In academic framing, recession-proof trends in the US are often attributed to the resilience of student housing. This perspective is based on the observation that college enrollment rates, though subject to fluctuation, do not necessarily decline in response to economic downturns. From 1976 to 2019, the enrollment rate of college-aged individuals (18-24 years) has been increasing over time, with a notable exception being the late 1980s, which saw a slight dip in enrollment rates following the Great Recession.

While unemployment rates in the early '80s reached levels similar to those seen after the Great Recession, the enrollment rate for all groups appeared to have spiked above trend in the years following the Great Recession. Yet, similar to our previous observations, we noted that enrollment rates for white females aged 25-34 increased from 9.8 percent in 2008 to 10.1 percent in 2009, which could indicate the recession had a positive effect on enrollment. However, this trend was not observed for the entire 18-24 age group, as we do not observe this response following prior recessions.

If college enrollment is in fact affected by recessions, we would expect enrollment rates to fall in response to an economic downturn. However, the chart also shows that enrollment rates were already on an upward trajectory prior to the recession itself. From the fourth quarter of 2007 to the second of 2009, Real GDP in the U.S. spiked above trend in the years following the Great Recession. Yet, similar to our previous observations, we noted that enrollment rates for white females aged 25-34 increased from 9.8 percent in 2008 to 10.1 percent in 2009, which could indicate the recession had a positive effect on enrollment. However, this trend was not observed for the entire 18-24 age group, as we do not observe this response following prior recessions.

One commonality, however, is that the enrollment rate for all groups appear to have remained fairly constant pace over the past four decades. This is consistent with enrollment growth being unaffected by long-term trends. This is evident from the data, which shows that the enrollment rate of college-aged Hispanics, on the contrary, increased at an increasing rate. And by 2019, the enrollment rate of young white females exceeded that of males by over 7 percentage points. While white females had lower enrollment rates than their male counterparts in the mid-1970s – in 1976, 25.6 percent of white females aged 18-24 were enrolled in college compared to 29.0 percent of white males – things began to flip in late 1980s.

From 43 Years of University Enrollment Data

[Graph showing enrollment rate trends over time]