

League Research Insights

A Closer Look at California Community College Enrollment

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About League Research Insights:

The Community College League of California (League) has been a steadfast advocate and dependable resource for community colleges across California for nearly 30 years. The League represents and supports California's community college districts (73 districts, 115 colleges, 72 centers). The League supports locally elected trustees and community college CEOs in serving their students and communities by advocating on their behalf at the state and federal levels, providing continuing professional development, and delivering services that employ economies of scale to minimize cost. League Research Insights are designed to build access to information, best practices, and highlight trends that enable districts to better serve their students.

Summary

During the Great Recession, enrollment declined across many groups, but the decline was particularly large among first-time students. In the aftermath of Proposition 30, enrollment has increased by 3.8% overall, with the greatest percentage change in growth in regions such as the Inland Empire/Desert and the Central Valley. Since 2008-09, California Community Colleges have seen a sizable shift in the age distribution of the students it serves, with growing enrollment by students ages 25 and under. Enrollment intensity has increased slightly though further improvements are still essential.

Context

With more than 2.1 million students at 115 colleges, the California Community Colleges is the largest system of higher education in the country. One in every four community college students in the nation attends a California community college. However, enrollment trends have shifted over the last ten years with some colleges seeing stagnant or decreasing enrollment while others are experiencing continued growth. This research brief provides an overview of enrollment trends across the California Community College system and explores where and why the shifts in enrollment are occurring. This brief is the first in a three-part series exploring the nuances of enrollment across the largest and most diverse system of higher education in the county.

The first brief, A Closer Look at California Community College Enrollment, explores the extent of enrollment changes over the period of 2008-09 through 2018-19. We explore three points in time: 2008-09, 2012-13, and 2018-19. The academic year 2008-09 was selected because of the draconian cuts in the State Budget. The 2008 Budget Act approved General Fund revenues of \$102 billion, but those revenue estimates were ultimately revised downward to address California's \$57 billion deficit (Department of Finance, 2018). In 2012-13, colleges saw some initial relief after voters approved Proposition 30, which temporarily increased the state sales tax rate for all taxpayers and the personal income tax rates for upper-income taxpayers (PPIC, 2013). Now, 10 years since the multi-billion dollar deficit, colleges continue to wonder about the causal factors for decreased enrollment, and what effect course rationings and changes in student consumer behavior have had on overall system enrollment trends and patterns.



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State of Enrollment Since the Great Recession and the Passage of Proposition 30

Following the Great Recession, community college participation rates fell by 18.7%, reaching a twenty-year low in California. Since 2012–13, the year California began its recovery from the Great Recession and when voters approved Proposition 30, enrollment at California Community Colleges has increased slightly. The system is now serving 87,722 more students, up 3.8% from 2012-13 (CCCCO Datamart, 2019). Unfortunately, enrollments have not reached the all-time high of 2009 when enrollments were over 2.8 million (Community College League of California, 2018). Currently, Full Time Equivalent Student (FTES) counts are down 139,381 since 2008–09. Had participation rates remained at 2008–09 levels, the community college system would today be serving nearly 600,000 additional students (PPIC, 2013).

California is not the only state struggling to increase college participation rates since the Great Recession. According to National Student Clearinghouse data, states with the biggest decreases in student enrollment numbers were Florida, California, Illinois, Michigan and Pennsylvania. Across the country, community college enrollments continue to slide with a decline of 3.4% over the 2017-18 academic year (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). In California, year-over-year enrollment at Title IV degree-granting institutions has decreased by 1.9%.

However, enrollment patterns are not consistent across the system and some districts have seen soaring demand. Of the 721 districts in the system, 24 have experienced significant percentage increase in growth since the passage of Proposition 30 in 2012, ranging from 12% to 44%. Regions with the greatest growth include the Inland Empire, the Desert region, and the Central Valley.

While birth rates and K-12 enrollments are declining, other factors may be affecting California's changing enrollment patterns. For instance, a 2015 study by Postsecondary Analytics found that employment and unemployment rates are the biggest factors driving enrollment for community colleges and other open-access institutions (Johnson, 2015). When unemployment is low and jobs are relatively available, the choice to enroll is also the choice to leave money on the table, especially for students who may rely on money in the short term to cover basic needs.

Gender

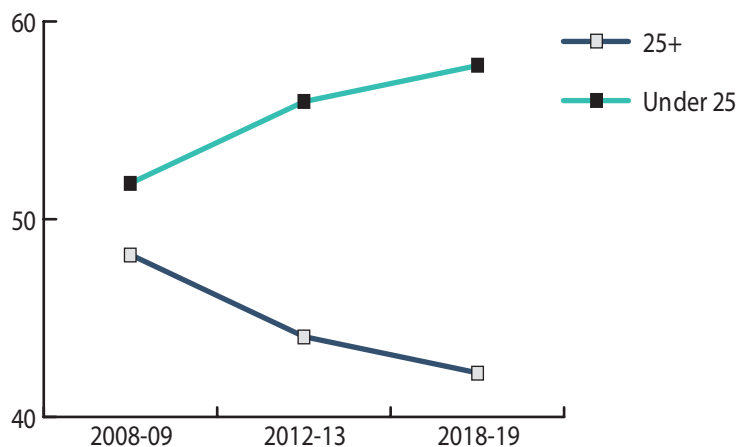
In 2008-09, the gender distribution of California Community College students was 54% female, 45% male, and 1% non-identifying. Over the period of 2008-09 through 2018-19, the percentage change in male enrollment is -0.35%, 0.37% for female enrollment, and -2.9% for non-identifying students. Total counts of female student enrollment are down 290,285 since the recession. Similarly, total male student enrollments are down 248,502 since 2008-09. These numbers correspond with statewide declines in enrollment during the period of the Great Recession.

Since academic year 2012-13, following the passage of Proposition 30, enrollments of women are up by a total of 72,059, or 5.9%. Enrollments of male students, however, have not recovered at the same pace. The system is serving 8,170, or 0.8%, more male students since 2012.

Age

Since 2008-09 and 2012-13, California Community Colleges have seen a sizable shift in the age distribution of the students it serves. The largest shift has been in enrollment of students under 25. Since 2012-13, the system has experienced a 12.4% change in enrollment of students 19 or younger. In that same period, enrollment of students ages 20-24 has increased by 2.8%, an 11% change since 2012-13.

These trends align with the emergence of new programs and policies intended to support first-time full-time students as they transition from high school to college. Specifically, shifts may be reflective of three primary dynamics:



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- Pent-up demand from the Great Recession, which reduced community college budgets by \$1.5 billion from 2008–09 to 2011–12 and led to a 21% decline in course offerings and shut out many first time college students.
- The creation of financial assistance programs aimed at incentivizing students to enroll in more units per semester. One example is the Student Success Completion Grant (SSCG) program for Cal Grant B and C recipients attending a California Community College full-time with 12 units or more. Given the construct of the program which utilizes the Cal Grant award as a qualifying criteria, this program may have accommodated more first time students.
- Increased momentum around Promise programs around California and the passage of College Promise legislation such as AB 19 (Statutes of 2017) and AB 5 (Statutes of 2019). Additionally, the 2018 Budget Act allocated \$46 million to implement AB 19. The total allocation increased to \$85 million in the Budget Act of 2019.

At the start of the recession, individuals ages 40+ constituted 21.4% of total California Community College enrollments. Now this age group constitutes 15.3% of all enrollments, down 6%, representing a 28% change since 2008-09. Several policy changes were instituted throughout the system within the last 10 years, therefore it is possible that some of these changes may have affected the enrollment patterns of individuals 40 years or older, including course repeatability regulations and availability of evening courses.

Course Taking Patterns

The number of course sections offered by the California Community Colleges has jumped from 329,122 in 2012-13 to 350,570 in 2018-19, an increase of over 6%.

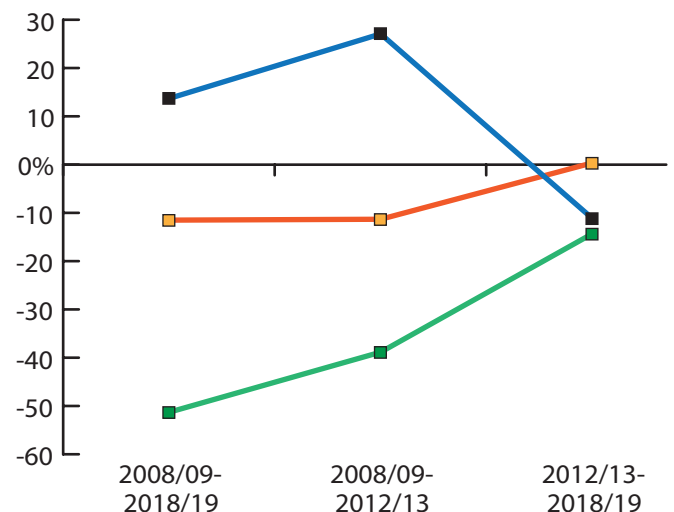
Enrollment in day courses increased by 7.7% in the period from 2008-09 through 2018-19. However, a similar increase was not seen in evening course offerings. Statewide, evening course offerings decreased by 25% between 2008-09 through 2012-13. From 2012-13 through 2018-19, course sections offered in the evenings decreased another 15%.

In the period since the passage of Proposition 30, districts have seen a significant upturn in day course enrollment by students ages 19 or younger. During the recession, day course enrollment by students 19 or younger dropped by 8%. Following the recovery (between 2012-13 through 2018-19), enrollment from this age group in day courses increased by 19.8%.

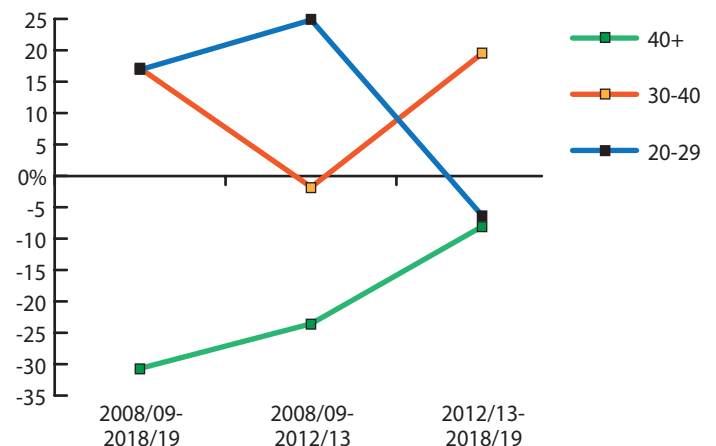
Since 2012-13, the largest drop in evening course enrollment was from students ages 20-24. By contrast, the largest increases in evening course enrollment were students ages 35-39, growing by 12%.

However, not all districts have reduced their evening course offerings. Twenty-three (23) of the 115 colleges have significantly increased evening course offerings, with one college increasing evening sections by 280.2% over the seven-year period since the passage of Proposition 30. Concurrently, the college's home district has seen a 44% increase in overall enrollment between the period of 2012-13 through 2018-19.

Day % Change



Evening % Change

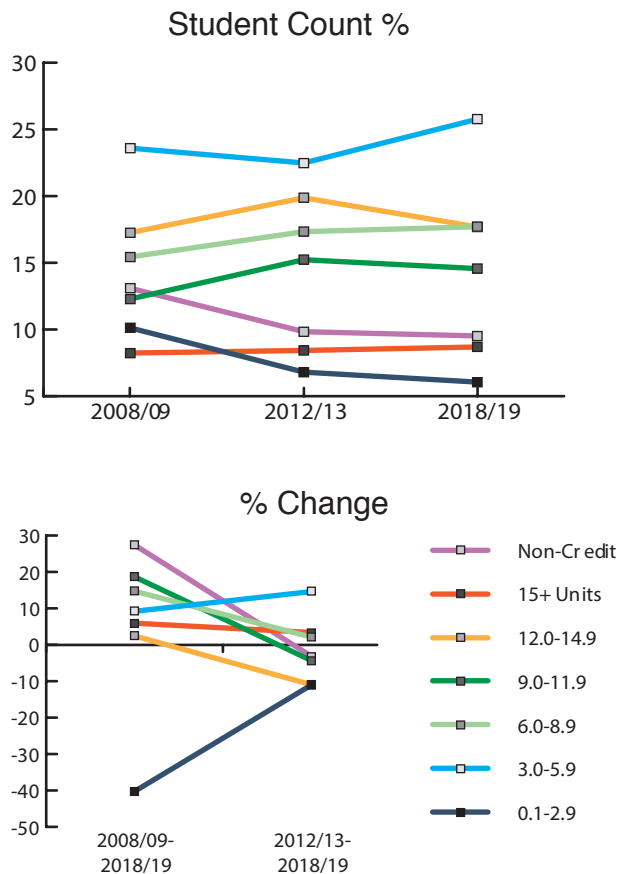


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Student Unit Load

Across California Community Colleges, nearly three-quarters of students attend part-time. Growing bodies of research demonstrate that college students who enroll full-time, taking 30 units per year, are much more likely to persist, save money and eventually graduate (CCCSE, 2017). Over the last ten years, colleges and policy makers have instituted several efforts to encourage more students to attend full-time, while also balancing the needs of part-time students.

Enrollment intensity has moved in a positive trajectory with a slight uptick in students taking 12 or more units. Notably, since 2008-09, the percentage of students taking fewer than 3 units has decreased by 40%. In the same period, the percentage of students taking 9-11.9 units has increased by 19%. Modest improvement in student unit load unfortunately has not been sustained as the system saw a 4% decrease in the percentage of students taking 12-14.9 units between 2012-13 through 2018-19.



Closing

Since 2012-13, the year California voters approved Proposition 30, enrollment at California Community Colleges has increased by 3.8%, and while this is positive news, more can be done to increase participation rates of post-traditional students. To delve deeper into this issue, the second brief in this series will focus on the characteristics and needs of California's post-traditional students.

As policies and budgets fluctuate for California's community colleges, understanding enrollment trends and patterns remains critical. As open access and diverse institutions, community colleges remain an indispensable investment in our state's present and future prosperity. Building our knowledge of who we serve and when is a step towards creating an accessible path to a better life for generations of low-income and working-class Californians.

Suggested Citation:

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