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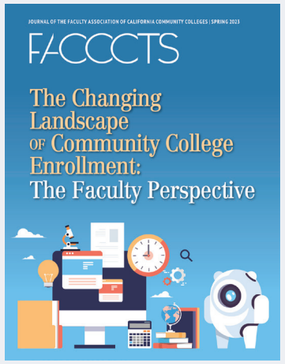
FACCCTS

The Changing Landscape of Community College Enrollment: The Faculty Perspective



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SPRING 2023

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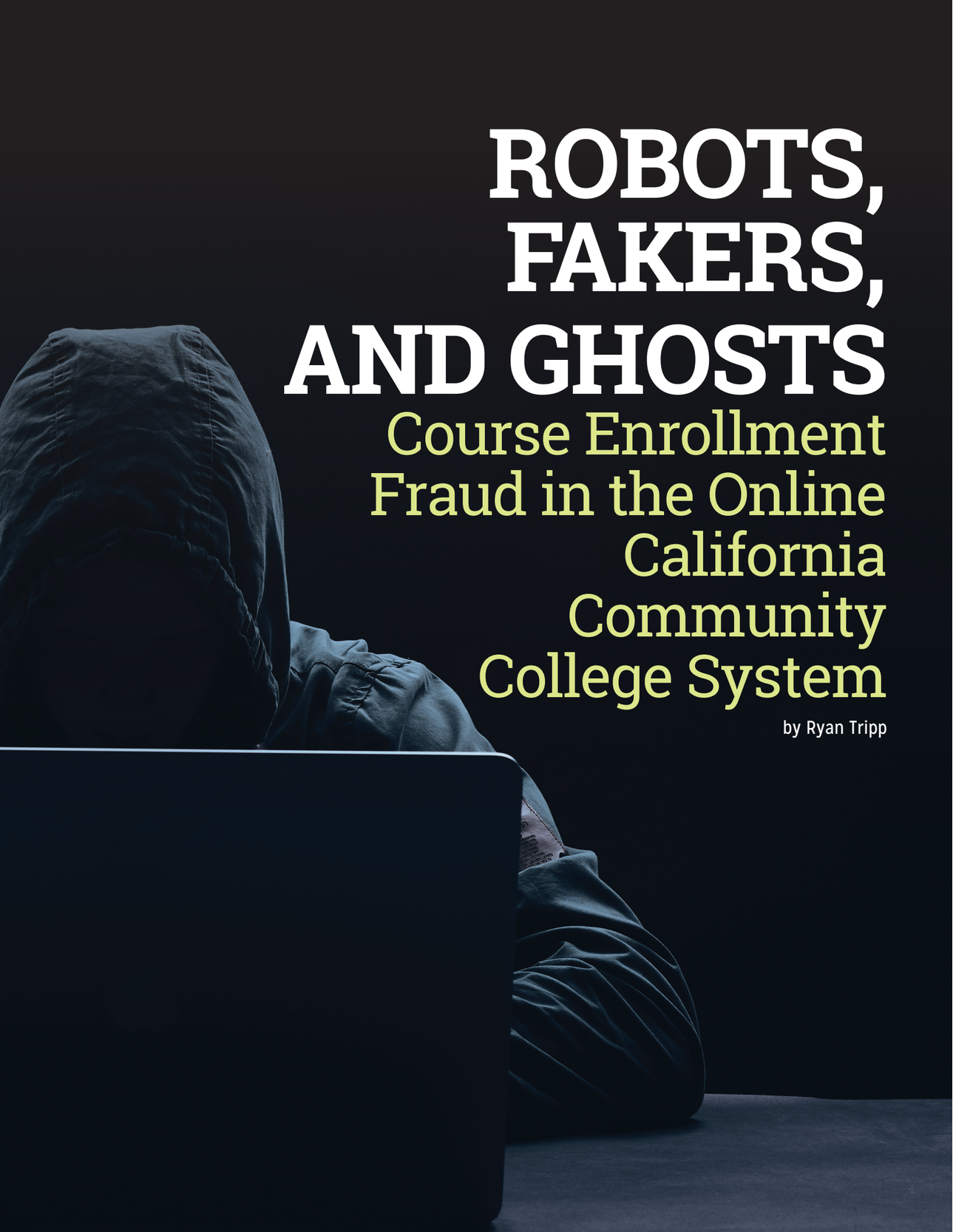

ROBOTS, FAKERS, AND GHOSTS

Course Enrollment Fraud in the Online California Community College System

by Ryan Tripp

Los Angeles Pierce College criminal justice faculty member Kim Rich began her path to investigating online roster robots, also known as Learning Management System (LMS) course bots, when she began teaching online courses in 2006. Perpetrators, she explained in a recent interview with *FACCCTS*, have designed programs to generate bots that automatically and rapidly perform certain tasks and functions in LMS platforms that would otherwise require user interface—that is, require human students. These bots, which were most likely not just generated in the United States, have potentially cost California community colleges millions of dollars and undermined assessments of student enrollment.

Rich distinguished the difference between these bots (or "fake-student-bots") and solely "fake students" in the online classroom. In unauthorized proxy applications of the latter, users register for the college and its courses under a composite of stolen identities, including names, dates of birth, internet photographs, and even social security numbers. Alternatively, students pay these proxies to complete their courses.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, bots and fake students with avatars have begun to frequently appear on rosters for LMS courses. More recently, fake students post to the discussion boards and submit assignments. According to Rich, submissions of exactly the same project, presentation, or essay, most commonly by two or more such registrants, constitute circumstantial evidence pointing to fake students. Identities were frequently stolen from the deceased, although individuals with vocational home pages and personal sites became targets as well. Another iteration of fake students served as paid proxies for registered students. Rich contended that this practice, with students paying individuals to complete courses on their behalf, was a form of academic fraud.

In November 2022, the Experience student news site at Los Medanos College (LMC) in Pittsburg reported online "ghost students," one of the first northern California college student newspapers to do so. The report indicated that, according to one administrator's review of a September (post-census) survey, approximately 530 sections had registered students who had never logged into the Canvas course. The vice president of instruction encouraged faculty to revisit the Contra Costa Community College District's guidelines for online attendance, warning them to "drop students immediately that have not logged in" and that these numbers were "a potential sign of fraudulent enrollment for the purpose of illegally accessing financial aid resources."

Rather than bots, the Experience described LMC concerns over ghost students who registered for asynchronous online courses "just for financial aid… Most of these scammers use information like phone numbers and the names of unsuspecting victims and even the information of people who have died to seem more legitimate." This concealment in turn resulted in a misappropriation of COVID-19 relief funds, millions of dollars in tax revenue for education, and full sections that blocked actual students from registering. In addition, the ghost students continued to disrupt data for decisions on curriculum and pedagogy. But, according to a financial aid advisor at the college, the ghost students had not yet interfered with or limited financial aid distributions for stu-

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, bots and fake students with avatars have begun to frequently appear on rosters for LMS courses.

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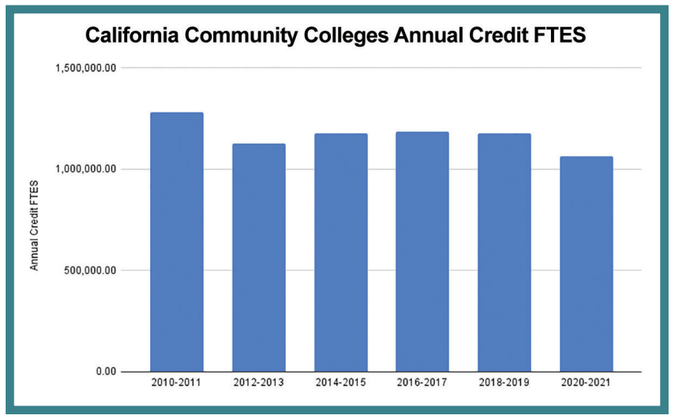
Increasing Student Enrollment AND Reducing Student Unit Accumulation: A Community College Paradox?

by Wendy Brill-Wynkoop, FACCC President
Ginni May, ASCCC President

In January 2022, faculty in one California community college received the following communication:

> You may be aware of our lagging enrollments. Like community colleges across the state and country, our enrollments are down significantly. Compared to last spring, we're down approximately 10%, and last spring we had fallen 10% from spring of 2020—a loss of approximately 2,200 students from spring 2021 to spring 2022. We have attempted to keep as many classes in the schedule as practically possible to serve as many students as we can; nevertheless, over the last week deans working with department chairs have been making schedule reductions on the sections that have very few students. This has been inconvenient for many full-timers. For our adjunct faculty it has, regrettably, too often meant lost jobs. In coming semesters you'll notice that enrollment management will be a major focus of our college.

Faculty throughout the California community colleges are receiving similar notifications, which are not unique to 2022. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollments across the California community colleges had been declining. During the past decade the number of full-time equivalent students (FTES) [1] diminished by 217,005 (from 1,279,577 FTES in 2010–11 to 1,062,572 FTES in 2020–2021), constituting nearly a 17% decline in annual FTES over the 10-year time span.



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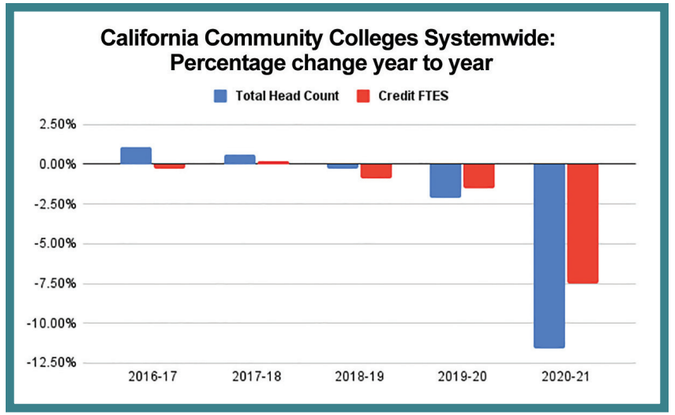

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In particular, total head count and credit FTES have declined over the past five years, and that decrease has accelerated following the COVID-19 pandemic.

So, what is the reason for the decline in enrollment? The short answer: It's complicated. Trends have shown that during a recession, when unemployment is high, enrollment increases, and during a strong economy, when unemployment is low, enrollment declines. However, a pandemic does not instigate a typical recession, and other factors in addition to the economy may influence community college enrollment. Nationally, all sectors of college enrollments are down; however, the community colleges are most affected. Across the country, the typical college-age student population is declining. The total cost of college is prohibitive for many people, even those who receive the college promise. The pandemic has driven up wages, and many students have chosen to work more.

From National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/), as colleges are working to increase enrollment, or at a minimum, slow the decline in enrollment, they should be aware that some actions intended to improve educational opportunities for students may also be leading to enrollment decline.

"You cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war."

– Albert Einstein

[1] FTES: Full-time Equivalent Student — 1 FTES = (17.5 weeks per semester)x(2 semesters per year)x(15 hours per week) = 525 student contact hours per year: https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/IEPI/Resources_Guides/sem-understanding-calculating-ftes-spring-2019.pdf?ver=2020-06-13-101228-017

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As colleges are working to increase enrollment, or at a minimum, slow the decline in enrollment, they should be aware that some actions intended to improve educational opportunities for students may also be leading to enrollment decline.

While this situation is not about war, there is a parallel: The California community colleges and policymakers have goals to increase student enrollment and at the same time reduce student unit accumulation. Colleges are not funded on actual head count; a large majority of California community college funding is based on FTES, which is a function of student contact hours, a calculation that depends upon the courses that students take.

Over the past decade in California, the Legislature has enacted numerous mandates aimed at innovation to streamline and simplify the pathways for students to earn associate degrees, certificates, and transfer to four-year institutions. The bills that focused on reducing the number of excess units or courses taken include SB 1440, Student Transfer (Padilla, 2010); SB 1456, Seymour-Campbell Student Success Act (Lowenthal, 2012); SB 440, Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act (Padilla, 2013); and AB 1451, Dual Enrollment (Holden, 2014).

The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office took such initiatives further in 2017 with its focus on transfer through the Vision for Success[2] goals that helped drive additional legislative mandates, including AB 705 (Irwin, 2017), The Seymour-Campbell Student Success Act of 2021: Matriculation: Assessment, The California Community Colleges Guided Pathways Grant Program, Ed Code §§ [88920–88922] passed in the 2017–18 Budget Bill; and the California Community Colleges Student Success Funding Formula, also passed in the 2017–18 Budget Bill. The following year the California Community Colleges Student Centered Funding Formula was passed through the 2018–19 Budget Bill.

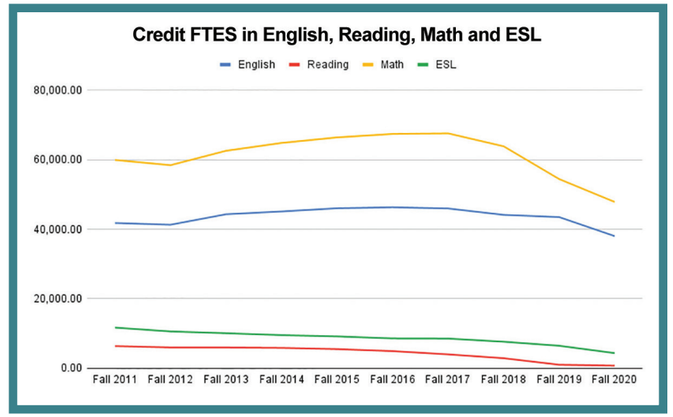
The most recent legislation is AB 928 (Berman, 2021), the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act, was signed by the governor in October 2021. This law will effectively reduce the number of units that students are required to take for their associate degree for transfer (ADT), and will require colleges to place students on an ADT pathway if their stated major contains an ADT component and if they have declared their intention to transfer.[3]

In general, an associate degree is not required for transfer and, to date, many students still transfer to the California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) systems without earning an associate degree[4]. Early transfer legislation, SB 1440 (Padilla, 2010), which led to the creation of the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT), guaranteed transfer to the CSU system for students who earned an ADT. While the minimum number of semester units required to earn any associate degree in the CCC system is 60, Padilla's legislation enabled an ADT to be earned with as few as 60 transferable semester units. In the next few years, SB 1456 and SB 440 by Lowenthal and Padilla, respectively, strengthened the mandate of the ADTs. In 2014, Holden successfully authored AB 1451, the Dual Enrollment bill, which encouraged partnership agreements between high schools and community colleges to assist high school students in completing courses that fulfilled high school and college credit simultaneously.

[2] California Community Colleges Vision for Success: https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Vision-for-Success/goals-and-commitments

[3] Students may opt out of the ADT under certain conditions.

[4] CSU Student Enrollment Dashboard: https://tableau.calstate.edu/views/FirstTimeFreshmanandCollegeTransfers/SummaryView?iframeSizedToWindow=true&%3Aembed=y&%3Arender=true&%3AshowAppBanner=false&%3Adisplay_count=no&%3AshowVizHome=no



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In 2017 the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office released The Vision for Success, setting big, ambitious goals of increasing the number of associate degree awards, increasing transfers, and decreasing unit accumulation, among other changes. In the same year, AB 705 (Irwin, 2017) and other legislative mandates resulted in significantly reduced remedial course offerings. College districts were strongly encouraged to place all students directly into transfer-level English and mathematics courses, and to eliminate reading programs. In that same year, the California Community Colleges rolled out the Guided Pathways framework, which was designed to streamline a student's pathway to completion, thus reducing excess unit accumulation. The CCC funding model also changed in 2018 with the adoption of the Student Centered Funding Formula in the 2018–19 state budget, minimizing the funding for enrollment and maximizing monetary awards for transfer, degree attainment, and completion of transfer-level mathematics and English within the student's first academic year.

These initiatives focused on getting students through transfer-level English and mathematics and reducing credit basic skills or remedial education. Fall FTES for credit courses has, for the most part, steadily declined, nearly 14% from fall 2011 (511,874 FTES) to fall 2020 (440,937 FTES). In particular, enrollments in English and mathematics have declined, about 9% and 20%, respectively. However, a significant jump in enrollments occurred during the middle years, indicating a reduction of approximately 18% and 29%, respectively, from the highest enrollment to the lowest during those years. Reading instruction has mostly been eliminated, and English as a second language curricula have been reduced by nearly 68%. The decrease in English and mathematics FTES constitutes about 22% of the overall loss of FTES in the CCC system.

AB 928, the Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act of 2021, is intended to improve the transfer process. One major component of the legislation is the creation of a singular general education pathway for transfer to both the CSU and UC systems, limiting the total required units for that pathway to 34 semester units, and reducing the current CSU requirement by five semester units. Decreasing the number of units accumulated by associate degree earners to 79 from 84 met one of the goals of the Vision for Success. The potential impact on FTES systemwide should be noted: For example, consider the 118,094 first-time associate degree earners in 2019–2020 as a cohort of degree earners; a decrease of five required semester units per student would be an estimated system loss of 4,921 FTES annually for four years, assuming students earn degrees within four years. That is a total loss of 19,682 FTES over four years for one cohort. On the upside, colleges may have some flexibility in requiring students in STEM majors to take up to 66 semester units due to majors requirements, although the general education units would not be different.

While the authors, sponsors, and supporters of these initiatives have the students' best interest as the primary goal, these initiatives do reduce enrollment. Such legislative mandates make increasing enrollment even more complex. Thus, an unintentional paradox has been embedded into the goals of the California Community College system. ■

Anti-Racist Resolutions for the Classroom

By Amy Leonard

Are you looking to reshape your classroom or try a new grading strategy for the next school year? During the 2022–23 school year, as the classroom environment started to achieve a level of normalcy, a number of faculty are re-examining their pedagogy and andragogy to create a more equitable classroom and incorporate the larger lessons learned from the pandemic. Incorporating a touch of humanity into their syllabi, grading, and classroom policies, as well as being "woke" enough to audit classes for racist and scarcity-based assignments and rubrics, are just a few examples.

To give a little background on why all faculty should make a new resolution to adopt some anti-racist pedagogy and andragogy into their classrooms in 2023, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges asserted in Decolonizing Your Syllabus, an Anti-Racist Guide for Your College that "Academic institutions should all have a call to action to address racial inequities and to be accountable to meet the transformational change that society needs." This sentiment is hammered home by the stark realities about which CalMatters higher education reporter Mikhail Zinshteyn wrote in an article titled "'We're not going to close the equity gaps': Despite progress, California Community Colleges won't reach Newsom's aspirational goals." That article, which Cal Matters published on Oct. 13, 2022, concluded that "The system [had] virtually no shot of reaching its most audacious academic goals of narrowing by 40% the graduation rate gap among its Black, Latino, and white students in five years. Nor [was] the system on track to narrow the graduation-rate gaps across regions, such as between the Bay Area and the poorer Inland Empire." The quotation in the article's headline is a statement by Pamela Haynes, president of the California Community Colleges Board of Governors.

Likewise, the Public Policy Institute of California found that "The pandemic increased challenges for low-income students and students of color, and many delayed their studies or dropped out of college." With the dire news on the state of community college educational success for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) students, determination of how to tackle the problem can seem overwhelming, but, fortunately, brave faculty already have begun adopting a few of the strategies that others may want to consider as they eye the 2023–24 year. These strategies fall under the umbrella of anti-racist pedagogy and provide suggestions for where to start and for reports on how it is working in their classrooms.

A simple place to start in our journey to create a more equitable space for your students is to decolonize our syllabus. According to Ishiyama et al., when syllabi contain a disciplinary tone in the language, students won't seek an instructor for academic help (2002). Hence, the suggested start would be for faculty to revise their syllabi polices and language to see how punitive it sounds versus warm and welcoming.

Another few tips from the Academic Senate's Decolonizing Your Syllabus…might be to ask ourselves:

- Does my syllabus contain links or information about housing insecurity help and food pantries?
- Do your course syllabus and Canvas site include positive messages and affirmations to further validate and provide a greater sense of belonging for BIPOC students in the course?
- Do the images and videos in the course showcase diversity and representation of the students?

This adjustment can have a lasting impact on our BIPOC students' success and their ability to find our classes a more welcoming space.

Once we have tackled the syllabi, we can begin to look more deeply into the success rates and interrogate how our department and campus curriculum connect to the success of your BIPOC students. As the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges asserted, "Dismantling racist structures requires a review of the history that created those structures. It requires understanding the history of the construct of race as a culture, the white supremacy ideology, the centuries of laws intended to maintain positions of power for whites, and the ways in which the equity and diversity efforts

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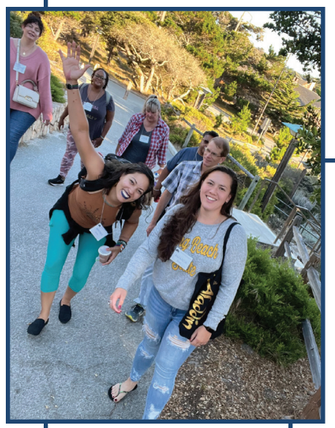
Relive the highlights of last summer's unforgettable Great Teachers Seminar and become inspired for the next one. Will we see you there?



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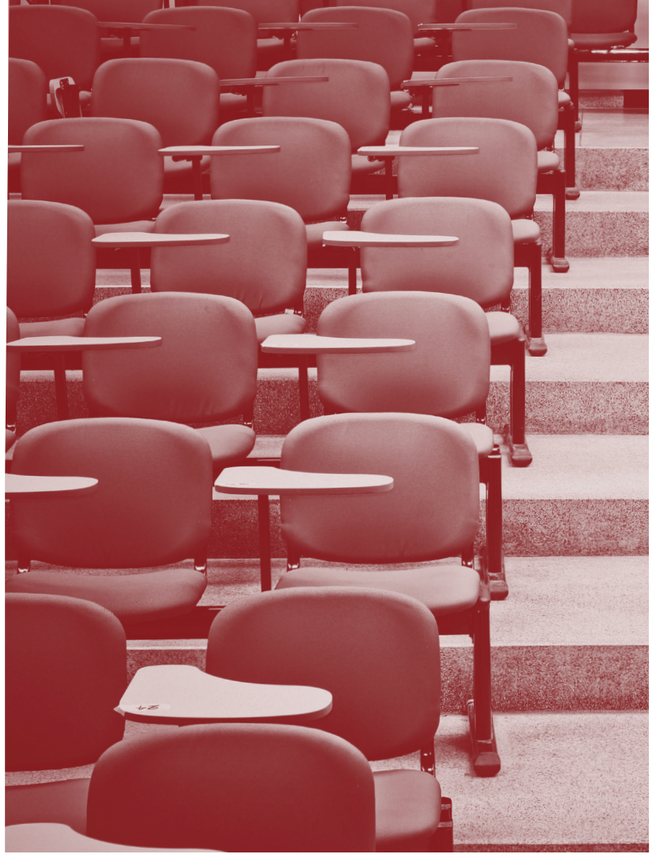
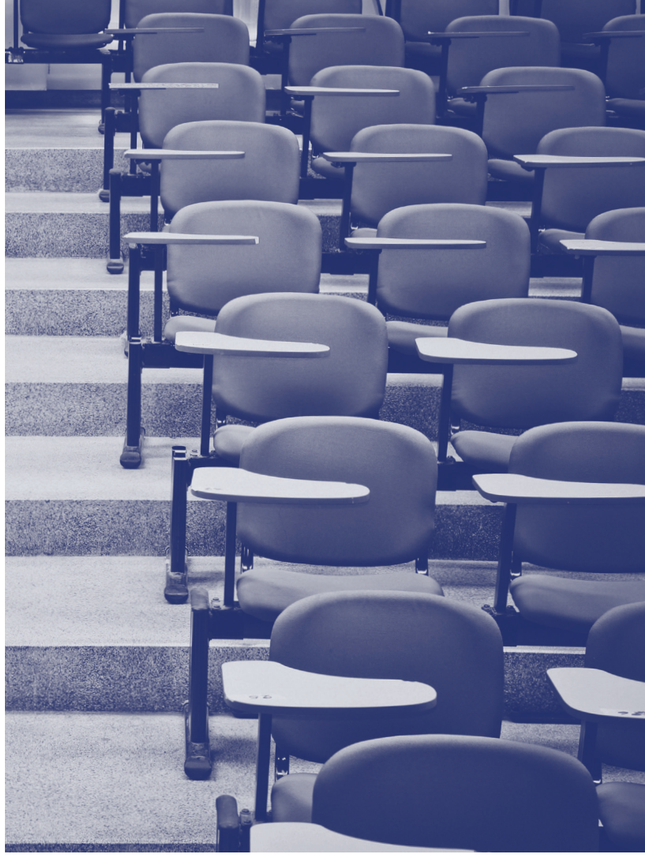
Declining Enrollment in California Community Colleges: Is Educational Polarization to Blame?

by Evan Hawkins, FACCC Executive Director





Enrollment has plummeted at California's community colleges.

From a peak of 2.8 million students in 2009, enrollment now stands at around 1.8 million. While this trend accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment was trending down for many years. This drop is attributable to a number of explanations, including demographic changes, higher demand for workers in the labor market, the perceived lack of value of a college education, and other hypotheses that often fit preconceived narratives of people attempting to influence higher education policy (such as colleges aren't flexible enough and practitioners are stuck in the status quo).

One explanation that has not received as much attention is that educational polarization is having a meaningful impact on enrollment in community colleges by influencing the perception of higher education. In this context, educational polarization is the cultural, socioeconomic, and political widening between Californians with college degrees and those without them. Working-class Californians without college degrees are an elusive constituency for California's community colleges. Community college leaders have spent enormous amounts of time and resources toward mostly unsuccessful attempts to convince members of this demographic to enroll or re-enroll at our institutions.

In a world of increasing educational polarization, it's hard to imagine any institution being immune from its effects. Political actors have increasingly embraced polarizing rhetoric critical of higher education. Institutions of higher learning have been particularly affected by the rise of social media and other forms of information delivery that have created a greater divide between those who are more educated and those who are less so. And as the gap grows, many working-class Californians no longer believe that college is a valuable pursuit, or are convinced that higher education is the cultural and political antithesis to their values and the values of people like them. Alternatively, communities that continue to harbor a more positive outlook on college attainment, such as middle-class and wealthy areas, have more access to financial assistance, professional networks, and other supports that encourage their students to value and pursue college degrees. Not surprisingly, these areas have maintained and increased their economic prosperity; they also have become areas of relative political insulation with a majority of residents subscribing to similar political world-views. Meanwhile, working class communities are seeing political shifts counter to what is being seen in communities with high educational attainment, while also seeing more pronounced enrollment declines.

The 2022 election data clearly shows a political divide that describes a growing higher education perception problem fueled by political and educational polarization. For example, Latino-majority congressional districts in the working class areas of Los Angeles County and the Inland Empire, including CD 38, CD 35, and CD 31, saw double digit percentage swings against Democrats in the 2022 general election. Colleges in these districts have seen some of the biggest post-pandemic declines in enrollment, including Rio Hondo College at -30%, Citrus College at -23%, and Mt. San Antonio College at -10%.

Proposition 209, which 55% of voters had passed in 1996, ultimately made affirmative action illegal in public institutions. In the 2020 general election, Proposition 16 would have reinstated affirmative action in California but was defeated with 57% voting in opposition. Even though the state was significantly more diverse in 2020 compared to 1996, the electorate became more anti-affirmative action. Proposition 16 had the support of FACCC, education unions, student organizations, higher education nonprofit organizations, the Chancellor's Office, and Governor Newsom. The initiative also had

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a 25-1 fundraising advantage over the anti-Prop 16 campaign. Despite all of that, the electorate voted down what could have been the biggest equity state initiative for community colleges in recent memory.

Some observers explain the failure of Proposition 16 as the result of confusing initiative language and a poor campaign. The demographic data tells a bigger story. Voting data and polling demonstrate that diverse and working-class communities across the state opposed Proposition 16. Only six counties in the state voted in support of the initiative. Those counties were Los Angeles and five Bay Area counties, which include regions with the highest levels of college degree attainment. Conversely, Imperial county, the population of which has some of the lowest levels of college degrees, opposed the initiative with 57.9% voting no. Furthermore, a pre-election poll by the Institute of Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley showed a majority of voters with educational attainment of less than a graduate degree opposed the initiative.

> Negative perception fueled by educational polarization is influencing students' decisions about whether or not they should pursue higher education—and it's also hurting colleges' ability to recruit new students.

Beyond election data and surveys, public polling on higher education shows some alarming data. A correlation between educational polarization and trust in higher education institutions was evident, quantified in annual surveys. Trust has been declining for years and is especially poor among Latino Generation Z adults, who make up a large percentage of potential California Community College students. Trust is also low among people who hold independent or conservative political worldviews, and private universities score much higher in trust levels than do public institutions. This has been historically true, but the gaps are becoming wider even while college-educated Americans continue to have a much higher level of trust in all levels of higher education.

Negative perception fueled by educational polarization is influencing students' decisions about whether or not they should pursue higher education—and it's also hurting colleges' ability to recruit new students. Higher education leaders have adopted value propositions that are not resonating with working-class people and communities, as ultimately demonstrated by enrollment trends. Fortunately, community colleges are well positioned to play an important role in reversing this trend. We must engage with working-class communities and build cultural, economic, and political bridges. When these communities see that we share their goals, they will be more likely to engage with our colleges. While higher education gets externally branded as a result of how it's discussed in political discourse, savvy community college leaders who understand educational polarization can find ways to brand their institutions to their community needs. To accomplish this, they'll need to step out of the 'high educational attainment bubble' and re-engage with local working class communities to respond to their values, needs, and goals. By cutting through the polarization and going back to our roots as community serving intuitions, community colleges can expand their value propositions to persuade communities that have been left behind in the college attainment gap. In doing so, we can increase trust and once again be seen as life-changing institutions for every working-class community in the state. ■

within California's community colleges have fallen short." This means if we are using a department rubric that has not been re-evaluated for racist or oppressive structures, revisit it as a department after bringing in some professional development on anti-racist pedagogy. Likewise, the statewide Academic Senate asserts: "[Faculty can] enact culturally responsive curricular redesign within disciplines, courses, and programs and with curriculum committees." At this larger level, faculty can look at how department student-learning-outcomes and texts are used to create more welcoming spaces for learning. That means, for example, making sure we have texts, images, and perspectives that represent the diversity of the student body, and that we advocate for inclusion of diversity not only in our own course but all courses regardless of modality.

The reports from the teaching trenches of faculty members who have started incorporating anti-racist pedagogy into their classes point to interesting needs to shift perspective. Math instructor Patrick Morriss at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills asserts that after adopting anti-racist grading techniques, "People tend to pass my classes with much less racial predictability of outcomes. I should note that many faculty view those results as failures. They say they can only imagine seeing results like those in their own classes by abandoning academic standards and mathematical rigor. I see two truths in that view. The first concerns imagination. Lower standards don't help anyone. Any anti-racist assessment policy must be academically rigorous. The problem is that academic culture confuses rigor with difficulty and/or with volume. It takes imagination to find a way through that confusion. The second truth concerns systemic perpetuation of racially predictable outcomes, as enacted through a gatekeeper mindset. In that realm, I strive to fail."

Foothill College English instructor Hilda Fernandez uses contract grading to make the expectations of the assignment and grading explicitly clear and found that "Overall, students expressed feeling less stressed about the work they are producing since completing all the assignments in a timely manner, and as each assignment required, would result in a 'B' grade. They could then dedicate quality time and brainstorming on areas they would like to improve or explore further—content and research, skill areas, cross-disciplinary connections—about which they were excited to learn as a class because sharing additional labor projects is a requirement. The required sharing with the class builds a sense of community amongst the class, which was an additional plus."

English instructor Sarah Lisha of De Anza College in Cupertino also found positive reviews from students after changing her grading rubric language and humanizing her rubrics and syllabi. She said, "They find the grading much more transparent, and I find them more willing to come to office hours to discuss things because they know my role is to help them improve."

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Finally, as with all changes to a course, faculty are finding what benefits the students also benefits them. Hilda Fernandez noted, "As faculty, I don't have to work extra hours creating ways students who fall behind can catch up with the class. Instead, it's up to the individual to reach out and decide what additional labor project interests them. This is great and exciting as faculty." Sarah Lisha suggested that faculty should "Give it a try! It's hard to re-do and re-examine what we've been doing, but it's beneficial and humbling to see how tiny tweaks can make all the difference for student success."

So, as we faculty members begin to acclimate to the new normal of teaching, it is imperative that we take the time to shed the systemic structures of oppression that were status quo in pre-pandemic times, and instead, heed the advice of Foothill College's Patrick Morriss for colleagues thinking about adopting anti-racist pedagogy into their classroom: "Do it. Do it now. Every delay means more students are experiencing systemic injustice. Don't wait another term." ■

Teaching Methodologies After the Pandemic: Which One is Right for You?

By David E. Balch, PhD

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, education began transitioning from traditional learning to virtual learning. The pandemic accelerated this transition, and a recent report in Quality Matters, an online journal, overwhelmingly predicted that by 2025, programs and courses mixing on-campus and online learning experiences would become the norm.

In general, faculty seemed to be appreciative that online learning platforms enabled education to continue during the pandemic, in compliance with required safety protocols. A few even enjoyed the challenge of transitioning from face-to-face to virtual. Many agreed that the transition:

- reduced commute time
- increased time with family
- increased time management skills
- allowed for better networking
- increased the awareness of online resources.

While faculty generally felt positive about a virtual classroom, some educators became concerned that the quality of education may suffer. Faculty have found that:

- students need to be self-motivated to succeed
- they miss the interaction and dynamics that a face-to-face environment provides
- non-verbal clues go unnoticed

One commonality among all teaching methods is that each is successful only to the extent to which students are able to fully grasp the lesson. With the integration of modern developments, these methods are no longer cut and dried.

DELIVERY METHODS

Traditional or Face-to-Face

The face-to-face modality creates a more dynamic classroom environment allowing active debates and better participation. The learning is more direct and helps students develop vital interpersonal skills. A traditional classroom allows for real-time sharing and discourse with the teacher and other students. Both student and instructor have the ability to see, hear, and pick up on physical cues and body language in real time. This can result in getting their questions answered immediately.

Online or Virtual

Online learning is made possible through technological advancements, including Zoom. With the availability of personal computers and smartphones, online instruction is an alternative to traditional learning. The only limitations are access to a computer or smartphone, an internet connection, and willingness to learn.

Hybrid or Blended

A hybrid class incorporates elements of both online and in-person learning. Some models offer in-person courses with online components. Others have a mix of students who attend in person or through Zoom or other online platforms. A hybrid class adapts better to student learning styles than an exclusively online or in-person class by integrating technology with instructor-led classroom activities.

HyFlex (Hybrid-Flexible)

Like the hybrid model, the HyFlex class incorporates elements of face-to-face and virtual instruction. Typically, students choose whether to attend in a synchronous setting in which they are face-to-face and may receive immediate feedback, or to attend in an asynchronous setting, in which they will learn at their own pace through online software. Students are typically given the ability to switch back and forth throughout the semester.

Student Preferences

According to a recent student technology report published by Educause, 820 undergraduate students showed an increased preference for courses that are mostly or completely online. The preference increased 220%, from 9% in 2020 to 29% in 2022. While a number of students still prefer the face-to-face learning environment, that share has dropped from 65% in 2020 to 41% this year.

Some respondents indicated that they prefer face-to-face instruction for the social connections, while others prefer virtual learning because it accommodates personal needs, such as disability accommodation, family responsibilities, or work schedules.

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According to a recent student technology report published by Educause, 820 undergraduate students showed an increased preference for courses that are mostly or completely online.

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dents. Across the Contra Costa Community College District, the more than 40,000 fake applicants for 2020 financial aid greatly exceeded the 12,000 that applied the year before.

Another LMC administrator indicated that "the goal for future sections will be to drop no-shows early enough so that the perpetrator cannot get financial aid and the seats in the classes are left open for real students who want to learn and truly need the financial aid resources." The college's Office of Instruction called on faculty to peruse the district's guidelines on online attendance. Financial aid representatives also asserted in the Experience article that the college's faculty, staff, and administration must take responsibility for maintaining the integrity of curricula and pedagogy. Moreover, the college administration declared its intention to join the Chancellor's Office and the Office of the Inspector General in investigating all cases of financial aid fraud. This fraud, noted a financial aid advisor, "is considered a crime, and anyone who provides false information to receive grants or loans could face up to one year in prison and/or a maximum fine of $10,000."

A single bot was usually not relegated to only one college. The same bot could appear in rosters within the entire California Community College system.

Shelter-in-place decrees during the COVID-19 pandemic spurred the rise of online courses via Zoom. This shift in turn exacerbated and even increased the number of both bots and fake students, more for financial aid purposes than for high marks in a given section. COVID-19 relief funds for students, federal, and state financial assistance, as well as supplementary aid, were all affected by bots and fake students. Since the return from shelter-in-place, Kim Rich observed bots that "adapted to what we have been uncovering, and so now they are able to do basic tasks. They can take quizzes. They can reply to discussions. They can do basic work."

Hybrid courses in certain districts required students to attend in-person class sessions prior to a district census, but not always. Rich, for instance, provided "100 percent confirmation that they [bots] have been on rosters for hybrid classes." At Pierce College in Woodland Hills, bots resulted in courses with wait lists. The college administration offered additional sections, but as soon as those sections became available for enrollment in the class schedule, bots would again fill the rosters. Based on her current research, Rich concluded that "it is not unreasonable to believe upwards of 30 percent of enrolled students are fake students."

A single bot was usually not relegated to only one college. The same bot could appear in rosters within the entire California Community College system. At Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, for example, multiple bots registered under the same IP and email addresses, but rarely with the same—or any—phone numbers. Rich communicated with hundreds of community college faculty across the golden state who had been affected by these bots. Conversely, she also spoke with hundreds of community college faculty who were, and are not aware of the scope of the bots crisis.

Ongoing and effective communication between online instructors and their students unexpectedly became a strategy to circumvent, and even undermine, bots. Rich attested that instructors "who were doing their due diligence, and having that regular effective contact with their students, and who were doing census properly, and who were paying attention, would often articulate that, "hey, the student is not working, or the student is not participating. I'm going to drop that person.' "

A major obstacle to that strategy was, and is, declining community college enrollment in California. Full-time faculty members expressed anxieties over class cancellations during as well as after the pandemic. For part-time faculty, these anxieties became manifest in reduced course loads and a dearth of offered class assignments. Rich supported both full-time and part-time faculty in not assuming any type of responsibility for authenticating students. On the other hand, full-time and part-time "faculty have a legitimate expectation that students enrolled in their courses are actual students and therefore expect information supplied by the college and district to be factual, ensuring faculty have the correct information to complete their duties and due diligence."

The experience of one California community college part-time faculty member challenged the dichotomy between fake students and fake-student-bots (or bots). This part-time instructor agreed to interview with *FACCCTS* under the condition of anonymity. Both during the pandemic and in fall 2022, administrators at one of this part-timer's community college assignments encouraged, but neither mandated nor required, instructors to drop suspected course bots before the semester census survey for enrollment. The part-time instructor adhered to the administrative recommendation, losing a third of registered students. The course was on the precipice of cancellation—the part-timer declined to reveal whether the course was cancelled or not. But at a meeting of full-time and part-time faculty, many of the former balked at the administration's bot warning and declined to drop suspected student bots.

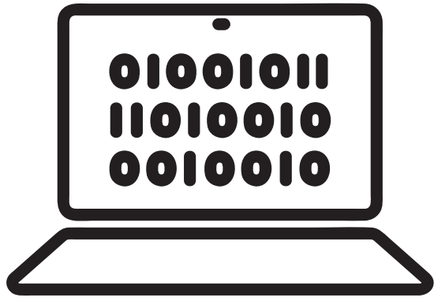
In summer 2021, as faculty and students continued to obtain COVID-19 vaccinations, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office issued statewide reports on bots. From June to August, the Chancellor's Office surveyed online courses and determined that approximately 20% were either bots or fake students tied to financial aid fraud. The California Student Aid Commission informed the *Los Angeles Times* that more than 65,000 fake students or fake-student-bots applied for financial aid that summer. Most of the fake students claimed to be over age 30 and to earn less than $40,000 annually, and sought a two-year associate degree. They frequently signed up for courses that did not contribute to the same major or general education requirements. According to representatives from six community colleges in California, hundreds of thousands of dollars in financial aid had been distributed to bots during that summer alone.

The Chancellor's Office and Student Aid Commission still hesitated in describing the situation as fraud, instead choosing the more flexible term, "fraud investigation." State officials subsequently requisitioned reports from almost every community college in California. These reports would feature statistics for alleged and confirmed bots or fake students, incidents directly connected to financial aid fraud, and the estimated misdistribution in financial aid funds. Officials also announced the implementation of new anti-bot programs and software. The reports have yet to be released publicly due to the ongoing fraud investigation taking place at the state level.

In November 2022, the California Community Colleges Technology Center Enabling Services team hosted a one-hour online session on both the fraud investigation and "tools that are available from the Tech Center to help our colleges tackle the problem." Panelists included Monica Zalaket,

Robots, Fakers, and Ghosts | *Continued from page 21*

the Enabling Services college relationship manager, who discussed the newly introduced monthly fraud collection survey, and Jane Linder, the Student Success Suite product manager, who addressed the "spam filter utility and its significance in reducing fraudulent applications." This utility is one of many anti-bot filters, software applications, and programs that the state Technology Center planned on rolling out in 2022 and after.



In her *FACCCTS* interview, Kim Rich emphasized the sheer magnitude of online bots in monetary terms. If "a given student received $3,000 in financial aid," and 40,000 bots have infiltrated a given district, that's $120 million in financial aid misdistribution for an academic year. "It doesn't take a genius," Rich mused, "to see how quickly that adds up, especially if you consider the 73 districts and 116 community colleges that comprise the state system. And what about nationwide? They're making bucket loads of money—billions, billions, and billions." ■

Teaching Methodologies After the Pandemic | *Continued from page 19*

WHICH SYSTEM?

In a report by Barnes & Noble Education titled, "Noble Education's Annual College 2030 Report," nearly 2,600 students, faculty, and administrators at colleges and universities nationwide were surveyed to gain a better understanding of how they've adapted and developed solutions to conquer higher education after the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the respondents, 49% of students said they prefer a hybrid class format. In contrast, only 35% of faculty members favor a hybrid format, and 54% prefer fully in-person instruction. Only 18% of students and 11% of faculty favor fully remote classes.

In summary, a majority of older students and faculty members apparently appreciate the convenience of online learning but still struggle with digital literacy and the lack of student "presence." Younger students and faculty find themselves familiar with technology due to the ever-evolving presence of it in their lives. Technology means flexibility; from cloud-based platforms to videoconferencing, they've embraced the freedom of remote learning. Both younger and older faculty members and students appear to prefer the hybrid model incorporating face-to-face and virtual learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic that forced educational institutions to make decisions about face-to-face, hybrid, and virtual instruction may ultimately answer the question, "Which style is best for my class?" This author predicts the answer will be, "It depends." ■

Faculty Association of California Community Colleges

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