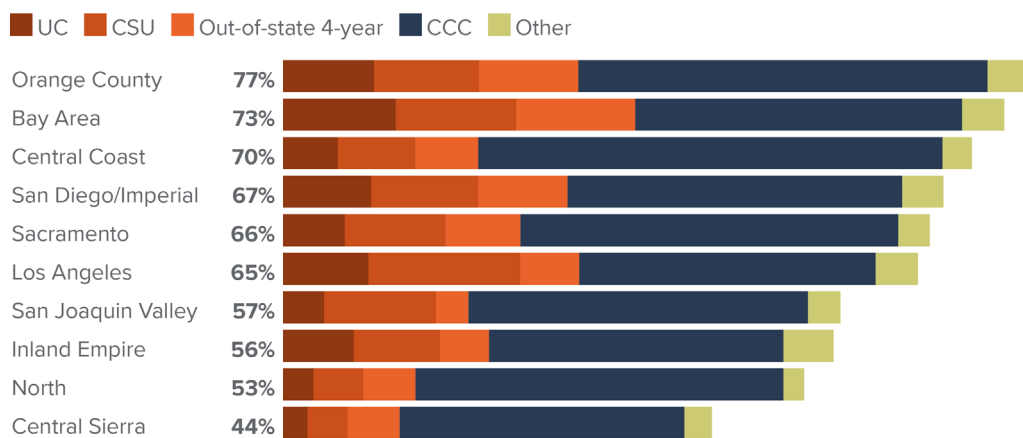


Pathways to College Completion in the San Joaquin Valley

With its youthful, diverse, growing population; expanding economy; and robust regional networks, California’s San Joaquin Valley could be on the verge of dramatic improvements in college enrollment and completion. However, the valley currently has one of the lowest rates of baccalaureate completion—which both drives and reflects the region’s challenging economic realities. Low four-year college-going rates account for this trend, exacerbated by low transfer rates among students from in-region community colleges.

College-going rates, especially to four-year colleges, are low in the San Joaquin Valley

College-going rate of recent high school graduates, 2020–21



Source: PPIC-based on California Department of Education data.

Notes: College-going rate for California high school completers 16 months after high school completion. Other college destinations include out-of-state two-year institutions and in-state private two-year and four-year institutions. County-level data aggregated regionally.

What are the San Joaquin Valley’s key education-related challenges and opportunities?

California’s labor market rewards those with bachelor’s degrees. In the San Joaquin Valley, an early-career worker with a bachelor’s degree earns on average 41 percent more than one with just a high school diploma, and 61 percent more for those with graduate degrees. Yet compared to the rest of the state, only 14 percent of valley adults ages 23 to 34 have a bachelor’s and only 4 percent a graduate degree.

College pathway success varies across the region. Although valley high school students graduate at the same rates as their peers in the rest of California (85.1% and 86.4%, respectively), their college enrollment ranges from less than 30 to around 80 percent. A major obstacle is completing the college preparatory courses (A–G) required for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU). While completion rates vary across districts, they are among the lowest in the state—less than 50 percent and lower among students of all demographic groups.

Clearly, students at some San Joaquin Valley high schools and districts are faring better than at others—these effective strategies can be leveraged and scaled. For the most part, the infrastructure exists to accommodate more college students, and valley leaders as well as parents and students have expressed strong interest in college completion.

How can institutions, educators, and policymakers expand support for college-going and completion pathways throughout the region?

Improve preparation in high school and community college. Establishing A–G course completion as the default (or mandatory) pathway together with expanded access to transferrable dual-enrollment courses can facilitate a smoother transition to higher education. At the community college level, more work to clarify the transfer path into four-year colleges can provide students with what they need to make that transition.

Expanding freshman and transfer access to CSU and UC. UC could modify their admissions process to prioritize more equitable representation. Both CSU and UC—especially valley campuses—could increase their engagement in early recruitment efforts by working directly with high schools and community colleges to help raise students’ eligibility and thus likelihood of applying.

Broadening regional coordination and collaboration. We recommend developing regional—rather than local—college promise programs. For example, UC Merced has partnerships with 32 high schools and districts, guaranteeing admission—with currently no restriction on majors—for students meeting the program criteria. Wider coordination focused on economic and workforce needs at the regional and state levels is critical to ensure a more diverse pool of college graduates across the state.

Supporting students. UC and CSU should expand outreach and coordination to San Joaquin Valley students. To help address students’ constraints, they should provide enhanced aid, housing, and transportation options and supports. They could also make concerted efforts to offer tight-knit collegiate environments, acknowledge students’ cultural values, and instill a sense of belonging. Part of this work will involve fully informing students and families of these supports and emphasizing the college-going narrative around leaving home in search of better economic opportunities.

Raising persistence and graduation rates at four-year institutions. This requires a deliberate effort from the state’s public four-year institutions to ensure students from the San Joaquin Valley are supported throughout their educational journey to and through earning a college degree.

Increasing program evaluations and data sharing. Robust data, evaluation mechanisms, and flexibility are indispensable, as are regularly assessing progress and adapting strategies based on feedback and outcomes. Support for regional data sharing and evaluation is critical. The state should play a central role in coordinating these efforts, ensuring that relevant stakeholders have access to comprehensive and up-to-date information.

Supported with funding from College Futures Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Sutton Family Fund.
Sources: Adapted by Chansonette Buck from [Pathways to College Completion in the San Joaquin Valley](#), by Hans Johnson, Olga Rodriguez, Cesar Alesi Perez, and Marisol Cuellar Mejia.