California Community Colleges

Top 10 Strategies to Better Serve Californians:

High-impact Practices to Bring Back Underrepresented Students to California's Community Colleges

California's Community Colleges are innovating in a post pandemic era in ways that are bringing into focus a re-imagined system of higher education, one built for the future and one in which students' needs are the catalysts for transformational change. The pandemic has made clear that there is no going back to the old way of doing things. Why would we? We've listened to students, including more than 75,000 current, previously enrolled and prospective students who responded to a statewide survey. The findings paint a comprehensive yet evolving landscape of their needs and sentiments about how our 116-college system should serve them and their families.

In addition, the California Community Colleges Chancellors Office has gathered data on high-impact practices across the system to help document practices and strategies to address student needs and to engage with communities in an effort to recover enrollment and promote retention. Emergency conditions reports from the field described colleges' challenges and opportunities to serve students and support employees since March 2020.

Across our system, these learnings and the targeted actions taken by colleges to re-engage with students and their communities writ large are showing hopeful signs. Enrollment for the fall 2022 semester, the most recent term for which data is available, was up 2.4 percent across the California Community Colleges compared to the fall of 2021. Forty-five colleges saw growth of 5 percent or greater and, of that group, 18 experienced growth of 10 percent or more.

Student populations most impacted by the pandemic saw encouraging growth: Latino student enrollment grew by 5.7 percent for the period; Native American-Alaskan Native student enrollment grew by 5.4 percent, and Black student enrollment grew by 5.3 percent. And yet, there is much more progress to be made for the future of our students and our states economic development.

This publication outlines the top high-impact practices deployed by California Community Colleges over the past three years. It chronicles the commitment of colleges to retain students, support faculty and staff, and to serve as connectors to local communities, providing for basic needs. These are in no way a complete set of practices, but they are high-impact strategies that colleges want to retain, improve upon and see supported by state and federal policy, regulatory action and ongoing resources. As a combined set, these ten high-impact strategies light the way for the future of higher education and the sustainable transformation of California's 116 Community Colleges.

Eliminating Student fees/ Forgiving Student Debt

The pandemic created unforeseen financial stresses for many students. In response, colleges reported canceling all or some student debt beginning in spring 2020. This was done with a combination of policies that allowed students to use the Board of Governors' revised Title 5 regulation which expanded Excused Withdrawal (EW) under emergency conditions which preserves their academic standing, eases re-enrollment and removes one more barrier faced by students who face compounding basic needs challenges. Further, colleges are providing one-time debt forgiveness to support students in their academic goals by waiving local fees payments for students such as parking and other fees. To sustain these practices, districts can leverage various sources of funds, such as the expanded use of lottery funds on basic needs and financial assistance, to continue these impactful practices.

Course and Class Re-engineering

Both at the height of the pandemic and into the future, flexibility continues to be a priority requested by students. Colleges offered flexibility through multiple course delivery modes in asynchronous online, synchronous online, hybrid, hyflex and in person environments. To determine student need, colleges launched adult learner task forces to address intentional design and outreach to working and adult learners. These efforts included measuring equity implications of new course offerings on historically marginalized student communities and student groups which data showed had stopped out at higher rates. Colleges adjusted the length of courses, offering more short-term courses, which has continued to grow in the recovery. Matching student needs for flexibility, creating relevant schedules, and supporting faculty training in multiple modalities continues to be a significant focus for colleges. These efforts take a tremendous amount of time and local collaboration to develop, but colleges continue to be steadfast in their efforts to meet student needs for flexibility. Ongoing statewide support for technology and professional development continues to enable local transformations that allow for courses and classes to be re-engineered.

Expanded Dual Enrollment

Dual enrollment provides opportunities for high school students to take college courses and earn college credit creating expanded educational opportunities and economic mobility for underrepresented students. Colleges added a new guided pathway on-ramp by significantly increasing partnerships with K-12 districts and expanded offerings in dual enrollment. Importantly, dual enrollment continues through the recovery and is situating community colleges in a favorable position to increase courses in ethnic studies, career education, math, English and in areas where high school students prefer to complete college courses in lieu of advanced placement. Given the current climate and actions by The College Board to suppress course content by diverse authors, students will find community college courses are easily accessible, inclusive, and designed with their rich cultures in mind. In addition, Open Educational Resources (OER) are being used more fully in dual enrollment courses, offering college and K-12 districts financial savings in books, a key barrier for many students participating in these programs. These efforts appear to be yielding positive results. The number of students 19 years old or younger was up 9.6 percent in fall 2022 from fall 2021 largely due to growth in dual enrollment opportunities. Into the future, the embrace of dual enrollment can help increase equity in college access for students who have long been underrepresented in higher education.

Image: Long Beach City College

Outreach, Outreach, Outreach

Colleges have used multiple in-reach and outreach efforts to retain, re-engage and recruit students. In terms of in-reach, colleges used technology and people power for direct student contact, harnessing the power and effectiveness of affinity programs and student success teams. While e-mail was deployed, phones, text applications and messages through social media were also widely used. Student ambassadors and mentors carried out retention calls and texts, giving students options for support. Other widely used and effective outreach strategies included call centers, 24/7 tutoring, online technical support, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) based response systems.

Based on state and local enrollment data, colleges focused on historically underserved populations and implemented just-in-time retention and recruitment through community outreach events, online and social media engagement, events for high school students, and partnerships with faith-based and community organizations.

Colleges leverage unit attainment data to reach out to students who were well on their way to completing certificates and degrees, sending students specific completion education plans to follow seamless scheduling of counseling appointments. This is an example of intrusive service provision. Other effective efforts included diligent analysis and follow-up on student needs assessments done upon registering for courses.

Colleges also significantly increased outreach for financial aid, holding hundreds of remote and in-person sessions. While financial aid enrollment sessions are traditionally held on high school sites, colleges expanded event locations and held them at public libraries, faith communities, and community-based organizations to expand access to students for whom financial considerations prohibit their commitment to college.

Additionally, the Chancellor's Office I Can Go to College statewide awareness campaign nearly doubled its volume of marketing and outreach activities and did so in a way that provided for more culturally responsive approaches through its omnichannel approach and by targeting resources on populations which experienced the greatest declines. These efforts have indicated the importance of having stable outreach and engagements funds.

Persistence Strategies Are Key

While much of the focus on recent enrollment declines have included strategies for attracting new students, we cannot lose sight of the fact that nearly 30 percent of community college students do not persist from one semester to the next for a variety of reasons. A statewide survey conducted by the Chancellor's Office highlighted that when students lack a sense of belonging, they are more likely to consider leaving their institution. Achieving a sense of belonging is especially important for students of color and first-generation students. California's community colleges are responding with ramped-up and intrusive supports.

While some of the factors contributing to this loss maybe outside the control of colleges, we must redouble efforts to help students stay at our campuses with strategies that are intentional and which create a culture of universal belonging. If students don't feel connected to the college they attend, they are far less likely to persist and succeed, regardless of the academic interventions and support services the college has provided. As the Aspen Institute notes, "A culture of caring has become a hallmark of excellent community colleges." Several California community colleges participate in the Institute for Evidence-Based Change Caring Campus program. Through leadership, coaching and campus-wide commitment to changing behaviors among faculty and professional staff and creating an institutionalized culture of connecting to and supporting students. Increasing connectedness can go a long way toward increasing the likelihood of maintaining enrollment.

Relatedly, some colleges are using "secret shoppers" to learn how easy or difficult it is for students to navigate their colleges and access the supports and services needed to help them succeed. Some of the findings include multiple unsuccessful attempts by the "secret shopper" to have emails and phone calls returned, referrals for the caller to access a "chat bot" rather than directly addressing the issue, voicemail boxes that were at capacity and not allowing messages to be left and more. One college used the findings to significantly revamp operations and customer care. In contrast the secret shoppers that approached some for-profit colleges reported receiving communications from the college the day an application, and in some cases those communications continued for more than a year even if the students did not enroll.

Record Investments in Technology

Prior to the pandemic, students and employees were largely under resources and unprepared to study or work remotely. Colleges immediately created systems to buy, loan and support technology for students and employees. Colleges opened their parking lots to students to be able to access wi-fi while they waited for backordered hotspot hubs and laptops. Colleges created immediate ways for employee to maintain high-impact services by lending laptops, webcams and providing office equipment to create home offices.

While technology access and affordability remains a challenge for our students the higher education system of tomorrow will require the redesign of space on campus so that students can use virtual modalities (i.e., Zoom) to attend classes on campus and the necessary supports for faculty and staff to innovate teaching and learning. Colleges have started this work by innovating and braiding funds to increase investments in libraries and tutoring programs and platforms. As colleges expand their technology within existing resources, the success of students and institutions, will require updating antiquated laws that still do not include purchases of technology as a cost of instruction.

Image: Long Beach City College

Faculty Professional Development for Teaching in Multiple Modalities

What began as a rapid response, all-out training effort for distance education conversion of courses in March 2020, quickly transitioned to a comprehensive professional development focus provided by colleges for faculty teaching in all modalities. As students increasingly rely on the flexibility offered over the past three years, college are recognizing and prioritizing resources to increase access to high quality, flexible modalities for coursework. Colleges are using @ONE the Online Network of Educators –a collaborative, system-wide network of California Community College faculty, staff, and administrators –coordinated by the professional development team of the California Community Colleges California Virtual Campus-Online Education Initiative (CVC-OEI). Coupled with extensive online and distance education teaching professional development colleges are investing in hyflex classroom environments, updated software, and application-based resources for teaching, and flexible work environments. Ongoing training and supports for faculty and staff to adapt and innovate continues to be the focus for colleges who are designing with real-time student data, which calls for more flexible learning modalities in teaching and learning.

Expanding Promise Programs

Colleges expanded Promise Programs to include new populations such as veterans, foster youth, part-time students, formerly incarcerated students. These groups and others have been impacted by state policies that removed the limitation of state student aid as a part of the changes to the California College Promise Grant, which now allows any full-time student who has not earned a college credential to have their tuition fees waived. Colleges utilized federal emergency funds and resources raised through philanthropy to meet student basic needs and waive tuition for underrepresented students.

Radically Re-energized Student Support

Student services professionals have re-imagined and re-energized efforts to serve students in flexible and just-in-time ways. In the early stages of distance learning, college departments moved completely online, and permanently eliminated paperwork barriers students experienced. Admissions, accounting, financial aid, counseling and support programs worked tirelessly to connect students with the services and support they needed by leveraging phone calls, text, online meetings, and online submission of forms. Hundreds of online workshops replaced in-person orientations, education planning sessions and service appointments. Colleges have continued to develop sophisticated artificial intelligence (AI) programs that help connect students with the resources they need, with follow-up and direct attention from college staff. Virtual welcome centers, alongside in-person one-stop enrollment fairs and events have re-captured students who stepped away from classes. The demand for services in multiple modalities has lead districts and colleges to think outside traditional staffing approaches and expand their reach in ways that inform working professionals long-term needs and district master plans. . As a result, colleges are deploying student success teams, investing in online and hybrid staffing for expanded services, and creating high-tech, high-touch options.

Meeting Students' Basic Needs

Colleges have been building resources and systems to address students' basic needs for many years, with a major intentional focus beginning in 2015. Colleges have created basic needs centers, food pantries, affordable housing, childcare, technology assistance programs, and health care support as wrap-around services. During the pandemic, colleges saw basic needs challenges increasing for students. In response, colleges expanded their efforts through private and public philanthropy, partnerships with local food banks, housing commissions, county rent and utility assistance programming, farmers markets, and more. Colleges have now become beacons of support for their communities and are recognized for their holistic care of its students and employees. Additionally, several colleges have shovel ready housing projects underway with many more in the planning stages and waiting for statewide funding to be approved. Despite the pandemic, colleges moved forward rapidly to assure that poverty-driven barriers are mitigated for students. As colleges transition to a new normal, programming to continue building students' financial stability includes basic needs assessments, supports for students with dependent children, and increased resources for mental health support.
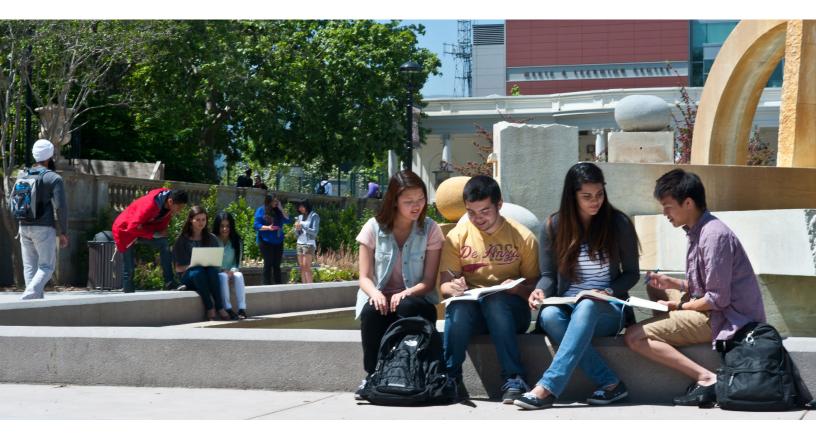

Image: De Anza College

On the Horizon

A new higher education environment is emerging. Faculty and staff are examining student enrollment patterns, more precise and frequent use data to support equity in instruction and student supports, and adjusting how they operate. Greater attention and design to support the states adult learned and working learner population is advancing. Facilities are being re-imagined, creating inclusive spaces for learning, including spaces for students to attend their asynchronous classes on campus. Libraries are expanding resources, including assisting faculty in curating and adopting Open Educational Resources (OER) to eliminate the high cost of textbooks. Opportunities to expand dual enrollment with equity with an eye toward communicating the benefits of early college with younger K-12 populations and preparing pipelines are untapped. Everything is on the table and focused on re-engaging students, investing in employees, and creating a sense of belonging for every current and prospective student.

As colleges continue their work, to the Board of Governors and Chancellor's Office will continue to lead statewide partnerships and resources to enable local innovation. Collectively, as a system we need will need to continue to examine the policy and regulatory improvements that will promote the adoption of maximum flexibility, quality, equity-informed and aligned practices. California Community Colleges have demonstrated their agility and are ready to provide new levels of access, persistence, and equitable success for all students. The future of California Community Colleges is one where innovation will be ubiquitous and now is our time.

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