less," Ms. Hamilton said.

## Political Climate

Budget cuts, struggles over teacher tenure, and increased scrutiny of children's test scores have cranked up the pressure on both teachers and teacher-preparation programs.

Mr. McDiarmid and Alisa Chapman, the North Carolina system's vice president for academic and university programs, pointed to several other factors they believe may have contributed to declining enrollment in North Carolina. In 2011 the state government cut funding for the Teaching Fellows program, created in 1986, which awarded a \$6,500-per-year scholarship to selected high-school seniors who agreed to teach for four years in the state's public schools after graduation.

"This program became an exemplar; by just about any measure, it was a remarkable success," Mr. McDiarmid said. "There's been research that shows that pupils of those teachers consistently score higher on achievement tests. Despite those very positive results, the legislature decided to eliminate the program."

Ms. Hamilton, who has taught elementary school in California in addition to North Carolina and Washington State, believes that the lack of unions in North Carolina leads to worse working conditions for teachers, which could dissuade people from joining their ranks.

"Here, you're just kind of on your own," she said. "All of these things are assumed, and they put you on committees, and there's no stipend, no award."

## Negative Reputation

Harder to quantify, but still powerful, is public perception of teachers and education programs.

"In the last few years there's been a great deal of criticism of teachers. In its worst form we call it teacher-bashing. It's just less attractive because there's so much criticism," said Richard M. Ingersoll, a professor of education and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. "It's sort of a beleaguered occupation at this point."

Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality,

theorized that declining interest in the profession, or its traditional preparation programs, had led to decreased enrollment in education departments. She cited a [PDK/Gallup poll](#) that reported in September that 57 percent of Americans would like their child to pursue a career in public-school teaching—lower than in 2005, when 62 percent approved of that career path.

"It's either people have decided that teaching isn't as attractive a place to work as it was 10 years ago, or that teacher preparation itself is not adding value," Ms. Walsh said.

But education professors believe their programs add significant value to the classroom. So instead of waiting for the economy or public opinion to improve, many are innovating.

The University of North Carolina—the state's largest supplier of teachers—is taking steps to "address the pipeline problem," Ms. Chapman said. Those steps include starting a statewide marketing recruitment push and creating a first-year teacher-support program.

"Teachers who participated in the institutes we conducted through the program were significantly more likely to return to teaching in their school," Ms. Chapman said. "The professional development made a difference."

Individual universities are adapting, as well. Starting with the Class of 2018, Chapel Hill undergraduates majoring in education will complete a fifth-year master's degree. The university's minor in education, only a few years old, has about 60 students, many of whom go on to Teach for America, said Professor Lynda Stone.

This fall, the university welcomed its first cohort of students in the new master's of international education program, aimed at international students, people interested in working for global nonprofit organizations, and those who want to open schools abroad. And next fall Professor R. Keith Sawyer hopes to open a one-year master's degree he's creating that will focus on educational innovation, technology, and entrepreneurship.

"We've been out in front of this with innovative new master's

programs," he said. "The dean conceived of this new program idea after the drop had already started to occur."

He believes the new degree will attract people interested in working for education-technology start-up companies and government agencies.

Traditional teachers may eventually return to master's programs, too. If the pay bump were reinstated in North Carolina, Ms. Hamilton would reconsider the option. It helps that she will soon be an empty-nester.

"Part of why I was looking at doing it last year is that my life was getting easier," she said. "I was getting this opening I would like to fill with something that was stimulating my mind and was benefiting my class."

*Clarification (10/10/2014, 12:23 p.m.):* We've updated two charts in this article—extending the y-axes to zero in both cases—to more accurately reflect the extent of the enrollment declines. Earlier versions of the charts may have made the drops appear more precipitous than they were.

23 Comments

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**jfran** · a year ago

Teachers are badly paid. Fact. But this article shows another problem: I have taught teachers for decades and am in awe of many of them, but there is a growing group-think among too many other teachers that reflects the very complaints they have about their own students. Teachers claim students don't understand life-long learning but then they themselves (and the woman here is not alone in this) thinks after 20 years she may "need to reboot." And her primary reason for not doing so is "I just decided not to, because it's silly if you're not going be rewarded financially." Yeah, learning is silly. And in those twenty years, I mean, what difference could technology and cognitive, psychological and disciplinary theories make anyway? Teachers who complain (they don't all by any means) say their students have no passion, take little initiative, won't do anything unless they are rewarded. Yet teachers themselves increasingly have those same attitudes, seen also among many within the last generation of the professoriate. YES teacher pay should be increased, yes they have been pounded into exhaustion by needless busy-work, but we--and that's another problem, teachers and the professoriate have not seen education as a "we" problem--are supposed to be really smart people and need to stop acting like independent contractors in competition: Teachers at all levels are broken by the system and reward has become a focus, but our whole system top to bottom is