



## ONLINE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Below, we provide background on the state's efforts to provide online instruction at the community colleges, describe the Governor's proposal to create a new online college, provide an assessment of that proposal, and lay out some issues for the Legislature to consider in evaluating it.

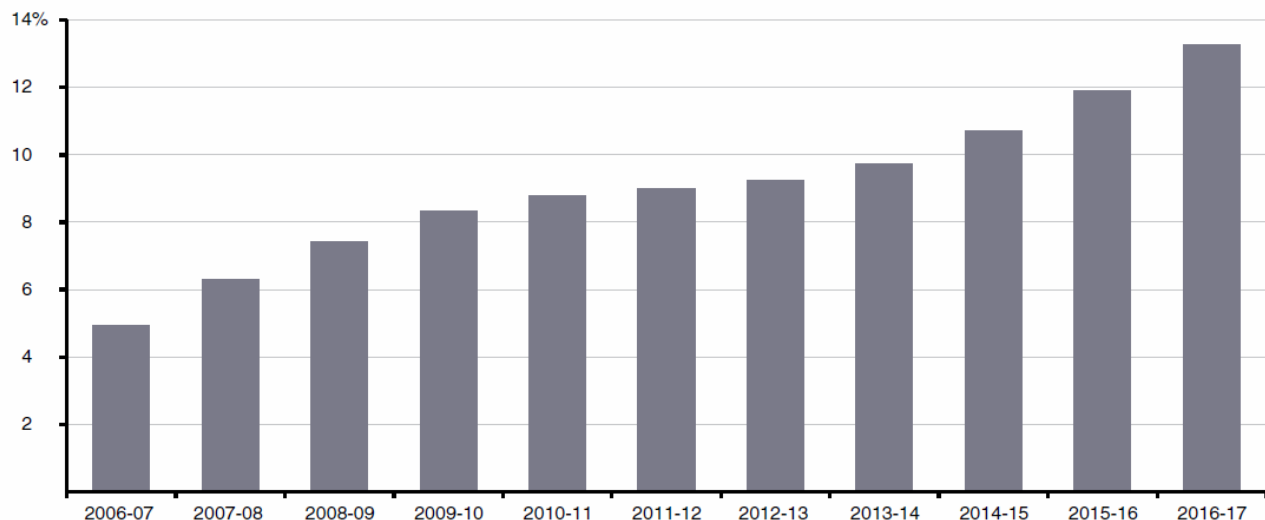
### Background

**Community Colleges Systemwide Provide 13 Percent of Instruction Online.** As **Figure 32** shows, 13 percent of 2016-17 instruction occurred in online courses. (CCC defines an online course as one in which more than half of instruction is online.) The vast majority of these courses are conducted asynchronously—that is, an instructor provides online course sessions that students can access any hour of the day. A small share of online courses (about 1 percent of all instruction) is provided synchronously, meaning that faculty and students communicate with each other in real time. The share of instruction provided online has increased notably in the last ten years, increasing from 5 percent in 2006-07. Although some colleges run fully online degree or certificate programs (48 colleges report offering at least one fully online program), community college students typically take the bulk of their courses in person and a minority of courses online.

**Decisions Regarding Online Course Offerings Are Made by Districts.** As with other decisions regarding course and program offerings, colleges determine the number of online courses and programs they will offer. Online offerings vary by district with some districts offering only a few online courses and 12 districts reporting more than 20 percent of their instruction is online.

**Figure 32**

#### Percentage of CCC Instruction Taken Online Has Increased Notably



**Online Education Initiative (OEI) Launched in 2013 to Enhance Online Instruction.** Most notably, OEI makes a common course management system available to all community colleges. The course management system allows faculty to post information about a course (including its syllabus), instructional content (such as video presentations and text-based lectures), assignments, and other material. Students use the system to perform functions such as submitting their assignments, taking tests, and participating in online discussions with classmates. The OEI also provides training and resources for faculty interested in developing online courses and online tutoring for students. In addition, OEI runs a course exchange, which creates a more streamlined process for students at participating colleges to take online classes from other participating colleges. Currently six colleges participate in the course exchange.

**To Date, Notable Shortcomings With Systemwide Efforts to Increase Online Offerings.**

Although many districts have increased their online offerings since 2013, efforts to give students access to online courses outside of their home districts have not had much success. Three main problems (discussed in the next three paragraphs) have limited systemwide expansion of online offerings.

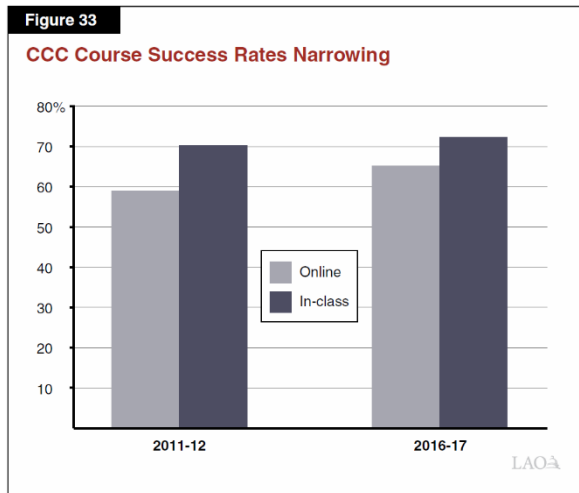
**Enrolling in Online Courses Outside of Home District Is Difficult.** Although CCC students interested in taking an online course at another district in the system can search for options online, registering for these courses can be cumbersome. To enroll in courses outside of their home district, students have to apply separately for admission to each college offering a course of interest, receive new student identification numbers and passwords, and register for each class separately.

**Campuses Are Reluctant to Participate in Course Exchange.** To address some of the concerns with the existing cumbersome enrollment process, the OEI course exchange is intended to provide a more streamlined process for students to enroll in online courses offered by other colleges in the exchange. The OEI currently automates various components of the application process to allow students to enroll more quickly in online courses offered outside of their home district. (Recent changes in state law will allow greater streamlining of this process.) Course offerings in the exchange, however, are limited. Currently, only 45 courses are available. Though campuses might have various reasons for being reluctant to participate, one of the main reasons appears to be concern with losing enrollment funding to other campuses in the exchange.

Enrollment funding for each course a student takes is scored to the college in the exchange running that course. This means colleges only have a fiscal incentive to participate in the exchange if they believe they can “win” more students than they “lose.”

**No Systemwide Coordination of Course Offerings.** Because decisions regarding online course offerings are made by districts, little coordination exists systemwide to monitor online offerings and determine whether these options are meeting the needs of students statewide. In some types of courses, such as transfer-level general education courses, many online courses are available. In other areas, however, little online content exists.

**Lower Success Rates in Online Courses, Though Gap Is Closing.** As Figure 33 shows (see next page), CCC students perform somewhat worse in online courses compared to in-person courses. In 2016-17, students successfully completed 65 percent of online courses, compared with 72 percent for in-person courses. This gap, however, is smaller than in prior years. In 2011-12, 59 percent of online courses were completed successfully, compared with 70 percent of in-person courses. These outcomes are similar to trends in other higher



education systems across the country. Improved performance in online courses is likely due to a number of factors, including improvements in the quality of online content, the growing expertise of faculty in teaching them, and better support services (such as online tutoring). Colleges also have developed online learner readiness modules to help students understand how an online course differs from an in-person course and determine whether they are well suited to taking online courses.

**Success in Online Courses Varies by Student Type.** Although students overall perform somewhat worse in online courses, the gap between in-person and online performance varies by type of student.

Various studies find older adults, students with higher GPAs, and women have higher completion rates for online courses than other types of students.

## Governor's Proposal

**Creates New Online College Within CCC System.** The Governor's budget proposes to create a new online college with an explicit statewide focus. Initially, the college would be run by the CCC Board of Governors. The board either could hire a Chief Executive Officer or give authority to the Chancellor to administer the college. By July 2025, the college would be required to have its own board consisting of five voting members (three appointed by the Governor, one appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly, and one appointed by the Senate Rules Committee) and two non-voting members appointed by the Governor.

**Provides \$100 Million for Startup and \$20 Million for Ongoing Operations.** The startup funding could be spread over a seven-year period and used for technology, building space, and business plan development, among other things. The funding for ongoing operations could be used for the salaries and benefits of staff, staff training, and technology licensing and maintenance. When the college begins enrolling students, it would begin receiving apportionment funding similar to all other community college districts. The apportionment funding would be in addition to the base \$20 million ongoing allocation.

**Initial Program Offerings Would Target Working Adults, Focus on Short-Term Pathways.** The Governor's proposal provides broad discretion for the online community college to identify the programs and credentials it would offer. Initially, the college is intended to focus on short-term programs. Over the next three years, the college would be required to develop at least three short-term program pathways linked with industry needs. The administration's goal is to focus on attracting working adults ages 25-34 with no postsecondary education credentials. This target group could include those with a high school diploma but no postsecondary experience, some college credits but no degree, and other adults, such as incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals and recent immigrants, presumably without a high school diploma. The administration indicates that not all programs would be fully online. In pathways where hands-on experience is needed, the college intends to partner with other entities (such as libraries, other community colleges, and industry) to provide such experiences. The college also could establish partnerships with these or other types of entities to provide support services, such as tutoring.

**Programs Intended to Accelerate Student Time to Completion and Improve Affordability.**

The administration indicates the online community college is to focus on developing programs that reduce time to completion and are affordable for students. To that end, the college is intended to use existing industry certifications, competency-based learning, and prior learning assessments to reduce the amount of additional courses students need to complete their pathway. (Both competency-based programs and prior learning assessments allow students to more quickly complete a program if they can demonstrate they already have mastered some of the content.) To the extent possible, the college is to use open educational resources, which are available to students at no cost.

**Proposal Sets Several Milestones and Reporting Requirements for College.** As **Figure 34** shows, the Governor proposes the new college meet certain program, administrative, and accreditation milestones within the first seven years. Most notably, the Governor's proposal requires the online community college to begin enrolling students by the last quarter of 2019, with at least 13 program pathways designed and validated by July 1, 2023.

**In Long Run, College Would Seek Accreditation.** The Governor's proposal requires the online community college eventually to be accredited by an accreditor recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. Without accreditation, students may be wary of enrolling in the college, students would be unable to transfer credits earned at the online community college to other community colleges, and students would be unable to access federal financial aid. Although the proposal includes no specific deadline for attaining accreditation, the new college must develop an accreditation plan by July 1, 2020.

**College Exempt From Some Requirements.** Initially, the online community college would be exempt from collective bargaining requirements. Instead, the college would be required to "meet and confer" with faculty to discuss salaries, benefits, employment practices. The proposal includes no specific deadline for when collective bargaining would need to occur. In addition, the college would have flexibility with regard to setting its academic calendar and establishing an alternative student fee structure. The online community college would be subject to most other rules and regulations that apply to existing community colleges.

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#### Specific Milestones for New Online Community College

The online community college is to meet the following milestones by the specified dates:

##### By July 1, 2020

- ✓ Develop a seven-year implementation plan, including a business plan and three program pathways.
- ✓ Develop internal business processes and establish outcome goals.
- ✓ Map the student experience, including recruiting, onboarding, instructional experience, billing, and entry into a job.
- ✓ Develop an accreditation plan.
- ✓ Create a statewide outreach plan.
- ✓ Define duties for instructional support and program development.
- ✓ Establish a process for recognizing prior learning.
- ✓ Enroll students by the last quarter of 2019.

##### By July 1, 2021

- ✓ Incorporate student feedback to improve the college's instruction, technology, and support services.
- ✓ Design and validate at least three additional program pathways.

##### By July 1, 2023

- ✓ Continue to enroll students into the college's program pathways and incorporate student feedback to improve the college's activities.
- ✓ Design and validate at least 10 additional program pathways.

##### By July 1, 2025

- ✓ Continue enrolling students into the college's program pathways.
- ✓ Incorporate student feedback to improve the college's activities.

Most notably, the college would be required to spend at least 50 percent of its general operating budget on salaries and benefits of faculty and instructional aides engaged in direct instruction. The college also would be required to have its program and courses reviewed and approved by the Chancellor's Office.

## Assessment

**Governor's Problem Statement and Proposed Solution Are Not Well Defined.** In its description of the proposal, the administration identifies many key problems a new online community college could address: greater educational options for working adults lacking postsecondary credentials, greater access to online courses, innovation at the community colleges (such as incorporating competency-based components and measuring prior knowledge), and providing cheaper alternatives to for-profit colleges. The proposal for a new online community college, however, does not identify which of these problems is the administration's primary concern. The administration also does not provide a clear rationale for why a new community college is needed to address these problems, rather than making systemwide improvements through existing community colleges. We describe more specific concerns with the proposal below.

***Unclear If Providing Online Offerings Will Solve Key Barriers for Target Student Group.***

One of the proposal's goals is to increase educational attainment for adults who currently have no postsecondary credentials. Although this is a laudable goal, the administration has not provided any evidence that an online community college will address the key barriers for this potential student group. Although an online program can increase convenience, working adults may not be pursuing additional education for a number of reasons. The administration also has not provided evidence that those working adults who are interested in more education cannot access it through existing online or in-person community college programs.

***Unclear if Target Student Group Is Well Suited for Online Approach.*** Studies find that individuals with a lower track record of academic success (as measured by GPA) have a larger drop-off in online courses compared to in-person courses. Given the target students under the Governor's proposal consist of those who have no postsecondary experience and may not have graduated high school, an online setting likely is not the most effective instructional approach for them. The online community college could address this concern by paying particular attention to counseling and support services, online readiness assessments for students, and access to online tutors. The proposal, however, lacks detail on how the college would provide such support.

***Unclear How Statewide Industry Partnerships Would Be Developed.*** Identifying industry partners would be critical for the success of the Governor's proposed college. These partnerships would be necessary for identifying program pathways with high-industry demand and providing the hands-on experience students will need to complete the pathways. The administration's proposal, however, lacks detail regarding how it will develop these partnerships, especially how it will develop them statewide given the regional nature of many industries. Without partnerships in all areas of the state, students may not have access to hands-on experiences critical to program completion.

***Creating a New College Has Significant Drawbacks Compared to Working Within Existing System.*** Compared to funding new initiatives within the existing CCC system or improving upon existing CCC initiatives, creating a new college requires much greater upfront spending. It also has the disadvantage of taking longer until students can access the new course offerings. The college would have to hire staff and develop key business practices before developing programs. By starting a new college, initial programs also would not be

accredited. Students enrolled in the college's programs prior to accreditation would be unable to receive federal financial aid and would not be able to transfer credits to other colleges.

***Eventually, a New College Would Have Its Own Constraints.*** The administration has indicated that, by starting with a completely new organization, the online community college would be better positioned to implement innovative new programs. Without having programs that are already based on the traditional academic calendar, for example, the college could more easily use a competency-based education model that allows students to advance at their own pace. Although the college initially may be more nimble, the college eventually would face many of the same constraints that existing community colleges face. Most notably, the college eventually would be expected to collectively bargain and would have to spend 50 percent of its budget on instructional salaries from the start. In the long run, these restrictions could result in the online college having the same types of constraints existing community colleges have in making major programmatic reforms.

## Issues for Consideration

***Elements of Proposal Could Have Benefits for Some Students.*** Some elements of the Governor's proposal could have statewide benefits. Greater access to online education can provide increased opportunities for students to access required courses, thereby potentially speeding their time to graduation and reducing total cost of attendance. Also, by aggregating geographically separated students into online courses, programs can be run more efficiently. Additionally, creating competency-based programs and recognizing prior learning can help students complete programs more quickly with a lower cost of attendance.

***Explore Changes to Make Systemwide Improvements.*** Rather than creating a new college to implement key reforms, the Legislature could consider statutory changes that would help implement reforms within the existing CCC system. If interested in expanding access to online courses, the Legislature could incentivize districts to participate in the existing course exchange and improve students' intercampus access to online courses. If the Legislature is interested in increasing the number of programs that incorporate competency-based elements or recognize prior learning, it could modify the existing apportionment-based funding model that currently creates a fiscal disincentive for colleges to pursue these options. If the Legislature is interested in having a particular set of programs available in an online format, the Legislature could have the Chancellor's Office run a competitive grant application for colleges to develop such programs. Additionally, the Legislature could fund more training for faculty willing to teach those particular online programs and staff willing to support the students taking them. The Legislature also could consider using the CCC Strong Workforce Program to build additional industry partnerships to help link online coursework with hands-on job experience. These options could address many of the administration's current concerns and could be implemented immediately and at lower initial cost.

***No Urgency If Interested in Creating an Online Community College.*** Ultimately, the Legislature may still want to pursue an online community college. Creating a new online college, in tandem with various other community college reforms, could significantly improve access and program options systemwide. Given the many important decisions involved in creating a new online college, we encourage the Legislature to take its time to review the Governor's specific proposal and consider alternatives. As part of this examination, we encourage the Legislature to gather more information about what underlying problems exist, what are the root causes of those problems, how a new online college could be designed to respond to those issues, and how a new college could be funded and held accountable for meeting its objectives.