



Bring Community Back to Community College

by Wendy Brill-Wynkoop, FACCC President

California's vast and diverse community college system represents an essential pillar of accessible and affordable higher education for all who seek it.

With 116 campuses and over 1.8 million students enrolled annually, these institutions together form the largest system of higher education in the entire nation. Their extensive geographic reach across the state provides open doors to uplift and empower all who strive for personal, professional, and economic advancement, from remote rural areas to urban centers.

However, in recent years, policymakers have tended to overemphasize narrow performance metrics related to transfers and degree completion rates, often losing sight of the more holistic measures of student success tailored to diverse goals and situations. This risks diminishing the comprehensive educational and social missions community colleges have delivered for decades as open-access institutions embedded within the fabric of local communities. With proper resources and supportive policies aligned with student-centered values, California's community colleges can maintain excellence across the full breadth of their offerings and continue serving as engines of economic mobility.

As the system emerges from the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, it now marks a critical juncture to re-center this community-focused vision and create space for policies and innovations that address evolving economic and social contexts. Doing so requires grappling with the true diversity of student needs and life circumstances that shape the pursuit of education differently.

While community colleges serve students of all backgrounds, their open admission policies intentionally target demographics historically underrepresented in higher education. Older adults balancing work and families, single parents, formerly incarcerated individuals, immigrants, first-generation students, and others facing systemic barriers disproportionately rely on community colleges as springboards for advancement.

These students arrive with a multiplicity of circumstances, commitments, and goals shaping their educational journeys. While some seek personal enrichment

and lifelong learning to satisfy intellectual curiosity, others require developmental education to strengthen foundational skills as a necessary first step. Many balance full-time jobs crucial for making ends meet while supporting spouses, children, siblings, or elders. Amid the grind of competing priorities, most can attend only part-time, frequently prolonged over many years, rather than the traditional two for an associate degree.

Nearly all confront challenges meeting basic needs, with housing and food insecurity distressingly commonplace. Blanket policies emphasizing standardized metrics around transfers to four-year institutions and degree completion timelines often fail to accommodate the inherent diversity of student situations and needs. Success cannot be neatly measured by one-size-fits-all technical benchmarks alone. The colleges must retain flexibility and autonomy to nurture each student holistically, helping tailor academic paths aligned to their unique aspirations, constraints, and life circumstances. Resources are sorely needed to help students thoughtfully navigate goals, realistic timelines, financial costs, and other logistics fundamental to staying the course.

While transfer pathways to universities remain invaluable options, short-term vocational programs and career education represent equally viable routes for timely socioeconomic advancement suited to community college students' needs. Skills-building courses, industry certifications, vocational training, and associate degrees directly targeting local high-demand employment sectors can provide entry points into livable-wage jobs without the extended time commitments of prolonged prerequisite course sequences. Strong career education programming strengthens regional economies as graduates put skills to immediate use across healthcare, technology, construction, hospitality, and other essential industries. It enables colleges to adapt offerings to the shifting job landscapes in real-time nimbly. Ongoing partnerships with local government and industry leaders ensure alignment with real-world economic needs.

As automation transforms work across sectors, community colleges will become crucial resources for displaced workers needing to retrain and upskill into newly emerging roles. However, career education cannot be permitted to fall by the wayside in favor of singular

>> continued on page 10

academic transfer pathways; it, too, requires ample support and thoughtful integration into holistic programs serving diverse students.

Beyond formally enrolled students taking classes for credit, community colleges also serve surrounding communities day-to-day as anchor institutions and invaluable public resources. Their campuses provide communal spaces welcoming diverse groups to come together, interact, and nourish themselves intellectually, creatively, physically, and socially. Across theatre productions, museum exhibitions, developmental education courses, business accelerators, child care services, and much more, everyday citizens can engage with their local college at any age or stage of life. Community organizations and local government agencies connect through forums, com-

mittees, events, and a myriad of partnerships.

This community enrichment capacity holds immense social value yet remains difficult to quantify in metrics-driven funding models. State policies and investments must recognize colleges as more than enrollment numbers and completion data—they require resources and support to weave themselves deeper into the civic infrastructure and provide these communal services.

As inequality continues to fester and widen statewide, integrated student support services are fundamental to helping more students overcome systemic barriers to completion. Emergency financial assistance, public benefits enrollment, mental health counseling, child care, transportation stipends, and other wraparound supports allow colleges to address the root causes behind retention and achievement gaps. Ongoing public investments must expand these offerings through basic needs centers and beyond. While state and local programs have made tuition-free community college a reality for more students, non-tuition expenses like textbooks, supplies, housing, food, and healthcare remain oppressively high across California.

Integrated support services uplift the whole student rather than taking a piecemeal approach.

Those individuals working directly with students on the ground every day—faculty, frontline staff, and administrators—understand their colleges’ unique contexts and challenges best. They must be entrusted

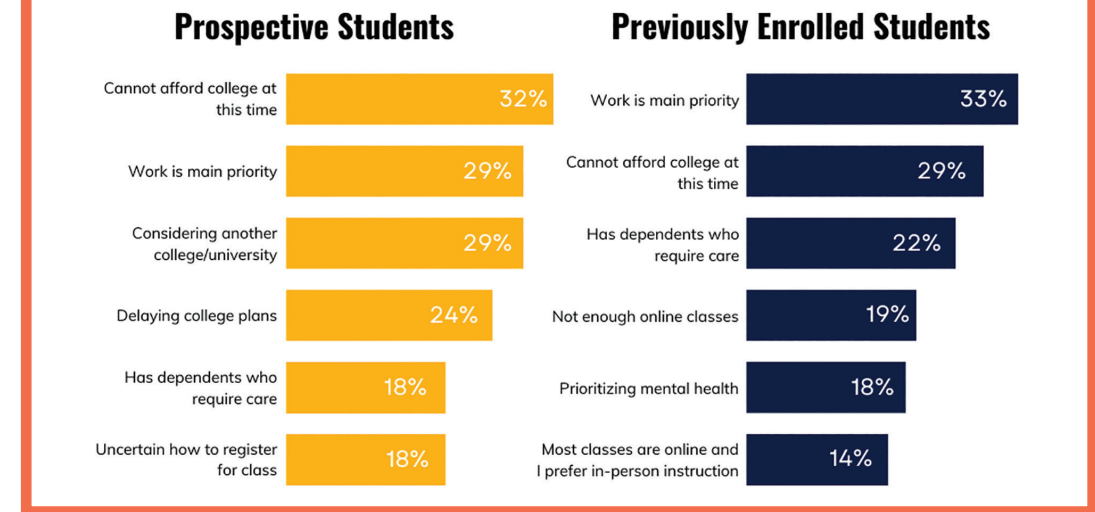
and empowered to take risks, try new approaches, and pursue innovations that increase equity and student-centered outcomes. Imposing excessive top-down mandates or one-size-fits-all regulations from the state risks stifling the local ingenuity needed to drive continuous improvement. The state can strike a productive balance between

providing standards, guidance, and funding while allowing latitude for diverse implementation approaches attuned to each college’s student community and neighborhood setting. Trusting in the expertise and creativity of local stakeholders is essential for progress.

But enacting the full promise of California’s community colleges relies first and foremost on establishing sufficient public funding and investments. Well-intentioned recent reform initiatives have expanded expectations and responsibilities for the colleges without allocating adequate resources to execute this broader mission. This neglect has perpetuated systemic inequities, evident in the continued achievement gaps correlating strongly with race, income, and other societal disparities.

Only with stable, consistent state funding and budgets acknowledging the actual costs of educating students holistically can the community college system structurally transform into an equitably empowering force for all. The Faculty Association of California Community Colleges will continue advocating relentlessly for student-centered fiscal policies that honor the unique value these institutions provide when supported with appropriate per-student funding.

REASONS AFFECTING DECISIONS FOR ENROLLMENT



At their best, California’s community colleges represent democracy and social justice in action. They offer inclusive, affordable, high-quality education as an inalienable public good and right for all who seek it, not a privilege for the few. The diverse students who rely on these colleges have faced many systemic barriers yet draw hope for a better future from the profound power of education and skills training.

When adequately supported with funds and policies tailored to their comprehensive mission, California’s community colleges can fully uplift all students’ aspirations while enriching the cultural, economic, and social fabrics of the communities they call home. For the millions of Californians served by these institutions, the community colleges remain valued legacies worth fighting for, everyday emblems of possibility and progress.

The time is now to embrace this potential by recentering holistic services to students and communities, fostering flexible and creative pathways to success, demanding equitable outcomes and inclusion, and supporting the colleges as engines of knowledge, innovation, and growth that advance us all. This is the promise of California’s community colleges. ■

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