

A Community Anchor: A Review of Career Education Policy Barriers and Solutions

Part three in the series:

A Community Anchor: Redesigning Career Education to Support Regional Economic Development

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About This Series

A Community Anchor: Redesigning Career Education to Support Regional Economic Development

The [California Community Colleges \(CCC\)](#) provides education and training to diverse student populations for a variety of purposes, including to prepare them for careers in today's workforce. This series of briefs revisits findings from a group of community colleges' efforts to redesign career education (CE) programs to better prepare students for shifting regional workforce needs. Given the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on regional economies today, what opportunities might be leveraged from the community colleges' earlier efforts to facilitate workforce development? To address this question, this series highlights the perspectives of CCC students, faculty, staff, and administrators, based on several evaluation and research projects by the [Education Insights Center \(EdInsights\)](#) focusing on CE programs in the CCC from 2012 to 2017. The series includes three briefs that cover:

- [student perspectives about career education programs](#),
- [college personnel perspectives about program development](#), and
- [opportunities to facilitate career education and workforce development](#).

This final brief in the series focuses on policy options that can foster more innovation and address challenges in CE program development. It is based on our earlier research for a series of reports called *Career Opportunities*, aimed at identifying ways that state and system policy can best support the CE mission of the CCC. **We revisit the [primary recommendations](#) from that series about barriers to more effective CE programs,¹ outline related actions the system has taken to address those barriers and improve CE in recent years, and suggest opportunities for further changes to policy to promote the success of CE students.** At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic crisis are having particularly devastating effects on California's low-income populations and people of color, ensuring that state and system policies support community colleges to provide robust and relevant CE programs to the state's displaced workers may be critical to the state's economic recovery.

EdInsights was an external evaluator for two consortia of California community colleges that received grants from the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program, funded by the U.S. Department of Labor.² The findings in this series are based on these evaluations, as well as research conducted by EdInsights on the CE mission of the CCC, including focus groups and surveys with over 1,000 CCC students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The views expressed in this brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders of the evaluation and research projects.

Key Takeaways

Recent Policy Reforms Have Tried to Address Barriers to Effective CE Programs

Findings and Policy Recommendations	Recent State and System Reforms That Address These Findings and Recommendations
<p><i>Finding:</i> The CE mission is marginalized from the academic core of the institution, with funding streams, organizational structures, and institutional cultures that combine to diminish the stature of CE in ways that are out of sync with the needs of today's students and economy.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> Better integrate the CE mission into the academic core of the colleges.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Strong Workforce Program (SWP) provides stable annual funds for all colleges that supplements apportionment funding for CE instruction, replacing some competitive grant programs. • The implementation of the Guided Pathways (GP) framework across the CCC has highlighted the innovative work done in CE programs, which have already adopted some main components of GP including structured pathways through programs, support services tied to those pathways, and clear connections of pathways to careers. • The K12 Strong Workforce Program (K12 SWP) provides competitive funding to local education agencies (LEAs) to support development of CE courses and pathways to higher education, to clarify students' options for career training of value in today's economy.
<p><i>Finding:</i> There is an insufficient focus on programs and their outcomes, with the colleges conducting their planning primarily around courses, adjusting class schedules up or down based on resources and available faculty rather than the needs of regional economies.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> Focus on programs and outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The CCC's <i>Vision for Success</i> includes commitments to focus on students' end goals and to take ownership of the system's goals and performance, commitments that are reflected across reform efforts. • A portion of SWP funding is allocated based on college performance in meeting workforce needs. • GP encourages a focus on programs and outcomes, by asking colleges to clarify and streamline pathways for students, to support students in getting and staying on a pathway, and to report student progress and outcomes by program. • The Student-Centered Funding Formula includes a Student Success Incentive Allocation. • CCC accountability metrics and data dashboards increasingly focus on student progress and outcomes, and include measures by program. • Legislatively mandated reforms of assessment and placement policies (AB 705) require colleges to maximize the probability that students complete college math and English within the first year, reducing or eliminating the developmental courses that have been a major barrier to completion.

Findings and Policy Recommendations	Recent State and System Reforms That Address These Findings and Recommendations
<p><i>Finding:</i> Individual colleges are expected to do too much in isolation, creating excessive workload and variability in policy and practice that do not benefit students.</p> <p><i>Recommendation:</i> Reduce variation and excess burden across colleges by scaling programs, sharing resources, and collaborating for improved outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The <i>Vision for Success</i> includes a core commitment to leading the work of partnering across the state’s education and workforce development systems. • The SWP requires neighboring colleges to form a regional consortium to promote collaboration, funds the consortium, and requires it to develop a 4-year plan for addressing regional needs. • Centers of Excellence provide colleges/regional consortia with labor market information to support CE planning. • The Economic and Workforce Development Program funds industry area experts to connect community colleges with regional industry and labor leaders to support alignment of CE programs to workforce needs. • The K12 SWP encourages collaboration across LEAs and requires collaboration between schools and community colleges to address regional needs.

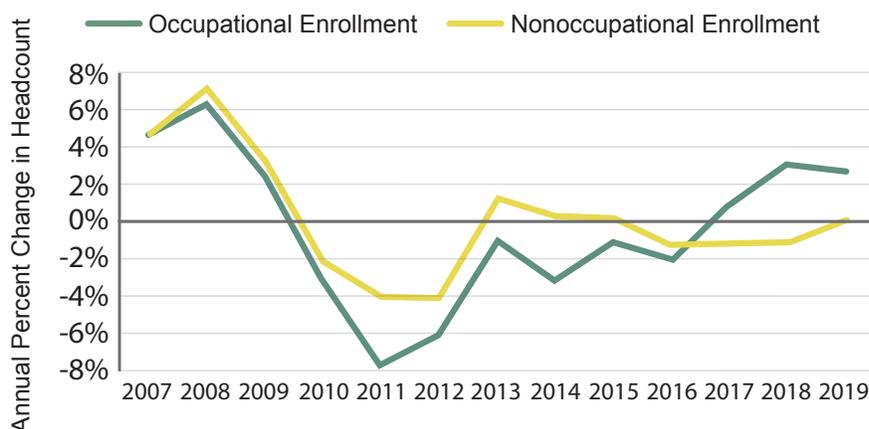
Impact of Recent Reforms Not Yet Clear, But Some Early Promising Signs

The reforms described in the table above have either been effectuated in the last few years (e.g., SWP, AB 705) or implementation is underway (e.g., GP), so it is too early to assess their impact in any conclusive way. However, there are some early promising signs for some reforms. For example, many community colleges have increased the number and proportion of their English and math courses that are transfer level as a result of AB 705, and growing numbers of students are completing these transfer-level courses in their first year of enrollment.³

While the overall effects of the various reforms embedded in the SWP are not clear, there is some promising early evidence related to the impact of its revised funding mechanism. CE courses are more costly for colleges to offer than other courses, as they are often heavily dependent on expensive equipment, and they require more frequent curricular change as well as structured engagement with employer partners to ensure they remain relevant to workforce needs. In addition, many have class size restrictions due to access to equipment or specialized accreditation requirements. This higher cost has left CE courses and programs more vulnerable when budgets get tight, as demonstrated during the Great Recession. After reaching a peak in 2008, the total number of course sections offered across the CCC dropped by nearly 17 percent by 2012, as colleges responded to state budget cuts.⁴ Courses defined as “occupational”—those included in course sequences making up CE programs—were cut more substantially, dropping by more than 20 percent compared to a decline of 14 percent for “nonoccupational” courses.⁵

Since the SWP was implemented in 2016, however, the number of occupational course sections offered has increased by three percent compared to a slight decline (by 1%) in nonoccupational course offerings. This suggests that the additional funding and other policy changes may be having the intended effect of helping colleges to maintain and even grow their CE programs. The impact on student enrollment is likewise promising, displayed in the figure below depicting the annual percent change in the number of students enrolled in occupational and nonoccupational courses. Enrollment in occupational courses has grown by an average of two percent per year since the SWP was passed in 2016, while it has remained fairly flat in nonoccupational courses.

Since passage of the Strong Workforce Program in 2016, student enrollment in occupational courses in the CCC has grown faster than enrollment in nonoccupational courses.



Additional Opportunities for Policy Reform to Support CE

Many of the policy changes recommended in our *Career Opportunities* series and other research on CE⁶ have been made through the SWP and other reforms, but opportunities remain. Some examples include:

- Removing the requirement that a program belong to a single college. Allowing programs to be developed and owned by a district or a consortium of colleges could maximize student access to programs of breadth and quality, further incentivize collaboration across colleges, and limit the incidence of individual colleges stretching too thin to offer programs for which they lack critical mass of faculty and facilities.
- Developing statewide standards and frameworks for career programs for optional, and incentivized, college use. While some variation in similar programs across colleges is reasonable, excessive variation can make it difficult for students and employers to understand the value of credentials. Reducing the variability, while ensuring programs are stackable and closely aligned with labor market needs, could help both students and employers understand expected learning outcomes and the value of particular certificates and degrees, and could facilitate students' progress as they move from one college or region to another.
- Reviewing the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office's (CCCCO) approval of associate degrees to help colleges streamline their offerings. Many colleges offer both an Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) and a non-ADT associate of arts (AA) or associate of science (AS) degree in the same discipline, reducing efficiency in the curriculum and causing unnecessary confusion for students.⁷ Recasting the non-transfer AA/AS degrees to make them more explicitly aimed at preparation for employment could facilitate students' choices and help employers understand the value of CCC credentials.
- Evaluating the role played by regional consortia to ensure the state is providing sufficient incentives—financial and otherwise—for colleges to work together to share programs, align curriculum, consolidate industry and employer engagement activities, and share administrative duties for work-based learning. Effective collaboration could expand and deepen partnerships with industry across California's diverse regions.

Implications

Being in another major recession and facing significant budget cuts to California higher education are daunting, particularly given the potential scale of the problem and concerns about how to maintain recent advancement toward meaningful reforms to support student progress and outcomes. Assessing current policies and practices with an eye toward better serving our students, communities, and regional economies will be critically important. The learnings from CE students, faculty, staff, and administrators shared in this series can help inform discussions of institutional, system, and state policy changes to support effective CE in the community colleges, and thereby contribute to economic recovery in California.

Reflection Questions

If you work at the CCCCO and wish to start conversations about how to better support colleges in offering CE programs that best support student success, we offer the following reflection questions:

- What can we do to understand the impact of the SWP and other reforms aimed at improving career education across the system?
- Are there opportunities tied to the SWP's 4-year cycle for reviewing and updating regional plans (e.g., analysis of plans to identify common challenges)?
- How can we address the common challenges colleges face in developing effective CE programs that meet the needs and interests of students and regional economies? What are additional opportunities for systemwide policy changes or other actions to:
 - Support college leaders with change management strategies?
 - Assist colleges and regional consortia with setting reasonable goals?
 - Meet the needs of college personnel for professional learning?
 - Help colleges identify responses to capacity constraints?
 - Streamline program review/approval/discontinuation processes or remove other bureaucratic barriers?
 - Support colleges in engaging effectively with industry and employer partners?

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

- ¹ The final report in the *Career Opportunities* series presented a detailed menu of policy change options that resulted from our systematic review of potential barriers to greater student success and analysis of the statutes and regulations that we linked to those potential barriers. The findings presented here represent the broad themes, while the recommendations are the broad categories within which we situated specific policy options. The details can be found in [Part IV](#) of the original series of reports.
- ² U.S. Department of Labor (n.d.). *Trade adjustment assistance community college and career training*. U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/tradeact/community-colleges>
- ³ Hern, K. (2019). *Getting there: Are California community colleges maximizing student completion of transfer-level math and English?* Los Angeles, CA: Campaign for College Opportunity; RP Group (2019). *Access, enrollment, and success in transfer-level English and math in the California community college system*. San Rafael, CA: Author.
- ⁴ Author calculations based on data from the CCCC's Data Mart, originally included in a post for the *Insights blog*.
- ⁵ Based on the CCC's Standard Accountability Model code classification, using data gathered from the CCC's Data Mart. The figures for occupational course sections include courses that are defined as "clearly" and "advanced" occupational. Courses that are "possibly" occupational and those exclusively enrolling students in apprenticeship programs are excluded, although including them does not change the story.
- ⁶ See also Shulock, N., Moore, C., & Offenstien, J. (2011). *The road less traveled: Realizing the potential of career technical education in the California community colleges*. Sacramento, CA: Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy; Shulock, N., Lewis, J., & Tan, C. (2013). *Workforce investments: State strategies to preserve higher-cost career education programs in community and technical colleges*. Sacramento, CA: Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy.
- ⁷ Lewis, J., Bracco, K.R., Moore, C., Nodine, T., & Venezia, A. (2016). *Trial and error: California students make the best of an improving yet complex transfer process*. Sacramento, CA: Education Insights Center.



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