

Increasing Student Enrollment AND Reducing Student Unit Accumulation: A Community College Paradox?



by Wendy Brill-Wynkoop, FACCC President
Ginni May, ASCCC President

In January 2022, faculty in one California community college received the following communication:

You may be aware of our lagging enrollments. Like community colleges across the state and country, our enrollments are down significantly. Compared to last spring, we're down approximately 10%, and last spring we had fallen 10% from spring of 2020—a loss of approximately 2,200 students from spring 2021 to spring 2022. We have attempted to keep as many classes in the schedule as practically possible to serve as many students as we can; nevertheless, over the last week deans working with department chairs have been making schedule reductions on the sections that have very few students. This has been inconvenient for many full-timers. For our adjunct faculty it has, regrettably, too often meant lost jobs. In coming semesters you'll notice that enrollment management will be a major focus of our college.

Faculty throughout the California community colleges are receiving similar notifications, which are not unique to 2022. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollments across the California community colleges had been declining. During the past decade the number of full-time equivalent students (FTES)¹ diminished by 217,005 (from 1,279,577 FTES in 2010–11 to 1,062,572 FTES in 2020–2021), constituting nearly a 17% decline in annual FTES over the 10-year time span.

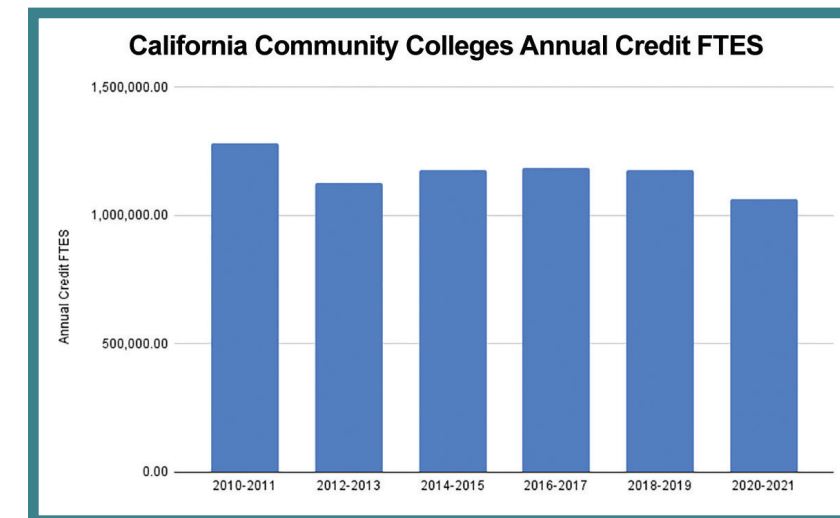
In particular, total head count and credit FTES have declined over the past five years, and that decrease has accelerated following the COVID-19 pandemic. So, what is the reason for the decline in enrollment? The short answer: It's complicated. Trends have shown that during a recession, when unemployment is high, enrollment increases, and during a strong economy, when unemployment is low, enrollment declines. However, a pandemic does not instigate a typical recession, and other

factors in addition to the economy may influence community college enrollment. Nationally, all sectors of college enrollments are down; however, the community colleges are most affected. Across the country, the typical college-age student population is declining. The total cost of college is prohibitive for many people, even those who receive the college promise. The pandemic has driven up wages, and many students have chosen to work more.

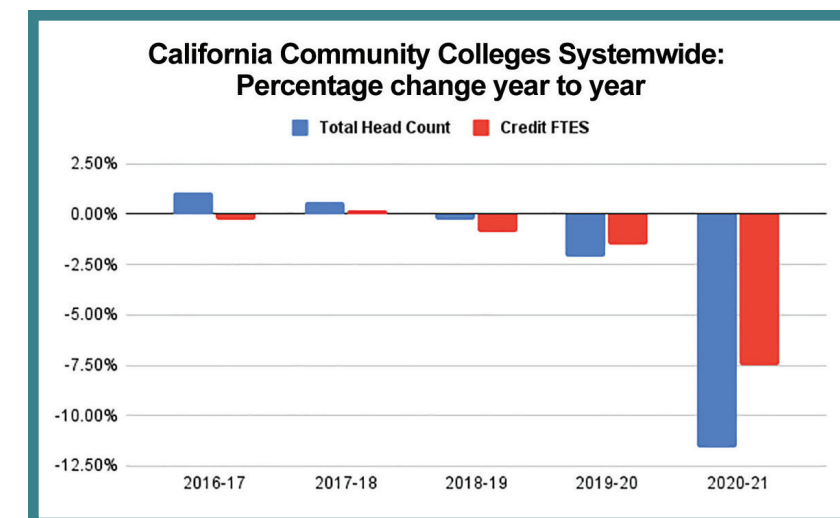
From National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (<https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>), as colleges are working to increase enrollment, or at a minimum, slow the decline in enrollment, they should be aware that some actions intended to improve educational opportunities for students may also be leading to enrollment decline.

“You cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war.”

– Albert Einstein



CCCCO Datamart 1/12/2022



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¹ FTES: Full-time Equivalent Student — 1 FTES = (17.5 weeks per semester)x(2 semesters per year)x(15 hours per week) = 525 student contact hours per year: https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/IEPI/Resources_Guides/sem-understanding-calculating-ftes-spring-2019.pdf?ver=2020-06-13-101228-017

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While this situation is not about war, there is a parallel: The California community colleges and policymakers have goals to increase student enrollment and at the same time

reduce student unit accumulation. Colleges are not funded on actual head count; a large majority of California community college funding is based on FTES, which is a function of student contact hours, a calculation that depends upon the courses that students take.

Over the past decade in California, the Legislature has enacted numerous mandates aimed at innovation to streamline and simplify the pathways for students to earn associate degrees, certificates, and transfer to four-year institutions. The bills that focused on reducing the number of excess units or courses taken include SB 1440, Student Transfer (Padilla, 2010); SB 1456, Seymour-Campbell Student Success Act (Lowenthal, 2012); SB 440, Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act (Padilla, 2013); and AB 1451, Dual Enrollment (Holden, 2014).

The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office took such initiatives further in 2017 with its focus on transfer through the Vision for Success² goals that helped drive additional legislative mandates, including AB 705 (Irwin, 2017), The Seymour-Campbell Student Success Act of 2021: Matriculation: Assessment, The California

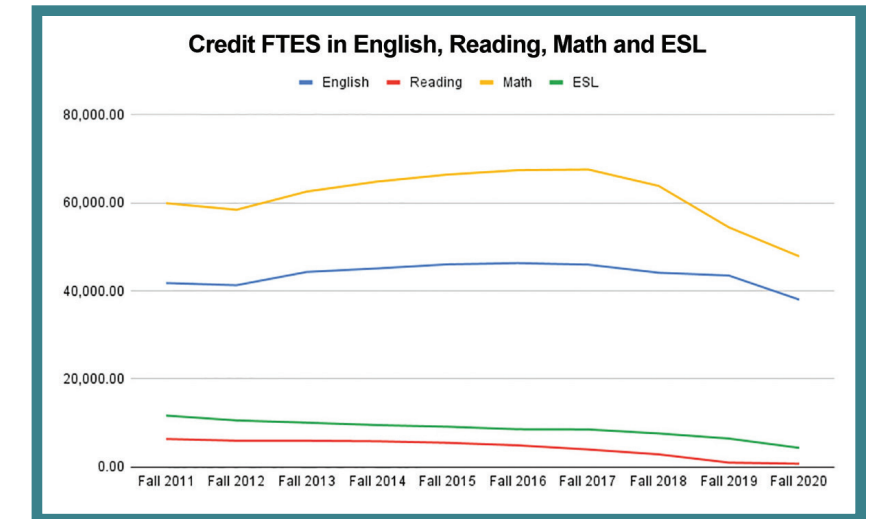
Community Colleges Guided Pathways Grant Program, Ed Code §§ [88920–88922] passed in the 2017–18 Budget Bill; and the California Community Colleges Student Success Funding Formula, also passed in the 2017–18 Budget Bill. The following year the California Community Colleges Student Centered Funding Formula was passed through the 2018–19 Budget Bill.

The most recent legislation is AB 928 (Berman, 2021), the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act, was signed by the governor in October 2021. This law will effectively reduce the number of units that students are required to take for their associate degree for transfer (ADT), and will require colleges to place students on an ADT pathway if their stated major contains an ADT component and if they have declared their intention to transfer.³

In general, an associate degree is not required for transfer and, to date, many students still transfer to the California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) systems without earning an associate degree⁴. Early transfer legislation, SB 1440 (Padilla, 2010), which led to the creation of the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT), guaranteed transfer to the CSU system for students who earned an ADT. While the minimum number of semester units required to earn any associate degree in the CCC system is 60, Padilla's legislation enabled an ADT to be earned with as few as 60 transferable semester units. In the next few years, SB 1456 and SB 440 by Lowenthal and Padilla, respectively, strengthened the mandate of the ADTs. In 2014, Holden successfully authored AB 1451, the Dual Enrollment bill, which encouraged partnership agreements between high schools and community colleges to assist high school students in completing courses that fulfilled high school and college credit simultaneously.

In 2017 the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office released The Vision for Success, setting big, ambitious goals of increasing the number of associate degree awards, increasing transfers, and decreasing unit accumulation, among other changes. In the same year, AB 705 (Irwin, 2017) and other legislative mandates resulted in significantly reduced remedial course offerings. College districts were strongly encouraged to place all students directly into transfer-level English and mathematics courses, and to eliminate reading programs. In that same year, the California Community Colleges rolled out the Guided Pathways framework, which was designed to streamline a student's pathway to completion, thus reducing excess unit accumulation. The CCC funding model also changed in 2018 with the adoption of the Student Centered Funding Formula in the 2018–19 state budget, minimizing the funding for enrollment and maximizing monetary awards for transfer, degree attainment, and completion of transfer-level mathematics and English within the student's first academic year.

These initiatives focused on getting students through transfer-level English and mathematics and reducing credit basic skills or remedial education. Fall FTES for credit courses has, for the most part, steadily declined, nearly 14% from fall 2011 (511,874 FTES) to fall 2020 (440,937 FTES). In particular, enrollments in English and mathematics have declined, about 9% and 20%, respectively. However, a significant jump in enrollments occurred during the middle years, indicating a reduction of approximately 18% and 29%, respectively, from the highest enrollment to the lowest during those years. Reading instruction has mostly been eliminated, and English as a second language curricula have been reduced by nearly 68%. The decrease in English and mathematics FTES constitutes about 22% of the overall loss of FTES in the CCC system.



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AB 928, the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act of 2021, is intended to improve the transfer process. One major component of the legislation is the creation of a singular general education pathway for transfer to both the CSU and UC systems, limiting the total required units for that pathway to 34 semester units, and reducing the current CSU requirement by five semester units. Decreasing the number of units accumulated by associate degree earners to 79 from 84 met one of the goals of the Vision for Success. The potential impact on FTES systemwide should be noted: For example, consider the 118,094 first-time associate degree earners in 2019–2020 as a cohort of degree earners; a decrease of five required semester units per student would be an estimated system loss of 4,921 FTES annually for four years, assuming students earn degrees within four years. That is a total loss of 19,682 FTES over four years for one cohort. On the upside, colleges may have some flexibility in requiring students in STEM majors to take up to 66 semester units due to majors requirements, although the general education units would not be different.

While the authors, sponsors, and supporters of these initiatives have the students' best interest as the primary goal, these initiatives do reduce enrollment. Such legislative mandates make increasing enrollment even more complex. Thus, an unintentional paradox has been embedded into the goals of the California Community College system. ■

² California Community Colleges Vision for Success: <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Vision-for-Success/goals-and-commitments>

³ Students may opt out of the ADT under certain conditions.

⁴ CSU Student Enrollment Dashboard: https://tableau.calstate.edu/views/FirstTimeFreshmanandCollegeTransfers/SummaryView?iframeSizedToWindow=true&%3Aembed=y&%3Arender=true&%3AshowAppBanner=false&%3Adisplay_count=no&%3AshowVizHome=no