

# Regaining Ground

## Enrollment Trends in the Los Angeles Community College District in the Wake of COVID-19

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Community colleges (CCs) play a vital role in the United States' higher education landscape, as gateways to four-year universities as well as offering career-focused degree and certificate programs tailored to specific vocational fields. A decline in community college enrollments represents diminished educational and economic prospects for a significant segment of the population. In California, about half of high school graduates in 2021 enrolled in college within a year of graduating and two thirds of these enrolled in a CC (California Department of Education, 2022). The proximity of these institutions, their open access policies, and significantly lower tuition costs compared to public four-year universities make them appealing choices. The tuition at California CCs is less than one sixth of the average cost at a public four-year institution (\$1,510 vs. \$9,860; Hanson, 2023). CCs play a crucial role in facilitating pathways to bachelor's degrees. Substantial proportions of new enrollees at the University of California (29%) and California State University (42%) systems begin their academic journeys at CCs, often to minimize the overall cost of their undergraduate education (Ugo, 2023). Even for students without transfer intentions, completing a credential at a CC is associated with a median 18% increase in annual earnings, underscoring the economic benefits of sub-baccalaureate credentials (CCCCO, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic, however, disrupted traditional enrollment patterns, particularly among students facing financial constraints and family responsibilities.

A clear understanding of these losses is critical for driving institutional responses and allocation of scarce resources to recover enrollments in equitable ways. In this brief, we examine changes in enrollments at the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) between Fall 2017 and



Summer 2023 to document the extent of pandemic-era enrollment declines overall and across student populations within one of the largest and most diverse CC systems in the country.

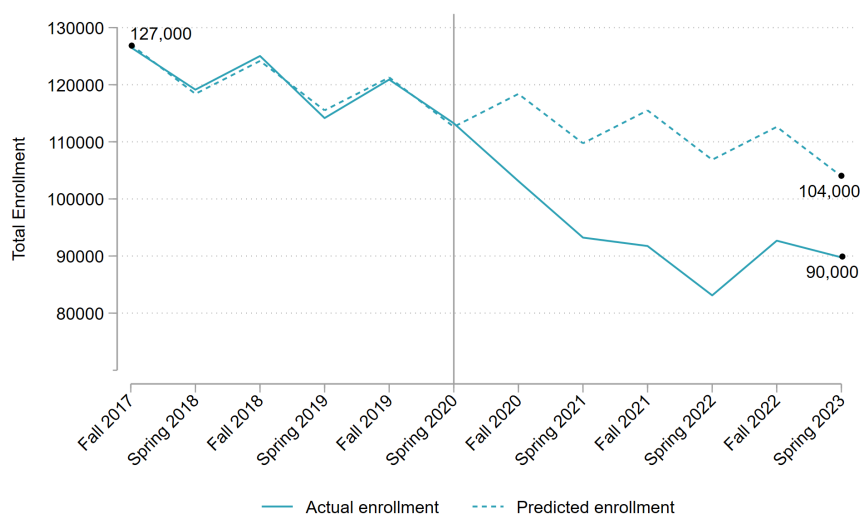
## Enrollments at LACCD, 2017-2023

LACCD is one of the largest community college districts in the country. The district enrolled about 100,000 students as of Fall 2023. LACCD serves a vast and racially diverse metropolitan area through nine college campuses. All the campuses are designated as Hispanic Serving Institutions, two are also Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions and one is also a Predominantly Black Institution. In Fall 2023, the student body consisted of Latino/a/x (62%), White (15%), Black (9%), Asian (6%), Filipino (3%), multiethnic (3%), and other (2%) students. Like many other CCs in the country, LACCD serves many high-needs and underserved student populations. A little more than half the students qualify for the California Promise Grants (earlier known as Board of Governor's fee waiver), a quarter receive Pell Grants, and 46% of enrolled students identify as first generation.

### Overall Enrollment

The National Student Clearinghouse (2024) data shows that CCs nationwide experienced large year-on-year enrollment drops in Fall 2020 (-8.7%) and Fall 2021 (-6.9%) and modest recovery signs emerged in Fall 2022 (+0.3%) and Fall 2023 (+2.6%). The year-on-year enrollment losses at LACCD were comparatively larger, shrinking by 15% and 11% in Fall 2020 and 2021. Signs of recovery first appeared in Fall 2022 (+1%) with larger gains appearing in Fall 2023 (+8%).<sup>1</sup> Between Fall 2017 and Spring 2023, LACCD enrollment reduced by 27%, from 127,000 to 90,000 students (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Pandemic Exacerbated Preexisting Trends of Enrollment Declines, but the Losses Stabilized by Fall 2022**



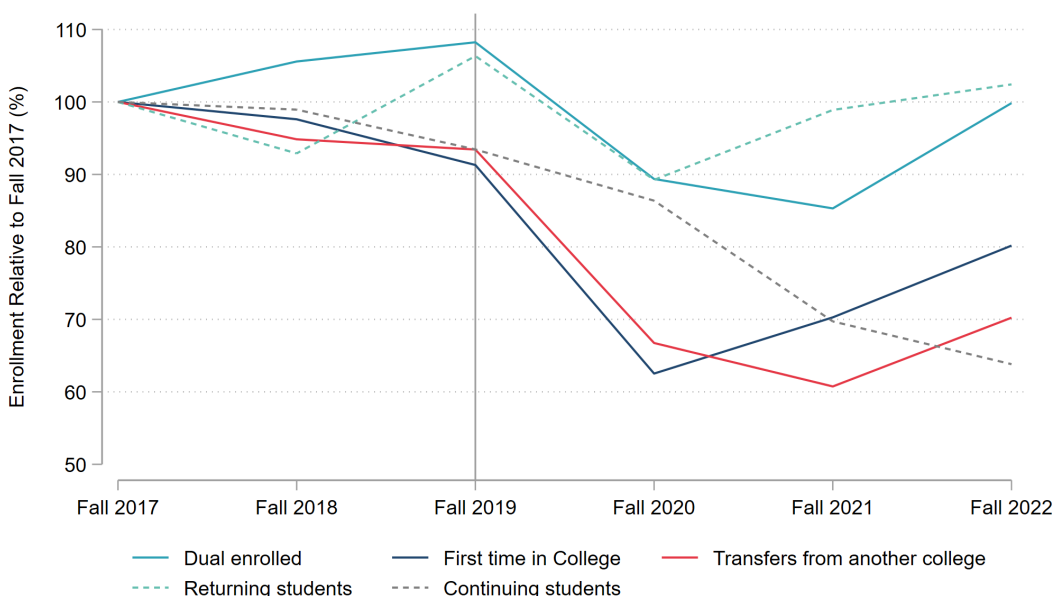
Note: Limited to credit-taking students. Time trend (regression coefficients) estimated using data from Fall 2017 to Fall 2019 to predict enrollments Spring 2020 onwards. The dashed line represents expected enrollment levels in the absence of the pandemic.

It is important to note that enrollments at LACCD, and in CCs across the nation, were declining for at least five years prior to COVID-19 and the pandemic exacerbated these losses. We estimate expected enrollment through 2023 using pre-COVID-19 enrollment trends to descriptively examine how post-pandemic enrollments deviate from pre-pandemic projected enrollments (see the dashed line in Figure 1). These projections indicated there would have been moderate declines in LACCD regardless, but these losses were exacerbated by the pandemic. Our estimates of counterfactual trends suggest that LACCD may have lost an additional 14,000 students due to the pandemic as of Spring 2023. We disaggregate the enrollment trends to understand whether the losses varied across student characteristics.

## Changes by Enrollment Type

We begin by examining changes in enrollment across student type (dually enrolled, first time in college (FTIC), continuing, returning, and transfer students)<sup>2</sup>. This disaggregation can illuminate the extent to which enrollment losses have been unevenly felt and focus attention on groups that may need additional support or encouragement to enroll and persist. Figure 2 illustrates how enrollment in each group has changed relative to Fall 2017; changes above 100% indicate this population has grown in the district while changes below 100% represent enrollment losses.

**Figure 2: Cumulative Enrollment Declines Were Greatest and Most Sustained Among Continuing Students**



Note: Enrollments in Fall 2017 were about 127,000. Each subgroup's enrollment in 2017 used as a base to calculate percentage change. Fall 2017 enrollments comprised of dual enrolled(11%), first-time in college(16%), transfer(8%), returning(6%), and continuing(59%) students.

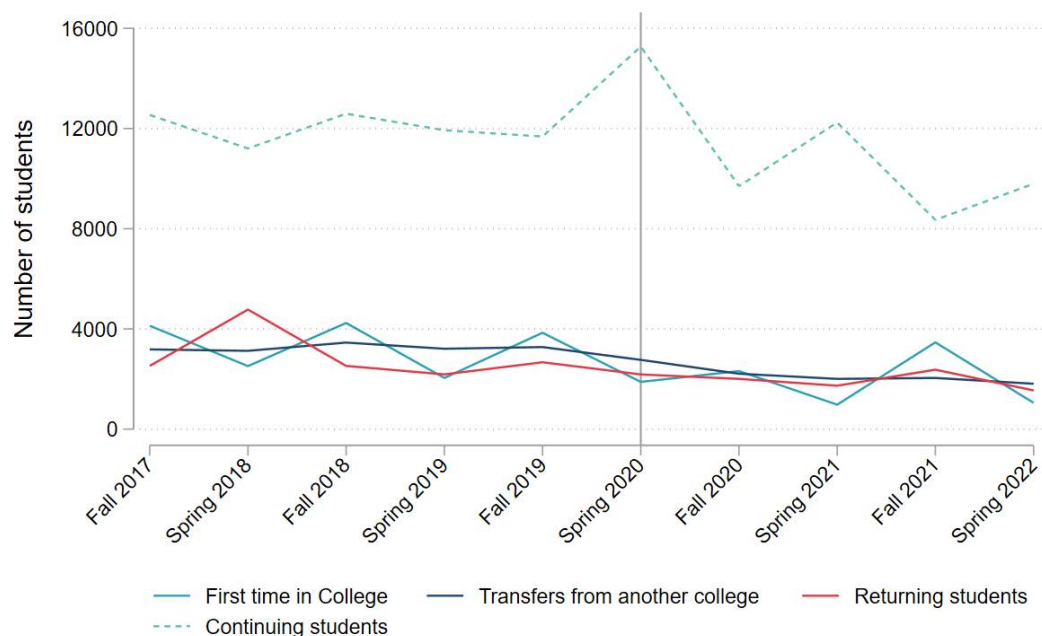
As shown in Figure 2, we see differences in enrollment losses by type of student. There were enrollment declines among all student groups, accelerating pre-COVID-19 declines among continuing and FTIC students, and sharply reversing prior gains among dual enrollees, returning students, and transferring students.

Losses among dually enrolled and returning students were small and rebounded to pre-pandemic levels relatively quickly (returning students by Fall 2021 and dually enrolled students by Fall 2022). In comparison, the number of FTIC students and transfers shrank to 60% of pre-pandemic levels at the height of the pandemic and remained depressed through recent terms (to 80% and 70% of pre-pandemic levels, respectively, in Fall 2022).

The declines in continuing students within LACCD are particularly notable, as this population continues to shrink relative to Fall 2017 enrollments. As of Fall 2022, LACCD enrolled 27,000 fewer continuing students relative to Fall 2017 (a 37% decrease). Continuing students is a dynamic label and the number of students in this category can fall as a result of (1) students exiting the district after earning awards or stopping out, or (2) fewer first-time, transferring, and returning students rolling over into the continuing student pool.

As shown in Figure 3, stopouts<sup>3</sup> among continuing students did increase by 2500 students in Fall 2020, the first term after the pandemic began. However, this one-time increase in stopouts does not fully explain the loss in continuing students. As we'll show in a subsequent brief, we also do not see large increases in the number of students exiting after completing a credential.

**Figure 3: Stopouts by Continuous Students Increase in the First Term After COVID-19**

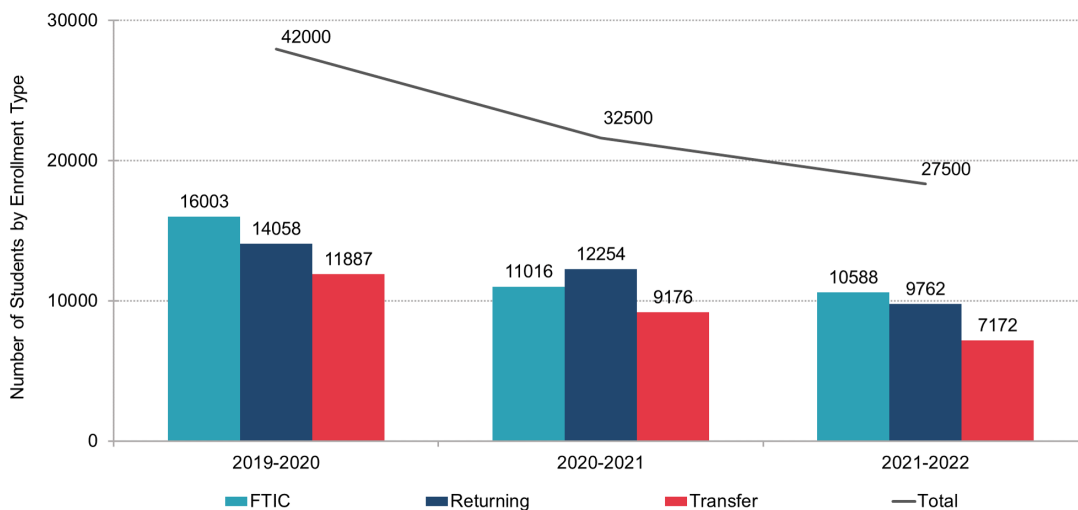


Note: Stopouts are students who did not enroll for four the next four consecutive terms and did not earn a credential. Stopout recorded for the last term of enrollment on record, enrollment type taken from last term of enrollment on record.

New enrollees in LACCD are usually FTIC, returning, or transfer students. They are categorized as continuous students in their second term or year of enrollment. When the number of FTIC, returning, and transfer students decreases, there will mechanically be a subsequent decrease in the number of continuing students. We explore this possibility by analyzing three successive cohorts of students when they are first identified as continuing.

We identify the enrollment type for each student in the year before they became a continuing student (FTIC, returning, or transfer). When we do this (presented in Figure 4), we find that the size of incoming cohorts of continuing students has steadily reduced since 2019; in Fall 2020 (2021) there were 9,500 (5,000) fewer incoming continuing students compared to the prior year. The number of FTIC students declined sharply by 32% in 2020–21 but stabilized by 2021–22. However, transfer and returning students have reduced steadily each year, indicating that fewer students are choosing to transfer institutions or reenroll in college since the pandemic.

**Figure 4: Fewer Additional Students Are Identified as Continuing Each Year as the Pandemic Progresses**



Note: Includes all students first identified as continuing students in that year. The graph shows the last recorded enrollment status for the student in the preceding year of enrollment

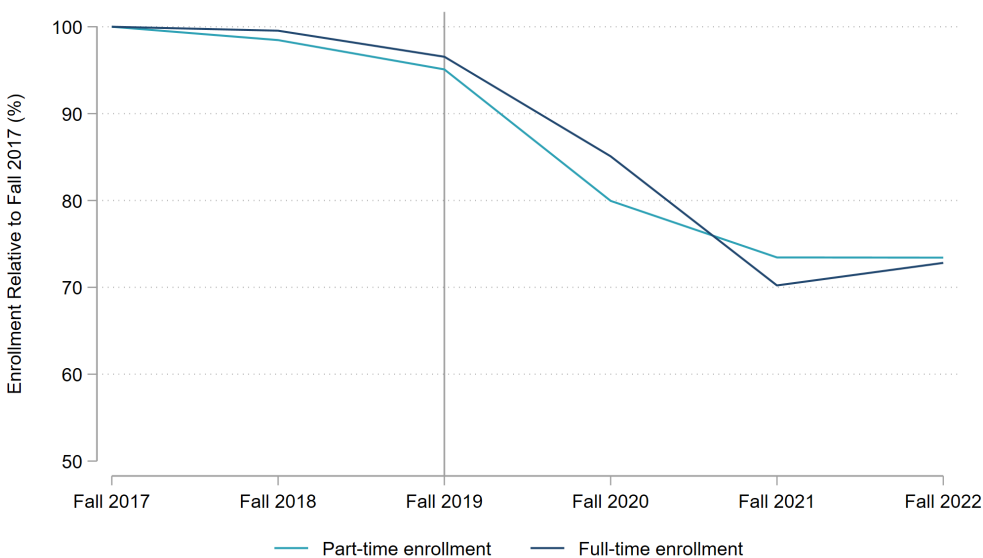
The increase in stopouts among continuing students in Spring 2020 combined with the cumulative loss of FTIC, returning, and transfer students entering and persisting drives the overall decline in the number of continuing students at LACCD. While the falling number of continuing students is troubling and warrants continued scrutiny, as enrollments among other student types recover, the number of continuing students should increase with a lag of one to two years as we do not see persistent increases in stopout among FTIC, returning, or transfer students. As these groups continue to rebound, they will gradually re-fill the pipeline for continuing student enrollment in the district.

## Changes by Enrollment Intensity

In addition to understanding how enrollment losses vary across student type, we are also interested in understanding the extent to which full- and part-time enrollment reacted similarly or differently following the onset of the pandemic. As institutional funding in California is largely tied to full-time equivalent enrollment, changes not just in the number of students but their intensity of enrollment could have significant fiscal implications for institutions (Shaw et al., 2023). Prior research also suggests that students enrolled full-time are more likely to complete a credential (Attewell et al., 2012). Nationally, full-time enrollment at public 2-year colleges decreased more sharply than part-time enrollment: about 30% vs. 23% between Fall 2017 and Fall 2022 and about 21% vs. 13% between Fall 2019 and Fall 2022 immediately following the pandemic (National Student Clearinghouse, 2023).

For these reasons it is important to understand whether enrollment intensities within LACCD shifted following the onset of the pandemic. Figure 5 presents full- and part-time enrollment in LACCD by term relative to Fall 2017. These percentages can be interpreted as the change in enrollment among that population in the specified term: for example, part-time enrollment in Fall 2020 was 80% that of part-time enrollment in Fall 2017, a 20-percentage-point decline.

**Figure 5: Similar Enrollment Declines Seen Among Full-Time and Part-Time Enrollees**



Note: Enrollments in Fall 2017 were about 127,000. Each subgroup's enrollment in 2017 used as a base to calculate percentage change. In Fall 2017, about 30% students were full-time (attempting 12 or more credits).

As shown in Figure 5, part-time enrollment initially decreased more steeply than full-time enrollment following the start of the pandemic. Part-time enrollment began to even out by Fall 2021; full-time enrollment began to rebound the following term. While the total share of students enrolled full- and part-time in LACCD remains similar today as pre-pandemic (just at lower levels), the pandemic likely shifted individual students' decision-making about

how to enroll, as students may have lost employment, taken on caregiving responsibilities, or increased their employment intensity (Belfield & Brock, 2020; Chin et al., 2022; Fishman & Cheche, 2023). We explore the relationship between labor market conditions and community college enrollment in our brief “Labor Market Opportunities and Declining Community College Enrollment in the Pandemic Era: The Picture in Los Angeles County.” A future brief examining a student survey about their community college enrollment decision-making will further probe the decisions leading to these observed enrollment behaviors.

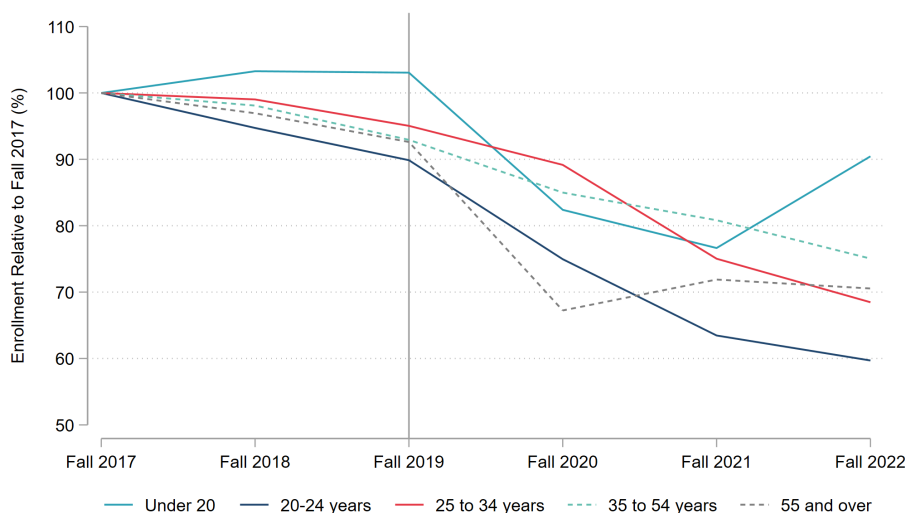
## Trends Across Student Populations

In this section, we further disaggregate changes in enrollment declines across student populations. These analyses help illustrate the ways the changing context in which students decided whether to enroll in LACCD and the factors shaping their ability to remain enrolled varied across student populations. Wherever possible, we also discuss intersectional variations in enrollment patterns.

### Age

Nationally, initial enrollment losses were concentrated among students above 18 years of age. While other groups began recovering in 2022, the number of 25–29-year-olds enrolling in CCs continued declining (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2024). As shown in Figure 6, we similarly see losses across all age groups in LACCD in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic. Figure 6 presents the relative enrollment of students by age range compared to Fall 2017. Percentages less than 100 indicate that the number of students in that age range has decreased since Fall 2017.

**Figure 6: Enrollments Among Students Between Ages of 20 and 54**



Note: Enrollments in Fall 2017 were about 127,000. Each subgroup's enrollment in 2017 used as a base to calculate percentage change. Fall 2017 enrollments comprised of students under 20 years(30%), 20-24 years(31%), 25 to 34 years(23%), 35 to 54 years(12%) and 55 and over(3%).

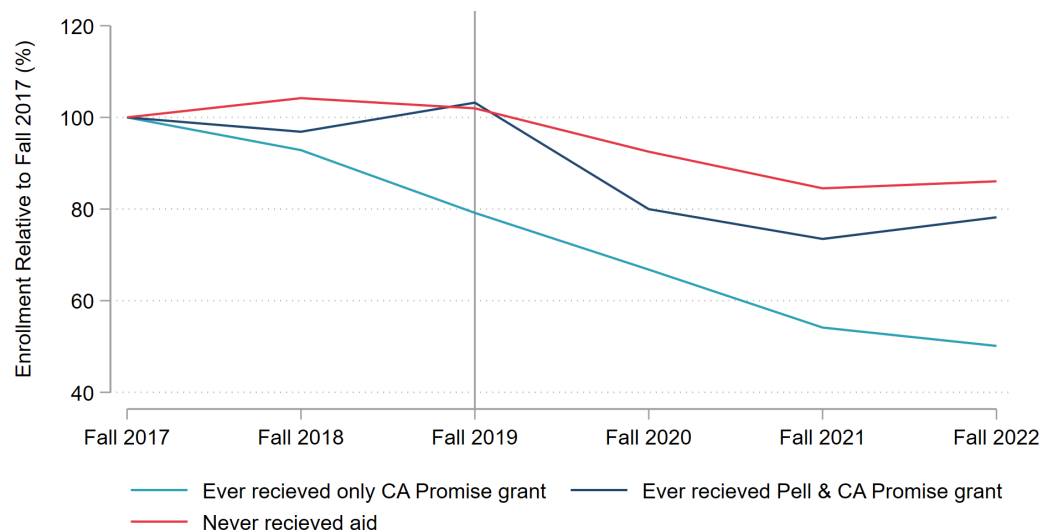
Enrollment recovery has been uneven across age groups since Fall 2020. Enrollments were first to increase among students above 55 (Fall 2020), followed by students under 20 (Fall 2021). While enrollment declines continue for all students between 20 and 54, the rate of decline has slowed for 20–34-year-old students. There has been no appreciable change in the rate of decline of enrollments among 35–54-year-old students.

The rapid recovery of enrollments among students under 20 in recent terms may be due in part to investments in dual enrollment throughout California (Friedmann et al., 2024) and specifically in Los Angeles through a collaboration between LACCD and the Los Angeles Unified School District (Hidalgo, 2024). If LACCD follows national trends (National Student Clearinghouse, 2024), we would also expect to see increases in enrollment among students aged 20–24 years and older than 30 years in Fall 2023.

## Financial Aid Receipt

Financial instability and affordability play a large role in students' decisions to enroll and their ability to stay enrolled in college (CCCSE, 2021; Mukherjee et al., 2017). We find differences in enrollment losses in LACCD based on students' access to financial aid. In Figure 7, we compare enrollments across three groups of students: (1) those who received both the federal Pell Grant and California's Promise Grant (Board of Governors' fee waiver), (2) those who only received the CA Promise Grant, and (3) those who never received any financial aid. The y-axis on Figure 7 shows enrollment in a given term as a percentage of enrollments in Fall 2017; percentages above 100 represent increases in the student count while percentages below 100 represent enrollment decreases.

**Figure 7: Students Only Receiving the California Promise Grant Had Large and Sustained Enrollment Losses**



Note: Enrollments in Fall 2017 were about 127,000. Each subgroup's enrollment in 2017 used as a base to calculate percentage change. In Fall 2017, 31% students ever received only CA Promise grant, 28% ever received both Pell & CA Promise grant, and 41% never receiving aid. Very few students (between 0.3% and 0.8%) receive only Pell and are not included in the graph.

Figure 7 shows that students who never received financial aid had the smallest overall drop in enrollments following the start of the pandemic, while students with both grants had somewhat larger losses. The steepest decline was among students who only received California Promise Grant, although an important caveat is that we cannot observe in our data how many students moved from the California Promise only to Pell and/or California Promise. The maximum Expected Family Contribution threshold for any Pell eligibility dropped in the 2019–20 academic year, and financial need overall likely increased as a result of the pandemic, so part of this decline could be the result of students shifting between categories.

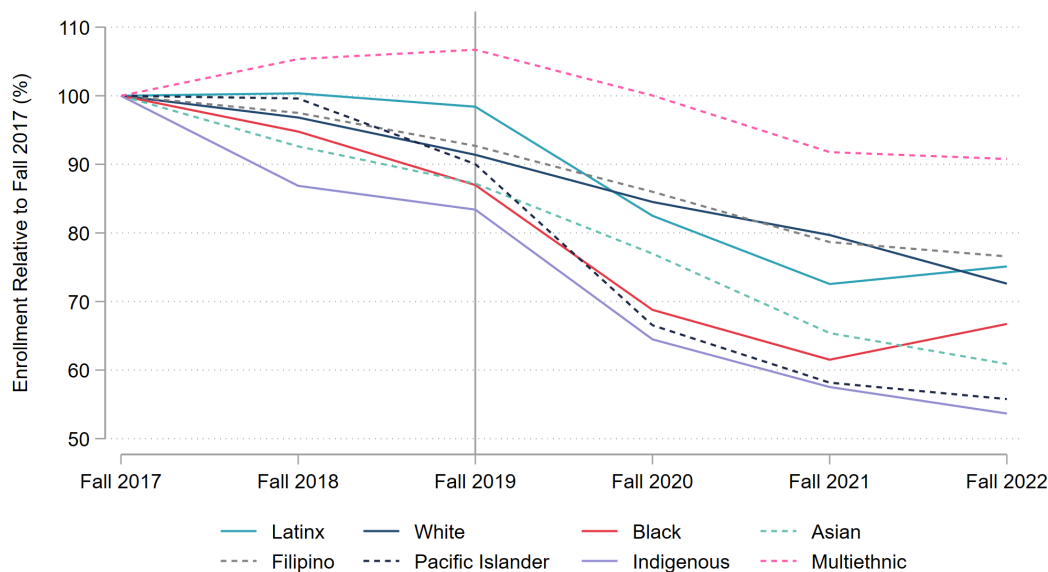
No-aid students are more likely to come from families above the income threshold for aid and may face fewer financial pressures challenging their enrollment. The Promise Grant is available to many California residents (including undocumented students) and use similar income thresholds as Pell. However, the grant only waives enrollment fees (about \$46 per credit or \$502 per term for a full-time student). In comparison, the average Pell award of \$4,400 per year at community colleges is much larger (Hanson, 2024). Students with both Pell and Promise Grants get the fee waiver to cover tuition and substantial funds through Pell that can cover additional costs associated with attendance, including housing, books, transportation, and other basic needs. California community colleges also disbursed substantial amounts of emergency aid using FAFSA forms to determine eligibility and unmet need, further supporting enrollment of Pell-eligible students (Rodriguez et al., 2024). Meanwhile, students receiving only Promise Grants are potentially left with more unmet financial need that presents a barrier to college enrollment.

## Race/Ethnicity

LACCD mirrors national trends in terms of racial/ethnic differences in enrollment loss, and began prior to the start of the pandemic (National Student Clearinghouse, 2024). Figure 8 presents enrollments across race/ethnicity as percentages of enrollments in Fall 2017; enrollments that are 80% of those in Fall 2017, for example, mean that for every 10 enrollees in Fall 2017 there are now 8 students.

As shown in Figure 8, the largest enrollment declines in LACCD have been concentrated among Black, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, and Asian students (a decline of over 30 percentage points relative to enrollments in Fall 2017). Rates of decline following the start of the pandemic also vary across racial/ethnic populations. Enrollment losses between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 were steepest among Latina/o/x, Pacific Islander, Black, and Indigenous students. Enrollments had stabilized or begun increasing by Fall 2021 for Black, Filipino, Latina/o/x, Multiethnic, and Pacific Islander students, but continued falling among Asian, Indigenous, and White students.

**Figure 8: Enrollment Losses Were Steep Among Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Asian, and Black Students**



Note: Total enrollments in Fall 2017 were about 127,000. Each subgroup's enrollment in 2017 used as a base to calculate percentage change. Racial composition of the student body in 2017: Latinx (64%), White (14%), Black (10%), Asian (7%), Filipino (2.5%), Pacific Islander (0.2%), Indigenous (0.2%), Multiethnic (2%).

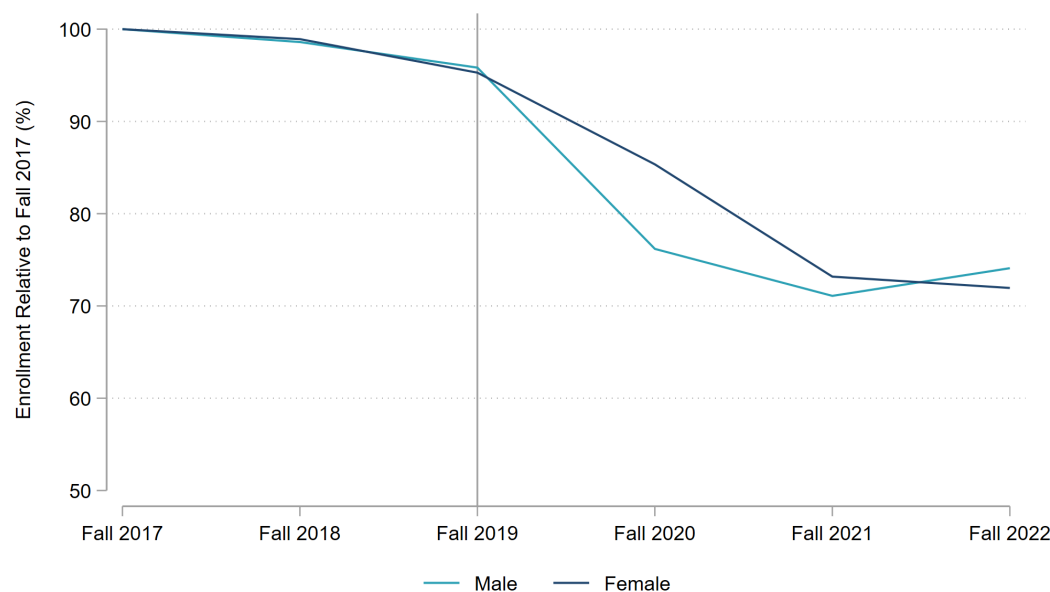
The potential risk of not enrolling due to lack of access to aid differs by race/ethnicity. For instance, our data shows even after receiving both Pell and CA Promise Grant, Black students had slightly larger enrollment losses than average (by 6%). Meanwhile, White students that only received California Promise Grant had smaller enrollment drops (30% vs 44%) as compared to students from other race/ethnicities. Among Asian students, those receiving no aid experienced much larger enrollment declines compared to other race/ethnicities (30% vs 17%). Furthermore, Asian enrollees enrolled full-time almost halved as of Fall 2022 (compared to 27% reduction across all full-time students).

## Gender

In line with the national trends (National Student Clearinghouse, 2024), there were some differences by gender in the rate of enrollment losses in LACCD.

As shown in Figure 9, initial enrollment losses among male students were much larger than those among female students (9% in Fall 2020). Enrollment declines slowed following Fall 2020 with male enrollments ticking back up after Fall 2021. Enrollments decreased steadily among female students until Fall 2021, when enrollments stabilized (but have not yet begun rebounding).

**Figure 9: The Larger Enrollment Declines Among Male Students After the Pandemic Evened Out by Fall 2021**



Note: Enrollments in Fall 2017 were about 127,000. Each subgroup's enrollment in 2017 used as a base to calculate percentage change. In Fall 2017, about 43% students were male and 57% were female. Non-binary option only appeared in 2020 and has not been included here.

Gender differences in enrollment losses were similar across race/ethnicities except for Filipino students where male student enrollments dropped by 15% more than female students in Fall 2020. Enrollment losses for males in the 25–35 year age group reduced 12% more than female students in the same age group in Fall 2020. These differences disappeared by Fall 2022. The gender differences in enrollment losses and pace of recovery could be explained by differences in social expectations around care giving responsibilities or different rate of job loss between male and female community college students (Fry, 2022).

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified many barriers to college enrollment, including concerns about affordability, childcare, basic needs, and foregone labor market opportunities, while creating new barriers related to technology, public health, and economic uncertainty. The confluence of these conditions led to steep drops in community college enrollments nationally. In this brief, we explored these trends within the context of the Los Angeles Community College District, which serves as a valuable microcosm of the national community college context given its size and diversity. While enrollments have stabilized and are recovering from the staggering losses immediately after the pandemic, enrollments in LACCD remain well below pre-pandemic levels.

Sustained enrollment declines have direct bearing on the financial health of community colleges. State funding represents 64% of California community colleges' total revenue, with 80% of that funding tied to enrollments (Shaw et al., 2023). Drops in enrollment translate into smaller state funding disbursements, forcing community colleges to grapple with resource constraints and make tough financial trade-offs about the support they can offer students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, federal Higher Education Emergency Relief funds provided a lifeline, enabling institutions to recoup lost funding, offset technology costs, and provide emergency financial aid to students. However, with this funding now exhausted, community colleges are likely facing reductions in funding even as student needs remain amplified from the fallout of the pandemic (Belfield et. al, 2024; HOPE Center, 2021).

Most critically, these enrollment declines represent foregone opportunities for thousands of individual students, in terms of educational attainment and likely long-term economic and non-pecuniary benefits. Troublingly, our analyses suggest that the uneven recovery in enrollments may be widening opportunity gaps across groups. Enrollment recovery has been slower among students ages 20–54 and among students with greater unmet financial need. Enrollment recovery has also been uneven across students with different racial/ethnic backgrounds, with more rapid increases among Black and Latina/o/x students than among Asian, Filipino, Indigenous, Multiethnic, Pacific Islander, or White students. Identifying the feasibility and efficacy of potential policy responses, such as providing greater financial assistance, basic needs provision, childcare availability, and increased choice in course modalities, that could mitigate barriers to student initial and continued enrollment are critical first steps to recovering enrollments and supporting students to reach their academic goals.

## Endnotes

1. Administrative data only allows us to follow students up till summer 2023. However, LACCD's public data dashboards have limited enrollment data for Fall 2023.
2. Students enrolled at LACCD are categorized as continuously enrolled (previously enrolled students continuing to take courses), dually enrolled (concurrently enrolled high schoolers), first time in college students (no prior college enrollment), returning students (students previously enrolled in LACCD re-enrolling after an absence of four or more terms), or transfer students (previously enrolled at another college).
3. Students with no enrollment records for four consecutive terms and no award earned are defined as stopouts.

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For more information about the ARCC Network, visit [ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/arccnetwork/](https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/arccnetwork/)

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