Introduction

This report provides a brief update to the prior two reports on 2020 enrollment trends among the California community colleges.

Method

Respondents from 28 California community colleges provided enrollment and/or FTES projection data on survey #3—which was open from June 23rd, 2020 through June 30th, 2020. An invitation to participate in survey #3 was distributed on a listerv for CCC institutional research professionals on June 23rd with a reminder sent out on June 25th. The survey was hosted on Bakersfield College’s Qualtrics account.

Results

The majority of respondents (n = 22) reported that fall 2020 enrollments were down for fall 2020, relative to fall 2019, while four reported that enrollments were up, and two reported that enrollments were flat.

![Pie chart showing enrollment changes](image)

Among those colleges reporting negative percentage changes in their enrollments for fall 2020 (n = 20), the average decline was -17% with a range from -1.2% to -47% and a standard deviation of 11.4. Among those college with positive percentage changes in their fall enrollment (n = 2), the average increase was 15% with a range from 2.5% to 27.8% and standard deviation of 17.9. Two colleges had less than +/- 1% change in their enrollment from fall 2019 to fall 2020 and four colleges did not report percentage changes in enrollments.

Among those colleges reporting negative percentage changes in their FTES for fall 2020 (n = 18), the average decline was -20% with a range from -5% to -51% and a standard deviation of 13.8. Among those colleges reporting positive percentage changes in their FTES (n = 3). One college had less than +/- 1% change in FTES from fall 2019 to fall 2020 and six colleges did not report percentage changes in FTES.

Figure 2. Most colleges report lower enrollments and FTES for fall 2020 relative to fall 2019
There was a tendency for scheduling in fall 2020 to reflect a reduction in the number of available sections relative to fall 2019: 14 colleges (50%) reduced the number of sections; 6 (21%) kept the number of sections approximately the same; and 8 (29%) increased the number of sections offered in fall 2020.

There was a modest positive correlation between reported change in number of sections offered in fall 2020 relative to fall 2019 and percentage change in fall 2020 FTES ($r = .35$), as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Positive correlation between increase in fall 2020 sections and increase in fall 2020 FTES

Respondents indicated that the colleges in the sample have made a clear shift toward online instruction for fall 2020, with all colleges ($n = 28$) having a much higher prevalence of online sections in fall 2020 relative to fall 2019.
Additionally, 89% of respondents (24 out of 28) indicated that they will be “completely or mostly online for fall 2020”.

Caveats

The data in the survey is derived from a sample of voluntary participants from 28 out of 115 California community colleges and may not represent all colleges in the system equally well. Additionally, fall 2020 enrollment data is still early in the cycle and there may be a great deal of variability in early enrollment numbers. Additionally, one of the impacts of the pandemic may be to delay action and enrollment either by directly affecting the systems and processes that students use to enroll or by causing uncertainty among students and potential students. The end result of these disruptions may be to cause different patterns of enrollment or delayed patterns of enrollments which may result in misleading comparisons across semesters as the typical comparative assumption of all other things being equal is certainly not being met in this instance.

Discussion

Declining enrollments and FTES remains the dominant trend for fall 2020. Interestingly, FTES decline has been steeper than enrollment decline (-20% vs. -17%). While some students may be having difficulty applying and enrolling in a completely online environment others may be able to enroll but are choosing to enroll in fewer classes than perhaps they would have if in-person facilities were operational. When students make enrollment decisions they are likely considering their own capacity to handle the demands of multiple online classes given common limitations that many students are operating under, e.g., sharing devices with others in their household, limited internet access and bandwidth, difficulty establishing quiet spaces that are conducive to study. Given these known limitations, the decision to enroll in fewer classes is understandable although the long-term effect may be to reduce student momentum toward completion.

With the first day of classes approximately six to eight weeks away, there is still time for college outreach and enrollment activities to make up lost ground. There are questions as to whether students will embrace online education as survey results have indicated that most students prefer face-to-face instruction (cf. https://bit.ly/Students-Prefer-F2F & https://bit.ly/HE-Impacts-of-COVID-19). Additionally, an appreciable number of community college students—around 20% in some surveys—struggle with to access online classes in a way that will provide them with a quality experience, due to restrictions in access to wifi, internet bandwidth, and appropriate devices (cf. https://bit.ly/Digital-Gap).

For community colleges, there are reasons to expect that fall 2020 enrollment may yet increase. University students may be unable or unwilling to travel and to reside in far flung locations, preferring to take courses closer to home a local community college until the pandemic resolves (cf. https://bit.ly/COVID-19-Impact-on-Seniors & https://bit.ly/Harvard-F20-Yield-Drops). And given the recent spike in unemployment it is likely that community colleges will soon begin to see a surge of displaced workers making their way to the local community college for skill upgrades (cf. https://bit.ly/Upskilling-F20). The enrollment picture continues to develop in interesting and unexpected ways. Given the dynamics of the moment, one thing that is clear is that the final word on fall 2020 has yet to be written.

Stay safe & stay tuned...