

The Effects of COVID-19 on Transfer-Intending Students in California's Community Colleges

Highlights

- ▶ Enrollment fell by 20 percent from fall 2019 to fall 2021 for transfer-intending students at community colleges. Asian, Black, and Latino students saw the sharpest drop in numbers.
- ▶ For first-time and continuing students, persistence—or enrollment across terms—slowed during pandemic terms, as did successful course completion.
- ▶ Students who remained enrolled during the pandemic steadily accumulated transfer-level units, and a greater share reached critical transfer milestones than pre-pandemic cohorts—a likely upshot of recent reforms.

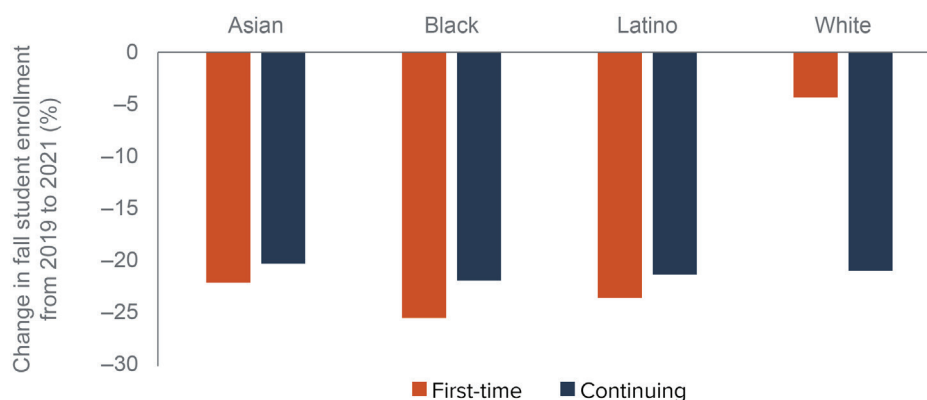
California's community colleges serve almost 2 million students each year, most from low-income and historically underrepresented groups. In 2020–2021, a combined 44 percent of undergraduate degrees awarded between the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems went to students who transferred from a state community college, making transfer an important path to completing a bachelor's degree and to economic mobility.

COVID-19 hit in the middle of the spring 2020 term, forcing community colleges to pivot to a mostly online learning environment—and widening inequities in access and well-being between students. Though the full effects of the pandemic are just emerging, an early consequence may be the diminished size and diversity of future transfer cohorts.

What toll did the pandemic take on enrollment at community colleges?

Fall enrollment among transfer-intending students fell more sharply during pandemic terms than the 3 percent and 2 percent declines of prior years: enrollment sank into double digits (20%) from fall 2019 to fall 2021. Overall, 152,332 fewer students enrolled in fall 2021 (593,604) compared to fall 2019 (745,936).

Community college enrollment fell sharply for most transfer-intending students



Source: Authors' calculations using MIS data.

Notes: Percent change in enrollment from fall 2019 to fall 2021. Restricted to transfer-intending students who enrolled in at least one credit course in the fall term of interest. Excludes enrollments from special-admit students.

The pandemic further exposed inequities between students—Black, Latino, and Asian students faced the largest drops in student counts, especially considering pre-pandemic trends in enrollment. Those students who did not remain enrolled during the pandemic may have struggled with academics or resources.

Enrollment in subsequent terms also fell, exposing pre-existing issues with persistence and success. Rates of persistence and successful completion of at least one course in fall, after one year, and after two years fell between 4 and 8 points among pandemic-affected students compared to similar non-pandemic cohorts.

How did students who remained enrolled fare with making progress towards transfer?

While fall 2020 and 2021 enrollees completed fewer transferable units than did fall 2019 enrollees, differences were very small, and pandemic-affected students who remained enrolled made similar academic progress to earlier cohorts.

A higher share—and remarkably, despite enrollment declines, a larger number—of first-time students who enrolled in fall 2019 and 2020 accomplished the critical milestone of completing transfer-level math and English along with 30 transferable units as of the following fall compared to students in previous fall terms. A greater share of continuing students also made progress towards transfer. Still, gaps in student success remain.

Which policies may have buffered transfer-intending students from the effects of the pandemic?

Before the pandemic, several reforms had begun to reshape community colleges, offering greater support toward success along the transfer pathway. Assembly Bill (AB) 705 has transformed how colleges place students in introductory, transfer-level courses, while reforms such as Guided Pathways and Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) have steered students beyond introductory courses to help them reach long-term goals.

During the pandemic, the community college system was proactive in implementing a range of measures, from providing emergency aid and resources to policy changes such as suspending regulations on excused withdrawals. Within classrooms, many faculty members expanded flexibility in their grading practices. These and other initiatives seem to have limited some negative effects of the pandemic.

What efforts could boost enrollment and help students reach their transfer goals?

To prevent further declines, colleges, high schools, and the state must strengthen collaborations that expand enrollment—such as College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP), a type of dual enrollment program. But with falling K–12 enrollment, colleges may need to focus on enrolling prospective adult students, and encouraging those who left to return. Meanwhile, localized approaches to boosting enrollment must address the specific needs of the communities in which community colleges reside.

And while strong academic supports are crucial to success within classrooms, existing students also need holistic and non-academic supports—such as mental health counseling and economic resources—to better manage obstacles that could push them off the transfer path. Furthermore, equity must be embedded into policy efforts to expand and diversify future transfer cohorts.

Looking ahead, a longitudinal data system would allow researchers to better track students' outcomes and identify successful programs. The California Legislature and the governor support establishing a longitudinal database, and efforts are underway for a data system that connects K–12, higher education, workforce, and social services data.

Adapted by Stephanie Barton from [The Effects of COVID-19 on Transfer-Intending Students in California's Community Colleges](#) by Cesar Alesi Perez, Jacob Jackson, Marisol Cuellar Mejia, Olga Rodriguez, Hans Johnson, and Daniel Payares-Montoya. Supported with funding from the College Futures Foundation and Sutton Family Fund.