

# Declining Enrollment in California Community Colleges: Is Educational Polarization to Blame?

by Evan Hawkins, FACCC Executive Director

**Enrollment has plummeted at California's community colleges.**

From a peak of 2.8 million students in 2009, enrollment now stands at around 1.8 million. While this trend accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment was trending down for many years. This drop is attributable to a number of explanations, including demographic changes, higher demand for workers in the labor market, the perceived lack of value of a college education, and other hypotheses that often fit preconceived narratives of people attempting to influence higher education policy (such as colleges aren't flexible enough and practitioners are stuck in the status quo).

One explanation that has not received as much attention is that educational polarization is having a meaningful impact on enrollment in community colleges by influencing the perception of higher education. In this context, educational polarization is the cultural, socioeconomic, and political widening between Californians with college degrees and those without them. Working-class Californians without college degrees are an elusive constituency for California's community colleges. Community college leaders have spent enormous amounts of time and resources toward mostly unsuccessful attempts to convince members of this demographic to enroll or re-enroll at our institutions.

In a world of increasing educational polarization, it's hard to imagine any institution being immune from its effects. Political actors have increasingly embraced polarizing rhetoric critical of higher education. Institutions of higher learning have been particularly affected by the rise of social media and other forms of information delivery that have created a greater divide between those who are more educated and those who are less so. And as the gap grows, many working-class Californians no longer believe that college is a valuable pursuit, or are convinced that higher education is the cultural and political antithesis to their values and the values of people like them. Alternatively, communities that continue to harbor a more positive outlook on college attainment, such as middle-class and wealthy areas, have more access to financial assistance, professional networks, and other supports that encourage their students to value and pursue college degrees. Not surprisingly, these areas have



maintained and increased their economic prosperity; they also have become areas of relative political insulation with a majority of residents subscribing to similar political world-views. Meanwhile, working class communities are seeing political shifts counter to what is being seen in communities with high educational attainment, while also seeing more pronounced enrollment declines.

The 2022 election data clearly shows a political divide that describes a growing higher education perception problem fueled by political and educational polarization. For example, Latino-majority congressional districts in the working class areas of Los Angeles County and the Inland Empire, including CD 38, CD 35, and CD 31, saw double digit percentage swings against Democrats in the 2022 general election. Colleges in

these districts have seen some of the biggest post-pandemic declines in enrollment, including Rio Hondo College at -30%, Citrus College at -23%, and Mt. San Antonio College at -10%.

Proposition 209, which 55% of voters had passed in 1996, ultimately made affirmative action illegal in public institutions. In the 2020 general election, Proposition 16 would have reinstated affirmative action in California but was defeated with 57% voting in opposition. Even though the state was significantly more diverse in 2020 compared to 1996, the electorate became more anti-affirmative action. Proposition 16 had the support of FACCC, education unions, student organizations, higher education nonprofit organizations, the Chancellor's Office, and Governor Newsom. The initiative also had

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a 25-1 fundraising advantage over the anti-Prop 16 campaign. Despite all of that, the electorate voted down what could have been the biggest equity state initiative for community colleges in recent memory.

Some observers explain the failure of Proposition 16 as the result of confusing initiative language and a poor campaign. The demographic data tells a bigger story. Voting data and polling demonstrate that diverse and working-class communities across the state opposed Proposition 16. Only six counties in the state voted in support of the initiative. Those counties were Los Angeles and five Bay Area counties, which include regions with the highest levels of college degree

score much higher in trust levels than do public institutions. This has been historically true, but the gaps are becoming wider even while college-educated Americans continue to have a much higher level of trust in all levels of higher education.

Negative perception fueled by educational polarization is influencing students' decisions about whether or not they should pursue higher education—and it's also hurting colleges' ability to recruit new students. Higher education leaders have adopted value propositions that are not resonating with working-class people and communities, as ultimately demonstrated by enrollment trends. Fortunately, community colleges are well positioned to play an important role in reversing this trend. We must engage with working-class communities and build cultural, economic, and political bridges. When these communities see that we share their goals, they will be more likely to engage with our colleges. While higher education gets externally branded as a result of how it's discussed in political discourse, savvy community college leaders who understand educational polarization can find ways to brand their institutions to their community needs. To accomplish this, they'll need to step out of the 'high educational attainment bubble' and re-engage with local working class communities to respond to their values, needs, and goals. By cutting through the polarization and going back to our roots as community serving intuitions, community colleges can expand their value propositions to persuade communities that have been left behind in the college attainment gap. In doing so, we can increase trust and once again be seen as life-changing institutions for every working-class community in the state. ■

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attainment. Conversely, Imperial county, the population of which has some of the lowest levels of college degrees, opposed the initiative with 57.9% voting no. Furthermore, a pre-election poll by the Institute of Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley showed a majority of voters with educational attainment of less than a graduate degree opposed the initiative.

Beyond election data and surveys, public polling on higher education shows some alarming data. A correlation between educational polarization and trust in higher education institutions was evident, quantified in annual surveys. Trust has been declining for years and is especially poor among Latino Generation Z adults, who make up a large percentage of potential California Community College students. Trust is also low among people who hold independent or conservative political worldviews, and private universities