



Legislative Analyst's Office
California's Nonpartisan Fiscal and Policy Advisor

 Search

January 20, 2011

The 2011–12 Budget:

Prioritizing Course Enrollment at the Community Colleges

State Law Establishes “Open Access” Policy, Identifies Key CCC Missions. Under the state’s *Master Plan for Higher Education* and state law, the California Community Colleges (CCC) operate as open access institutions. That is, whereas only the top one-third of high-school graduates are eligible for admission to the state’s public universities, *all* persons 18 or older may attend a community college. (While CCC does not deny admission to students, there is no guarantee of access to a particular class.) Current law defines CCC’s core mission as providing academic and vocational instruction at the lower-division (freshman and sophomore) level. Under this mission, community colleges prepare students for transfer to four-year institutions and grant associate’s degrees and certificates. Other important statutory missions include providing opportunities for workers to update their job skills (such as by taking a computer class) and offering precollegiate basic skills instruction in English and mathematics.

State residents enroll at the community colleges for a variety of reasons. In 2009–10, almost one-half of CCC students indicated that they sought transfer to a four-year institution or to obtain an associate’s degree or certificate. About one-third of students attended CCC for other purposes, such as learning English or taking recreational classes. (The remaining nearly one-fifth of students were “undecided.”)

Need to Rethink CCC Enrollment–Management Policies. In recent years, community college enrollment has been constrained by two major factors: (1) reductions in course-section offerings as a result of state budget cuts, and (2) strong demand for CCC services by adults seeking retraining and other skills at a time of weak state and national economic growth. The CCC system reports that many students—particularly first-time students—have not been able to enroll in the classes they need to progress toward their educational goals. Thus, in effect, CCC enrollments are currently being “rationed.” This access problem will become even more serious in 2011–12 to the extent that budget reductions further reduce enrollment slots.

Given limited resources, we believe that it is more important than ever for the state to target funds that best meet the state’s highest priorities for community college services. To accomplish this, we recommend the Legislature: (1) adopt statewide registration priorities that reflect the Master Plan’s primary objectives, (2) place a limit on the number of taxpayer-subsidized credit units that students may earn, and (3) restrict the number

of times that a student may repeat physical education and other classes at taxpayers' expense.

Statewide Registration Priorities

Campuses Have Wide Discretion Over Which Students May Register Early. Before each term begins, different groups of CCC students are permitted to register for classes at different times. Some students are given enrollment (registration) priority, which means that they have an opportunity to select their classes before "open registration" begins for the general student body. Students value priority enrollment because there is considerable competition for many classes, and these classes fill up quickly.

While colleges have considerable discretion in how they assign priority, current law singles out two groups of students. Specifically, colleges must give registration priority to current or former members of the military. Statute also requires colleges to assign a "low" enrollment priority to high-school students who are concurrently enrolled at a community college to "ensure that these students do not displace regularly admitted students." (We note that this statutory language is ambiguous, since, by definition, high-school students who are given priority are able to register before—and thus potentially displace—adult CCC students who do not have priority.)

Regulations adopted by the statewide Board of Governors give campuses wide discretion as to whether any other categories of students may be given priority registration. As a result, enrollment priorities vary across the state. In December 2010, the Chancellor's Office surveyed the CCC system's 112 colleges about their priorities. Each of the 76 colleges that responded to the survey indicated that they have a registration priority system. Virtually all colleges grant earliest registration to current and former members of the military, students with disabilities, and participants in Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (a program designed for low-income, underprepared students who are attending CCC full-time). Other groups granted early registration by some campuses include athletes and students in the state's welfare program. Next, colleges usually assign relatively early priority to students who are continuing their studies at the particular college (that is, they enrolled in the preceding term). Typically, the more units that students have completed prior to the start of the term, the earlier their registration priority. (However, some colleges indicated they bump students who exceed a certain unit threshold—such as 90 or 100 units—to the lowest priority among continuing students.) In addition to units earned, a small number of colleges responding to the survey also take into account students' academic performance at CCC (such as grade point average) when assigning priority among continuing students.

Most first-time CCC students do not receive registration priority; instead, they must wait until open registration. A few colleges, however, administer an outreach program whereby recent high-school graduates who participate in pre-term assessment, orientation, counseling and other "matriculation" services receive an earlier registration appointment than new students who have not participated in the program.

Campus Policies Often Do Not Reflect Master Plan's Highest Priorities. On its surface, the priority accorded to continuing students by colleges may seem appropriate, as it gives students who are seemingly nearing completion of their educational goals "first call" on needed—but often difficult-to-obtain—classes. This approach, however, has several consequences that run counter to the Master Plan's intended goals. For example, continuing students may not necessarily be enrolled at CCC to acquire the skills they need to participate in the workforce or society (such as technical or language skills); rather, they may be taking classes for purposes of personal enrichment. Other students

with a large number of credits may state that their intent is to obtain a degree or transfer, but they are not making satisfactory progress toward that goal. Yet, because these types of students are typically granted a relatively high registration priority, they can squeeze out more-focused and higher-priority students who have not taken as many units.

Recommend Statewide Registration Priorities. Given the state's likely need to further reduce course offerings in 2011–12, we recommend that the Legislature adopt statewide registration priorities that reflect the Master Plan's key goals and, to the greatest extent possible, maximize access for the state's highest-priority students. For example, we envision an approach that assigns the highest registration priority to continuing students who are fully matriculated—participated in assessment, orientation, and counseling, as well as completed an educational plan—and are making satisfactory progress toward their educational goals (for example, as defined in federal financial-aid rules).

Next-highest priority could be granted to new students—particularly recent high-school graduates—who have completed matriculation requirements and other key steps, such as applying for federal financial aid. Nonmatriculated new and continuing students, students with a declared goal of personal enrichment, and students who are not making satisfactory progress toward their goals would not be allowed to register for classes until open registration. (We believe it is reasonable to give colleges some flexibility to make individual determinations on a student's registration ranking to take into account extraordinary circumstances, such as the availability of counselors to see new students prior to the start of the academic year.) In developing these priorities, we also recommend the Legislature clarify whether its intent is to assign priority to concurrently enrolled high-school students, or to require these students to wait until the end of open registration before they are able to register for CCC classes. Our recommendation would not result in state savings *per se*; rather it would help to ensure that state resources are first directed to the highest-priority students under the Master Plan.

Cap on State-Supported Instruction

Significant Number of CCC Students With High-Unit Counts. As noted earlier, the primary purpose of the CCC system, as established by the Master Plan, is to educate students who enroll to (1) earn credits for transfer to a four-year institution, (2) obtain an associate's degree or certificate, or (3) gain basic job or language skills. Students seeking to transfer or earn an associate's degree generally need 60 units of coursework. Students who wish to obtain technical training rather than an associate's degree generally need fewer than 60 units of credit. According to the Chancellor's Office, community colleges serve a considerable number of students who have already earned more than 60 units. In fact, in 2009–10, the system provided instruction to nearly 120,000 students (headcount) who had already earned 90 or more CCC units. Over 9,000 of these students had already accumulated 150 or more units. The state continues to subsidize these students' courses while other CCC students with little or no previous access to postsecondary education may be unable to find open courses.

Recommend Limit to State-Supported CCC Coursework. Given scarce state resources, we recommend the Legislature place a limit on the number of taxpayer-subsidized units that a student may earn at CCC. We believe a 100-unit threshold would provide a reasonable maximum for state funding purposes. A 100-unit cap would permit students 40 units (over one academic year) beyond what is typically required to earn an associate's degree or credits for transfer. This threshold would allow students to earn some credit for coursework that is not applicable for a degree or transfer (such as precollegiate basic skills instruction in English or mathematics), as well as a "cushion" in

case students need to take some additional classes as a result of changing their program or major.

Under our recommendation, students with more than 100 units would still be eligible to attend CCC. However, since a state subsidy would no longer be provided, the Legislature could authorize colleges to charge these students up to the full cost of instruction. Our recommendation would result in a CCC workload reduction of up to 38,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) students in 2011–12, for a savings to the state of as much as \$175 million.

Course Repetition

Regulations Allow Multiple Repeats of Certain Classes. Community college regulations generally allow students to retake academic or vocational classes up to two times in an effort to make up for substandard marks (such as an “F” or “no pass” designation). In such cases, districts receive apportionment payments (general-purpose monies) all three times from the state. For “activity classes,” however, regulations allow districts to receive apportionment funding for up to four times (the initial enrollment plus three repeats) regardless of a student’s grade. Regulations define activity classes to include physical education (such as aerobics and bowling), dancing, drawing and painting, and certain other visual or performing arts. For physical education, “repetition” is defined as when a student completes a class (such as “beginning yoga”) and then either (1) reenrolls in the same class, or (2) enrolls in a similar class that is part of the same sequence (such as “intermediate yoga”). (For visual and performing arts, by contrast, repetition is counted only when a student reenrolls in the same exact class.) Regulations place no limit on the number of times that districts may claim apportionments for a student repeating a *noncredit* activity class (such as ceramics and physical fitness for older adults).

Repetition of activity courses is fairly common. For example, according to the Chancellor’s Office, in 2009–10 over 50,000 students (headcount) enrolled in the same credit physical education class that they had already taken and for which they received credit in a previous term. (The Chancellor’s Office does not have data on the additional number of students who took a physical education class in 2009–10—such as “Weight Training 2”—after completing a similar-type class—such as “Weight Training 1”—in a previous term.)

Recommend Elimination of State Support for Repeats. Like virtually all types of CCC instruction, credit and noncredit activity classes can be of value to students. However, given limited resources and the Master Plan’s priorities, we believe it is reasonable for the Legislature to limit the number of times that the state pays for students’ enrollment in these classes. Under our recommendation, districts could claim apportionments the first time that students take an activity course. This would allow students to receive credit they may apply toward completion of their program. (For example, some four-year institutions such as California State University allow students to apply one CCC unit of physical education toward a bachelor’s degree.)

We recommend that the Legislature eliminate state funding for any repeats of the same or similar (that is, part of the same sequence) activity class. (Our recommendation would exclude intercollegiate athletics and “adaptive” physical education classes, which are designed for individuals with physical disabilities, as well as students who are majoring in physical education or the fine arts.) Colleges would be permitted to allow students to repeat these classes, though these enrollments could not be counted for purposes of calculating apportionments. Alternatively, colleges could provide opportunities for students to repeat these activities through CCC “community service” classes, which

statute requires to be fully supported by student fees. The precise amount of savings generated by our recommendation is unknown. Based on available data from 2009–10, it appears that CCC’s workload could be reduced by an estimated 15,000 FTE students in 2011–12, generating state savings of roughly \$60 million. (This estimate takes into account students with more than 100 units who repeated an activity class in 2009–10.)

Conclusion

This brief has identified ways the Legislature can better target limited CCC funds toward the Master Plan’s key missions. Taken together, our recommendations would (1) help increase opportunities for high–priority students (such as recent high–school graduates) to enroll in courses they need to progress toward their educational goals, and (2) reduce funding for lower–priority enrollment by approximately 50,000 FTE students—for savings to the state of about \$235 million. Figure 1 summarizes our recommendations.

Figure 1

Summary of LAO Recommendations for the California Community Colleges (CCC)

- Adopt statewide CCC registration priorities that reflect the Master Plan’s top goals.
- Establish a 100–unit cap on the number of taxpayer–subsidized credits a CCC student may accumulate.
- Eliminate state funding for repetition of physical education and other recreational classes.

Contact Information

[Steve Boilard](#), Director, Higher Education, 319–8331

[Paul Steenhausen](#), California Community Colleges, 319–8324

[Judith Heiman](#), California State University, Financial Aid, 319–8358

Acknowledgments. The Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) is a nonpartisan office which provides fiscal and policy information and advice to the Legislature.

LAO Publications. To request publications call (916) 445-4656. This report and others, as well as an [E-mail subscription service](#), are available on the LAO’s Internet site at www.lao.ca.gov. The LAO is located at 925 L Street, Suite 1000, Sacramento, CA 95814.