

Why We Should Care About Fraudulent Enrollments

By Sarah Thompson, FACC Vice President, Las Positas College

Fraudulent enrollments are a growing problem in the California Community Colleges, but the system's response to this crisis has been uneven. While some districts actively pursue and remove fraudulent accounts, others largely ignore the issue. The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office response seems tepid, despite the escalating severity of the problem over the past four years. It's only now, in response to legislative and congressional criticism, that a system-wide plan is being developed.

We intentionally use the term "fraudulent enrollments" instead of "fraudulent students" because the latter suggests individual students are enrolling under pretenses. This is not accurate. Organized criminals flood the system with fake applications solely to receive financial aid and defraud federal and state governments.

So why a halfhearted system response? Why the lack of urgency to address this issue?

And Why Should We Care?

1. When governments are defrauded, taxpayers are cheated.

As public institutions, community colleges have a duty to ensure that they are good stewards of taxpayer money. They need to maintain community trust and demonstrate that how colleges report financial and enrollment data to the public is trustworthy.

2. Real students are being denied access to classes.

Fraudulent enrollments make it difficult for genuine students to register for the courses they need to progress toward degrees and certifications. Additionally, some students might lose access to financial aid if they can't maintain the required course load for eligibility.

3. It is a labor issue.

Full-time faculty often experience multiple last-minute class cancellations due to fraudulent student enrollment. To meet their load requirements, these faculty members may be reassigned to classes initially assigned to part-time faculty. These part-time faculty, already in a vulnerable position, then face the double burden of losing their courses to others. This situation pushes already at-risk faculty into even more precarious working conditions.



4. It corrupts our data.

Districts report financial and data enrollment information multiple times a year, including in their annual reports. Unless there is a mechanism to flag or remove fraudulent enrollments, the data is misleading. Since some districts monitor more aggressively than others, it is difficult to accurately identify growth and decline trends across the state.

5. It is a direct conflict of interest with our funding model to pursue enrollment fraud.

The Student Centered Funding Formula rewards districts for their enrollment numbers, enrollment growth, and the number of financial aid recipients. With

this model in mind, reporting fraudulent data can result in a loss of revenue for districts. This gap puts the system at risk.

6. It's worse than you think.

Consider this: over Memorial Day weekend, the Chabot-Las Positas College District, which aggressively tracks fraud, processed 600 new college applications. Of those, 300 were identified as fraudulent accounts.

This issue demands our full attention. Fraudulent enrollments hurt students, faculty, and the credibility of our institutions. ■