



**2026 REPORT**

# Strengthening the Nursing Pipeline: Nursing Expansion Efforts Across California Community Colleges

California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office | Sonya Christian, Chancellor



# STRENGTHENING THE NURSING PIPELINE: NURSING EXPANSION EFFORTS ACROSS CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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Prepared By

**California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office**



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# STRENGTHENING THE NURSING PIPELINE: NURSING EXPANSION EFFORTS ACROSS CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

## VISION 2030 IN ACTION

### I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California is among the top 10 states that are projected to face a nursing shortage in 2037, with demand exceeding supply by 18%. The analysis projects that California would need 65,000 more full-time equivalent nurses by 2037, which is the highest of any state.<sup>1</sup> Addressing this challenge requires scalable, cost-effective educational pathways that can both expand capacity and remain accessible to the populations most likely to enter and remain in the workforce. California community colleges are central to this effort. Over the past three years, allowable nursing program capacity, measured through Board of Registered Nursing (BRN) caps, has increased by approximately 15% across California community college nursing programs, while the number of graduates has grown by approximately 16.5%, demonstrating measurable gains in both enrollment capacity and student completion. These trends are particularly significant within the broader higher education landscape and reflect Vision 2030 in action through expanded workforce pathways, regional responsiveness, and student-centered education innovation.<sup>2</sup>

California community colleges provide multiple entry points into the nursing profession through programs such as Home Health Aide (HHA), Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Medical Assistant (MA), Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN), and Associates Degree in Nursing (ADN-RN). These stackable pathways serve diverse populations across urban, rural, and underserved communities. Recent statewide nursing expansion efforts, including targeted investments in simulation technology, faculty development, clinical partnerships, student support, and pathway alignment, reflect growing recognition that systemwide strategies are needed to expand nursing education capacity.

Early outcomes demonstrate that when structural barriers are addressed comprehensively, colleges can increase both enrollment and student success, strengthening California's long-term healthcare workforce capacity. The state must expand nursing education capacity to meet urgent workforce needs, and California community colleges have demonstrated their ability to grow, innovate, and deliver results. Continued investment in nursing education infrastructure, regional partnerships, and accessible and aligned workforce pathways will be critical to strengthening the long-term workforce capacity in the healthcare sector.

### II. THE WORKFORCE IMPERATIVE

Labor market projections consistently indicate a sustained need for registered nurses as well as a growth in demand. The need is driven by an aging population, increasing care and healthcare complexity, and workforce attrition.<sup>3</sup> The California Healthcare Workforce Policy Commission designates certain regions of the state as high, medium, and low severity Registered Nursing Shortage Areas (RNSAs). California's nursing shortage is unevenly distributed throughout the state.

According to the data, 48 out of 65 RNSAs are experiencing a shortage of nurses, located in areas such as the Inland Empire, Central Valley, and northern California counties. Nearly 60% of California’s population lives in an area with a nursing shortage.<sup>4</sup> 22 California rural hospitals are at risk of closure due to workforce shortages.<sup>5</sup> More than 11 million Californians live in an area without enough primary care providers and lack access to quality care.<sup>6, 7</sup>

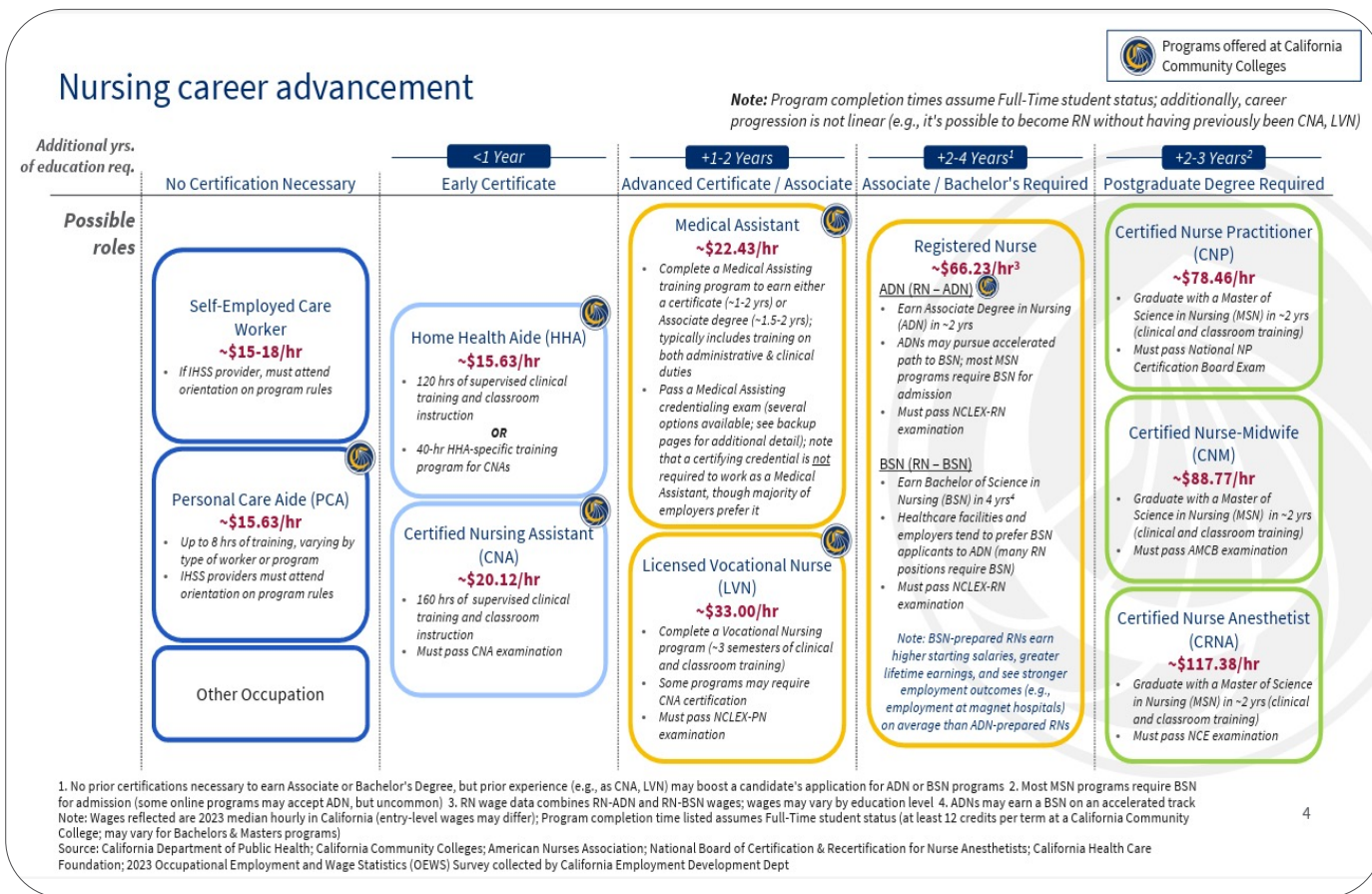
At the same time, the pipeline of newly trained nurses is not keeping pace, creating structural shortages that are felt across the state. Regional inequity, particularly in rural, inland, and underserved communities, limit access to both care and educational pathways. In many areas, prospective students face significant geographic, financial, and logistical barriers to entering nursing programs, while providers struggle to recruit and retain staff locally.<sup>8</sup> This misalignment exacerbates disparities in health outcomes and capacity.

Traditional higher education pathways alone do not close this gap. Capacity constraints within public four-year systems limit the number of students admitted into nursing programs. Clinical placement limitations, faculty shortages, and infrastructure constraints further restrict expansion. As a result, many potential students are turned away despite qualifications and continuing demand. While recent investments represent an important step forward, the scale of the shortage requires sustained and expanded approaches to build on this foundation. Absent sustained investment and continued innovation in nursing education and workforce pathways, existing challenges are likely to intensify, including prolonged vacancy rates, increased dependence on traveling nurses, rising healthcare delivery costs, and widening regional disparities in access to care.

### **III. THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN THE NURSING PIPELINE**

Community colleges sit at the center of California’s nursing education system. They are not a peripheral contributor; they are where the majority of the state’s nursing workforce begins. The California community college’s CNA, LVN, and ADN-RN all provide multiple, flexible entry points into the profession.

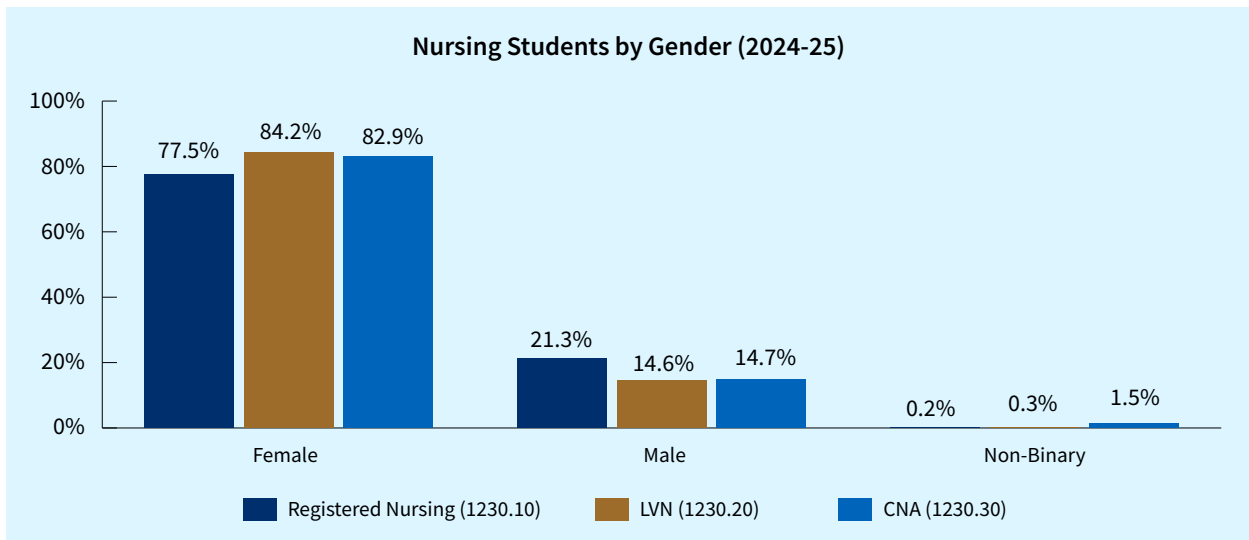
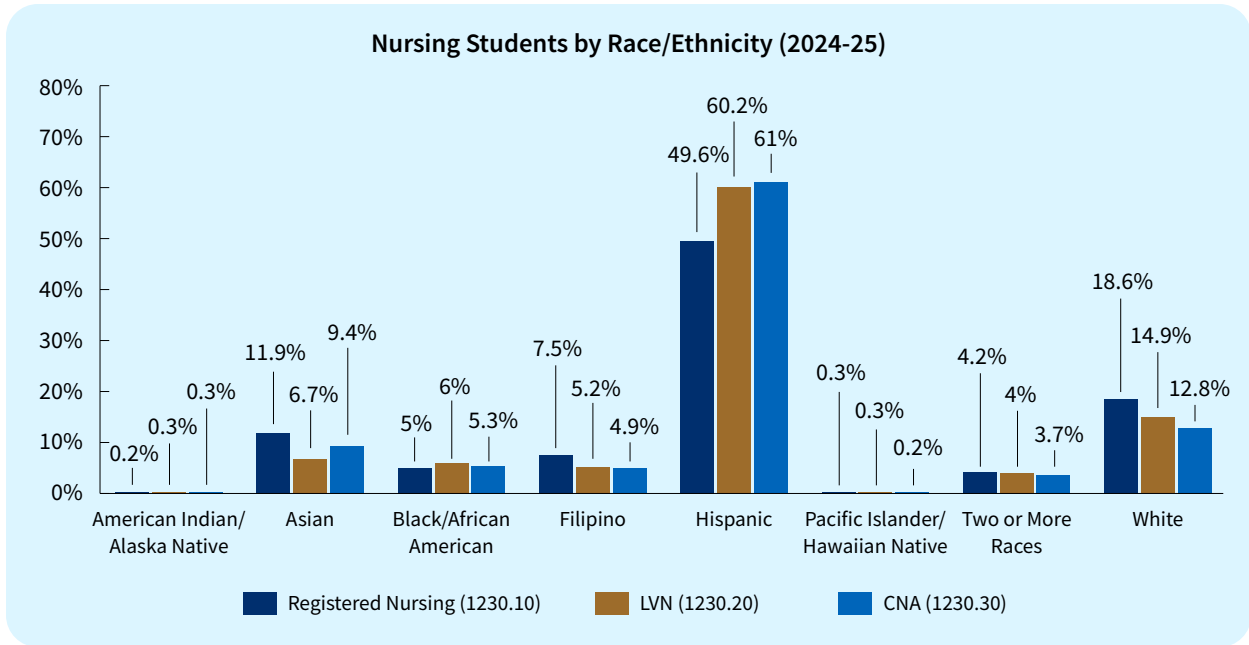
**Figure 1. Nursing Career Advancement**

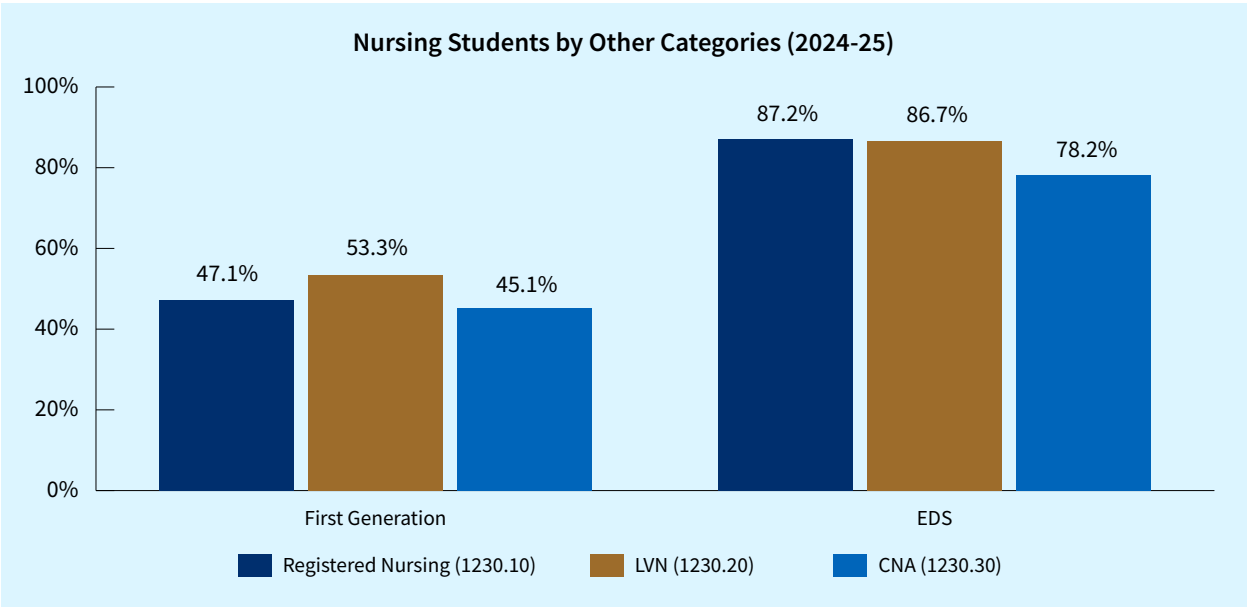
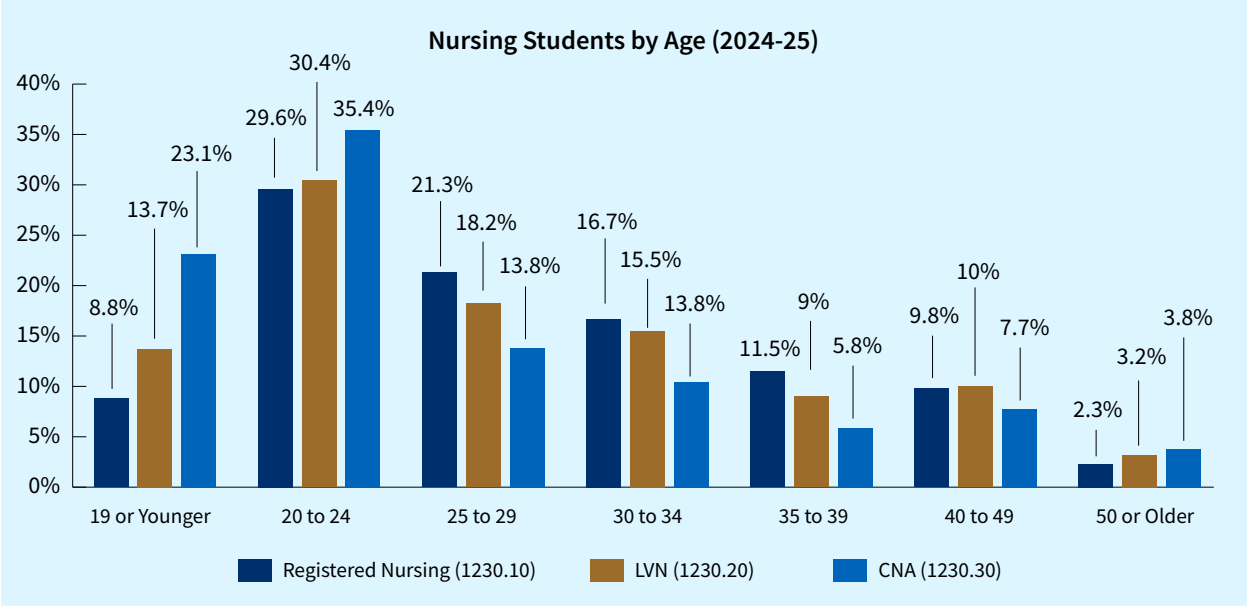


California community colleges enroll roughly 70-75% of students entering nursing education pathways statewide, making them the primary source of new nurses entering the workforce.<sup>9</sup> Community colleges serve both large urban populations, and smaller, more rural communities, often acting as the only accessible option for individuals pursuing a career in healthcare.

Accessibility in education matters. Community college nursing students are often working adults, parents, caregivers, or individuals returning to school after a break in the workforce. Many are place-bound and cannot relocate to attend a university program. Community colleges address these realities, offering local access, more flexible schedules, and a cost structure that is available to a larger population. Sixty-two percent of California community college nursing students are economically disadvantaged, and colleges serve a higher share of Hispanic and first-generation students, reinforcing their role as the most equitable entry point into the nursing profession in the state.

**Figures 2-5. Nursing Program Demographics Data<sup>10</sup>**

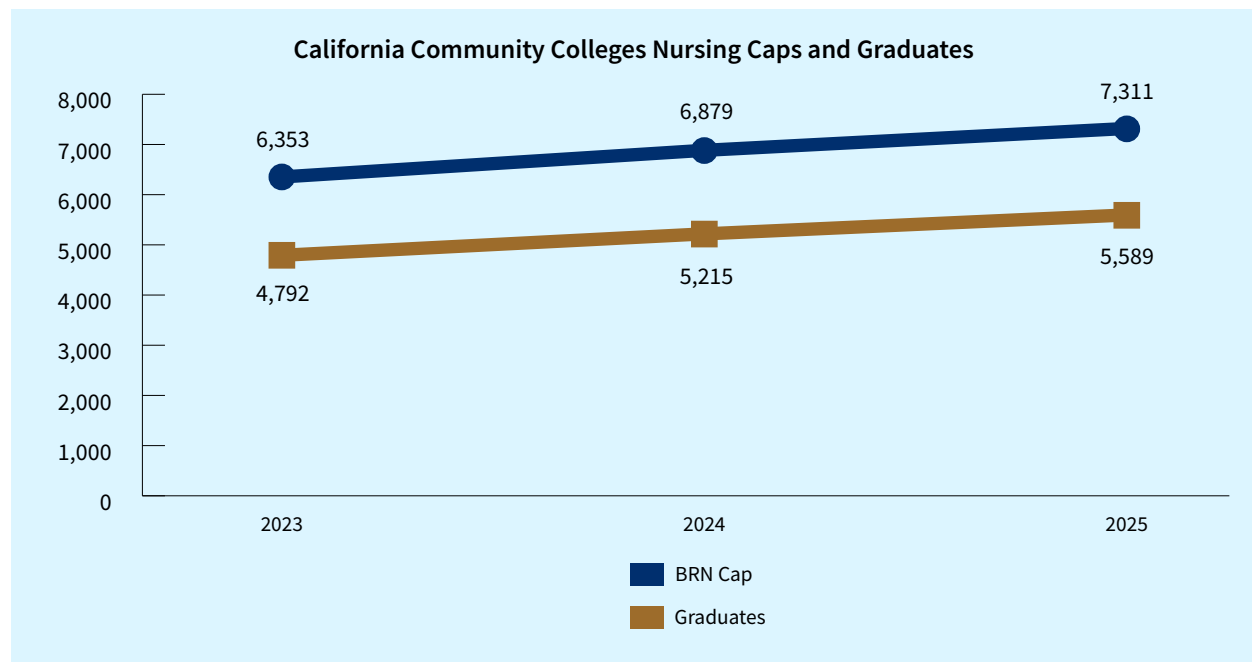




#### IV. EVIDENCE OF IMPACT: WHAT DATA SHOWS

Recent data shows clear and consistent momentum in capacity growth across California community college nursing programs, even within current system constraints. Over a three-year period, allowable program capacity, measured by Board of Registered Nursing (BRN) caps, has increased by approximately 15%. During that same time, the number of graduates grew by approximately 16.5%.<sup>11</sup>

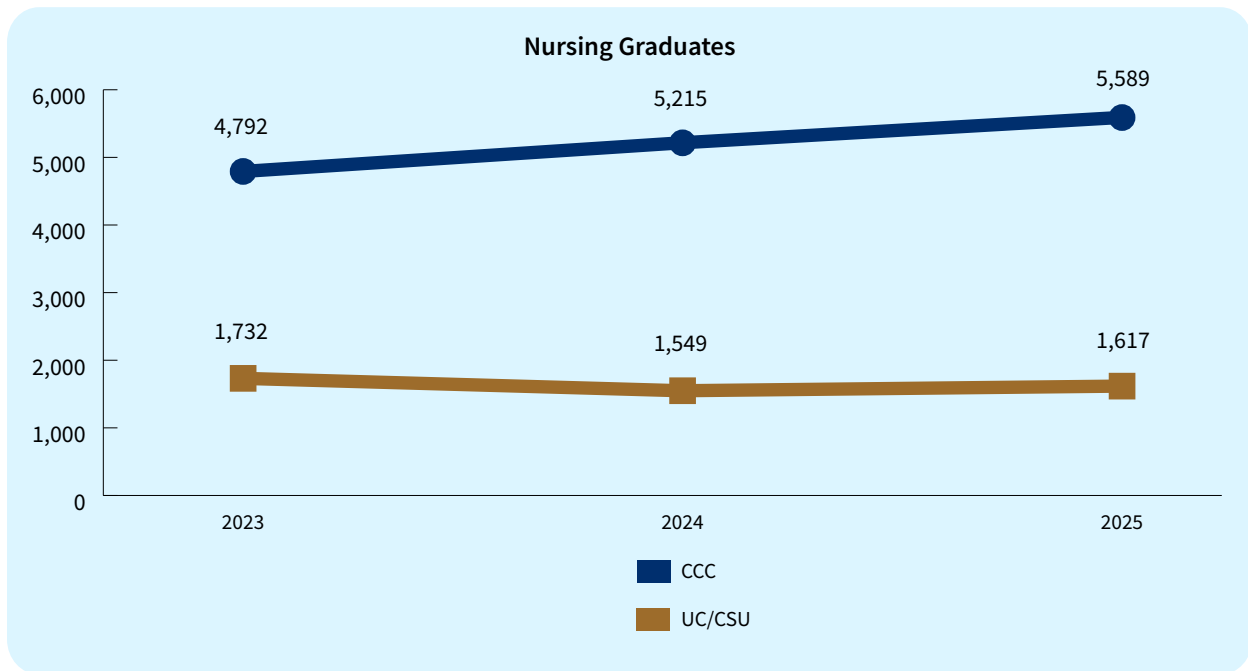
**Figure 6. BRN Cap Growth vs. Graduate Growth (3-year Trend)**



The relationship between these two trends suggests that growth in the number of graduates is not solely explained by increased capacity. While programs have expanded the number of seats available, they are also supporting more students through to program completion, an indication of increased program efficiency.

The trajectory of community college programs is also notable when viewed in the broader higher education context. While community colleges have demonstrated measurable growth in both capacity and completions, nursing output from other segments has remained relatively flat. This reinforces the role of community colleges as a driver of growth within the state’s nursing education system. These gains are occurring alongside strong student outcomes. Recent statewide data shows retention rates of approximately 93% and completion rates nearing 90% within community college nursing programs and NCLEX pass rates at 91% overall. Eighteen California community colleges achieved a 100% pass rate.<sup>12</sup> Given that community colleges are open access institutions without competitive admissions requirements, the high retention, completions and pass rates are impressive and reinforce that expanded access is not coming at the expense of program quality or student success.

**Figure 7. Nursing Graduate Trends by Segment<sup>1314</sup>**



California community colleges demonstrated sustained growth in nursing graduates between the years 2023 and 2025. During the same period, graduate counts across other public higher education segments remained relatively flat. This pattern suggests that community colleges are serving as a key source of expanded nursing workforce capacity statewide.

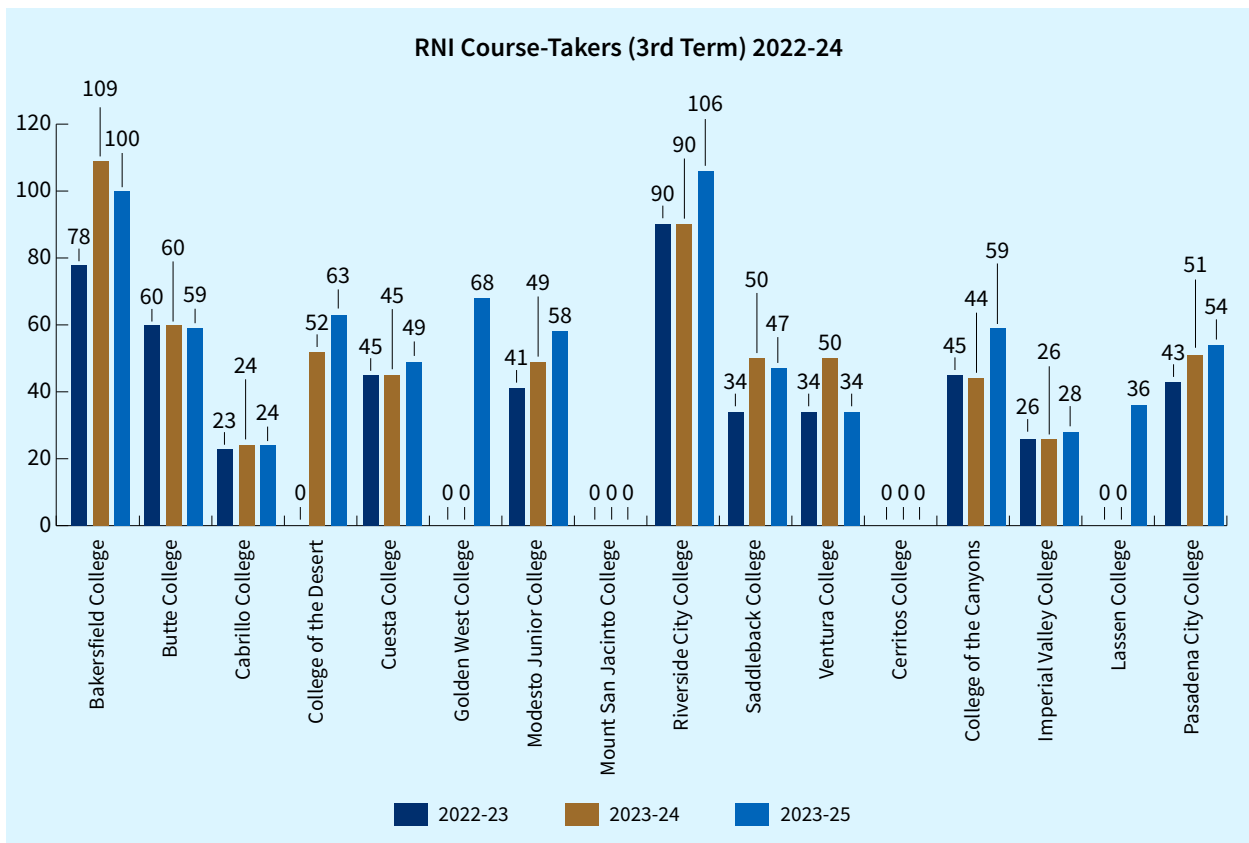
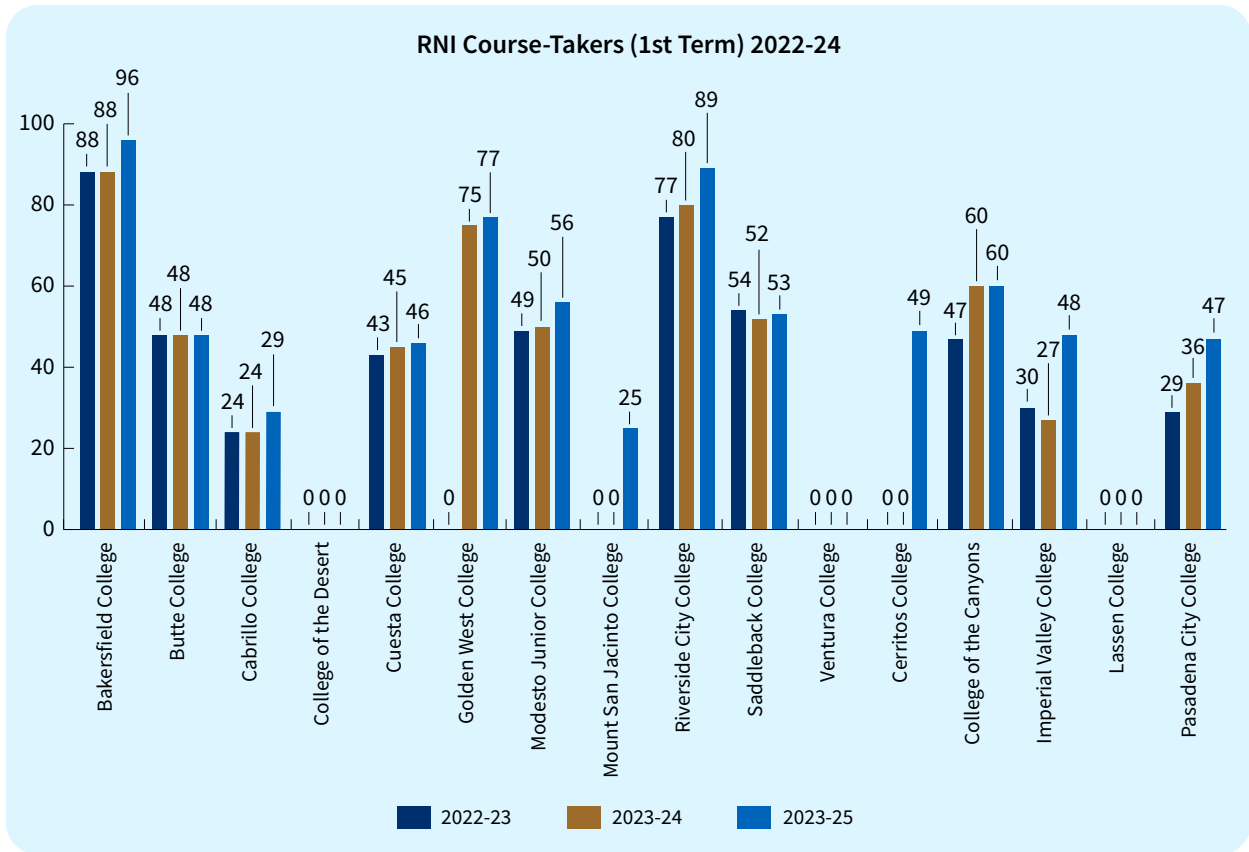
## V. SYSTEMWIDE STRATEGIES DRIVING NURSING EXPANSION

The gains in capacity and program completion are not coincidental. They are the reflection of targeted investments designed to address the most persistent constraints in nursing education.

### Demonstrating Nursing Expansion Strategies

The goal of the Bridging the Nursing Gap: ADN Expansion Demonstration Project, part of the California community colleges' Vision 2030 strategic framework, was to increase enrollment in associate degree nursing programs and to address the shortage of registered nurses in rural and remote areas while ensuring equity in access to the profession. The outcomes provide a clear proof point: when colleges are provided with targeted support, they are able to increase both capacity and student success.<sup>15</sup> Across 18 colleges and two cohorts, participating programs achieved enrollment increases of between 12 -18% during the first and third term courses demonstrating that demand can be met when structural barriers are addressed.

Figures 8-9. 1st and 3rd Term Nursing Student Comparison



The early results of the project align with system trends showing approximately 15% growth in approved program capacity and a 16.5% growth in the number of graduates over a three-year period. These outcomes suggest that when colleges receive targeted support, they are able to both serve more students and ensure more of them succeed through program completion.

Beyond enrollment, the demonstration project convened a community of practice (COP). The work centered on strengthening institutional capacity through faculty development, expanding use of immersive technologies in partnership with Apple Inc., improving clinical partnerships, and implementing system-level policy to align nursing faculty minimum qualifications with Board of Registered Nursing standards and collectively confirming the activities would result in maximum impact for students.<sup>16</sup> The COP findings reinforced broader statewide strategies and investments focused on strengthening nursing program capacity, student progression, and workforce alignment.

Community colleges are essential to the nursing workforce infrastructure. They provide the scale, regional reach, and flexibility needed to respond to California's nursing shortage in real time. Expanding California's nursing workforce depends on strengthening this foundation.

## **Statewide Investments Supporting Nursing Expansion**

Other recent statewide investments reflect growing recognition that nursing workforce expansion requires more than increasing enrollment targets. Expanding capacity depends on addressing multiple structural pressures at the same time. These include updating facilities and instructional space, increasing faculty recruitment and retention efforts, aligning student progression across the pathway. Most importantly, providing high quality clinical experiences for students is paramount. However, clinical placement access is limited and increasingly competitive with hospitals often unable to accommodate students due to staffing shortage and safety requirements.<sup>17</sup> Simulation technology has emerged as a direct response to these constraints. It allows students to effectively practice complex clinical scenarios in a controlled environment when real placements are unavailable.

California has committed significant multi-year funding to support these efforts, with competitive awards designed to help colleges expand and strengthen nursing pathways. What distinguishes this approach is not only the scale of investment, but the recognition that nursing education challenges are interconnected. Efforts to expand enrollment and graduate more well-trained nurses are most effective when paired with investments in instructional infrastructure, wrap-around student services and support, workforce partnerships, and long-term institutional capacity.

A consistent pattern is emerging across participating colleges: when these constraints are addressed together, programs and outcomes grow at the same time.

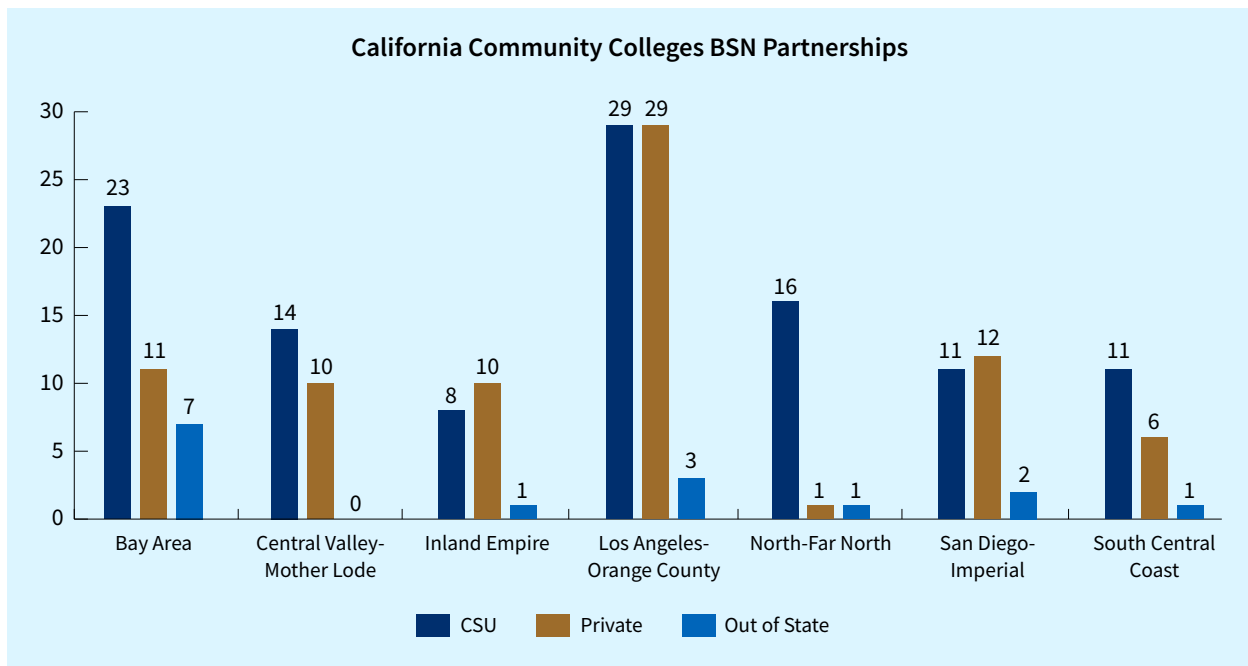
## **Building Curriculum and Partnerships to Success**

In many nursing programs, student progression has historically been shaped as much by program structure as by academic readiness. Complex prerequisite sequencing, rigid scheduling, limited course availability, and inconsistent pathway alignment can create barriers that delay progression, especially for working adults, caregivers, and English language learners.<sup>18</sup>

Across the state, colleges are redesigning curriculum and strengthening pathways to reduce these barriers and improve progression through nursing programs. This includes streamlining prerequisite structures, improving alignment across CNA, LVN, and ADN - RN pathways, expanding evening and hybrid course options, and strengthening CSU and private university partnerships to improve transfer progression. Colleges are also increasingly incorporating immersive technologies such as simulation, virtual reality training environments, telehealth scenarios, and AI-supported clinical documentation tools to strengthen clinical readiness.<sup>19</sup> In many regions, community colleges serve as the connector between education and the healthcare system, helping align workforce demand with training capacity.

Partnerships are foundational to the state’s nursing infrastructure. All California community college ADN-RN programs report established partnerships with four-year institutions, with the majority of these collaborations occurring with CSU campuses through concurrent enrollment, dual enrollment, and ADN-to-BSN pathway models. These partnerships support clinical placements, transfer progression, workforce alignment, and expanded access to bachelor’s degree opportunities for community college nursing students. Community colleges continue to serve as key regional partners in helping to align education pathways with healthcare workforce demand statewide.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 10. California Community College BSN Partnerships – All Regions**



While partnerships remain important, they do not meet statewide demand for BSNs. In 2023-24, there were more than 33,000 applications for fewer than 10,000 BSN enrollment slots, leaving nearly 24,000 applicants without access.

### Equipment and Physical Capacity

For many colleges, the primary limit on enrollment is not demand, it is space.<sup>21</sup> In many regions, limited clinical placement availability continues to constrain enrollment growth, particularly as competition for placements increases across segments.<sup>22</sup>

Community colleges are expanding their capacity through investments in simulation labs and immersive technology, facility expansion and modernization, and instructional equipment. American River College has invested in expanded simulation lab capacity, while Marin Community College District and Merced Community College District have upgraded nursing lab equipment to support larger cohorts and expand hands-on training opportunities.<sup>23</sup>

Other colleges are leveraging technology to address geographic and access barriers. For example, Cerro Coso College is developing a mobile simulation unit designed to bring high-fidelity patient care training directly to rural and remote communities across its 18,000-square-mile service region. The mobile lab incorporates telehealth scenarios, emergency response training, virtual reality tools, and AI-supported electronic health record software to help students strengthen clinical reasoning, digital literacy, and documentation skills.

### **Faculty Capacity and Stability**

Faculty shortages remain one of the most consistent barriers to expansion. Even with demand and facilities in place, programs cannot grow without qualified instructors. Competition for nursing faculty is particularly challenging because experienced nurses can often earn significantly higher salaries in clinical settings than in education.<sup>24</sup>

To address these challenges, community colleges are implementing a range of recruitment and retention strategies designed to stabilize and expand instructional capacity. Efforts include strengthening faculty pipelines, supporting advanced degree attainment, and reducing barriers for clinicians interested in transitioning into teaching roles.

For example, Rio Hondo College implemented a faculty development and retention strategy that provides tuition reimbursement for nursing faculty pursuing BSN-to-MSN completion, paired with a structured service commitment requiring participants to remain with the college after graduation. Other colleges are supporting adjunct faculty recruitment, mentorship models for new instructors, clinical release time, and “grow-your-own” faculty pathways designed to recruit experienced, working nurses into educator roles.

### **Student Services and Support**

Nursing students often balance employment, caregiving, and financial pressures while enrolled. These realities can directly impact retention and completion, particularly within the populations most served by community colleges.

For example, several colleges participating in nursing expansion efforts have implemented dedicated nursing success counselors and retention specialists focused specifically on supporting students through high-risk transition points within nursing programs, including prerequisite completion, clinical placement coordination, and licensure preparation.<sup>25</sup>

These types of services and targeted student support are particularly important for the populations most likely to be served by community colleges<sup>26</sup>, and programs that have strong wrap-around student support specifically for nursing students are seeing marked improvements in both retention and completion.

## Coordination and Data Improvement

Scaling these nursing enrollment and graduation efforts requires strong coordination and reliable data. Inconsistencies in how nursing students are identified make it difficult to track progression across programs. The state is addressing these gaps by encouraging consistent approaches to program tracking and data use. This will support better measurement and more informed decision-making.<sup>27</sup>

Efforts are underway to strengthen coordination, improve program tracking, and support more consistent approaches to nursing education data and reporting. These improvements will support stronger workforce planning, more reliable measurements, and better-informed decision-making over time.

Together, these priorities drive towards a clear point. Programs that are supported in addressing structural barriers across facilities, staffing, partnerships, and student experience are able to expand capacity and improve outcomes simultaneously.

## VI. SYSTEM CONSTRAINTS AND MEASUREMENT CHALLENGES

While the data presented points to clear and consistent trends, ongoing statewide efforts are helping strengthen how nursing education pathways and outcomes are measured across institutions. As California's nursing education system continues to expand, colleges and state partners are working to improve consistency in how programs are coded and reported in order to support stronger statewide analysis and coordination.

One important step in this work is the Common Course Numbering (CCN) Project, which is helping improve alignment across systems and create more standardized approaches to program classification and reporting. In addition to supporting more reliable and comparable data analysis, the initiative is intended to strengthen transfer and articulation by creating clearer academic pathways, improving credit mobility for students across institutions, and helping reduce confusion and duplication related to prerequisite coursework across programs and segments.

These efforts reflect a broader commitment to improving coordination, strengthening system alignment, and building a more connected nursing education pipeline statewide.

## VII. POLICY AND INVESTMENT IMPLICATIONS

These findings point to a single conclusion: California's nursing workforce challenges are not tied to a single issue, and there is no single solution. Expanding the pipeline will require continued investment across facilities, faculty, partnerships, and student pathways, while building systems that are already producing tangible results.

### Continued Expansion of Program Capacity

Recent investments have allowed colleges to increase enrollment and improve student outcomes, but many nursing programs continue to operate within significant constraints. Addressing these limitations will require long-term strategic investments. Funding to address these constraints is essential if colleges are to continue growing enrollment while maintaining quality and compliance with BRN requirements.

## Data Consistency and System Coordination

As these programs continue to grow, stronger data coordination and reporting consistency is increasingly important. Variability in program coding and reporting structures across colleges and systems continues to limit the ability to fully compare outcomes across regions and institutions.<sup>28</sup> Ongoing statewide efforts to improve alignment, standardize reporting practices, and strengthen data consistency should continue as more reliable data will support stronger workforce planning, clearer evaluation of investment, and improved identification of workforce needs.

California already has much of the infrastructure needed to respond to the state's nursing shortage. Community colleges have a demonstrated ability to expand access, increase capacity, and produce strong outcomes. Additional investments should focus on continuing and expanding this work to build a nursing workforce that is prepared for the evolving needs of healthcare delivery.

## The Case for the Community College BSN

While increasing the number of ADN prepared registered nurses remains essential, healthcare workforce expectations continue to evolve toward higher levels of nursing education and training. Across California, employers are increasingly prioritizing BSN-prepared nurses, particularly in acute care, leadership, care coordination, and population health settings.<sup>29</sup> Research has linked higher proportions of BSN-prepared nurses to improved patient outcomes, including reductions in mortality, complications and hospital stay lengths.

BSN pathways, however, remain unevenly accessible across California. Geographic limitations, program capacity constraints, and the cost of attendance continues to create barriers for many students particularly those in rural regions, underserved communities, and place-bound populations. Expanding BSN opportunities through California community colleges offers a practical and efficient path forward.<sup>30</sup>

Community college BSN pathways would also offer a significantly more affordable option for students. Current estimates place total tuition and fees for a community college BSN pathway at approximately \$10,560, compared to substantially higher costs within other segments.<sup>31</sup> If authorized, California community college BSN pathways would complement, not compete with, existing university programs by expanding overall nursing education capacity and serving students who may otherwise lack access to these opportunities.

Recent statewide nursing expansion efforts further reinforce the need for community colleges to expand RN-to-BSN pathways. Investments in facilities, simulation technology, faculty development, pathway alignment and student services and support have strengthened the broader nursing education infrastructure across the community college system. Because BSN students have already completed their pre-licensure clinical training, expansion of these pathways would not require additional demand on clinical placement capacity.

Expanding BSN offerings at California's community colleges is a vital step toward building a stronger, more resilient nursing workforce. By aligning best practices established by the state's public four-year institutions and responding to local community needs, these programs can help close critical workforce gaps, foster equity and accessibility and ensure

the state has the highly trained nurses required to meet both present and future healthcare demands. This investment will also reduce long-term staffing costs, support economic mobility for students and help secure a healthier, more equitable future for all Californians.

## **IX. CONCLUSION**

California's nursing workforce is not a future challenge; it is a current and growing reality affecting healthcare systems and communities across the state. Addressing this need will require more than incremental expansion efforts. It will require sustained investment in the educational infrastructure responsible for preparing the majority of California's nursing workforce. Community colleges are already demonstrating what is possible. Across the state, colleges have expanded enrollment capacity, increased the number of qualified graduates, strengthened workforce partnerships, and improved student outcomes, while serving populations that are often underrepresented in traditional higher education pathways. These efforts reflect Vision 2030 in action – aligning education, workforce development, and regional economic needs through student-centered nursing pathways.

California community colleges are meeting the moment. They are capably expanding nursing education in meaningful and measurable ways. Continued investment in infrastructure, clinical partnerships, faculty development, and bachelor's degree pathways represent a critical opportunity for our state's students. By addressing California's workforce shortages and building a more geographically accessible, affordable, and equitable nursing education system, California community colleges are the path to meeting California's healthcare needs.

## ENDNOTES

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- 8 [Nursing Shortage Map - Foundation for California Community Colleges](#)
- 9 <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Workforce-and-Economic-Development/Nursing-and-Allied-Health>
- 10 <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/calif-community-college-degrees-22218321.php>
- 11 [California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Internal Analysis](#)
- 12 <https://www.rn.ca.gov/education/passrates.shtml>
- 13 Data limitations should be noted: identifying “nursing students” is complex due to inconsistent COCI/TOP coding across colleges, making end-to-end tracking challenging. As a result, findings are directionally strong rather than precise. Efforts are underway to improve identification and tracking through more consistent coding and course-to-program alignment.
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- 16 [Think Different: - Nurse Leader](#)
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California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office  
1102 Q Street | Suite 4400 | Sacramento, CA 95811

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