

The Decline of Colombian Private Higher Education

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Colombia has experienced a surprising phenomenon in higher education. While opening access to a substantially greater portion of the relevant age cohort group (36% in 2009 against only 19% in 2000), the system registered a proportional downturn in private enrollment. Such a decline is particularly unexpected, given that, historically, Colombia has largely grown its higher education system as a result of the private initiative. In fact within Latin America, Colombia trailed only Brazil, for many decades, in the private sector's proportional share of total enrollment.

Colombia's private majority peaked at 68 percent in 1996, but private enrollment progressively fell to 45 percent in 2007, thereby returning to its 1970 level. To be sure, Colombia's private proportional downturn does not involve an absolute decrease, given that private higher education has experienced a slight increase in enrollments after 1997 (8,700 new enrollments per year on average within private institutions against 45,000 new students annually entering private institutions between 1995 and 1997)

Public Expansion

One factor of the private sector's downfall possibly relates to the increased tuition for private institutions, reducing affordability, and shrinking the tuition gap between public and private institutions. Much more important, however, in explaining the private sector's drop is the astonishing public education growth. Private enrollment increased only by 18 percent, while public higher education expanded by 196 percent between 1997 and 2007. The system achieved almost 590,000 new enrollments during that period, of which 84 percent of new students were in the public sector.

The growth of public higher education is based on governmental actions within a set of varied policies and programs to increase coverage, as a fundamental goal. Public expansion definitely succeeded. In contrast, a government effort to stimulate demand for private nonuniversity programs through student financial aid has not had similar impact (only about 7,000 new entrants came into nonuniversity private colleges between 2002 and 2005).

Trends

The private-sector decline in Colombia is opposite to Latin America's overall expansion of private enrollment, which has progressively grown to 49 percent. Furthermore, the decline experienced by Colombia appears unique in recent years (1990s–2000s) among Latin American countries, where private sectors have grown (Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, and Nicaragua) or remained stable (Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay).

On the other hand, even though Colombia's private enrollment decline lasted a complete decade, in 2008 the enrollment growth shifted again to be

higher in private institutions than in public ones (8.3% and 4.3%, respectively). This fact fits the tentative global finding in which declines are seen to exist for certain time periods.

The Colombian case also fits a more robust phenomenon found in the global private higher education literature—private-sector decline amid private enrollment growth. A more specific factor fit is how the private-sector decline is largely the result of the upgrading of a type of public education to higher education status, as shown in the article on Thailand in this issue. On the other hand, the Colombian private decline does not fit those cases (e.g., Japan), where declining demographics explain the downturn in private higher education. While the Colombian population aged 17-to-21 years increased only by 9 percent, higher education enrollment grew by 44 percent, between 2002 and 2008.