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What's Next for Higher Education?

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For almost two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented disruptions for California's college students and the institutions they attend. The year ahead is likely to be filled with continued uncertainty as colleges and students seek to return to some semblance of normalcy. How should policymakers and higher education officials leverage their efforts to help students reach their educational goals?

From our perspective, the focus must continue to be on student-centered policies and programs that improve access, completion, and equity in our higher education systems. For all the many problems created by the pandemic, it also provides an opportunity to innovate and double down on approaches that are known to work. Key areas to watch include:

- **Equitable access to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU).** Among the 50 states, California ranks near the bottom in access to four-year colleges for recent high school graduates. The [elimination of standardized testing](#) could lead to more students seeking to attend the state's universities. In addition to opening up more slots for new students, improving the transfer pathway from community colleges would increase enrollment of low-income and underrepresented students at the state's public and private universities. [Increasing capacity at in-demand campuses](#) will yield the largest gains.
- **Supporting community college students.** Understanding and responding to enrollment declines at the community colleges, the state's largest provider of higher education, is critical to finding ways to re-engage those students. Community college students tend to have fewer economic resources than other college students do and are more likely to have been negatively affected by the pandemic. [Recent reforms have been tremendously successful](#) in increasing student access to and completion of the introductory English and math courses required to transfer to a four-year college. Even so, persistence rates beyond those courses remain too low. Identifying institutional reforms and student supports (e.g., articulation agreements, [guided pathways](#), and student aid) to help students achieve their academic goals is essential.
- **Fiscal relief for institutions and students.** Colleges and students have received \$10 billion over the past two years in [emergency aid from the federal government](#), and the governor's budget proposes additional funding for the state's public colleges. These resources can help address persistent fiscal problems due to lost revenues and increased expenses related to the pandemic.

Efforts to simplify, target, and expand the state's financial aid programs for students with the most financial need [will be key](#) in the coming year given the uneven economic impacts of the pandemic. In addition, new initiatives like dual admission, which would provide a seamless transfer to UC or CSU after completion of lower-division coursework at a community college, could offer cost-effective ways for [more students to earn a college degree](#).

- **Development of a cradle-to-career data system.** California is on the verge of establishing a data system [that links pre-K, K–12, higher education, workforce, and social services data](#)—and that would provide tools for answering important policy questions and navigating college access and success. Other states have used their systems to more effectively and efficiently direct funding and develop policies and program interventions that maximize student success. California can leverage the experiences of these states to implement a system that delivers essential information to students, parents, institutions, and policymakers.
- **Online learning.** Remote instruction is likely to take on a much larger role in higher education than in the past. Identifying the best methods and circumstances for providing online instruction should be a central focus in the year ahead. The [Online Education Initiative](#) of the community college system provides tools to help college officials employ effective approaches. Ensuring that students have the resources they need—including [access to technology](#)—continues to be vital. Other policy and program changes, including flexible scheduling and online student services, would further support students who have work or family commitments.

Prior to the pandemic, great strides had been made in increasing the number of Californians with a college degree. Both UC and CSU had enrolled more students, improved student success, and increased graduation rates. Community college reforms had led to dramatic progress in student access and success in transfer-level courses. Meanwhile, strong state support helped keep tuition and fees down, and the share of students taking out loans was in decline. Building on this progress and applying the lessons learned during the pandemic will go a long way toward improving educational attainment and achieving Governor Newsom's goal that [70% of working-age Californians have a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2030](#).

In the coming year, higher education will continue to grapple with student and staff health, remote instruction and support services, and fiscal stability. Finding ways to better reflect the full diversity of California's population remains a critical concern, one that must be addressed if higher education is to meaningfully serve as a driver of educational and economic mobility. How will the state's colleges and universities allocate resources to meet these needs and reach the state's goals? At the [PPIC Higher Education Center](#), we are energized to help find innovative ways to address these challenges—and more—in the weeks and months ahead.

TOPICS

