Statewide College Attendance Survey

Fall 2022

In partnership with

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Executive Summary

The California Community Colleges (CCC) Attendance Decisions Survey was designed to understand the factors influencing prospective and previously enrolled community college students' decisions to attend a California community college in fall of 2022. This survey was administered in late summer/early fall 2022 and included responses from all 116 CCC by 75,497 previously enrolled and prospective (as of fall 2022) students. The survey aimed to understand what influenced students' decisions to enroll or re-enroll (for previously enrolled students) and what they needed to attend college during this time.

Key findings from this statewide survey highlight students' increasing need to balance and navigate complex lives, including the need to work and care for dependents. In addition, while the community college system is one of the most affordable systems in the world, **current and prospective students still question whether they can afford college at this time,** with nearly a third of the respondents indicating that they did not know if they could afford to attend college during this time and/or that they needed to prioritize work. What **students indicated they needed from their colleges to attend college were more flexible options (more course offerings and options such as online), and financial and non-financial assistance (e.g., childcare) to help them better balance these competing priorities**.

In addition, there does seem to be a relationship between students' perceived value of education and their decision whether to attend/enroll in the college, whereby the less valuable they perceived a college education, the less likely they were to enroll or plan to enroll in fall 2022. **As students are trying to navigate and balance their priorities, colleges may want to think about how best to emphasize the value propositions for attending college.** While the need for students to balance school, work, and personal obligations has always been present, the pandemic seems to have made this balancing act much more challenging. Moreover, these **findings reinforce that the cost of attendance is more than money but also time for many students.** The "cost of education" weighs heavily on students' minds as they decide about attending. Given these findings, there are three potential areas of opportunities related to recruitment, outreach, and retention efforts at the state and local levels:

1. **Re-emphasize the value proposition for college** to make workforce connections more explicit to help current and prospective students make informed decisions about the potential return on investment regarding their education.
2. **Increase student-centered course scheduling options and resources** to better support students' needs to balance school and personal/work responsibilities.
3. **Leverage state investments such as the** California Virtual Campus to meet students' growing demand for and interest in online offerings and state appropriations for mental health and basic needs monies; connect students with these services to support their educational pursuits.

By better understanding the factors influencing students' decisions to attend college, community colleges and the state can better support students' pursuit of an education at a community college and improve local and statewide enrollment management and retention strategies.

Introduction

In the last year, California community college (CCC) enrollments have decreased by 13%, and student headcount has decreased by 11%, with declines corresponding to a reduction of course section offerings. Common enrollment and retention strategies include a focus on prospective students by coordinating with K-12 partners, and more proactive retention and completion strategies that include contacting students who stopped or dropped out from a prior term or students who are close to completing their degree/certificate/transfer requirements or have reached certain unit thresholds. In an effort to provide information to community colleges and the state Chancellor's Office about factors affecting enrollments at the local and state level, a statewide survey was administered to current and prospective students in early fall 2022.

The COVID-19 pandemic shook the academic landscape, transforming a mostly in-person community college experience in California to a mostly remote community college experience between 2020 and 2021. During this time, colleges grappled with how best to continue supporting students' academic and non-academic needs, and students grappled with how best to navigate and continue their education during this transition and the transitions taking place in their personal and work lives. The increased need for students to prioritize and balance competing priorities likely further exacerbated the enrollment declines the CCC system was already experiencing before the pandemic. Therefore, a better understanding of the factors driving current and prospective students is needed so that community colleges and the state can better meet and support students' academic pursuits.

Report Overview

This report presents findings from a statewide survey administered by The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group) on factors affecting current and prospective California community college students' decisions to attend a community college in fall 2022. The report is organized by sections in the survey. Section 1 describes the sample characteristics. Section 2 describes students' fall 2022 enrollment plans. Section 3 describes the factors influencing students' decisions to attend a community college. Section 4 complements Section 3 by providing survey respondents' perceived value of a college education, and among previously enrolled students, their perceptions of the campus climate at their college. Section 5 summarizes what students indicated they needed from their colleges to pursue their educational goals. The final section summarizes the survey's key findings and opportunities for consideration.

For information about the survey methodology, instrument, and aggregated tables summarizing each survey item, please refer to Appendices A, B, and C, respectively.

Section 1: Sample Characteristics

Survey Respondents

The survey had 75,497 student respondents, with at least one respondent from each of the 116 California community colleges. There was a relatively representative sample of CCC students by ethnicity and gender (Table 1). The racial/ethnic demographics of survey respondents paralleled those of students across the system; however, there were slightly larger percentages of African American/Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander students in the sample compared with their statewide proportions. Likewise, the percentage of female students was considerably larger in the survey sample compared with what is typically observed statewide. The majority of respondents (79%) are pursuing a degree, certificate, or transfer as their educational goal, and 15% of respondents reported a disability (any kind). In addition, one in three students indicated they were caring for dependents.

Table 1. **Student Demographics: Fall 2022 Survey Respondents vs. Fall 2021 Statewide**

Demographics	Percentage of Fall 2022 Survey Respondents (n = 75,497)	Percentage of Fall 2021 Statewide[1] (N = 2,247,974)
Ethnicity		
African American/Black	7	6
American Indian/Native Alaskan	1	<1
Asian/Filipino	11	13
Hispanic	36	44
Pacific Islander	1	<1
Two or More Races	4	4
White	20	27
Not reported/unknown	19	5
Gender		
Female	66	55
Male	29	43
Nonbinary	3	<1
Not reported/unknown	2	1
Under 25 years of age	47	53
Veteran	4	1
With dependents	36	N/A
With a disability	15	3
Seeking degree/certificate/transfer	79	N/A

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[1] Based on CCCCO Data Mart - Student Headcount data for Fall 2021 retrieved on December 16, 2022.

Students' College by Region

Respondents were mostly from colleges in the Los Angeles/Orange County region (40%), with the fewest respondents from colleges in South Central Coast (4%) (Figure 1). The number of responses by individual colleges ranged from eight to 4,785.

Figure 1. **Percentage of Respondents by CCC Region**
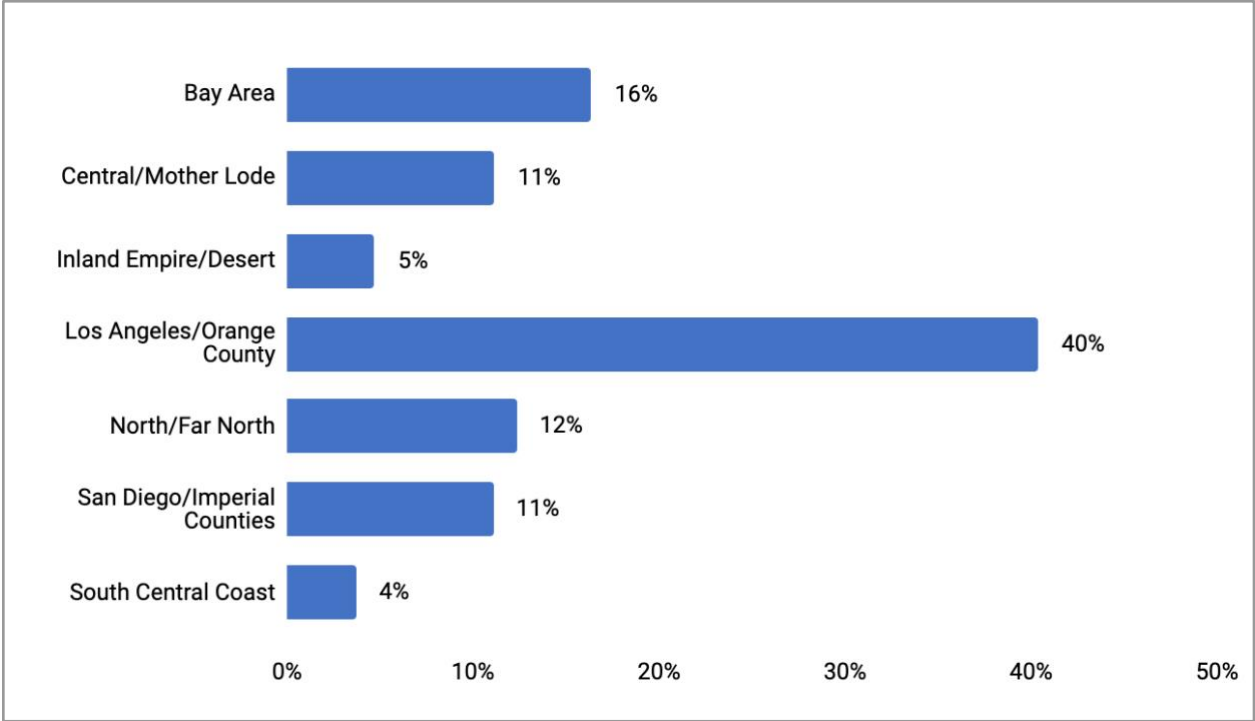
Section 2: Fall 2022 Enrollment Plans

The survey included relatively equivalent proportions of prospective (students who had not previously enrolled in a CCC before fall 2022) and previously enrolled students (students who had enrolled in a CCC before fall 2022) in terms of survey completion. Previously enrolled students comprised the majority of survey respondents (56%), and prospective students made up the remaining 44% of respondents (Figure 2).

Figure 2. **Attendance Status**
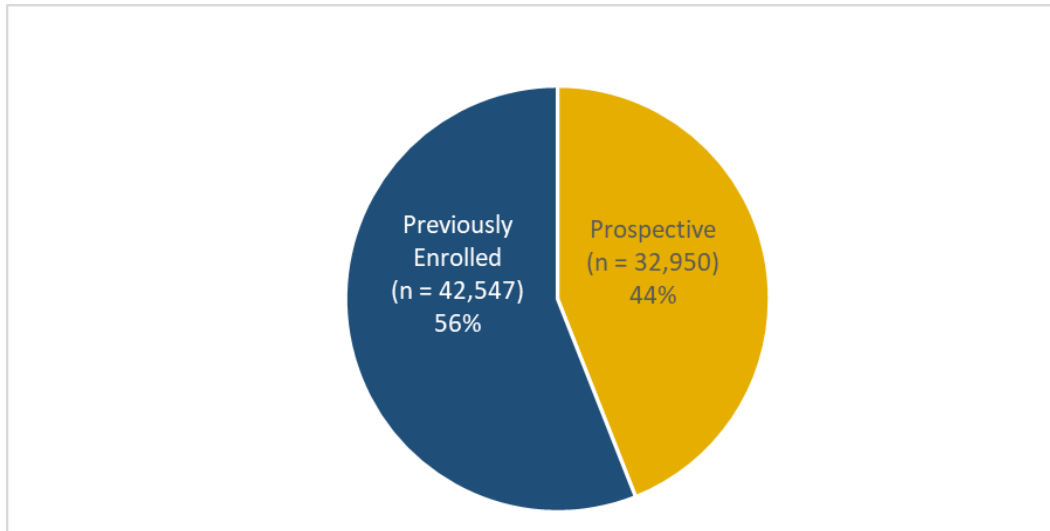
The majority (73%) indicated they had already enrolled in courses at a California community college for fall 2022. An additional 10% indicated they planned to attend. Smaller percentages of students were still deciding (8%) or said they did not plan to attend college (9%) in fall 2022.

Interestingly, when disaggregated by attendance status (Figure 3), a larger percentage of prospective students indicated they had already enrolled in fall 2022 (78%) compared with those who were previously enrolled (69%), emphasizing the importance of retention and persistence strategies to support continuing students through the completion of their program pathway.

Figure 3. **Fall 2022 Enrollment Plans by Attendance Status**
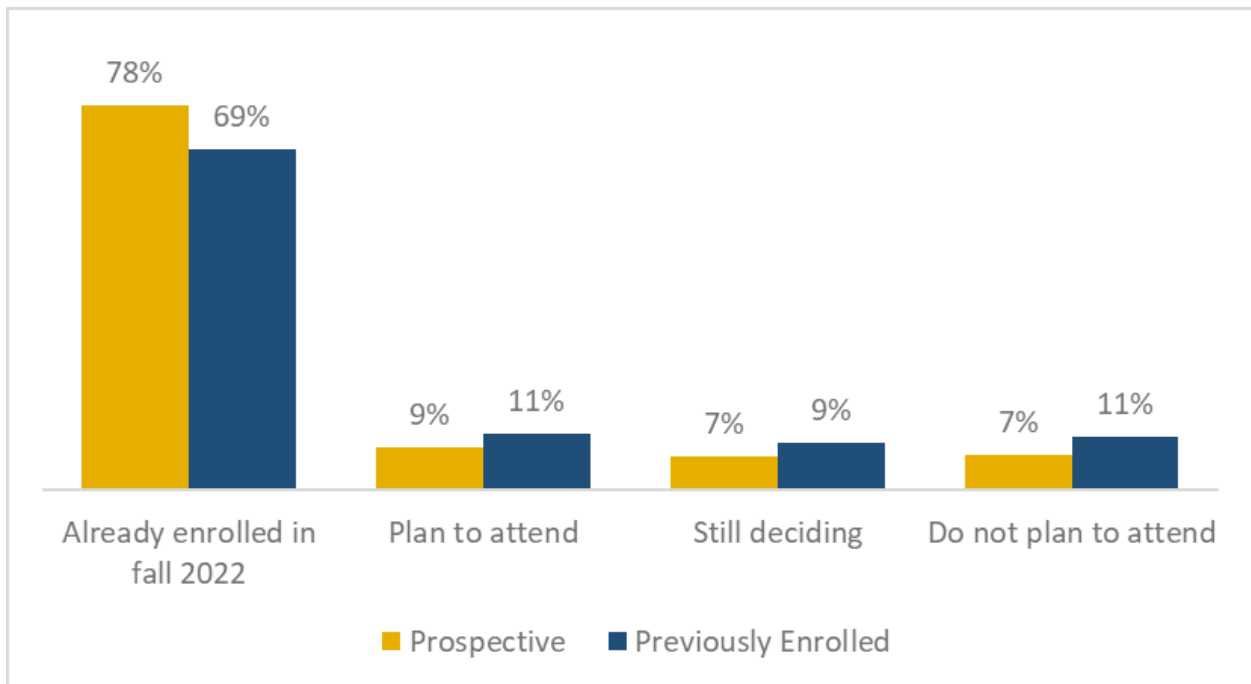
In terms of unit load, there was a fairly even split between students who planned to enroll full-time (47%) in fall 2022 and students who planned to enroll part-time (48%). A small percentage of students (5%) indicated enrolling in noncredit classes only.

The majority of students (74%) reported that they were not taking classes at any other college or university, suggesting they are opting to attend only one institution in fall 2022 to meet their course-taking needs.

Section 3: Factors Affecting Enrollment Decisions
Comparison of Reasons by Prospective vs. Previously Enrolled Students

Both prospective and previously enrolled students' responses indicated that the reasons affecting their decision to attend were primarily financial-related (over 30%), including not being able to afford college and needing to focus on work (Figure 4).

These findings point to students' increasing demands to balance school and life responsibilities. These pressures are also evident among currently enrolled students and contribute, in large part, to the reasons why students are dropping and withdrawing from classes. As two previously enrolled students shared in the survey:

> *I have to work to provide for my family. I'm the only one paying bills, my mom is sick, and I don't have good internet to do online. Also, I don't think I could afford to pay for my classes because most of my money goes to paying bills, rent, phone, etc.*

> *I was homeless and I got housing because I was supposed to go to school, but I ended up having to pick up more hours at work for rent, and I don't have help, so I wasn't able to complete school due to needing rent money and money to live off of.*

The top three reasons affecting **prospective** students' decision whether to attend were:
- Not being able to afford college (32%)

- Considering another college or university (29%)

- Needing to prioritize work (29%)

Over 40% of the previously enrolled students who responded to the survey had already completed a degree or certificate, with 29% indicating they had transferred and are now attending a university. Excluding completion and transfer reasons, the top three reasons affecting **previously enrolled** students' decision whether to re-enroll were:
- Needing to prioritize work (33%)

- Not being able to afford college (33%)

- Needing to care for dependents (22%)

Figure 4. Top Reasons Affecting Prospective and Previously Enrolled Students' Decisions Whether to Attend
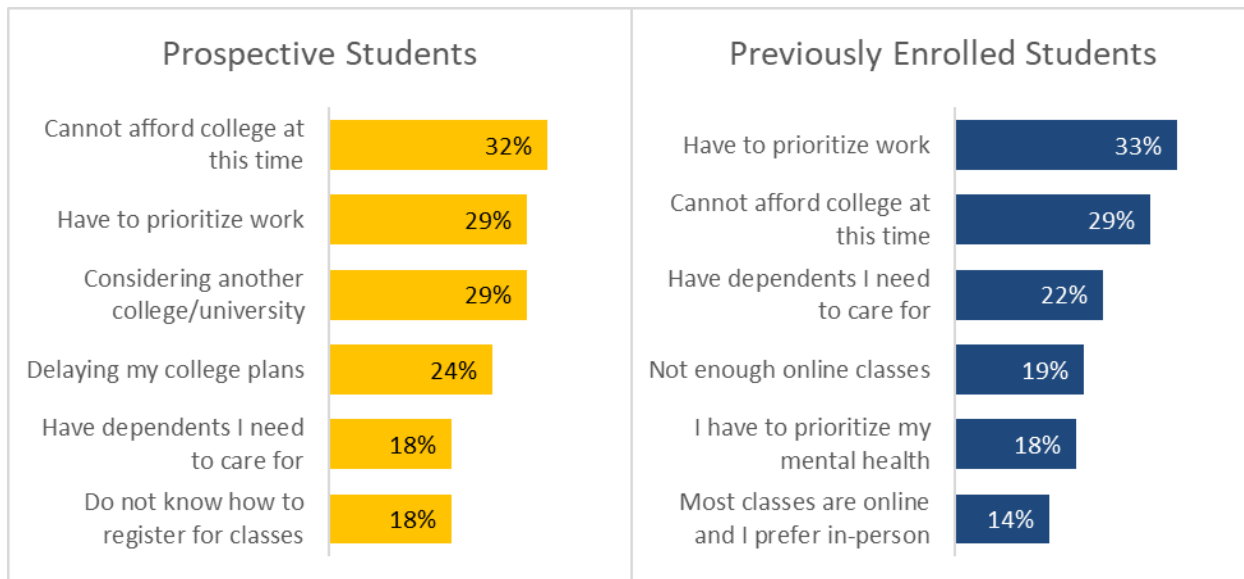
Note: Respondents were able to check more than one reason. For previously enrolled students, two reasons were excluded from this figure for comparison purposes: already completed a certificate or degree (43%) or transferred (29%).

Many students shared that they are working and saving money so they can take classes in the future. For these students, the one thing they indicated needing right now is money. Students reported that financial support from the college would assist with basic needs such as housing, food, and childcare, as well as school expenses including computers/laptops, textbooks, and internet services. Two students shared:

> *The rent price, in addition to food and other necessary bills, has caused difficulties in my planning to attend college. Due to this, I severely lack the capacity to attend college at this time and don't desire to take a loan when I don't need to.*

> *My biggest fear is that I don't have enough money to pay for my studies and all the necessary materials, mainly because now I need to fill more classes and I don't have money to pay for them.*

While some students reported that they hoped colleges would return to more face-to-face programming, the vast majority reported they would also like the college to offer additional online courses. Students reported that online classes provide them with the flexibility they need to work, care for dependents, and manage all of the other responsibilities they have outside of school. Online education also allows them to navigate unexpected challenges that arise during the semester, including changes in their schedule that might otherwise lead them to have to drop or withdraw from classes. In the words of four students:

> *Flexible schedules and…more online classes to be able to work and still have time for my family.*

Allow more online classes for students like myself, with work and home priorities, that want to attend college and obtain degrees.

Flexible online classes that can be self-paced would work well for me.

Have more space for online classes or offer more in general. Juggling school and work are super hard. Especially when both are highly needed.

Most students expressed a need for continued support and flexibility from their college so they can manage competing responsibilities from school, work, and family. Many students hope that professors will continue to be lenient with due dates and class attendance, which would help them progress toward their educational goals and not feel the need to drop out or take a break from classes. Two students shared:

A little wiggle room with many professors' unrealistic expectations for students who have to juggle life to get an education. Examples - small window time frame for tests 10 am-2 pm or peer discussions due by 6 pm on an assignment handed in at 10 am that morning (due times do not always line up with work and parental duties). If a student falls ill, too bad, assignments or tests have hard deadlines. Death in the family, easier to drop classes than risk failing a course due to needing a day or two to grieve.

Encourage or allow professors to have more opportunities to be flexible with a student's schedule and/or late work. It is extremely frustrating when I cannot even focus on reading text due to illness, and I waste valuable time during the class, leading to a lower score for me despite my skills and/or knowledge, and therefore wasting my money.

Previously Enrolled Students' Prior Enrollment History

Students who were previously enrolled indicated they would be taking more units in fall 2022 relative to the last term they attended (Figure 5).

Figure 5. **Unit Load Comparison Among Previously Enrolled Students: Fall 2022 vs. Last Term Enrolled**
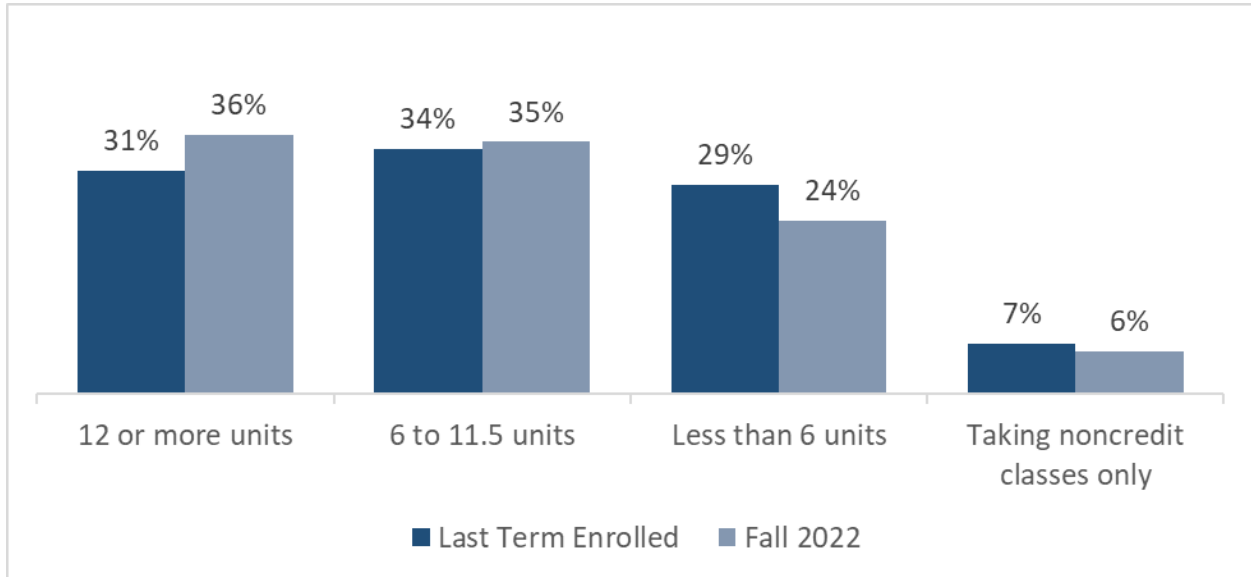
Among students who were previously enrolled, one in four reported dropping or withdrawing from at least one course in their last term (Figure 6). The most common reasons students did so were:

- Needing to prioritize work (33%)

- Needing to prioritize their mental health (30%)

- Not being able to keep up with the pace of classes (29%)

These findings reflect the growing demands of students' experience with trying to maintain school-life balance and their psychological well-being. Students reported that they feel overwhelmed and stressed out from the competing demands of school, work, and home. Many students indicated they would benefit from accessing mental health services and programs for emotional support. They are feeling burdened by the many pressures and responsibilities they manage and expressed sentiments of exhaustion and burnout. Four students described:

> *Mentally I was overwhelmed, I did not have access to help as I needed it, and it became too much.*

> *My mental health wasn't great, so school wasn't my priority at the time.*

> *Caregiving plus poor mental health made it difficult to focus, I was exhausted a lot of the time.*

> *Mental health, I couldn't keep up with the online material. It was difficult to reach out for help, and the pandemic didn't help much either.*

Figure 6. **Top Reasons Previously Enrolled Students Dropped Class(es)**
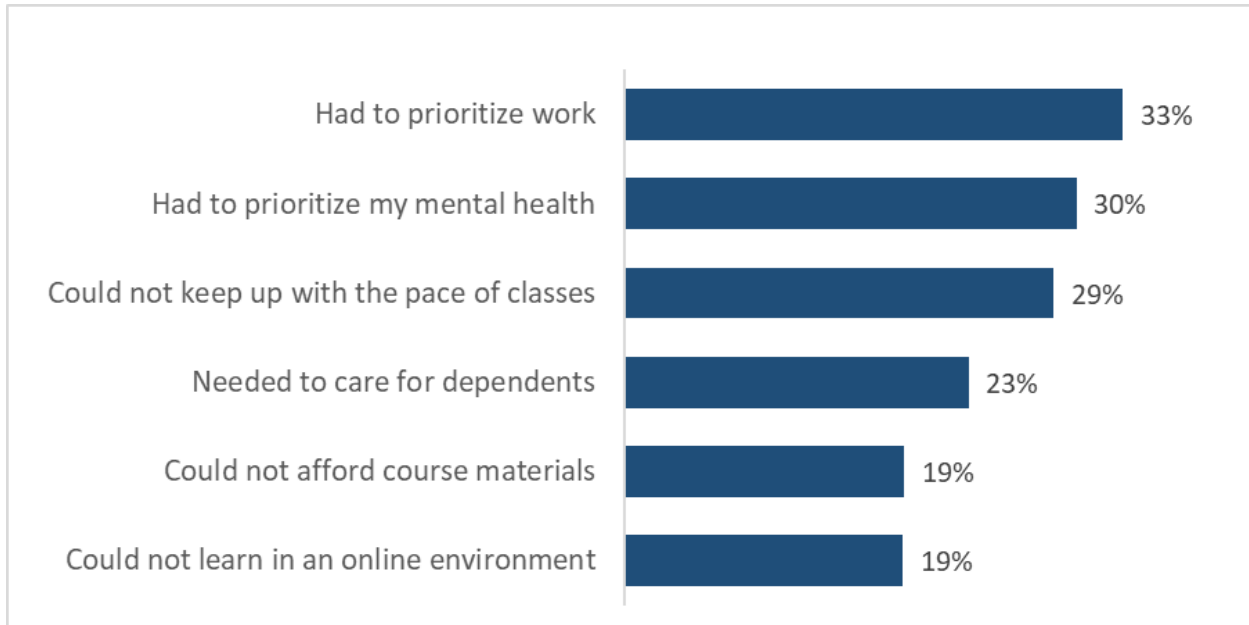
Students indicated that they would like better and more responsive guidance from the college, especially from admissions and records, financial aid, and counseling. According to these students, receiving accurate and timely answers to their enrollment questions, information on next steps, and course availability is imperative to their persistence and retention. Two students described the help they wanted when they were registering for classes:

> *Give me an understanding of what courses I should be taking. Help me figure out how I can take the steps to get farther into my chosen major.*

> *Help me register for classes, as it is my first time attending college and errors were occurring while I tried to do it on my own.*

Students shared how they wanted a more personal and caring touch when communicating with their colleges. As two students explained:

> *Respond to emails, and not passive-aggressively tell me to use a website that isn't working.*

> *Getting human support was too complicated…I had to apply to the school (fill out documents) before I could speak with someone to help me understand if the school even offered what I needed. There's so much fatigue involved with filling out documents. The steps I was told to take to get in touch with a counselor lead me to the wrong campus. When I expressed this, I was told, "Oh, well. I don't how to help you." This showed me that the communication between campuses is poor and the humans who are supposed to help students are either apathetic about their job or don't know how to do their jobs sufficiently.*

Students emphasized the importance of counseling and the difficulties they encountered in getting counseling assistance. In the words of two students:

> *Be better at communicating. When I started 2016, it was great, but as I took more classes, I*

realized how unorganized the counseling advisors are. They all tell you different things, and not everyone says the same thing. For instance, whenever I thought I was ready to graduate, they kept adding more classes and some weren't any I needed. It's hard to make a counseling appointment without one person telling me something different.

GET BETTER COUNSELORS! That care to help and respond. My first time speaking to a counselor, our call was disconnected I had no idea how to reach her, and she did not try to contact me back. Once I spoke to somebody in the front and was able to get a hold of the counselor she answered that was not helpful I felt forced into being a part-time student because I have kids and I wanted to be full-time…All in all, I felt like she did not care to help or even encourage me to further my education.

Section 4: Other Factors Affecting Enrollment Decisions

Perceptions of Campus Climate

For previously enrolled survey respondents, two questions were asked about their perceptions of the campus climate. The majority of students who were previously enrolled in a California community college reported that the campus climate was supportive in general and was supportive for students who were similar to them (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Campus Climate: How supportive is the campus climate at your college?
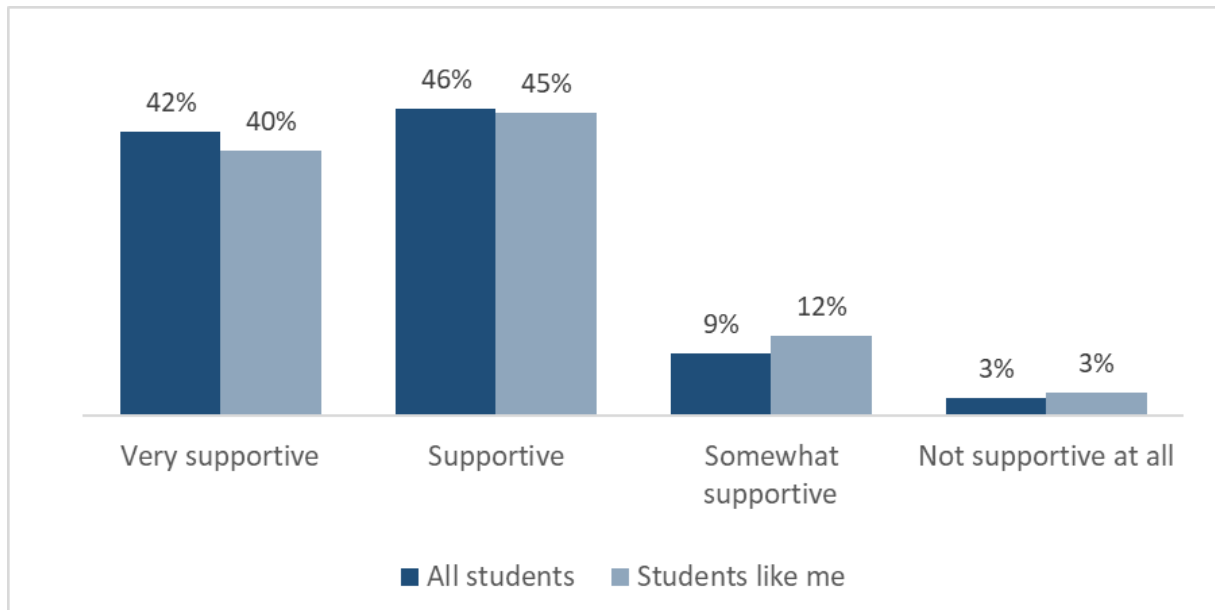
Perceived Value College Education

An examination of students' perceived value of education disaggregated by fall 2022 enrollment plans found a somewhat inverse relationship between their reported level of importance and their fall enrollment plans (Figure 8). In other words, students who placed a higher value on education were more likely to enroll or plan to enroll for fall 2022, compared with students who did not plan to enroll and were more likely to place a lower value on education.

Figure 8. **Value of Education by Fall 2022 Enrollment Plans**
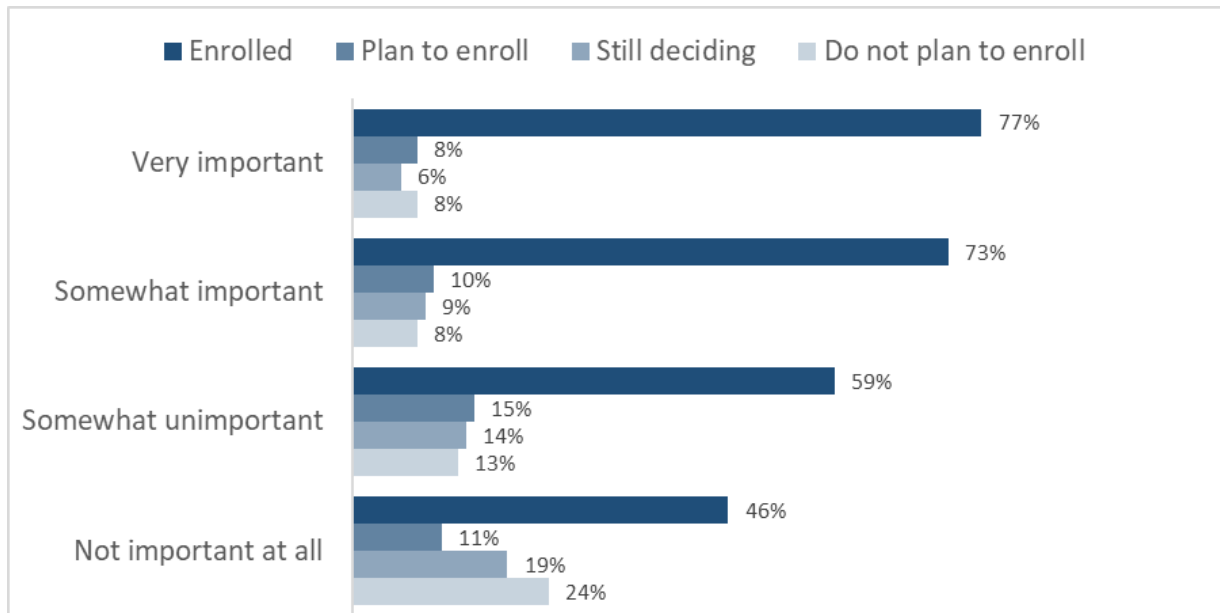
Section 5: What Students Say They Need from Their Colleges

When asked what they needed from their colleges to stay enrolled or attend college, students expressed the need for more flexible course offerings and support resources from the college that include, but are not limited to, financial and non-financial assistance (e.g., childcare).

While some students reported that they hope colleges return to more face-to-face instruction (13% of prospective and 14% of previously enrolled), a slightly greater percentage of students indicated they would like colleges to continue offering online courses (15% of prospective and 19% of previously enrolled). Students reported that online classes allow them to care for children and dependents and maintain their work schedules, which can be challenging with face-to-face instruction.

Over 40% of students indicated they wanted to be contacted by the college. Colleges were provided real-time access to their students' survey data to assist with strategic enrollment management efforts, examine local trends, and reach out to students who had questions or needed support.

Conclusions and Opportunities

Students are navigating complex lives that include the need to work and care for dependents while questioning if they can afford college and whether their investment will be worth it. While the community college system in California is one of the most affordable systems in the country, current and prospective students are still struggling to afford college, with nearly a third of the respondents citing financial-related reasons (e.g., needing to prioritize work) affecting their decision whether to attend during this time.

Current and prospective students are weighing their options, and college affordability concerns are showing up not only in terms of the finances needed to pay for education, but also in terms of the time and effort needed to complete that education. When asked what students needed from the colleges to pursue their education and/or take more units, students indicated they needed more flexible options such as online courses, and financial and non-financial assistance such as childcare.

In addition, there seems to be a relationship between students' intrinsic value of education and their decision to attend/enroll in college, whereby students who reported lower levels of the perceived value of education were less likely to enroll or plan to enroll in fall 2022. As students are trying to navigate and balance their priorities, colleges may want to think about how best to emphasize the value propositions for attending college.

While the need for students to balance school, work, and personal obligations has always been present, the pandemic seems to have made this balancing act more challenging. Based on these findings, there are three potential areas of opportunities for these results to inform recruitment/outreach and retention efforts:

- **Re-emphasizing the value proposition for college more explicitly**

  Individual colleges and the CCC system as a whole may consider revamping and supporting outreach and recruitment practices that make workforce connections more explicit to help current and prospective students make informed decisions about the potential return on investment of their education. With nearly a third of prospective and previously enrolled students reporting the need to prioritize work, colleges will need to think about how best to communicate why college education is important and the potential job and career opportunities that become available to students as a result.

- **Increasing student-centered course schedules and support services/resources**

  Students seek more flexible course offerings to better balance their work, school, and personal obligations. Colleges must assess their scheduling practices and implement more student-centered course scheduling that uses various strategies to meet students' needs. These strategies may include, but are not limited to, alternative scheduling options (e.g., weekend and evening courses/programs, short-term courses) and modalities (e.g., synchronous and asynchronous online courses, hybrid/hyflex options). In addition, students need more flexible and convenient access to resources and support services such as tutoring and financial aid, so alternative delivery options (e.g., remote/online access) and hours of operation (e.g., beyond the typical 9-5 Monday through Friday) are needed to provide better service to students.

- **Raising awareness and increasing the utilization of state investments to support students**

  With prospective and current students' increasing interest and availability in online offerings, the California Virtual Campus (CVC) may be a tool that can be used to recruit prospective students and retain currently enrolled students by increasing convenient access to courses students need. However, it is unclear whether college practitioners and students are aware of this tool and/or whether the tool is being included in colleges' recruitment/retention/enrollment management plans. In addition, several investments were made via [Senate Bill 129: Budget Act of 2021](#) to improve services to support students' overall mental well-being and meet their basic needs. For these state investments, concerted and coordinated efforts from colleges and the state need to be done to increase the promotion of the CVC and the resources and services made available under Senate Bill 129 to help connect students to the classes and resources they need to pursue their education.

Despite all the challenges students shared in the survey, nearly half of the respondents indicated they would like to be contacted by their college for help with enrolling. As the state continues to recover from the pandemic, the CCC system and its colleges must keep students' interests and needs at the forefront of these efforts and be more proactive and innovative in attracting and retaining students.

Appendix A: Survey Design and Methods

This study used a cross-sectional survey to explore the factors affecting prospective and previously enrolled community college students' decisions whether to attend a California community college in fall 2022. The online survey was codesigned by staff from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) and the Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group), and a professor in education at the University of California, Davis, who specializes in postsecondary and workforce transitions (see Appendix B for survey instrument). The 33-item survey included a mix of fixed-choice and open-ended items to understand what influenced students' decisions whether to enroll or re-enroll (for previously enrolled students) and what they needed to attend college.

The survey link was sent to all 116 California community colleges via contacts with each college's institutional research office. Each college was asked to send the initial invitation to complete the survey, along with at least two reminders. Responses from this survey were collected between August 6, 2022, and September 23, 2022. Ninety gift cards (10 x $100 gift codes to Amazon, 80 x $25 gift codes to Amazon, Starbucks, Target, or Walmart) were offered as an incentive to students to complete the survey and were awarded via a random drawing.

Sample

Convenience and purposive sampling methods were used to collect responses from students who had an enrollment record at any community college between summer 2020 and fall 2022 (previously enrolled students) or who had applied to any community college in the same timeframe (prospective students). There were 75,497 responses from students across 118 institutions in this study, including all 116 community colleges and two continuing education institutions.[2]

Appendix B: [Statewide California Community College Attendance Survey](#)

Appendix C: [Technical Tables](#)

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[2] The raw survey results included 90,847 cases examined and cleaned to eliminate incomplete or anomalous data. See the codebook for definitions and data types for all variables in the survey. The data were sorted and examined for duplicates by matching respondent information (e.g., student name and email address). If duplicates were identified, the first completed response was used in the analysis.

The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (The RP Group)

As the representative organization for Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE) professionals in the California Community Colleges (CCC) system, the RP Group strengthens the ability of CCC to discover and undertake high-quality research, planning, and assessments that improve evidence-based decision-making, institutional effectiveness, and success for all students.

Project Team

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- Student Senate for California Community Colleges

Lastly, we thank the CCC students themselves for sharing their experiences so openly with us.