

**Equity- and Student-Centered Strategies in the Context of SCFF:
Lessons from a Professional Learning Community in the
California Community Colleges**

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Equity- and Student-Centered Strategies in the Context of SCFF: Lessons from a Professional Learning Community in the California Community Colleges

Introduction

The 2017 *Vision for Success* was created to focus on equitable success outcomes for students in the California Community Colleges. Multiple coordinated reform efforts are underway to achieve this vision, including Guided Pathways; a comprehensive Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiative; and the Student Centered Funding Formula (SCFF), among others. Adopted in the state budget for 2018–19, the SCFF essentially provides three layers of funding for colleges: a base allocation that maintains elements of the prior funding formula, an additional supplemental allocation for each student qualifying for financial aid, and a student success allocation for each student and with an added premium for low-income students who achieve specified outcomes, such as a certificate or degree. The SCFF is intentionally designed to incentivize strategies that enhance equity and student success—a departure from the historical approach of funding colleges based solely on enrollment. The SCFF is still in its early stages, and colleges are still adapting—a challenge made far more difficult by the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020 and declining enrollment that began prior to the pandemic and then accelerated. Still, there are some initial learnings about how colleges are working to advance an equity and success agenda within the parameters of the SCFF.

This brief describes how some colleges are approaching the task of maximizing equitable outcomes for students within the context of the SCFF. The ideas, strategies, and actions highlighted here came to light within a professional learning community (PLC), sponsored by the California Community College Chancellor's Office and facilitated by a team from SRI International. Comprising cross-functional teams from five colleges, the PLC met monthly from April through September 2022 to discuss ideas, opportunities, and plans for improving equitable opportunities for students to learn, engage, receive supports, progress through college, and complete their intended educational goals (transfer, degree or certificate, etc.). The PLC also discussed how these improvements connect to and align with the incentive structure of the SCFF, the systemwide *Vision for Success*, and locally adopted Vision goals. Speakers from other colleges joined the group at times to share ideas; their examples are included here as well.

The purpose of this brief is to document the wide range of ways that colleges are seeking to support equitable opportunities for students within the context of the SCFF. This brief is written for the benefit of other colleges working on their own implementation plans as well as state leaders and policymakers seeking to understand the kinds of impacts, perceived and actual, the SCFF may be having. Because this brief is based on the experiences of only the PLC participants and presenters, it is by no means exhaustive. However, it does give some information about which strategies are being planned and tried and brings to light the different lenses through which colleges are approaching this work. To preserve anonymity, and since the purpose is to learn about strategies and not about particular colleges, colleges are not named and information is aggregated across multiple colleges at times. The flow of the topics outlined here follows students' journeys into and through college and includes the following categories:

- Financial aid uptake and affordability
- Enrollment
- Placement in and completion of college-level courses in the first year
- Students' sense of belonging and persistence

- Long-term completion outcomes

All of the strategies featured in this brief are works in progress. As such, these strategies are offered in the spirit of innovating, learning, and sharing.

While these strategies are presented as a menu of options, much of the discussion in the PLC centered around the need for colleges to have a holistic, coherent, approach for students that weaves these actions together. Colleges are taking different approaches to create that coherent approach. Some are folding strategies into a focus on regional economic development, career and adult education, and/or basic needs and related wraparound supports. Students who joined the discussions emphasized the need for colleges to create cultures that enhance and support students' sense of belonging and connectedness. This brief is intended to support efforts that embrace this need.

“The SCFF funding formula is aligned with behaviors that lead to student completion, but the message isn’t about that. We want to make sure that people aren’t doing things just for dollars, which would be the wrong reason. The right reason is for student success.”

—Community College Administrator A

Strategies to increase enrollment

Under the SCFF, enrollment remains the primary driver of revenue. This presents a challenge for colleges given declines in K–12 enrollment and the negative enrollment effects of the pandemic. With these concerns in mind, colleges are looking for new strategies to boost enrollment. Here, we profile examples from two colleges that are taking different approaches, each with a coherent frame around its approach.

Focusing on basic needs, adult learners, and economic development. One college in a region that is weathering economic distress has based its enrollment strategy on being an economic engine for its community. That approach includes several interconnected components:

- A program for adult learners that is designed to support students who are returning to college and helps them complete degrees quickly
- The identification of degrees and certificates that can be completed fully online, thus maximizing opportunity and flexibility for students with competing life demands
- A robust “zero textbook cost” program to dramatically reduce students’ book and materials costs
- Expansion of basic needs supports, including new financial aid and food programs

Expanding and tailoring offerings for different types of learners. Another college is taking an approach that tailors options to the kinds of learners who appear to be increasing their enrollment in the college. That includes:

- Summer enrollment for recent high school graduates
- Dual enrollment for high school students
- Online enrollment for working adults and others needing flexibility
- Noncredit enrollment for students who are seeking specific career focused skills

- Career and technical education (CTE) enrollment for students seeking entry to or advancement in a particular workforce pathway

“Colleges can do a calling campaign where students reach out to students who have enrolled but haven’t registered for classes. It can be intimidating for some students to talk to the dean, so sometimes it’s better for students to talk to other students about what they need to go to college.”

—Community College Student B

Strategies to improve financial aid uptake and affordability

A central goal of the SCFF and aligned reforms is to support students’ persistence in college. Financial aid is critically important to this goal. Given the high cost of living in California, students’ financial aid needs are vast—and greater than available funds. Clearly, with enough financial resources to support living expenses, college students are more likely to stay in school and complete their program of study.

Colleges and districts are taking a wide range of approaches to support students financially. The first set of strategies involves improving access to and uptake of federal and state financial aid. Colleges’ efforts in these areas include:

- **Following up on incomplete FAFSAs.** Some colleges identify students who did not complete the FAFSA during their application process and offer assistance with follow-up calls or emails.
- **Using technology to support FAFSA completion.** One college is utilizing technology to streamline the FAFSA process, by facilitating IRS verification online, enabling parents to sign online, and enabling students and staff to track the progress and status of an application.
- **Ensuring that students have the information and supports they need to take full advantage of federal financial aid.** In some colleges, this includes moving away from old messages encouraging students to save their Pell Grant eligibility for later years at a four-year institution.
- **Providing direct application assistance.** Some colleges are hiring classified student success staff who work directly with high schools and others in the community to support entering students.
- **Adjusting the Cost of Attendance.** Some colleges have revisited their reported Cost of Attendance (COA) to ensure that it accurately reflects students’ cost of living in their region. This adjustment can significantly expand the proportion of students who are eligible to receive federal financial aid.
- **Building/expanding Promise Programs.** Many colleges are building on the statewide California Promise Program with localized marketing and recruitment efforts and additional program features. Through these efforts, colleges can create the look and feel of a specialized scholarship opportunity that is tailored to local students.

The second set of strategies is to lessen students’ financial burden as they progress through college, for example by:

- **Creating a debt forgiveness program.** One college is forgiving up to \$1,000 of debt incurred by tuition and fees for each student who was enrolled during the pandemic, left, and now wishes to return to complete their education.

- **Offering on-campus work programs.** Some colleges are expanding opportunities for students to find jobs that are conveniently located on campus and more accommodating to a busy student's schedule.
- **Reducing costs on campus.** There are numerous student fees and expenses that colleges can creatively use one-time funds to waive or reduce. One college, for example, is using COVID-19 federal stimulus dollars to waive parking fees. Others are redesigning courses to use only free, open-source materials, thus relieving students of the cost of textbooks or other materials.

Any of the above actions can be helpful, but the most impactful approaches are those that combine multiple interconnected strategies to increase students' awareness of financial aid, assist students with applying for it, and offer other opportunities for students to earn money and reduce their expenses.

"It's important to think about students who just barely miss the mark on getting financial aid and services."

—Community College Student A

"Financial aid touches every aspect of students' lives across campus. We need ambassadors everywhere."

—College Administrator, College B

Strategies to increase placement in and completion of college-level courses in the first year

The California Community Colleges are in the midst of a multiyear reform effort to increase the number of students to enroll in and complete college-level math and English in their first year of enrollment. This goal is reflected in several pieces of legislation and an explicit financial incentive in the SCFF. The rationale for this goal is to help students spend less time in remediation, save time and money, make faster progress toward educational goals, and reap the psychological and emotional benefits of successfully completing college-level work.

Colleges across the state responded to the call to place students in college-level English and math in their first year and help them succeed. Some of the most popular strategies include:

- Establishing first-year cohort experiences
- Academic Intervention in Math & English (AIME) courses that provide extra support to help students succeed in college-level coursework
- Tutoring opportunities in noncredit courses and outside of other class

Some colleges are tailoring their efforts in this area based on their institutional culture, student population, and/or mission and values. For example, one college set a goal to emphasize academic equity for historically marginalized student populations. It analyzed data to understand where in students' academic journeys they faced institutional barriers. That analysis informed its decisions about the interventions and changes to make. The college's strategies for supporting equitable placement and completion include:

- Eliminating below-transfer-level math classes
- Providing embedded tutoring

- Developing a comprehensive plan to support students in transfer-level math

Students who don't complete aren't bad or defective. Things that would help include taking care of technical issues, making things clear and understandable, and giving students a seat at the table [in campus decisions.] Sometimes even the cafeteria closing at a certain time affects students."

—Community College Student B

Strategies to enhance students' sense of belonging and persistence

Students cannot complete degrees if they do not stay in school. While student persistence has long been a focus of California Community College policies and practices, some colleges are taking new approaches that are tailored to their local context. In addition, some colleges are working to identify and dismantle systemic barriers that hold inequities in place and cause harm to historically marginalized students. One college aligned its policies, practices, and resources to support the overarching goal of becoming an anti-racist institution. This college's strategies include:

- Supporting faculty in the implementation of evidence-based practices, such as:
 - Reviewing syllabi to ensure student-friendly language and policies
 - Decolonizing curricula
 - Encouraging and supporting students in bringing multilingual and multicultural experiences into the classroom
 - Fostering learning spaces to promote dialogue and inquiry around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues, topics, and current events
- Curriculum Committee work to implement DEI methods questions in course outlines
- Curriculum Committee work to create a process for evaluating and improving courses and programs to ensure principles of anti-racism and DEI are incorporated

Another college is focusing on embedding more equitable instructional practices in the classroom. This college's specific strategies include:

- Conducting curriculum audits by carefully reviewing syllabi in a formalized, equity-centered process
- Classroom observations to learn from each other about improving practices
- Utilizing faculty peer evaluations and feedback for formative purposes
- Providing data to faculty regarding student learning in their classes, disaggregated by, for example, sex, race, and income. Emphasis is put on supporting Black, Latinx, Asian Pacific Islander, and Native American students, in addition to supporting students with multiracial identities. For example, departments are asked to make goals for how they want to support Black students and for Black student degree and certificate completion.

“Students feel like passers-by in the college system instead of the main part of it.”

—Community College Student C

“Representation is important. We need to have representation in our classes beyond just ethnic studies courses, and it’s not enough to have these one-off events about race, gender, etc.”

—Community College Student D

Strategies to improve long-term completion outcomes

Students benefit by staying in college and completing degrees or certificates. Students who reach these milestones are more likely to take jobs in fields that interest them and earn higher wages. The SCFF additionally rewards colleges with extra revenue for colleges for each student that reaches one of these milestones. To help students reach their educational goals—and to do it equitably—colleges are utilizing a wide range of strategies.

Again, the strongest approaches appear to employ multiple coordinated strategies. One college, for example, is doing all of the following to help students reach long-term completion outcomes:

- Implementing auto-awarding of degrees and certificates
- Strengthening the functionality of degree audit
- Integrating career tools into career services and making them available on the college’s website
- Ensuring that faculty and staff help students understand meta major opportunities by embedding the majors into student counseling, developing meta-major cohorts, utilizing first-year pathways, and helping undeclared students connect with majors and goals
- Conducting a data-informed equity evaluation of procedures and services to understand and address policies that result in a disproportionate impact on student enrollment, retention, and success

Another college is approaching this goal with the following coordinated strategies:

- Supporting students in taking courses listed in their individual education plans
- Using education plan data for course scheduling
- Launching a Completion Center in the counseling department
- Overhauling the auto degree award process

Finally, a third college is using this set of interconnected strategies:

- Offering meta majors with aligned counseling supports
- Assigning CalWorks and Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) counselors to work with students in specific majors and with affinity groups including Black students, Indigenous students, Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders, and Latinx students
- Investing in technology (Starfish) to support case management and provide students with a consistent point of contact

- Staffing a student success office with classified student success specialists to be student advocates and connect students to financial aid, to a counselor, and to walk them across campus to find their classes and other resources
- Offering auto-awards to ensure that students are receiving appropriate recognition and certification for their achievements

“We are chasing current student success ... If [colleges] want to increase their funding, they have to lean hard on the student success pieces of SCFF ... If they can grow through success, that gives colleges a light that we can lean into ... Our college is mission-driven ... If we are not helping student success and closing equity gaps, then we are not meeting our mission.”

—Community College Administrator A

Conclusion

While creating equitable opportunities for students is the most important objective for colleges participating in the PLC, all of the student-centered strategies above have an important secondary benefit: they have the potential to increase revenue to colleges under the SCFF. Strategies that boost enrollment are still the most effective for increasing college revenues under the SCFF, as enrollment is still the main driver of the base allocation from the state. Colleges can also increase their supplemental allocation revenues by recruiting and enrolling students with low incomes and ensuring they apply for and receive a College Promise Grant, Pell Grant, or receive financial aid under an AB 540 exemption. Colleges can further increase their student success and success equity allocations with increased numbers of students earning associate degrees and credit certificates, transferring to four-year colleges and universities, completing transfer-level math and English within their first year, completing nine or more career education units, or attaining the regional living wage—outcomes that all may be affected by the strategies described above.

At the same time, no strategy or set of strategies is a silver bullet for alleviating colleges’ current concerns about flat or declining enrollment and the resulting impact on revenues. Many colleges are facing significant enrollment challenges that may ultimately grow too large to overcome with thoughtful strategies to boost supplemental and success allocations. In an era of declining enrollment, the State of California may want to reconsider whether the formula’s heavy reliance on enrollment is still in the best interests of the state, the college system and its institutions, and students. Boosting the weights given to the supplemental and success allocations could potentially make all of the above strategies more financially rewarding for colleges, while also benefitting students and advancing California’s vision for a more equitable and effective college system.

Finally, it is important to remember that no two colleges will approach student learning, engagement, progression, and completion in the same way. Context matters. Colleges will need to take into account their student populations, the regional/labor market context, their existing strengths and assets as an institution, and other such factors as they continue to map out their comprehensive approach to enhancing equity and student success.

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