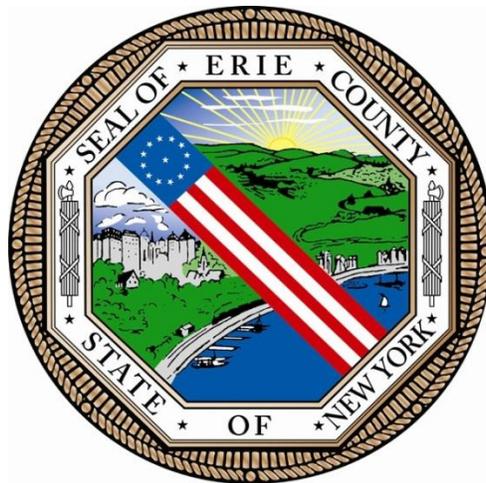


**March 2019**

## **A Report on Enrollment at SUNY Erie**



**STEFAN I. MYCHAJLIW**  
**ERIE COUNTY COMPTROLLER**

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**DIVISION OF AUDIT & CONTROL**

**95 FRANKLIN STREET  
BUFFALO, NEW YORK 14202**

**March 13, 2019**

Erie County Legislature  
92 Franklin Street, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Buffalo, New York 14202

Dear Honorable Members:

On March 1, 2019, a member of your Honorable Body requested information regarding enrollment at SUNY Erie, more commonly known as Erie Community College (ECC). The genesis for this request arose out of information presented by administration from ECC to your Honorable Body at a Finance and Management committee meeting.

Our objectives were to:

- Quantify enrollment for this year and previous years.
- Compare enrollment over a time period.
- Compare enrollment at ECC to other public colleges in Western New York.
- Examine the effectiveness of the Excelsior Scholarship program to bolster enrollment.

To accomplish these objectives, we reviewed enrollment and other data available from the State University of New York database.

As a result of our examination, we have determined that student enrollment at ECC has decreased during the time period 2010 - 2018. At this time, although the Excelsior Scholarship program is not yet fully implemented, it appears that the program has not yet increased attendance at ECC.

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## Background

ECC is a public institution that provides education and services in Erie County and surrounding communities in Western New York. The college was established in 1946 and has grown from a two-year technical institute to a three-campus college. The campuses are located in Amherst, Buffalo and Orchard Park. ECC offers a wide variety of associate degree and certificate programs, as well as online programs. The college's mission is to "meet the needs of a diverse student body and contribute to regional economic vitality by providing high-quality, flexible, affordable and accessible educational programs committed to student success." ECC is one of 30 community colleges that are part of the 64-campus State University of New York (SUNY) system.

At a meeting of the Erie County Legislature's Finance and Management Committee on January 10, 2019, ECC's Executive Vice President for Administration and Finance spoke briefly regarding enrollment numbers. She stated that enrollment was "fairly close to being on par to where we were last year at this time." A legislator asked for data regarding the enrollment goals provided to the Legislature the previous year. The response was that enrollment was at 96.3% from last year. The legislator then requested historical data regarding ECC enrollment numbers, which are enrollment numbers provided to SUNY.

The legislator subsequently requested that the Comptroller's Office assist in providing data regarding enrollment at ECC.

The data in this report was obtained from SUNY, the City University of New York (CUNY) and a report from the Center for an Urban Future regarding the Excelsior Scholarship program. The report does not include enrollment from the 2019 spring semester, because, at the time of the meeting at which enrollment was discussed, registration was not yet complete.

## Enrollment at ECC

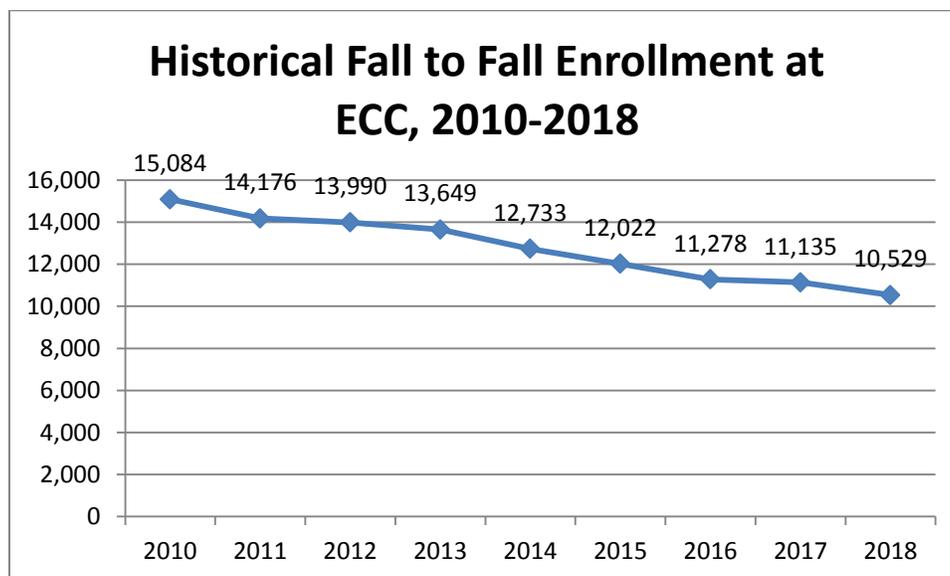
In order to compare enrollment numbers at ECC from year-to-year, the enrollment numbers for the fall semesters were selected.

Between fall semester 2010 and fall semester 2018, total enrollment at ECC decreased by 4,555 students. This represents a decrease of 30.2% over that time period.

Year	Full Time	Part Time	Total
2010	unavail.	unavail.	15,084
2011	9,356	4,820	14,176
2012	9,193	4,797	13,990
2013	9,039	4,610	13,649
2014	8,424	4,309	12,733
2015	7,931	4,091	12,022
2016	7,490	3,788	11,278
2017	7,269	3,866	11,135
2018	unavail.	unavail.	10,529

The decline in student population includes both full-time and part-time students.

The chart below uses the data above to graphically depict the steady decline in student enrollment at ECC since 2010:



## Enrollment at Other Western New York Colleges

The loss in population at community colleges is not limited to ECC. Most SUNY higher education institutions located in Western New York have also experienced declines in student population. The most significant declines have occurred at community colleges.

Institution	2010 Enrollment	2018 Enrollment	Percentage Change
Genesee Community College	7,486	5,530	-26.1%
Jamestown Community College	5,685	4,476	-21.3%
Niagara County Community College	7,428	5,047	-32.1%
Monroe County Community College	18,995	12,273	-35.4%
Alfred State College	3,709	3,737	0.8%
Brockport State College	8,589	8,287	-3.5%
Buffalo State College	12,419	9,118	-26.6%
SUNY Center at Buffalo (UB)	29,117	31,508	8.2%
Fredonia State College	5,773	4,655	-19.4%
Geneseo State College	5,665	5,588	-1.4%

Taken as a whole, the decline in student population at Western New York community colleges over the period is 30.8%.

Over this same time period, the student population at community colleges across New York State declined 19.8%. Recalculating to determine the State decline independent of Western New York community colleges, the decline of student population at non-Western New York community colleges is 17.7%. As such, the decline in student population at Western New York community colleges is significantly greater than the rest of New York State, with a decline in student population of 30.8%, compared to 17.7% for the rest of New York State.

Although not part of the SUNY system, City University of New York (CUNY) schools are also publicly funded by New York State. As such, their student enrollment numbers are included in our analysis. Over the five year period from 2013 through 2017, enrollment at CUNY community colleges also experienced a decline in student population. During this time period, the student population at CUNY community colleges declined 1.8%.

## The Excelsior Scholarship Program

The Excelsior Scholarship is a program that allows certain individuals to attend all CUNY and SUNY colleges tuition-free. To qualify, the student must be part of a family that earns up to \$125,000 per year. The student must be a resident of New York State, attend a CUNY or SUNY two- or four-year degree program, take 30 credit hours per calendar year, and plan to live in New York State for the length of time that they participate in the scholarship program.

The program began in the fall of 2017 and full implementation will be phased in over three years. The phase in involves expanding the eligibility pool from families who earn less than \$100,000 per year in year one, to families who earn less than \$125,000 per year for years three and beyond. The program is funded by the taxpayers of New York State. New York State has provided the following data as to who may be eligible for the Excelsior Scholarship by region:

<b>Region</b>	<b>Number of Families with College-Age Students</b>	<b>Percentage Eligible</b>	<b>Number of Families Eligible</b>
Western New York	68,712	78.8%	54,145
New York City	461,499	84.3%	389,044
Long Island	112,890	55.6%	62,767
Hudson Valley	92,333	63.0%	58,170
Capital Region	44,108	74.9%	33,037
Mohawk Valley	24,845	84.8%	21,069
Finger Lakes	55,747	79.2%	44,152
North Country	18,542	84.8%	15,724
Central New York	37,922	79.6%	30,186
Southern Tier	25,588	81.2%	20,777

The above chart describes the number of families with college age students and the percentage of those families who are eligible to participate in the program. For example, there are 68,712 families in Western New York with students who are college age. Of that number, 78.8% of those families are eligible to participate. As such, 51,145 families in Western New York are eligible to participate in the Excelsior Scholarship program.

For the first year of the program, only students whose family income was less than \$100,000 were eligible. Student enrollment declined at 27 of the 30 SUNY community colleges from fall semester 2017 to fall semester 2018. The available data does not analyze the impact of the Excelsior Scholarship program on school choice. For example, it does not indicate whether individuals chose four-year schools over community colleges because of the promise of the Excelsior Scholarship program. As such, it cannot at this time be definitively stated that the Excelsior Scholarship program has had a detrimental impact on student enrollment at community colleges. Further study on that issue is needed. However, attendance at community colleges has empirically decreased during the first year of the program.

Data from the first year of the program does suggest that the program has not as of yet been attractive to students. In the first year, only 20,086 students received an Excelsior Scholarship statewide. This represents just 3.2% of undergraduates. Of the 63,599 applications received, 68% were denied. The most common reason for denial was students not taking sufficient credits per year, which resulted in 83% of the denials.

At ECC, 289 students received Excelsior Scholarships. This equates to 2.6% of total enrollment. This is a higher percentage than the percentage of students enrolled in community colleges statewide, where 2.2% received Excelsior Scholarships. For the sake of comparison to other Western New York community colleges, 2.2% of students at Genesee Community College, 2.1% at Jamestown Community College, 2.8% at Monroe Community College and 3.0% at Niagara County Community College received Excelsior Scholarships.

The program does not appear to be a financing tool attractive to large percentages of students at four-year institutions either. At the University at Buffalo, 6.7% of students enrolled received Excelsior Scholarships, compared with 6.2% at Buffalo State College and 8.3% at the College at Brockport. Fredonia State University had the highest percentage in New York State of enrolled students receiving Excelsior Scholarships, although only 11.9% of students received them.

It is too early to determine if the program will serve the purpose of stemming the flight of talented and educated individuals from New York State after graduation from SUNY and CUNY colleges and universities. Future studies will need to be conducted to determine if students honor their commitment to remain in-state after graduation and whether the Excelsior Scholarship program had any impact on that decision. Further, the data will need to be refined to determine if students enrolled in the program are pursuing degrees in high need fields. Such study will occur after participants actually graduate from college and are hopefully able to secure employment. At this time, however, it can be definitively stated that attendance at community college declined during the first year of the Excelsior Scholarship program and that only 3.2% of students at SUNY and CUNY schools receive Excelsior Scholarships.

## **New York State Funding for Community Colleges**

New York State Education Law §6304 addresses the funding of community colleges. According to state law, New York State is responsible for funding a portion of the operating costs of community colleges. Student enrollment is a factor in the determination of aid for community colleges. In particular, it states:

“Such operating costs shall be subject to such maximum limitations and joint regulations as shall be prescribed by both the city university trustees and the state university trustees with the approval of the director of the budget. Such limitations shall be based on maximum allowances per student for each student in attendance in the case of operating costs, or in accordance with such other factors as may be deemed appropriate.”

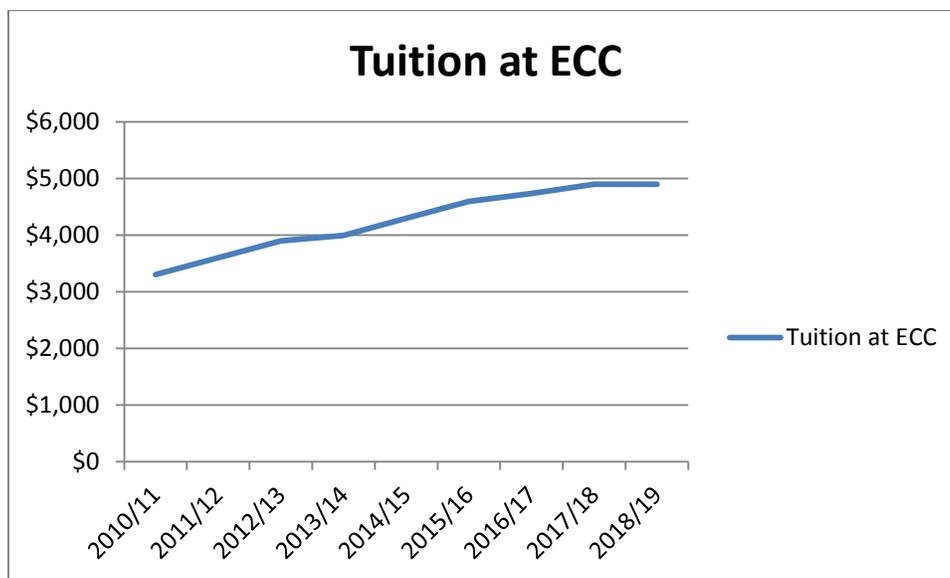
Because student attendance is a factor in computing state aid, declining enrollment places additional pressure on colleges seeking additional revenue. Between the 2010/11 academic year and the 2016/17 academic year, New York State aid to ECC fell from \$30,472,177 to

\$30,451,742. Because the amount allocated per student is calculated each year, the true impact of actual enrollment decline is not easily reflected in these numbers. However, it can be safely stated that New York State aid to ECC would have been higher if the enrollment had not declined.

In contrast to New York State's declining aid to ECC, Erie County has increased its aid to ECC. Funding for ECC has increased from \$17,429,317 in the 2010/11 academic year to \$18,945,674 in the 2016/17 academic year. This aid has increased despite the college serving a steadily declining student population.

In order to operate with a balanced budget, ECC and other community colleges may need to implement steps to reduce costs or increase revenue, such as tuition increases. Such steps may be contrary to the goals of the community colleges.

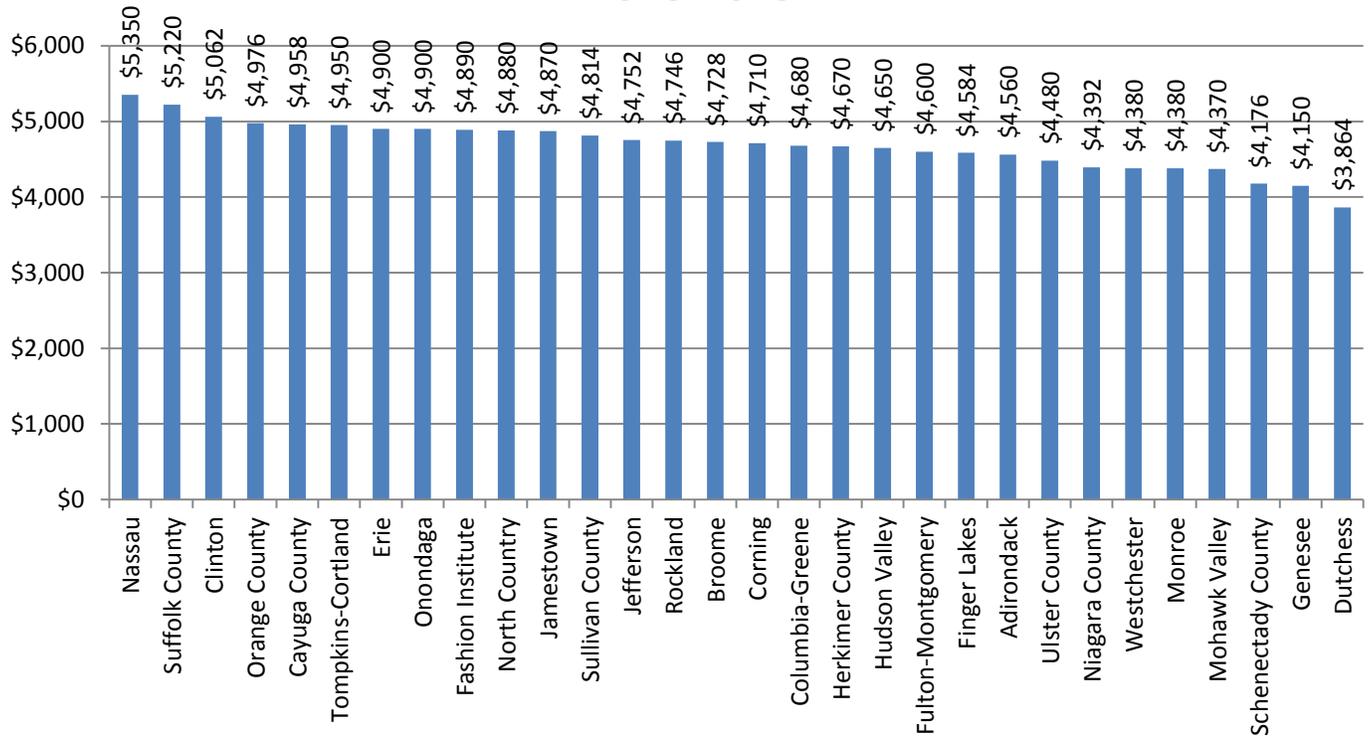
In fact, ECC has imposed tuition increases on its students during the time period examined. Tuition has increased from \$3,300 in 2010 to \$4,900 in 2018. This represents an increase in tuition of 48.5%.



ECC's \$4,900 tuition is the highest of any Western New York community college and above New York State's average community college tuition of \$4,688. In fact, only six colleges have higher tuition rates than ECC among New York State's community colleges.

Tuition at Western New York institutions offering bachelor level degrees is \$6,870 for the 2018-2019 academic year. These institutions include the University at Buffalo, Buffalo State College, the College at Brockport, Fredonia and Geneseo. Some students who attend community college do so as a more affordable way to earn college credit toward an ultimate degree goal.

## Tuition at New York State Community Colleges, 2018-2019



Tuition increases may encourage potential or current students to seek other options to invest in their education. Given the nature and scope of the request for information, this report does not opine as to what degree, if any, the steadily increasing tuition rates have caused the steadily decreasing student population at ECC.

### Conclusion

Community colleges across New York State are facing challenges related to declining student enrollment. At ECC, student enrollment decreased 30.2% between 2010 and 2018. As a group, the five Western New York community colleges (ECC, Genesee Community College, Jamestown Community College, Monroe Community College, and Niagara County Community College) faced student enrollment declines of 30.8% over that same period. The decline in student enrollment for the rest of the community colleges in New York State over that period was lower, 17.7%, but still significant.

At this point, it is too early to definitively opine on the Excelsior Scholarship program, which is a taxpayer funded program which pays for tuition for students attending SUNY and CUNY schools. In its first year, only 2.6% of ECC students participated in the program.

While addressing the challenges of declining student enrollment, community colleges will be forced to take steps to maintain a balanced budget. Such measures may include revenue increases, such as through tuition increases. Increasing tuition may have the effect of deterring attendance, further exacerbating declining student enrollment. Other measures may include cutting expenses.