



The Evolving Mission of California Community Colleges: Navigating Policy Changes for Student Success and Equity

The California Community Colleges (CCC) provide accessible, affordable, high-quality education to the state's diverse population and are crucial in meeting Californians' varied educational needs. However, in the past decade, recent policy changes intended to improve student success rates and close equity gaps have resulted in additional negative consequences that have undermined the CCCs' mission and negatively impacted specific student populations by removing options and choices previously available to students and reflecting the needs of the local community. Examining these challenges is crucial for identifying solutions to protect and reclaim the CCC mission.

Throughout the past decade, the CCCs have undergone significant policy changes to improve student success rates and close equity gaps. The increased emphasis on transfer and the narrowing of the curriculum have had additional unintended consequences that have negatively impacted student enrollment and success. By focusing on preparing students for transfer to four-year institutions, the CCCs have inadvertently neglected the diverse needs of their student body and the community. Many students who enter community colleges seek vocational training, basic skills development, or personal enrichment, and the current policies have limited their options and access to these critical educational opportunities. For example, eliminating pre-transfer level courses in math and English and restricting repeatability have left many underprepared students without the support they need to succeed in college-level courses. However, despite these well-intentioned efforts, the needle has not moved significantly toward reducing disparities in educational outcomes for traditionally underserved student populations. For example, the graduation rates for marginalized students in the CCC system remain disproportionately low compared to their white counterparts.

Moreover, the elimination of pre-transfer courses and the emphasis on fast-tracking students through their educational pathways have disproportionately affected traditionally marginalized students who may require additional “second-chance” opportunities and support to succeed

academically. Without adequate preparation and resources, these students are more likely to struggle in college-level courses and ultimately drop out of the system.

California Education Code section 66010.4, which outlines the mission of the CCCs, was substantially amended in the 2023 trailer bill. The revised code no longer explicitly mentions remedial education or courses. Instead, it uses the terms "instruction" and "additional learning support" to describe the provision of academic and vocational education, English as a Second Language, adult noncredit instruction, and support services that help students succeed at the postsecondary level. The ambiguity surrounding the term "instruction" raises concerns, as it could be interpreted to mean tutoring and support rather than actual courses. This change may further limit the CCCs' ability to provide the education and skills students desire, as well as the support underprepared students need to succeed.

The recent policy changes have undermined the CCC's mission by prioritizing a narrow set of goals and outcomes, particularly those related to transfer and completion rates. By selecting artificially narrow success metrics ("throughput") and failing to account for students who drop out early or never enroll in the first place because the courses they desire are no longer offered, the CCCs have overlooked other essential functions and inadvertently excluded a significant portion of their student population. CCC Datamart shows a loss of approximately 1 million students. This approach has limited the CCCs' ability to serve the diverse needs of their communities, as outlined in the original mission statement.

Community colleges play a crucial role in providing access to higher education and promoting social and economic mobility, particularly for students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds. As long-standing champions and innovators in the fight against inequality, they have the power to transform lives and communities by providing students with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities they need to succeed in their careers and personal lives. Moreover, community colleges serve as vital centers for civic engagement and the development of an informed and active citizenry.

To truly serve California's diverse population, the CCC system must reevaluate its approach to student success and equity. This necessitates a shift from a one-size-fits-all model that prioritizes transfer to a more comprehensive and inclusive vision of education that acknowledges community college students' varied goals, challenges, and levels of preparation. It requires listening to students' needs and valuing their input in the decision-making process.

Policymakers and college leaders must engage in meaningful dialogue with students, faculty, and community members to develop strategies that address the root causes of inequity and provide targeted support for underserved and non-traditional populations. Student voice and agency should be at the forefront of shaping policies and practices that directly impact their educational experiences. In addition to investing in programs that offer personalized guidance, academic support, and financial assistance to help students overcome barriers to success, policymakers should prioritize funding for targeted student populations, such as Rising Scholars, who are formerly incarcerated or justice-impacted. College promise programs should be expanded to include students who can only attend part-time, as many community college students have work or family obligations that prevent them from enrolling full-time. By providing targeted support and resources to these specific student populations, the CCC system can better address inequities and ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

While the recent policy changes in the California Community Colleges system were implemented to improve student outcomes and close equity gaps, they have fallen short of their goals and have had additional negative consequences that have hindered student success and access for a wide variety of marginalized students, and failed to meet the needs of local communities. Protecting and reclaiming the CCC mission is essential, as open access to higher education is critical for the public good and foundational to a healthy democracy.

The CCC system should embrace a more holistic approach to education that values its students' diverse talents, interests, and aspirations. By offering a wide range of educational programs, including vocational training, basic skills development, and lifelong learning opportunities, community colleges can better serve their communities and contribute to the state's social and economic well-being. The CCC system must reevaluate its approach and develop policies and practices that prioritize equity, inclusivity, and the diverse needs of its student population, and work with system partners to create a more inclusive and equitable community college system. Only by doing so can the California Community Colleges genuinely fulfill their mission of providing accessible, high-quality education to all Californians and contribute to the development of an informed and engaged citizenry.