

The Future of Higher Education Enrollment in California

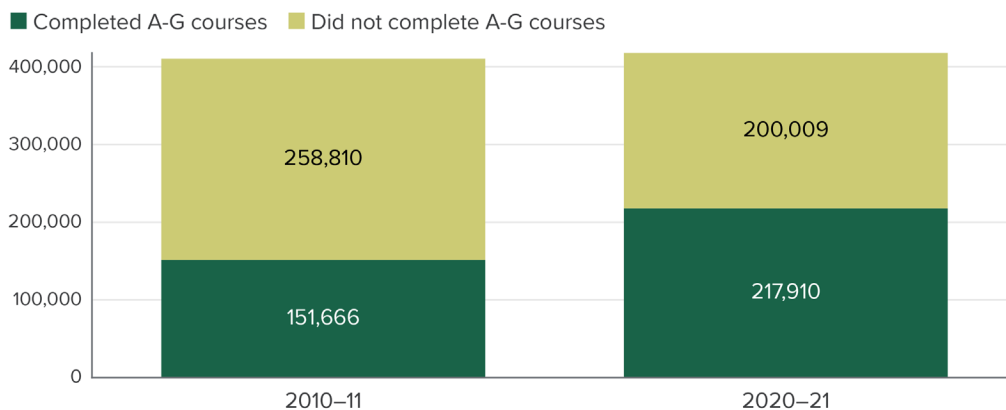
Higher education has long been a driver of economic mobility and well-being in California. In recent years, declines in the number of young adults led to falling enrollment at many colleges and universities across the country, but not at most of California’s higher education institutions. During the pandemic, however, the state population fell and higher education enrollment declined. What should California’s colleges and universities expect over the next couple of decades?

PPIC projections suggest enrollment increases until 2035

While the population of young adults most likely to attend college is expected to grow very slowly, or not at all, over the next couple of decades, we project that enrollment will increase slightly at least until 2035.

We expect college-going to resume the upward trajectory that we observed before the pandemic. Increases in college participation will be driven partly by increases in the share of high school graduates who complete the college prep courses required for admission to the University of California (UC) and the California State University (CSU)—known as the A–G requirement. In recent years, the number of high school graduates has grown very little—from 411,000 in 2010–11 to 418,000 in 2020–21. But the share of graduates who complete A–G coursework has grown from 37% to 52%.

Over the past decade, high school graduates have become more likely to complete A–G courses



Source: Author calculations based on CDE data.

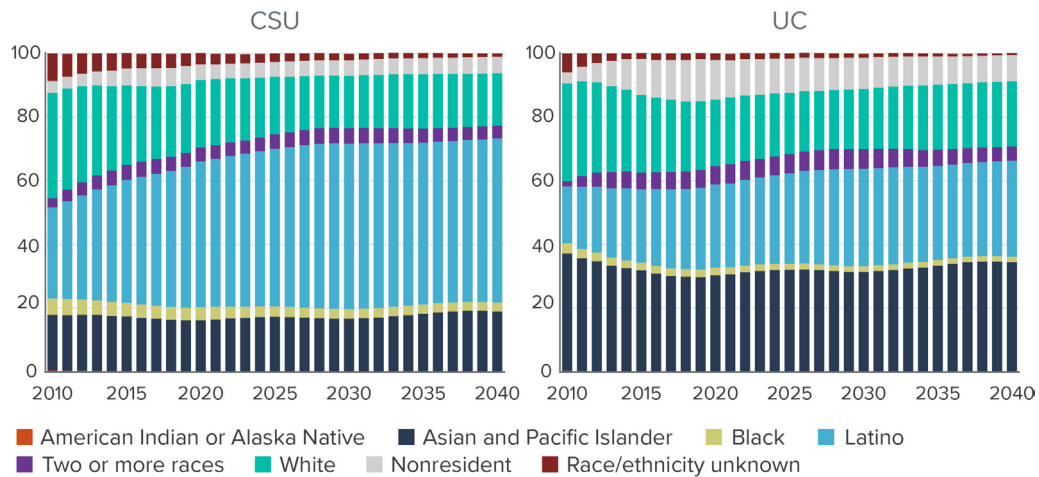
Note: Completion of A–G courses is a requirement for admission to UC and CSU.

Community colleges are likely to face bigger enrollment challenges than the state’s four-year colleges and universities. Our projections suggest that community colleges will see limited growth in enrollment after recovering from pandemic losses. Enrollment increases will require improvements in persistence among community college students. UC is projected to have robust growth, while growth at CSU and private nonprofit colleges will be modest.

We project improvement in one key area: diversity at California’s colleges will increase. In particular, continued improvements in completion of A–G coursework will lead to notable increases in the share of

Latino students at UC and CSU. In contrast, the share of Black students will not change much; declining populations of young Black adults will counteract increases in participation. The share of white students will vary by institution, and college-going rates will continue to be highest among Asian students.

Notable increases in Latino students are projected at CSU and UC



Source: UCOP to 2022 and PPIC projections 2023 to 2040.
Notes: Fall enrollment. See the full report's [Technical Appendix A](#) for details.

Policy implications

Increases in enrollment will help the state reach its goal of 40% of working-age adults with bachelor's degrees by 2035. But this goal is reachable mostly because 57% of residents ages 25–54 born outside California have college degrees, compared to only 35% of California-born young adults. Increasing college completion among young Californians would improve educational mobility—and help close equity gaps in the state's higher education systems.

- ▶ One approach would be to focus on the pathway from grade 9 to high school completion and then onto college completion. Currently, only about 35% of California ninth-graders will have bachelor's degrees by the time they reach their mid- to late 20s.
- ▶ Setting a goal of 45% of young Californians holding degrees would complement the existing state goal and allow California policymakers and higher education officials to center their efforts on students and young adults who are making critical decisions about their educational pathways.
- ▶ Our projections of enrollment growth assume that the state's university systems will be able to grow to accommodate student demand. Funding for capacity is often a challenge, but California has a long history of public investment in higher education. A long-term flexible approach, involving a combination of tuition increases combined with increased financial aid, could help make higher education finance more predictable and sustainable.
- ▶ Our projections also assume continued increases in A–G completion among high school graduates. The state has made impressive gains over the past couple of decades, but some disturbing trends—absenteeism, in particular—emerged during the pandemic. Local policies and practices, such as making A–G the default curriculum and creating a college-going culture, can and do make a difference.

Our most fundamental assumption is that if the state can increase the number of Californians who enroll in and graduate from college, the Golden State will continue to be a place of opportunity.

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Source: Adapted by Mary Severance from [The Future of Higher Education Enrollment in California](#), by Hans Johnson and Cesar Alesí Perez.