

# Anxiety builds as California colleges consider how and when to resume on-campus fall courses

*Amid pandemic, colleges plan options for fall courses including online, in-person, or a mix* LARRY GORDON/EDSOURCE TODAY

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Millions of California college students and their families are anxiously waiting to hear whether on-campus classes will resume this fall while college administrators are weighing the options to safely return students and faculty to campuses.

So far, no one is saying when these decisions will be made. And that has everyone on edge.

Increasing the anxiety for some students is the impending enrollment deposit deadline for incoming freshman and transfer students to the University of California and California State University institutions. Only 12 of 23 CSU campuses [extended the deposit deadline](#) from May 1 to June 1 to give students extra time and to preserve enrollments for the 2020-21 school year.

Not knowing if classes will resume on campus delays decisions on where to live or work this fall. These decisions could impact an estimated 3.3 million California college students.

“There’s just been a general lack of forward-thinking communications from a lot of campuses and it’s been detrimental to a lot of students’ thought about the future and continuing education,” said Valerie Johnson, a UC Berkeley student from Southern California, during a webinar about student needs amid the pandemic

“I can’t sign a lease for off-campus housing if my classes are going to be online because I can’t afford to live in the Bay Area or in Berkeley if it’s not essential for me to do so,” said Johnson, a member of the UC Student Association.

California university officials say they aren’t ready to decide whether classes will continue to be offered virtually, in-person or a mix of both this fall that could involve limiting the number of students in classes. But they’re considering a number of contingency plans.

“We understand that this period of uncertainty can be especially difficult for our campus community and, therefore, continue to share timely updates with our campus as decisions are made,” said a spokesperson for San Diego State University where planning is underway for multiple scenarios.

“The university is weighing a variety of options: looking at academic, residential, clinical and student life implications, each of which will need to take into account the possibility of continued social distancing guidelines.”

Christina Paxson, the president of Brown University in Rhode Island, wrote in the [New York Times](#) that colleges must reopen in the fall or face the prospect of catastrophic financial losses.

She urged institutions to “develop public health plans now that build on three basic elements of controlling the spread of infection: test, trace and separate.” Until a vaccine is available, colleges must also plan to safely handle the possibility of a campus infection while maintaining their academic operations, she said.

Paxson recommended colleges consider setting aside residential space for isolating and quarantining sick students, if necessary. “Our students will have to understand that until a vaccine is developed, campus life will be different,” she said.

One roadblock that could prevent colleges and universities from allowing students to return to campus is concern over legal liability. Colleges will want to avoid reopening until they know students and faculty will be safe on campus, said Edward Cramp, a San Diego-based attorney who represents universities across the United States.

“I think it’s definitely a big concern,” he said. “Universities have an obligation to provide a safe learning environment and a safe work environment for their students and their employees and their faculty.”

Cramp said liability was less of an issue for colleges and universities when they were open in the spring “because we didn’t really understand what we’re dealing with.”

“I think now we know that this is something that is highly contagious and really can affect all age groups,” he added. “I think we’re all on notice now. We’ve got to make sure that we don’t reopen our institutions in an environment where we aren’t fairly certain that we can do so safely.”

Administrators at many of California’s public colleges and universities have already said that they won’t make the decision to re-open on their own without consulting with the governor’s office, state and county public health officials, and their system leaders.

The stakes became apparent last week when California State University-Fullerton got backlash after a [report](#) said it had decided to forgo in-person instruction in favor of all virtual.

“There were reports I said that Fullerton is canceling classes and going fully virtual for the fall. Let me be clear, that is false,” Pam Oliver, provost and vice president for academic affairs for the campus, said during a webinar with faculty last week.

The university reiterated that no final decision had been made and like many colleges, Fullerton officials are examining every option.

Oliver said while the goal is “face-to-face, on-campus instruction,” the university also is asking faculty to be prepared to start the semester teaching virtually.

“Like every university in America, we are working through the unknowns of the current pandemic as we plan for the Fall 2020 semester,” said Chi-Chung Keung, a spokesman for the university. “While we will be flexible because the situation is changing rapidly, we expect to finalize this decision as the facts and circumstances become clear.”

San Jose State University officials also said [news reports](#) that it was planning to offer most of its fall courses online were “deceiving,” said Kenneth Mashinchi, a spokesman for the university, in an email.

“We are currently discussing plans for hybrid and online classes in the fall,” Mashinchi said. “Nothing is set in stone. Making a firm decision on the plan relies not just on us but on the recommendations of the Governor of California, state and county public health officials and the California State University system.”

Tracking the spread of the coronavirus and getting the advice of public health officials are part of the equation for universities to decide when to bring students and faculty back to campuses.

A Stanford University spokesman said that no decision about reopening classes for the fall quarter has been made and that the university is “closely tracking the latest public health guidance as the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to evolve.”

In Los Angeles County, the Claremont Colleges, a consortium of seven private institutions is working on a reopening plan for all of the colleges. “We have established working groups that are making progress to determine what actions are needed to bring academic, research and residential programs back to campus for the fall semester in ways that are guided by the best public health practices and government direction,” said spokesperson Laura Muna-Landa.

The 2.2 million-student California community college system, the nation’s largest system of higher education, is a network of 114 colleges that must also decide when to reopen campuses for in-person instruction. (In addition, there is Calbright College, the new online-only college.) Unlike the UC and CSU system, each community college has its own board of trustees. The community colleges’ chancellor’s office has not yet issued any guidance for fall instruction but Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley has recommended that colleges prepare for the possibility of online instruction to continue “in the event the stay-at-home order and social distancing measures are still in place,” said Christina Jimenez, a spokeswoman for the chancellor’s office.