Illuminating Innovations: Advancing Enrollment at California State University

Executive Summary

College Opportunity

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MANY CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES FACE ENROLLMENT CHALLENGES

In March of 2020, the global pandemic changed nearly every aspect of daily life around the world. Colleges and universities were forced to close their physical facilities and deliver both instruction and support services online, and higher education enrollment across the country declined. The impacts of the pandemic on California's colleges and universities varied, not only from system to system, but across campuses within each system. Amid a challenging environment, administrators, faculty, and staff worked to ensure students had access to resources, with some providing laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots, as well as basic-needs resources and supports. In the CSU system, following several years of rising enrollment, the number of undergraduates peaked in 2020 at 432,264 students. **Enrollment then declined by about 10,000 students from fall 2020 to fall 2021, with a further decline of over 17,000 students in fall 2022, resulting in the CSU's lowest total since 2014 at 404,820.** Fall 2023 brought with it an additional decrease of roughly 2,500 students- indicating that the system is beginning to stabilize as the harshest impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has come and gone. **Overall, the CSU has suffered a 6.5% decline from the system's pre-pandemic total.**

This report summarizes data on recent changes in undergraduate enrollment in the California State University (CSU). We find significant, but varying, enrollment challenges across campuses and student groups. We explore the response to enrollment challenges at campuses that have fared better in undergraduate enrollment levels over the last few years, particularly for Latinx and Black student populations, finding that their efforts to maintain and grow their enrollment align with the CSU system's priorities under <u>Graduation Initiative 2025</u> (GI 2025). We conclude by offering several recommendations to improve state and system policies to support undergraduate enrollment and maintain the benefits to the state of higher educational attainment.

Enrollment has declined by 6% at the CSU

Undergraduate enrollment in the CSU declined by over 6% overall between 2019 and 2023, with considerable variation by campus and by student group. The undergraduate student body can be thought of in three main groups—incoming first-time freshmen, incoming undergraduate transfer students, and continuing students. Within the CSU system, each of these groups has shown different enrollment patterns over the past few years. In 2018, CSU enrolled an all-time high of nearly 67,000 first-time freshmen (FTF). In fall 2020—the first full semester where enrollment decisions were made during the pandemic—the number of FTF decreased by over 4,000 from the prior year, with a further drop of over an additional 1,500 students for fall 2021. Numbers for fall 2022 and 2023 have been far more encouraging, with the system exceeding pre-pandemic levels for first-time freshman enrollment and reaching a new all-time high of 68,216.

A steady increase in California high school students graduating with the necessary course requirements to be eligible for the UC and CSU (known as the A-G requirements) is a key reason for this quick return to strong FTF enrollment numbers. Across the state, the number of college ready graduates has steadily increased over the last decade, with only a minor decline in 2020 that was reversed the very next year. **The 2022 high school graduating class included about 12,000 more A-G graduates compared to 2019, resulting in a substantial increase in students eligible to enroll directly into the CSU.** Systemwide, however, freshman enrollment has grown by over 3% since prior to the pandemic, but about half of CSU campuses continuing to have substantially depressed enrollment of FTF.

First-time freshmen enrollment has rebounded strongly in recent years, while undergraduate transfers continue to precipitously decline.

Figure 1.* CSU Systemwide Enrollment, First-Time Freshmen & Undergraduate Transfers (2018 to 2023).



Note: Figure 1 appears as Figure 5 in the full report

Data Source: California State University Division of Institutional Research and Analysis Department, Reports and Analytics, Applications and Admissions Dashboard

Across the state, the numbers for undergraduate transfer enrollment rose to an all-time high of 62,426 in fall 2020, despite coinciding with the first full semester where enrollment decisions were made with full knowledge of the pandemic. A significant drop of over 12,000 students then occurred as of fall 2023. The sizable declines in California Community College enrollment, the topic of our 2022 report titled <u>Illuminating Innovations</u>, contributed to this decline and will continue to put constraints on undergraduate transfer applications to four-year institutions over the next few years, as smaller cohorts of students will be available to apply for transfer.

New transfer enrollment in 2023 was mired at **16% (or 9,589 students)** below pre-pandemic levels. **In fall 2022 the CSU system enrolled fewer than 50,000 new undergraduate transfer students for the first time since 2012.** Application totals have similarly declined in recent years, with the CSU system having received 18,000 fewer applications (a 16% drop) from undergraduate transfer students in 2022 than in 2019. Different patterns of enrollment changes for FTF and transfer students across CSU campuses may reflect enrollment challenges facing nearby community colleges, changes in numbers of high school graduates in different regions of the state, differences in campus focus on outreach and recruitment of freshmen and transfer students, or other issues. While the decline in transfer student enrollment is deeply concerning, the bounce-back in freshmen enrollment ensured that the system nearly broke even in the enrollment of new students.

Together, new FTF and new transfer students comprise only about 30% of CSU undergraduate enrollment, however, with the other 70% made up of **continuing students**. These student numbers, therefore, are strong indicators for the health of the system. With that in mind, it is notable that **the number of continuing students enrolled in the CSU has dropped by 7% since 2019**, a figure that varied considerably across campuses (see Figure 2). **Overall, in 2022, CSU undergraduate enrollment was about 17,500 students less than it had been 12 months earlier, the system's single largest year-overyear decline of the 21st century.** Continuing student enrollment accounted for 87% of the enrollment decline in 2022 compared to the prior year.

While graduation rates have been rising, and the average time for students to graduate has shrunk due to reforms implemented as part of GI 2025, this does not by itself explain the recent reduction in continuing students. The one-year persistence rate (which accounts for students who graduated) declined from 86% in 2019 to 82% in 2021 for FTF and from 91% to 86% for transfer students. **This means that an urgent focus on the retention of students enrolled at the CSU is necessary and aligned with the GI 2025 effort.**



Eighteen of 23 CSU campuses have seen reductions in continuing student enrollment.

Figure 2*. Percent Change in Undergraduate Continuing Student Enrollment (Fall 2019 to Fall 2023).

Long Beach		4.8% 1,084
San Diego		3.6% 765
San Luis Obispo		2.4% 362
Dominguez Hills		1.6% 151
Sacramento		1.1% 225
San Jose	-269 -1.4%	
Fullerton	-907 -3.5%	
Northridge	-1,535 -6.4%	
Fresno	-1,040 -6.5%	
Los Angeles	-1,063 -6.5%	
Stanislaus	-437 -6.6%	
Systemwide	-20,533 -6.7%	
San Bernardino	-861 -6.9%	
San Marcos	- 785 - 8.1%	
Pomona	-1,872 -9.7%	
Bakersfield	-766 -11.3%	
Maritime	-74 -11.8%	
Monterey Bay	-547 -12.1%	
San Francisco	-3,354 -18.0%	
Humboldt	-1,111 -23.1%	
East Bay	-2,111 -23.6%	
Channel Islands	-1,157 -24.4%	
Chico	-3,051 -25.5%	
Sonoma	-2,071 -36.0%	

Note: Figure 2 appears as Figure 8 in the full report

Data Source: California State University Division of Institutional Research and Analysis Department, Reports and Analytics, Enrollment Summary Dashboard

International student enrollment is one last significant category to note in grasping the full picture regarding CSU enrollment trends. A substantial drop in international student enrollment of 67% between 2019 and 2023 had a tremendous impact on the system. Roughly 60% of the 27,881-student decline across the CSU system since 2019 consisted of international students. Factoring in only domestic students, the CSU lost 2.8% of its

undergraduate population since 2019, compared to 6.5% when including international students. The two year decline in international enrollment from 2021-2023 exceeds the total decline in domestic enrollment since 2019- a four year span. Equating to the system losing more international students in one year than they did domestic students in the last three years. But even that **2.8% decline represents 11,388 domestic students lost over three years.** It remains to be seen whether reduced enrollment of international students will continue or whether loosening of COVID-19 travel restrictions across the world will lead to the system recovering much of its international student population.



Despite campuswide enrollment decreases, 11 of 23 campuses grew their Latinx enrollment totals, and 7 grew their Black enrollment totals.

Figure 3.* Percent Change in Total, Black, and Latinx Undergraduate Enrollment by Campus (Fall 2019 to Fall 2023).



Note: Figure 3 appears as Figure 2 in the full report

Data Source: California State University Division of Institutional Research and Analysis Department, Reports and Analytics, Enrollment Summary Dashboard

In accordance with long observed demographic changes in the state, the Latinx student population in the CSU was growing steadily prior to the pandemic. While it declined slightly by over 1,800 students in 2021, the Latinx population has rebounded and slightly exceeds it's previous all-time high as of fall 2023. Eleven CSU campuses experienced growth in enrollment of Latinx students over the pandemic period (see Figure above).

Decreasing number of high school graduates in California

While recent enrollment losses are related to disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduced number of international students who may or may not return, a looming <u>demographic cliff</u> poses a longer term danger. The California Department of Finance <u>anticipates</u> high school graduating class sizes to begin a serious decline in 2025 after decades of near continuous growth. While over 433,000 students graduated high school in 2022, the Department of Finance expects that number to drop to 379,000 in 2032, a 50,000-student decline.

The Los Angeles area could prove to be particularly vulnerable, as the same report predicts the LA area will suffer a 13% reduction (nearly 23,000 students) in postsecondary higher education enrollment between 2012 and 2029. Further knock-on effects are possible, with <u>significant funding</u> for all of California's higher education systems being directly tied to meeting or exceeding certain enrollment totals. **Given that enrollment reductions often disproportionately affect underrepresented and low-income students, the next few years will be crucial for developing bold, equity minded strategies to retain current students and entice prospective students into pursuing higher education.**





CAN CSU CAMPUSES LEVERAGE GI 2025 STRATEGIES TO ENROLL AND RETAIN STUDENTS?

To learn about the response to enrollment challenges facing CSU campuses, we interviewed administrators at campuses that have fared better in undergraduate enrollment levels over the last few years, particularly for underrepresented student populations. Specifically, we focused on six campuses, including five that managed to gain enrollment of both Black and Latinx students between 2019 and 2022: Fresno, Fullerton, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San Diego. We also included Dominguez Hills, which serves predominately underrepresented students and had comparatively small losses of enrollment among Black and Latinx students.

In our questions, we focused on efforts to recruit/retain students and what practices administrators believed to show promise in maintaining or growing enrollment of Black and Latinx students. We identified themes across the interviews that suggest these campuses view strategies that line up with priorities of GI 2025 as important to their efforts to maintain enrollment of underrepresented students. Most of the strategies cited by interviewees as helping to address enrollment challenges for underrepresented student student populations in the aftermath of the pandemic fell into five priority areas, noted in the Table below:

Campus efforts to increase enrollment largely fell into five of the six priority areas for the CSU Graduation Initiative 2025.

Table 1. Summary of Campus Efforts to Increase Enrollment.

GI 2025 Priority	Enrollment Strategies and Activities	
IMPROVING ADMISSIONS AND ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT	 Focus outreach and recruitment on underrepresented students Engage affinity groups and programs in recruitment efforts Collaborate intensively with feeder schools and colleges Adopt flexible approach to course modality and course schedule to reflect student preferences Monitor enrollment closely and make frequent adjustments to match student behavior 	
FOCUSING ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND WELL- BEING	 Provide more proactive and personalized student services Increase mental health services Adopt new technologies to facilitate services and communication Foster sense of belonging among underrepresented students inside and outside the classroom 	
PROVIDING MORE FINANCIAL SUPPORT	 Expand basic needs services Relax fees and payment policies Improve policies, processes, and communication around financial aid Explore options for increasing support for low-income students 	
REDUCING ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS	 Streamline forms and processes Reform or eliminate registration holds Improve information sharing across departments to eliminate duplication in collection of student information 	
USING DATA TO INFORM DECISIONS	 Collect and analyze data across the enrollment period to facilitate strategy adjustments Discuss student enrollment at meetings of various campus constituencies Share student enrollment and progress data widely across campus Use data on student retention and progress in design of interventions 	

Each of these five areas is examined in more detail below.

1) Improving Admissions and Enrollment Management

Interviewees across the six campuses noted various efforts to improve policies and processes in outreach, admissions, and enrollment. Interviewees at most of the campuses pointed to recruitment efforts that target underrepresented student populations and efforts to tailor their communications in ways that speak effectively to those students. Several people noted significant challenges with recruiting Black students given their smaller numbers in the local area and in local high schools. In response, interviewees at several campuses described campus events aimed at increasing the number of Black admitted applicants who go on to enroll. Several interviewees pointed to increased efforts to include parents when designing outreach efforts, recognizing the important role family influence plays in the college decisions of first-generation students.

Many interviewees described increased collaboration with feeder high schools and community colleges in recent years. Interviewees described working with schools and colleges to improve course articulation and program roadmaps, develop agreements for streamlined or automatic admissions, and provide earlier and more intensive services to underserved student populations.

Interviewees at several campuses pointed to closer monitoring of enrollment and course registration leading up to each term, as well as concerted efforts to optimize class schedules to facilitate student enrollment. Campuses also described **increased flexibility in adapting their course offerings and course modalities.**

2) Focusing on Student Engagement and Well-Being

One of the most common themes across the campuses was an increased focus on supporting a sense of belonging among their underrepresented and underserved student populations. Many interviewees described the development or expansion of various affinity programs and centers aimed at providing a "home" for students from traditionally marginalized groups. Some interviewees described efforts to expand faculty involvement in the work of the affinity groups and centers to better connect students with faculty members who share their background. Increasing overall faculty and staff diversity was described as a critical, ongoing need to support these efforts.

Campus administrators also pointed to new and **expanded efforts to increase student engagement and to provide more proactive and personalized services to support students' well-being and success**. The campuses adopted online advising, mentoring, counseling, tutoring and other services during the pandemic, and they are keeping those options available for students who need or prefer them. They are making **better use of technology to communicate with students and facilitate their access to information and services**. Several interviewees described ongoing work to ensure that course curriculum and learning materials are more culturally inclusive. Some pointed to increased mental health services as important to their efforts to help students succeed and thereby stay enrolled amid all the disruptions to students' lives over the last few years.

3) Providing More Financial Support

Many interviewees described their **most significant enrollment challenges over the last few years as being among low-income students**, who suffered more substantial disruptions from the joint health and economic crises of the pandemic. The extra federal and state funding campuses received during the pandemic helped them hold onto those students by **offering emergency grants**, **waiving some fees**, **and forgiving small loans or debts**. Some interviewees said that the relaxed policies around fees and debts are being maintained.

Despite these policies, some campuses reported that **the challenge to keep low-income students enrolled is greater now than during the more acute phases of the pandemic**. Several factors contribute to this challenge, including competition from the labor market, financial pressures from high inflation, and the expiration of the temporary sources of funds campuses were using to provide financial support. In response, some campuses are pursuing means of increasing financial assistance over the longer term, with one campus channeling funds generated via higher fees for out-of-state students into scholarships. Another campus has been pursuing ways to increase campus employment opportunities for low-income students.

Officials at several campuses described efforts to improve their communications and processes around financial aid. This is meant to ensure that low-income and first-generation students understand the opportunities for financial assistance available to them, while improving the timeline for generating financial aid offers critical to families' college-going decisions.

4) Reducing Administrative Barriers

Interviewees across the campuses described efforts to reduce administrative barriers that can prevent students from enrolling. One campus conducted an audit of its admission process and discovered there were 10 to 15 steps for students to get through. Campus officials worked to reduce that to three to five steps by eliminating the need for students to duplicate information across different forms and departments. Several campuses extended their deadlines for payment, giving students more time to work out financial aid.

Other campuses have revised policies and procedures related to reenrollment following academic dismissal, reaching out to students, and offering academic support services to help them be more successful.

5) Using Data to Inform Decisions

An increased focus on collecting, analyzing, and sharing data and information was cited as a means to better inform decisions around student enrollment, progress, and success. Interviewees emphasized enhanced efforts to closely monitor student data, allowing for more frequent changes to outreach, recruitment, communications, and other activities to support their enrollment levels. One campus developed an **Enrollment Management and Student Services team** that meets with relevant department directors to track enrollment throughout the process.

Aside from the registration and enrollment process itself, many interviewees emphasized the use of data to monitor student success and retention and to understand differences across groups of students and across colleges, departments, and courses or course sections. Many described the **development of dashboards** that help departments understand their course success rates and retention rates as well as any disparities across student groups.



Several Cultural Shifts Reinforce Campus Efforts

Across the campuses, interviewees described several cultural shifts affecting the efforts they are making to increase enrollment and target underrepresented and underserved students.

The campuses appreciate the unique needs of transfer students. While transfer students have always comprised a significant proportion of CSU students, campuses have often served them as if they were the same as rising juniors who had enrolled as freshmen. Recent circumstances have contributed to a change in culture at these campuses toward better recognizing the unique needs of transfer students. Some interviewees referenced a decline in transfer applications and enrollment—in part a consequence of the significant enrollment drop in the state's community colleges during the pandemic. Combined with declining projections of the high school graduate population, some campuses are wisely focusing on efforts to deepen partnerships with community colleges, improve outreach to potential transfer students, and expand campus events and services targeted to transfer students.

Examples include:

- Agreements to provide cross-enrollment opportunities for students in feeder community colleges (Dominguez Hills)
- Improvements to program roadmaps for transfer students to help community college students make appropriate course-taking decisions (CSU Los Angeles)
- A new Transfer Resource Center to coordinate transition and support services for transfer students (Sacramento State)
- "Microsites" at local community colleges aimed at place-bound students, allowing students to complete a bachelor's degree at their community college through online and weekend courses (SDSU)

The campuses recognize the critical role of retention in overall enrollment. Many interviewees discussed a noticeable shift in their campus culture toward emphasizing retention to increase enrollment. Improving retention rates has been a focus of the CSU system for many years as part of GI 2025, but interviewees pointed to recent changes in the way retention is discussed. Rather than the typical focus on retention as a step toward higher graduation rates, retention is also discussed as a means of helping campuses achieve enrollment targets.

Efforts to increase outreach to current students from underrepresented groups, to provide more proactive and personalized student support services, to eliminate administrative barriers, and to be more transparent in sharing data on student progress are often tied specifically to a goal of improving the student experience so retention will increase.

The campuses view enrollment as a campus-wide responsibility. Interviewees also described a cultural shift toward acknowledging that campus enrollment levels are dependent on collaborative efforts across the campus. This perspective makes it clear that responsibility for achieving and maintaining enrollment is distributed across departments and roles, requiring collaboration. Specific to enrollment of underrepresented and underserved populations, interviewees often described campus conversations about what the campus can do to provide the kind of experiences these students need to be successful.



Campuses See Challenges Ahead to Maintain their Efforts

Many interviewees pointed to the changing higher education environment, insufficient funding, and some remaining barriers to change as significant challenges to increasing or maintaining enrollment of underrepresented students.

Changes in the higher education environment add uncertainty

Many interviewees expressed **concern about limited student demand and increased competition for enrollment amid growing skepticism about the value of a college education and the pending "enrollment cliff.**" Surveys have indicated growing public skepticism about the value of college, with one recent poll finding that 56% of adults think a four-year degree is "not worth the cost," up from 40% a decade ago.^[I] Interviewees also referenced moves by some states and corporations to eliminate college degree requirements for job applicants.^[II] Adding to these factors, the annual number of high school graduates in California is projected to decline by about 14% over the next decade.^[iii] Many interviewees foresaw significant challenges ahead for their campuses to maintain their enrollment, particularly among underrepresented and underserved student populations.

CSU funding is inadequate to meet student needs

Many interviewees expressed appreciation for increases to the CSU budget in recent years, and for the Governor's commitment to 5% annual base increases over five years, introduced in the 2022-23 state budget.^[iv] But they were concerned about the prospects for maintaining that commitment given projected budget deficits, the long-term underinvestment in CSU's physical infrastructure, the high costs of serving the underrepresented, low-income, and first generation students that increasingly comprise their student populations, and the impact of high inflation on the cost of campus operations. They noted increasing challenges to recruit and retain faculty and staff related to inadequate salary structures system-wide.

Intransigence and information deficits impede change

Several interviewees worried that **resistance to change could be an ongoing barrier to enrolling and supporting underrepresented students**. Some described limits to faculty willingness to change teaching and learning environments to be more flexible and equitable, and to incorporate innovative pedagogical approaches and technologies. Others **perceived limits to campus commitments to diversity and equity**.

Even when the willingness to change is there, some interviewees pointed to challenges with accessing information about what changes would be most effective. Many described difficulties with distinguishing proven policies and practices from those with less evidence to support them. Some thought the Chancellor's Office should be doing more to evaluate the literature on the effectiveness of various changes to policies and practices and to use the systemwide student data it collects to conduct its own research.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the CSU system has seen a 6% drop in undergraduate enrollment between 2019 and 2023. All campuses faced challenges to maintain enrollment among particularly vulnerable student populations, but some have been more successful at keeping their numbers of Black and Latinx students enrolled at or above the levels in 2019, before the pandemic.

Our interviews with officials at more successful campuses revealed common themes in their efforts. Those campuses have intentionally targeted underrepresented students with intensified outreach and services; worked to foster a sense of belonging for diverse groups of students; increased the scope of financial supports they provide; reduced administrative barriers that can impede student progress; and increased their use of data in conversations and decision-making processes. These efforts line up with priorities of GI 2025. Several cultural shifts on these campuses have further supported their efforts, including recognition of the unique needs of transfer students and the importance of retention to overall enrollment levels.

The next few years will be critical to determining the ability of California's higher education system to generate college graduates to spearhead the state's economic future. Reaching the Governor's stated goal of 70% degree and certificate attainment among working-aged Californians by 2030 will require higher enrollment and improved student retention and completion rates—an effort complicated by capacity challenges at some CSU campuses.

Below are some recommendations for better campus practices to support the enrollment and retention of underrepresented students, and for improved state and system policies to better support CSU campuses in their efforts.

For CSU Campus Leaders

- Expand efforts to reduce administrative barriers for students to ensure they can easily find information and navigate processes to apply, register, and remain enrolled to successful completion.
- Focus on creating welcoming and supportive environments for students where students see faculty and staff from similar backgrounds; have opportunities to find support from peers and mentors; are presented with culturally relevant curriculum; and encounter policies inside and outside of the classroom that support their needs and circumstances.
- Analyze and widely share disaggregated data on student enrollment and success to support helpful cultural shifts toward an increased focus on retention, the unique needs of transfer students, and the ways that campus enrollment levels and student outcomes are a shared responsibility.

For CSU System Leaders

- Improve analytical and technical support for campuses, including making better use of the vast array of student data collected by the system office, helping campuses identify which programs and interventions are well supported by evidence in national research, and providing guidance on effective implementation.
- Assess ADT pathways progress at campuses and support wider and stronger adoption by engaging in a review of campus acceptance of ADTs across majors and concentrations for opportunities to encourage reasonable adjustments in requirements to make the degree pathways work more consistently for students.
- Strengthen focus on retention in GI 2025 by incorporating measures of student retention and gaps across student populations.

State Policymakers

Maintain commitment to increased funding and financial aid.
 Policymakers should coordinate efforts to address college affordability and allocate

funding to financial aid to ensure that the total cost of attending college is manageable and predictable for students and their families as they make the decision of whether to enroll at a CSU campus – especially within the context of CSU's tuition increase policy. Specifically, policymakers should prioritize allocating funding in the 2024-25 State Budget to fund the Cal Grant Equity Framework to provide eligible students with the lowest income Cal Grant awards to cover the increased cost of attendance.

- Continue focusing on A-G access and student-centered transfer processes, looking for opportunities to remove barriers to entry for both first time freshmen and transfers.
- Improve coordination of education to meet student and state needs by forming a coordinating body to better plan for appropriate higher education capacity and to address systemic barriers to student progress across the education systems. While the state's recent investment in K-16 partnerships is a welcome step, any successes achieved related to increased academic preparation and college-going are less likely to be scaled effectively without stronger mechanisms for statelevel leadership.

Information regarding research methods and interviewee protocol and selection can be found in the full report.



READ THE FULL REPORT



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