

Why enrollment is rebounding at California's community colleges

Dual enrollment, career training programs driving increases

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After years of pandemic declines, enrollment at California's community colleges may finally be starting to rebound in a significant way.

Several colleges across the state, from San Diego to San Jose, are reporting that their enrollments are up by double digit percentages this fall. Statewide data for the fall isn't yet available, but enrollment in the spring was up 8% across the system of 116 colleges, according to [a memo prepared by the state chancellor's office](#).

College officials cited the expansion of dual enrollment and more interest in career-focused programs as being among the main drivers of the enrollment growth.

"In conversations with CEOs for fall 2023, I'm hearing good news, positive trends. And in fact, many of the districts are telling me that they're seeing double-digit enrollment growth," Sonya Christian, the statewide chancellor for the system, told the system's board of governors Tuesday.

Given that, the memo prepared by the chancellor's office says the system now has "a meaningful positive enrollment outlook for the first time in over five years."

Still, enrollment across the system as of the spring was down 16% compared to pre-pandemic levels. And although the colleges are seeing big increases in dual enrollment and more enrollments from some older students, other students have not returned. Among students between the ages of 20 and 24, enrollment was down 27% as of the spring compared with pre-Covid levels. It was also down 22% among students between the ages of 25 and 34.

Christian's goal for the colleges, [outlined in her official Vision 2030 plan for the system](#), is to increase enrollment to greater than pre-pandemic levels by 2030. The board of governors [voted Tuesday to begin formally implementing that vision](#). Among other goals, her plan calls to enroll more low-income adults, who she says have been historically left behind by the system. She also wants colleges to further expand dual enrollment by having every high school student taking a college class.

Dual enrollment has already been growing steadily across the state. In spring 2023, enrollment among students ages 19 and younger was up 14% compared with spring 2022, an increase that was largely aided by growth in dual enrollment programs. As of the spring, students in that age group had surpassed their pre-pandemic enrollment levels, making them the only age group to do so.

At the San Jose Evergreen Community College District, enrollment this fall is up by about 15% compared with a year ago, and the largest increases are among students aged 17 or younger, thanks to dual enrollment expansions. The district has specifically focused on expanding partnerships with high schools in East San Jose to enroll underserved high schoolers in that area, said Beatriz Chaidez, the district's interim chancellor, in an interview.

"People see the value in community colleges, and that's creating the increased interest, and we're casting a wider net with our K-12 partners," Chaidez added.

Colleges are also reporting growth in career training and skill-based programs. At Mt. San Jacinto College in Riverside County, where enrollment is up 13% compared with last fall, "there is a notable trend of students gravitating more towards career-focused educational paths," said Brandon Moore, the college's vice president of enrollment management, in an email.

Moore said there has been a "significant uptick" in enrollment in the college's automotive and computer information systems programs. "Furthermore, budding programs such as culinary arts are also carving a niche, reflecting a growing interest in specialized skill-based education," he added.

The San Diego Community College District, where enrollment is up by 14% this fall but still well below pre-pandemic levels, is similarly seeing increased demand for career training programs, said Ashanti Hands, president of San Diego Mesa College. That's specifically the case for short-term certificate programs in subjects such as accounting, biotechnology and cybersecurity.

"These are students who want to come and really focus on being able to find work," Hands said. "They can do that within a short amount of time. It's the immediate return on their investment."

Christian, who became statewide chancellor in June, wants to connect even more students to the workforce by targeting the state's adults who have graduated from high school but don't have a postsecondary degree. According to her office, there are 6.8 million of them in California between the ages of 25 and 54, and those individuals are disproportionately likely to be low-income and struggling to find well-paid work.

Under Christian's Vision 2030, the colleges would enroll many of those individuals and help connect them to good jobs. The Vision 2030 planning document notes that if the colleges enrolled 5% of those individuals, it would generate 300,000 new students across the system. During the 2022-23 academic year, the system enrolled about 1.92 million students, down by more than 300,000 compared with pre-pandemic levels.

"Vision 2030 asks the fundamental question: Why have we not yet reached these individuals? When students cannot find their way to college, it is our responsibility to bring college to them," Christian said.

Hands, the Mesa College president, said she's confident that community colleges across the state, including the San Diego colleges, will be able to fully recover the enrollment they lost during the pandemic. But she added that, as those increases happen in areas like dual enrollment and workforce programs, the colleges won't look the same as they did before the pandemic.

"We are not there yet, but the way that we are moving, I have no doubt that we will get

back to those numbers,” she said. “But it won’t be business as usual because I think we’re going to need to be mindful that we may be seeing different students, a different group of students.”

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Peter Honan 

2 weeks ago



This is a move in the right direction but all of this training can be more efficiently done in high school. As of now, community college continues the dysfunctional educational model of K-12 schools. Students should not be required to wait and pay for an extra 2 years to become a mechanic, a machinist or an electronic technician. Preparing high school students for these entry -level positions can and should be done in high school. See bordereducationproject.org

Eleanor

2 weeks ago



I’m interested in how much of that enrollment increase is online-only. The kids of today generally do not want to be forced to attend classes on campus at a specific time of day. Community Colleges are going to have to adapt to provide robust Distance Learning education to meet students where they are if they want to survive.

Maureen

2 weeks ago



The focus needs to be on course completion, not just enrollment. With dual enrollment with the high schools, “dual completion” should be recognized — counting earned course credit towards high school completion and college completion or career-based certificates.