

## Southern Miss and the Decline in Enrollment

Southern Miss' enrollment decline isn't hard to figure out. As [\*The Wall Street Journal\*](#) reported, "[t]otal college enrollment decreased by nearly a half-million students in 2013 from a year earlier, according to [Census Bureau data released today](#), making this the [second year with such a drop](#)." As the [University of Virginia Demographics Research Group](#) explained "the big factor that doesn't seem to be well-understood is simple population math. College attendance has climbed over the years to the point where an overwhelming majority of American young people will enroll in college of some kind at some point. This makes college enrollment extremely sensitive to fluctuations in the number of young people available. The generation currently in college or recently out of it is one of the largest this country has managed to produce. It's no wonder there was a spike in enrollment, recession or no, back in 2008-09 if one looks at the number of Americans who were just reaching 18-19 years of age. Since then those numbers have fallen sharply and will continue to fall more slowly for the foreseeable future as the U.S. birth rate hovers [below replacement](#)"

Falling student population, taken together with massive increases in tuition (largely financed with student loans), leads to the inevitable conclusion that Southern Miss has priced many of the existing pool of potential students out of the higher education market. Jeff Amy's 19-November-2014 [report for The Hattiesburg American](#) concerning the 3.2% tuition increase facing in-state USM students beginning 2014-15 cut to the core of the issue: "[s]till, increasing college costs are far outstripping stagnant family incomes. In-state tuition will rise 66 percent from fall 2005 to fall 2015, while household incomes have been basically flat in Mississippi. It now takes about 17 percent of the typical Mississippi family's income to pay for one year of college at a state university, not counting room, board or other costs."

For the best qualified students, it becomes a matter of supply and demand. As the population of potential students continues to decline, schools have more room for their “second choice” students, making it easier to be admitted. Why pay top dollar to attend Southern Miss when you can attend a better school for the same cost? If you want to attend Southern Miss, why not attend a local community college for two years and save at least \$10,000.00.

This is the inevitable squeeze for marginal colleges and universities like Southern Miss.