

California's public universities struggle with rising college eligibility

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Reading room at UC Berkeley's Doe Library

California in many ways is a victim of its own success in preparing ever larger numbers of students for college.

That is one way to look at the recent flap over the revocation of admission offers to about 500 students at UC Irvine who had either not sustained their academic performance during their last semester in high school or had not submitted their final high school transcripts as required by university rules.

The withdrawal of the offers was **widely portrayed** as the actions of an unfeeling bureaucracy at best, or at worst, of incompetence by the university's administration. The university **backed off** and admitted many of the students who were found not to be at fault in submitting their transcripts.

Receiving much less attention was this fall's admissions overload at **Cal Poly San Luis Obispo**, one of the most competitive campus in the California State University system, when about **700 more students than anticipated** accepted offers of admission. Instead of rescinding their admission offers, Cal Poly scrambled to find ways to admit all the students.

Both incidents highlight the success of California's public schools to prepare more students for college and careers — especially those students who have historically not been on a college track — and the challenges the state's public universities are facing in serving them all.

Over the past 10 years there has been a massive increase in the numbers and percentages of students meeting **A-G course requirements** needed for admission to the University of California and California State University systems — from 126,019 in 2005-06 to 194,698 in 2015-16.

Even more notable is that the number of low-income students who have completed the A-G requirements has tripled over the past decade.

Over the last five years, the number of high school graduates has increased by 5 percent, but the number of A-G eligible applicants has increased by 28 percent. “As a fraction of all those who are graduating from college, a larger percentage than ever are ready for college,” said PPIC research fellow Jacob Jackson.

According to California's **Master Plan for Higher Education**, the top 12.5 percent of the high school graduating class are eligible for admission to a UC campus, and the top 33.3 percent to CSU. But **a just released study** by the consulting firm **RTI International** found that 13.9 percent of the 430,000 high school graduates in 2015 using current admissions standards were eligible to enter UC and 41 percent were eligible to do so at CSU.

“The change in eligibility rates translates into a massive increase in the number of students who qualify for public postsecondary education in the state,” the report found.” Over a mere eight years, the number of eligible students at UC and CSU grew by more than 30 percent at UC and 50 percent at CSU, the RTI researchers estimated.

Adding to the pressures on colleges is the steadily increasing numbers of community college students who have met the requirements to transfer to CSU and UC. From 2000-01 to 2014-15, the number of students who completed the units they need to transfer increased by two-thirds, according to a **report by the Legislative Analyst's Office** earlier this year.

These increases are a combination of not only population growth, but of students doing better in school. Compounding the numbers is that California has a higher college attendance rate than all but 10 states, and is 3 percentage points higher than the national average of 43 percent, according to the LAO.

Not surprisingly, along with rising numbers of eligible students, total undergraduate enrollments have soared. This fall, 210,000 undergraduates enrolled at nine UC campuses (UCSF, the 10th campus in the UC system, doesn't have an undergraduate program.) That is an increase of 50 percent since 2000.

A sizable portion of the enrollment growth comes from big increases in out-of-state and foreign student enrollments, in response to the deep budget cuts inflicted by the state for the past several decades, and which accelerated during the budget crisis brought on by the Great Recession. But California resident enrollments have also jumped significantly, from 140,000 in 2000 to 175,000 this year.

“Enrollment growth at UC and CSU has not kept up with demand,” a [recent PPIC report](#) noted. PPIC researchers pointed out that growing numbers of students are leaving the state altogether to attend college. Between 2008 and 2012, the number of students leaving the state each year in search of other colleges grew by 40 percent, to about 30,000 per year, a number equivalent to the entire entering UC freshman class.

GOING DEEPER

[Assessing UC and CSU Enrollment and Capacity](#), Legislative Analyst's Office, Jan. 2017.

[University Eligibility for the Public High School Class of 2015](#), RTI International, July 2017

[Higher Education in California](#), PPIC, April 2016

The problem of capacity has been compounded by rising housing costs in many parts of the state, so that off-campus housing is becoming more expensive than living in dorms on campus. And many campuses don't have the dorm space to handle the demand.

The 23-campus California State University system has been similarly affected. Freshman enrollments **have increased** from 55,000 in 2011 to just under 62,000 last fall. Total California resident enrollments have risen from **291,000 in 2000** to **402,000** during the current academic year.

So what needs to happen to meet the demand? Building new campuses is not necessarily the solution. It can take years, even decades, to build a new campus, from the planning stage to completion.

Erecting a new campus is also hugely expensive, and it is not clear where the funds would come from to build one or more campuses.

What's more, the January **LAO report** concluded that additional campuses for either system is “not warranted at this time.”

LAO analysts said that both UC and CSU have not exercised all their options to increase enrollments. For example, under state law UC and CSU are supposed to offer summer classes enrolling 40 percent and 25 percent of their fall enrollment respectively. But currently UC is only enrolling the equivalent of 20 percent of fall enrollment, and CSU 6 percent.

Other measures listed by the LAO to cope with enrollment pressures include reducing non-California resident enrollments, constructing buildings already listed on strategic plans at some campuses, leasing off-campus space to be able to offer more classes, implementing “instructional efficiencies” such as expanding online coursework, and increasing the hours instruction is offered, including on weekends.

In theory at least, if all these measures were implemented, it is possible that new campuses would not be needed. But to implement them, both UC and CSU would almost certainly need a significant increase in state funding to build more buildings and to staff classes conducted in them. They would also need to change practices deeply rooted in the culture of the university, such as Saturday classes. Ceasing to admit out-of-state or foreign students who pay significantly more tuition than California residents would have an immediate impact on the budgets of several UC campuses in particular.

These measures would also take time to implement.

What is clear is that there are no easy or quick fixes to meeting the need to educate California's growing youthful population — and the rising percentage of students who are leaving high school

eligible to attend UC or CSU.

In the future, administrators at individual UC and CSU campuses may be more successful in accurately anticipating what percentage of incoming freshman they should offer admission to avoid the debacles experienced at UC Irvine and Cal Poly.

But doing so shouldn't obscure the welcome reality that efforts to better prepare students to attend college are paying off. Instead of backing off those efforts, it would be far more desirable to admit more California students, and for the state to underwrite the additional costs to allow its famed public universities to do so.

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▶ **el**

3 days ago



I think it's funny how even really great news in education manages to get cast as gloom and doom. These are exactly the results we want, a problem we have been working very hard to have. I hope we can give the K-12 system some serious credit for stepping up and I hope they will be making this even more of a problem going forward. Same for the community colleges. Thanks for the article, and thanks ... [Read More](#)

▶ **Zeev Wurman**

6 days ago



Well, I think it is smart not to build more campuses – student-readiness and enrollment is already starting to trend down. I assume that UC and CSU readiness are largely correlated. Given that math readiness level of CSU freshmen already has started to fall down after a decade and a half of increases (see <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ibpmqsfkyvp0qi9/CSU%20Remediation.pdf?dl=0>) and given that the CSU enrollment also started to slide (61,800 in fall 2016 versus a peak of 64,400 in 2015). It ... [Read More](#)

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