

The collapse of community college enrollment: Can California turn it around?



BY MIKHAIL ZINSHTEYN MARCH 21, 2022

[HTTPS://CALMATTERS.ORG/EDUCATION/HIGHER-EDUCATION/2022/03/COMMUNITY-COLLEGE-ENROLLMENT/](https://calmatters.org/education/higher-education/2022/03/community-college-enrollment/)

Despite sinking overall enrollment, some community colleges in California are seeing more students come back. Targeted state aid is likely helping, but so is more in-person instruction.

After community college enrollment collapsed in late 2020, California lawmakers last year gave the system of public two-year colleges \$120 million to help stem the tide of departing students and bring them back.

So far, progress has been uneven. Through last fall, just 17 of California's 116 community colleges have seen the number of students they enroll grow since fall of 2020. At 42 colleges, more students left in the fall of 2021 than in fall of 2020, according to a CalMatters analysis of system enrollment data.

Officials acknowledge that the number of students attending continued to sag systemwide. "Fall 2021 headcount is down approximately 7% from fall 2020 and down 20% overall compared to fall 2019," a cratering of more than 300,000 students over those two years, [said a March memo](#) from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office.

While \$120 million may be a rounding error in the state's \$47 billion commitment to higher education for the current budget year, it's still a large chunk of change.

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Gov. Gavin Newsom now wants to send another \$150 million to community colleges to further bolster their re-enrollment efforts.

The expected return on investment is unclear.

While colleges received \$20 million to stimulate re-enrollment in March of last year — well before fall term began — the remaining \$100 million only reached colleges in the middle of September at the earliest, several weeks after nearly all colleges started their fall semesters. While most state higher education financial support is annual, this money was one-time.

That means the bulk of the money's impact can't be measured yet. The full package's effect on student enrollment for the spring is also unknown because colleges don't report their student population numbers until around July.

Nor will the public ever truly know how colleges spend this money: Lawmakers and the governor last year didn't include any reporting requirements for colleges to show how they are using the re-enrollment dollars.

The chancellor's office of the community colleges supports Newsom's plan for re-enrollment money [but in its budget request last year](#) sought \$20 million in annual support, not \$150 million one-time.

Enrollment big picture

Early signs suggest the \$120 million for re-enrollment has made a difference in stabilizing campus student populations, but other factors are also responsible for bringing more students back or keeping them from leaving. Offering more courses in-person played a role, several college administrators said, as did billions of dollars in federal COVID-19 relief aid for students and colleges.

Much of the enrollment loss is outside the control of colleges. The labor market is sizzling now, with rampant labor shortages leading employers to pay well above minimum wage for positions that typically don't require a college education. Historically, community college enrollment swells during economic downturns when

employers are more selective, prizing applicants with college degrees. But enrollment dips when the economy is hot because adults don't view education as an immediate ticket toward gainful employment.

The whole California community college system isn't likely to return to its fall 2019 enrollment levels until two or three years from now, said John Hetts, a visiting executive for the chancellor's office who oversees enrollment.

Colleges will have to work harder to keep their student populations steady. The public K-12 system is projected to [shrink by nearly 600,000 students in eight years](#). California's overall population [has been either stagnant or in slight decline](#). Enrollment growth will have to come from more adults who aren't recent high-school graduates — including the roughly 3 million 25-to-54-year-olds who [already have some college but no degree](#) — and from college efforts to retain a greater share of their existing students, Hetts said.