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Improving Transfer from Community College to the California State University

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Table of Contents

Key Takeaways	3
Introduction	3
CSU Is the Leading Destination for Community College Transfer Students	6
Who Applies for Transfer?	10
Admission Rates Are High for CCC Applicants to CSU	17
Enrollment Rates Are High Too	25
CCC Transfer Students Have High Graduation Rates	39
Conclusions and Recommendations	43
References	45
Authors and Acknowledgments	47
PPIC Board of Directors	48

Key Takeaways

California's community college system serves over 2.1 million students, with most expressing transfer intent. But transfer rates are low—only one in five students transfer within four years of initial enrollment. Even modest improvements could substantially increase four-year enrollment and degree completion.

In this study we analyze transfer patterns between the California Community College (CCC) system and the California State University (CSU). As California pursues a goal of 40 percent baccalaureate completion among working-age residents by 2030, optimizing this critical pathway will be essential for meeting statewide educational objectives.

Major findings:

- The typical CSU applicant spends nine terms enrolled in the community college system prior applying to CSU. However, some applicants are able to apply for transfer sooner, especially those who reach key milestones during their first year of community college.
- Despite high acceptance and enrollment rates in CSU, many qualified students do not apply: 21 percent of ADT recipients between academic years 2018–19 and 2022–23 never applied to CSU despite guaranteed admission. More than half of these students (32,500) do not seem to have continued on their path to a bachelor's degree.
- CCC transfer students are admitted at very high rates: 92 percent of CCC transfer applicants are eventually admitted to at least one CSU campus. However, admission is not a linear process. Three in ten applicants apply in more than one term. Almost half of these students (47%) had all their applications denied the first time around but were admitted at a later term.
- A large majority (69%) of admitted transfer applicants in our sample choose to enroll in CSU. Among admittees who did not, 47 percent (62,700 applicants) did not appear to have enrolled at any four-year college. This group represents the most immediate opportunity for enrollment gains at CSU.
- For students who do enroll in a four-year institution, issues of proximity or cost do not seem to be why they did not enroll in CSU. But for students without enrollment in any four-year institution these factors may have been deterrents.
- Students successfully transferring to CSU achieve encouraging results: 76 percent of fall 2020 enrollees graduated by spring 2024.

When the transfer pathway works, it works. High admission rates and high graduation rates among successful transfer students validate investment in improving access to this proven route to baccalaureate completion. The challenge lies in ensuring that more California community college students are able to get to the point of applying, and that CSU has the capacity to welcome them in the campuses and majors of their preference.

Introduction

California has the largest and most diverse public higher education system in the country. The biggest and most connected parts of that system are the California Community Colleges (CCC) and the California State University (CSU). The community college system is composed of 116 colleges that serve more than 2.1

million students, while CSU's 23 campuses enroll almost a half million students. A key component of the state's higher education framework is the ability to transfer from the community college system to a four-year college.¹ CSU is the leading destination of community college transfers, who make up over 40 percent of the university's new undergraduate enrollment.

California has set an ambitious goal for postsecondary attainment, including substantial increases in baccalaureate completion: 40 percent among working-age Californians by 2030. A well-prepared workforce is a crucial part of ensuring that our state has a healthy economy for decades to come. Moreover, by increasing postsecondary attainment, particularly among underserved populations, California aims to reduce income inequality and create opportunities for all residents to achieve economic success. A four-year degree still gives most individuals the best chances of economic prosperity (Cuellar Mejia, Alesi Perez, Hsieh, and Johnson 2025; Levine and Pardue 2024).

Critical to achieving those goals is increasing the number of community college students who transfer to CSU. Most recently, CSU has taken important new steps in this direction. In their new systemwide strategic plan, CSU commits to increase transfer enrollment by 15 percent during the next three years as one of their strategies to improve educational and economic mobility in California.

It is an especially opportune time to undertake these efforts. After years of strong increases, the number of high school graduates is expected to stop growing and may even start to decline, limiting the pool of first-time freshmen (Johnson and Alesi Perez 2024). Some CSU campuses have experienced outright enrollment losses in recent years, and are looking for new students. At the same time, the community colleges enroll hundreds of thousands of students whose primary intent is to transfer.

But most of those students do not end up transferring: only one in five transfer within four years of initial enrollment (see Technical Appendix Figure B2) and large racial/ethnic and geographic disparities persist (California State Auditor 2024; Cuellar Mejia et al. 2023; Velasco et al. 2024).² This means that even small improvements in the share of students transferring can have large effects on enrollment at four-year colleges.

In short, the community colleges offer a large pool of students who want to earn a bachelor's degree, and CSU is in a prime position to capitalize on that desire.

1. California depends on transfer for its bachelor's degree production more than almost any other state. First-time enrollees at California's public universities are more likely to be transfer students than at public universities in all but seven other states (see Technical Appendix Figure B1).

2. Varying transfer requirements across and within segments is perhaps the main obstacle that community college students face in their pursuit to transfer but it is not the only one (California State Auditor 2024). Other challenges include credit mobility; lack of financial aid alignment between community colleges and four-year institutions; lack of early momentum; inadequate transfer advising; and limited access to resources and support services (Bustillos 2017; Cooper et al. 2020; Fink 2021).

This report answers fundamental questions about the transfer pathway that have been understudied until now:³

- Who is applying for transfer? And who is getting in?
- What happens with admittees who decide not to enroll in CSU? Where do they end up?
- What role do factors like proximity, selectivity, and cost play in explaining enrollment decisions among CSU admittees?
- How well do transfer students do at CSU? What educational markers in community college correlate to later success in CSU?

We close the report with recommendations for improving transfer from CCC to CSU, with a focus on students who are close to transferring but never successfully do so.

A note about data and methods

In the first section of the report, we use published data from CSU Application and Admission Dashboard (as of October 19, 2025) to describe recent trends in transfer applications and enrollment. In the rest of the report, we use intersegmental longitudinal student-level data (accessed through a memorandum of understanding between PPIC, CSU Office of the Chancellor, and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office) to further our understanding of the transfer pathway, with a focus on what happens once students get to the point of applying to a four-year university, in this case to a CSU campus.

Because we have data from both systems, including application and admission data from CSU, we can follow students across their community college careers (from their term of first enrollment to their last) to and through CSU. Moreover, we use the National Student Clearinghouse match of CCC students to determine those who successfully transferred to four-year colleges outside the CSU system.

Our analytical sample is composed of CSU applicants who *last* applied in a fall term between 2018 and 2023 (460,500 individuals). For those students, we account for *all* their application history (including any spring, summer, or winter applications) through spring 2024. Based on admission results, we divide applicants into three groups: those who were admitted and enrolled in a CSU campus; those who were admitted but decided not to enroll; and those who were never admitted. In the different sections of the report, we discuss the relative size of these groups and describe the demographic characteristics and academic trajectories of students in each group. Please refer to Technical Appendix Figure B3 for a disaggregation of our analytical sample.

[Technical Appendix A](#) provides more detailed information on our research methodology and describes some caveats and limitations of this study.

3. This is PPIC's third report on the transfer pathway. In our first report, *Increasing Community College Transfers: Progress and Barriers*, we shed light on the large gap between the number of community college students seeking to transfer and the number of students who actually do, as well as the large racial/ethnic gaps that exist in transfer rates. We also examine key academic milestones that correlate with a higher likelihood of transferring and discuss the potential impact on the number of transfer-eligible students of major reforms that the community college system has implemented in recent years (Johnson and Cuellar Mejia 2020). In our second report, *Strengthening California's Transfer Pathway*, we look closely at the academic journeys and characteristics of students who have successfully transferred (Cuellar Mejia, Johnson, Alesi Perez, and Jackson 2023). In this report, we shift the focus to what happens once students apply to a four-year university, CSU in particular.

CSU Is the Leading Destination for Community College Transfer Students

For decades, CSU has been the leading destination for transfer students from the CCC. Partly this is to be expected: most transfers are looking to attend a public college within California, and CSU is a much larger system than the University of California (UC) system. The CSU system also offers a broader geographic spread that covers both urban and rural areas. And students often enroll in campuses that are relatively close to their homes or where they completed their previous education ([Segovia & Cooper 2024](#); [Cuellar Mejia et al. 2023](#)).

In recent years, about 58 percent of community college students who successfully transferred to a four-year institution went to CSU. Another 17 percent went to UC, 10 percent to in-state private institutions, and 15 percent to out-of-state universities ([Cuellar Mejia et al. 2023](#)).

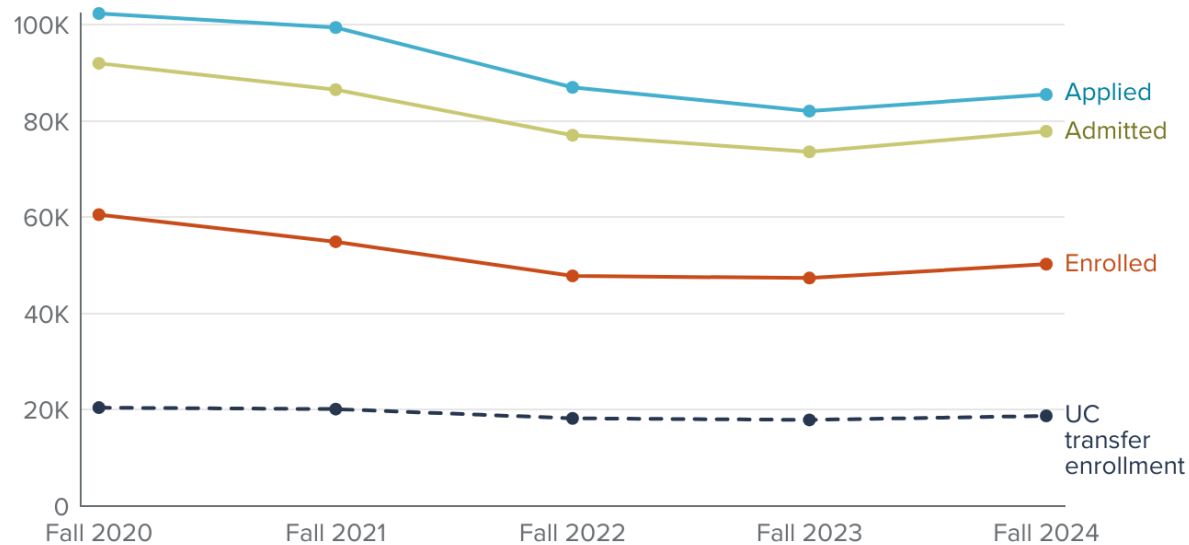
Transfer Applications and Enrollment Are Well below Pre-Pandemic Levels

Declines in community college enrollment, partly related to the COVID-19 pandemic, led to a subsequent decline in transfer applicants and enrollees between 2020 and 2023. Fortunately, some positive signs have started to emerge since then (Figure 1). In fall 2024, the CSU system received 3,430 more applications (a 4.2% increase) from community college transfer students than in fall 2023—but applications are still 16.4 percent below the 2020 peak. Fall 2024 applications resulted in 50,259 new transfer students enrolling in a CSU campus, a 6 percent increase over the prior year. Despite this increase, enrollment is 17 percent below the 2020 peak of 60,529 new transfer students.

Figure 1

Despite recent declines, CSU continues to be the main destination for CCC transfer students

New undergraduate transfers from California Community Colleges, fall terms



SOURCE: California State University, Applications & Admissions Dashboard.

NOTES: For context, CSU also takes transfers in the spring. The last two springs (2024 and 2025) have seen nearly 16,000 new CCC transfers enrolling compared to about 14,800 in spring 2021.

This recent growth has not spread equally across the system. For example, campuses like San Diego State, Cal State Los Angeles, and San Francisco State continued to experience declines through fall 2024. Indeed, transfer enrollment in both Cal State Los Angeles and San Francisco State is still more than 30 percent below the fall 2020 peak. Other campuses where transfer enrollment is markedly down are Dominguez Hills, Northridge, and Cal Poly Pomona (see Technical Appendix Table B2).

At the same time, at five campuses—Fresno State, Fullerton, Sonoma State, Monterey Bay, and Chico State—transfer enrollment has surpassed the fall 2020 peak.⁴

CSU depends on transfer enrollment more than UC and more than most public universities across the nation. Improving transfer rates not only increases enrollment, an issue at a growing number of campuses, it also enhances CSU's ability to maintain programs and services.⁵ Improvements could also positively impact the size and diversity of the pool of California college graduates—broadening economic opportunity and reflecting more closely the demographic makeup of the state.

4. Fresno State had previously been among the seven campuses fully impacted but have discontinued campus impactation over the last two years. Sonoma State and Monterey Bay are other CSU campuses that substantially reduced their impactation rates (Drummer 2025). For those who are not familiar with the term, impactation is a designation for a campus or specific major where the number of qualified applicants exceeds the number of available spaces, requiring the use of supplementary admission criteria beyond the standard California State University eligibility requirements.

5. In 2024–25, CSU began implementing an Enrollment Reallocation Plan, which gradually shifts enrollment slots and associated funding away from those campuses notably below their enrollment targets to those campuses notably above their targets (Drummer 2025).

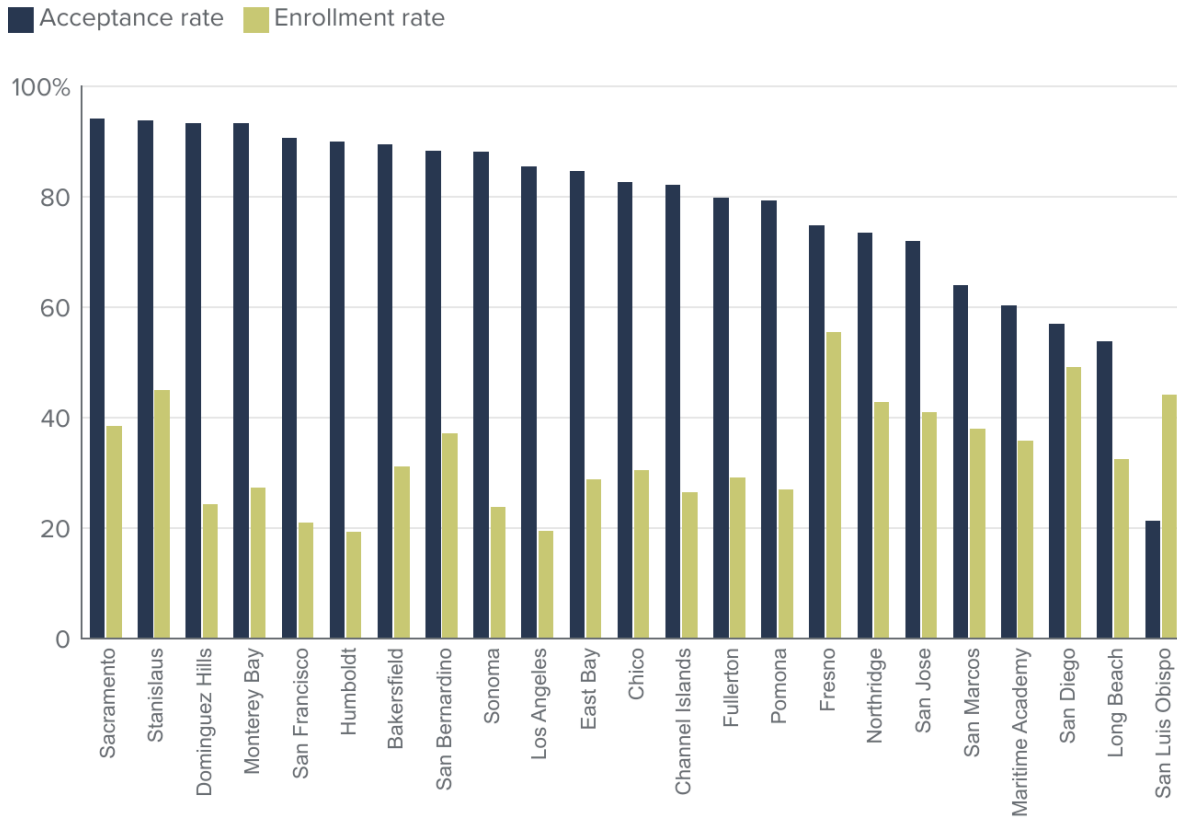
Admission and Enrollment Rates Are High Systemwide but Vary Widely across Campuses

The CSU system saw 91 percent of transfer applicants admitted to at least one campus for the fall 2024 term, and of those, 65 percent enrolled. However, both rates vary widely among the individual CSU campuses, influenced by factors including, but not limited to, campus selectivity, enrollment goals, and transfer agreements with local community colleges (Figure 2). On one extreme is Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, the most competitive and selective of the CSU campuses, with an acceptance rate of only 21 percent for transfer applicants. Other selective CSUs, though considerably less competitive than Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, include Cal State Long Beach (54%) and San Diego State (57%). And at the other extreme are campuses at Sacramento State, Stanislaus State, Dominguez Hills, and Monterey Bay, all with acceptance rates of over 93 percent.

Enrollment rates (the share of admitted applicants that enroll, also known as yield rates) are highest at Fresno State (55%), San Diego State (49%), Stanislaus State (45%), Cal Poly San Luis Obispo (44%), and Northridge (43%). Despite receiving the highest number of applications, the enrollment rate at Long Beach is 33 percent.

Figure 2

Acceptance and enrollment rates vary substantially across CSU campuses



SOURCE: California State University, Applications & Admissions Dashboard.

NOTES: Fall 2024 transfer applicants. Acceptance rate shows the percentage of applicants who were admitted. Enrollment rate represents the percentage of admitted students who enrolled.

CCC and CSU are working together to increase transfers

The transfer process is complex and in need of comprehensive reform.⁶ Transfer from CCC to CSU involves several steps: first, a community college student must become transfer eligible, then they need to apply to a four-year college or university, then they must be admitted, and finally they must decide to enroll. The California Community Colleges and the CSU system are actively collaborating to streamline the transfer process and make four-year degrees more accessible to students. Current efforts include:

The Associate Degree for Transfer: The ADT, established with legislation in 2010 (AB 1440), guarantees admission to one CSU campus for community college students who earn at least 60 of the 120 credits needed for a bachelor's degree in a specific major. Qualified ADT transfer students are guaranteed priority admission to a CSU with junior status, but not necessarily to a particular campus or program. There are currently 40 ADT pathways or majors offered across the CCC system. These represent the majors with the greatest number of CSU graduates annually.

Transfer Success Pathway: A dual admission program (launched for the graduating high school class of 2023 and beyond, and guided by the Postsecondary Education Trailer Bill AB 132) that guarantees future CSU admission to eligible students who are entering a California community college and who commit to transferring within three years. Students who are interested in a particular CSU major and campus can secure a guaranteed spot once they complete the requirements of their Transfer Success Pathway agreement. Students can map out their coursework using the CSU Transfer Planner portal to ensure they are on track.

CSU Transfer Planner: An online portal launched in 2023 that offers a centralized resource for community college students to research CSU campuses and degree programs. Within the planner, students are able to determine their Transfer Success Pathway eligibility, research CSU campuses and degree programs, track transferable units to minimize credit loss, and enter into a Transfer Success Pathway enrollment agreement with the university of their choice.

Local agreements: Individual CSUs have signed dozens of agreements with local community colleges to help those students transfer to their campuses through guaranteed admissions, dual enrollment, and clearer degree pathways.

Partnerships focusing on workforce needs: CCC and CSU have partnerships to increase the number of nurses and teachers in California. Twenty CSU universities provide ADN-to-BSN tracks, the majority of which offer hybrid and online program options. In addition, 15 CSUs work with 37 community colleges to provide concurrent enrollment nursing programs, which allow students to earn their ADN and BSN degrees in three years. Collaborative programs also create streamlined routes for CCC students to transfer to CSU campuses and pursue teaching credentials. The Teacher TRAC program is a successful example of this type of partnership.

Who Applies for Transfer?

Transfer applicants include a wide range of students, demographically and in terms of academic preparation.

6. The Community College Chancellor's Office has identified five major barriers: distinct systems, varying campus requirements, pathway complexity, uncertain credits, and disjointed financial aid.

In our sample, 48 percent of applicants are Latino, 26 percent white, 15 percent Asian, and 4.5 percent Black. More than half (57%) are female, 72 percent are 24 years old or younger, and 75 percent received a California Promise Grant or Pell Grant at some point during their CCC journey (see Technical Appendix Table B3).⁷

CSU transfer applicants who want to transfer with junior standing must have completed 60 semester transferable units as a minimum requirement for admission. The median student earned 71.5 transferable units in CCC before applying to CSU, with applicants in the bottom 25th percentile earning 62 and applicants in the top 75th percentile earning 85.

Seventeen percent of applicants applied with less than 60 units from the CCC system. Some of those students were deemed ineligible and denied admission, but others had earned credits through standardized external examinations—including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and College-Level Examination Program—or had credits from other colleges that we cannot track in our data.

The median CSU transfer applicant had a cumulative GPA of 3.13 (transferable units only) with applicants in the bottom 25th percentile having a GPA of 2.67 and applicants in the top 75th percentile having a GPA of 3.55.

Finally, 46 percent of all applicants had earned an Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) prior to applying, and an additional 22 percent had earned a local associate degree.

How Long Were Applicants Enrolled at CCC?

We find that the typical CSU applicant spends nine terms enrolled in the community college system prior to applying to CSU (with an interquartile range of six terms).⁸ However, some applicants are able to apply for transfer sooner, especially those who exhibited early momentum (Figure 3). For example, the typical student who successfully completed transfer-level math in their first year was able to apply to CSU after seven terms while the typical student who did not complete transfer-level math was not able to apply until attending for 10 terms.⁹ Other first-year outcomes (completing transfer-level English, or earning 24+ transferable units, and higher GPAs) are also correlated with more efficient transfer.

Students who are 25 or older, Black, or California College Promise Grant (CCPG) or Pell Grant recipients are less likely to meet these early milestones (see Technical Appendix Table B4), so it is not surprising that they are more likely to stay in CCC longer.¹⁰ Looking past first-year outcomes, students with higher cumulative GPAs tend to spend less time in CCC.

7. When comparing CSU applicants with CCC's student body we find that Latino students are equitably represented at 48 percent, females are slightly overrepresented (57% vs. 53%), and traditional-age applicants are significantly overrepresented (72% vs. 58%).

8. Those nine terms are not necessarily of continuous enrollment. The interquartile range is a measure of statistical dispersion, representing the spread of the middle 50 percent of a dataset. It's calculated by subtracting the first quartile from the third quartile of the data. The first quartile is the median of the lower half of the data, and the third quartile is the median of the upper half of the data.

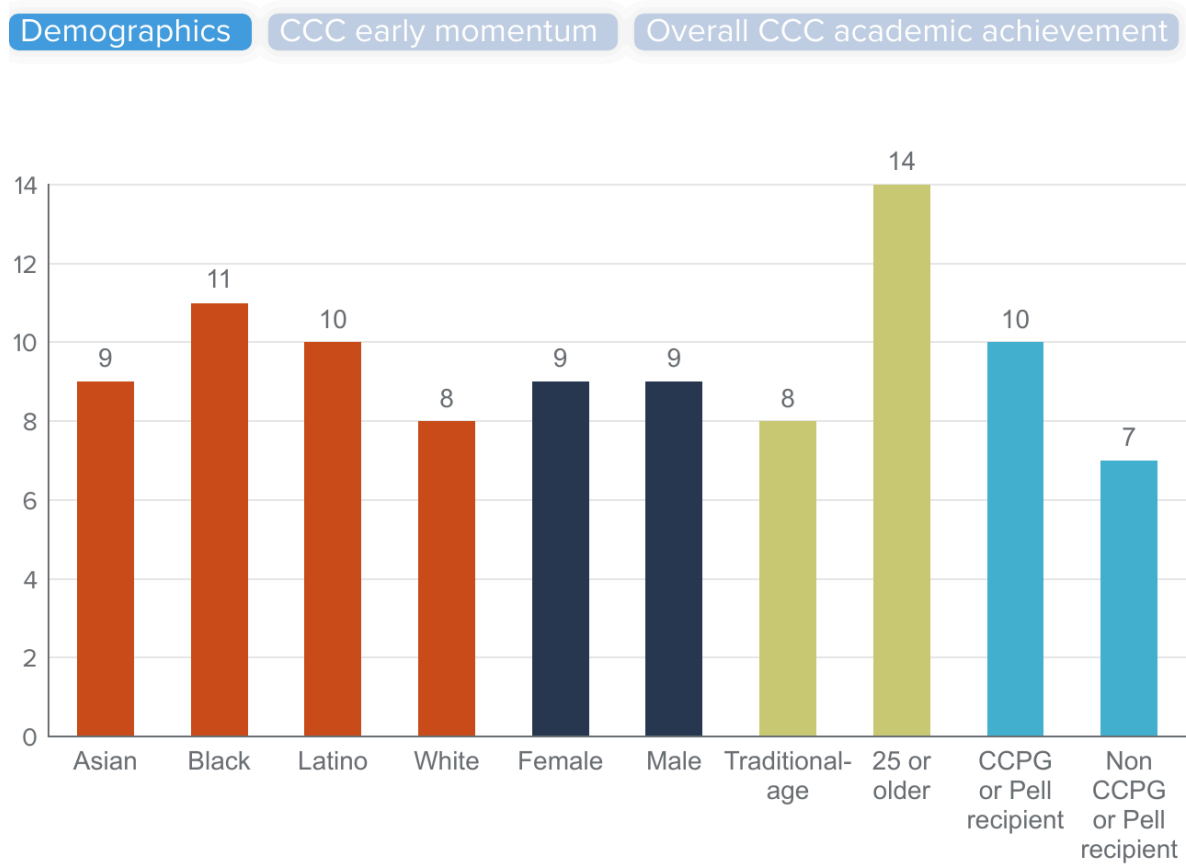
9. The typical applicant who started their community college journey as dual enrollee saves one term compared to those who did not. Promisingly, those who took transfer-level math or English while still in high school were able to apply to CSU after five terms enrolled in community college. Although these students represent only 2 percent of our sample, this is a promising result.

10. Black students and CCPG/Pell recipients are more likely to be 25 and older so there is a compounding effect.

Figure 3

Some students were enrolled at CCC much longer than others

Median number of terms enrolled in community college



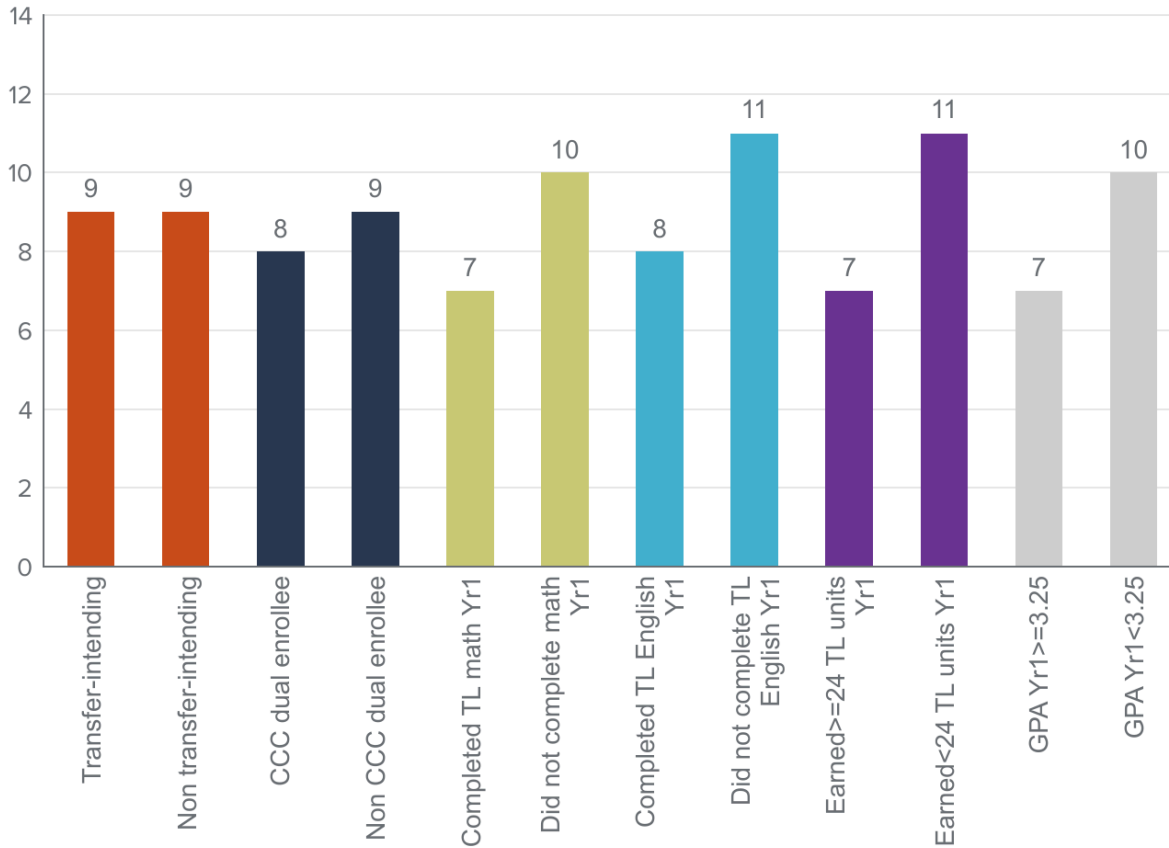
SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data.

NOTES: Restricted to students who applied for transfer to CSU. For a term to be included in the calculation, the student must have had at least one enrollment in a credit course. Includes summer terms. We are excluding for this calculation the three community colleges in the quarter system. Traditional-age refer to students 24 and younger. CCPG stands for California College Promise Grant.

Those who reached important milestones in their first year in CCC were able to apply for transfer sooner

Median number of terms enrolled in community college

Demographics **CCC early momentum** Overall CCC academic achievement



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data.

NOTES: Restricted to students who applied for transfer to CSU. For a term to be included in the calculation, the student must have had at least one enrollment in a credit course. Includes summer terms. We are excluding for this calculation the three community colleges in the quarter system.

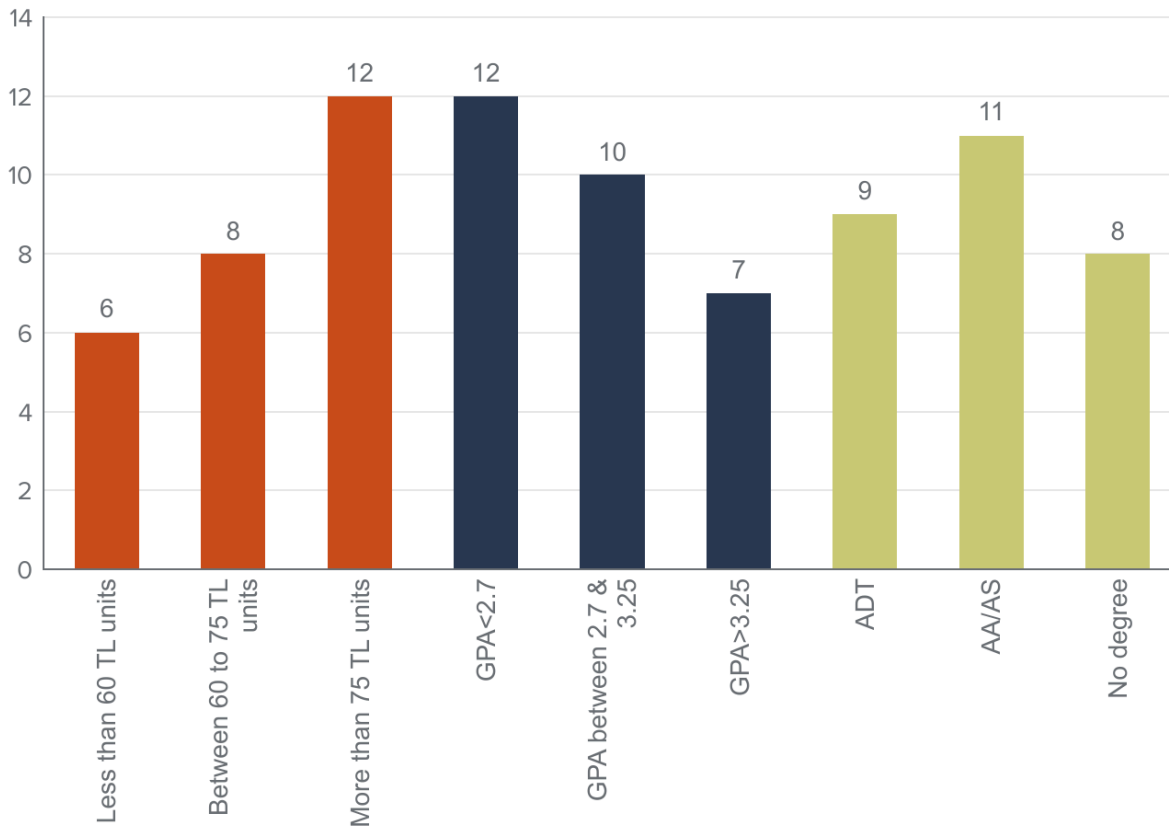
Higher GPAs are correlated with less time enrolled in CCC

Median number of terms enrolled in community college

Demographics

CCC early momentum

Overall CCC academic achievement



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data.

NOTES: Restricted to students who applied for transfer to CSU. For a term to be included in the calculation, the student must have had at least one enrollment in a credit course. Includes summer terms. We are excluding for this calculation the three community colleges in the quarter system.

CSU transfer requirements

To be admitted to the California State University as an upper-division transfer (i.e., junior standing) students must:

- have completed at least 60 semester (90 quarter) units of transferable college credit, of which 30 semester (45 quarter) units are at a level equivalent to general education courses;
- have attained a grade point average of 2.0 or better across all transferable college courses. In high-demand majors and campuses, a higher GPA may be required;
- be in good standing at the last college or university attended. In other words, this means that a student would be eligible to re-enroll at their last college or university;
- have completed the “Golden Four” courses (oral communication, written communication, critical thinking, mathematics/quantitative reasoning) with a C- or better.

Transfer students may earn general education or lower-division major credits by taking a CSU-accepted external examination in place of a course. The CSU faculties have determined the passing scores, minimum units of credit earned, and certification area of standardized external examinations. Each campus in the California State University system determines how it will apply credits earned by external examinations toward the degree major.

Campuses require that all admission requirements must be completed by the end of spring for fall admission or by the end of fall for spring admission. About a third of campuses expect admission requirements for spring semester to be completed by the end of the prior summer. More details are available [here](#).

Many Qualified Students Do Not Apply

A large number of community college students who did not apply to CSU would have likely qualified for admission. One way to assess the size of this group is by examining transfer outcomes for students who earned an ADT. (Many students who did not earn an ADT also appear to be likely to have gained admission had they applied, but ADT recipients offer a convenient test group.)

Our analysis of 276,400 ADT recipients between academic years 2018–19 and 2022–23 reveals that 21 percent never applied to CSU. For the most part, ADT recipients who did not apply to CSU look similar to those who applied, with some exceptions (see Technical Appendix Table B5). They were more likely to be white (29% vs. 23%) and 25 or older (33% vs. 26%). They were also more likely to have higher cumulative GPAs (51% have GPAs greater than 3.25 vs. 45%).

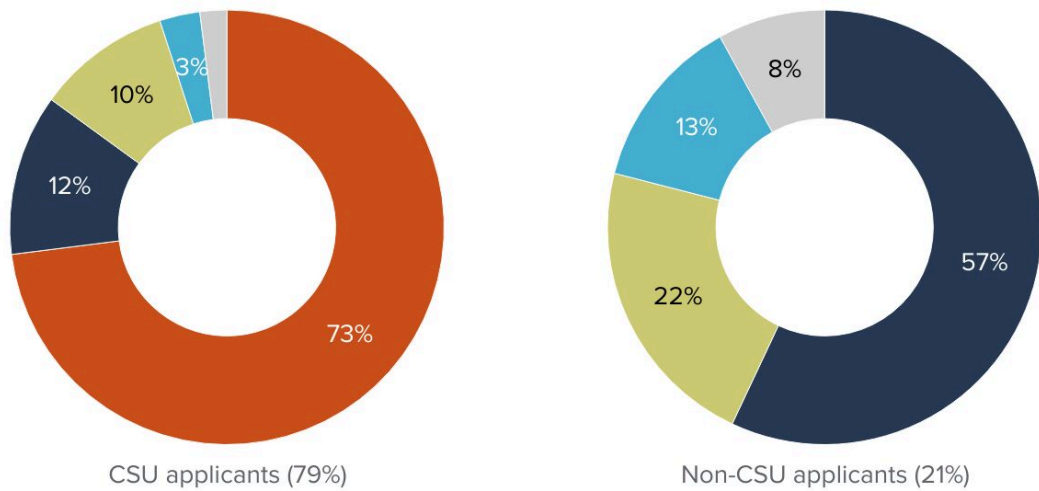
Among ADT recipients who did not apply to CSU, 43 percent enrolled in some other university—with a slight majority choosing UC (which is consistent with their higher cumulative GPAs). But disturbingly, more than half (57%, nearly 33,000 students in our sample) did not have records in the NSC data through fall 2023, suggesting that they did not transfer to any four-year college (Figure 4).¹¹ If we add these to the nearly 26,000 ADT recipients who applied to CSU but who did not seem to have enrolled in a four-year institution, then we have 59,000 ADT recipients who did not continue their path to a bachelor’s degree.

11. See Technical Appendix Table B6 for the demographic characteristics and academic backgrounds of students enrolling in each type of institution and those who did not enroll anywhere.

The big question is why. It is possible that some of these students never intended to transfer but earned an ADT because their advisors suggested it. However, we find that 87 percent of ADT recipients declared a transfer goal while in CCC. It is also possible that some of these students felt that a four-year degree was out of reach, whether because of financial considerations, inability to relocate due to family responsibilities, or because they needed to prioritize work. The strong labor market for workers without a college degree that characterized most of our period of analysis increased the immediate opportunity cost of attending college and could be another factor at play (Lafortune and Bohn 2023).¹² Information about labor market outcomes for these students could help gain a better understanding of economic forces influencing this population.

Figure 4
The majority of ADT earners who did not apply to CSU ended up not enrolling in a four-year institution

■ California State University
 ■ Did not enroll at a four-year institution
 ■ University of California
■ Out-of-state institution
 ■ In-state private institution



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data, CSU student-level application data, and National Student Clearinghouse data.

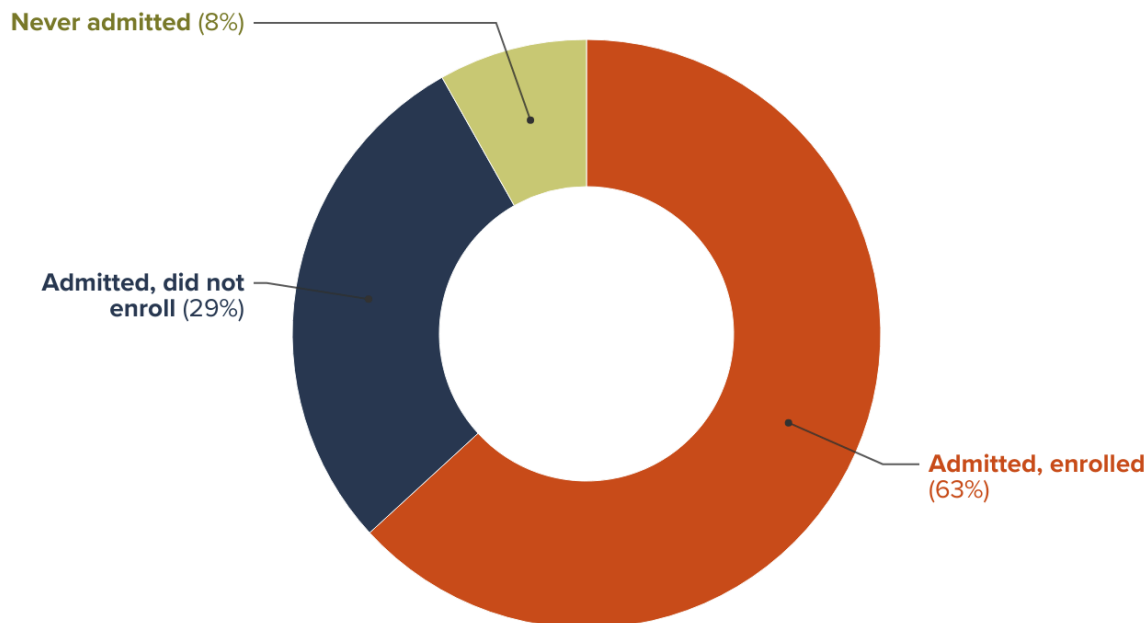
NOTES: Included are 276,400 students who earned an ADT between academic years 2018–19 and 2022–23. One limitation of the NSC data is record blocking. Records can be blocked by the student (i.e., under FERPA the student indicates that they do not want their college records to be disclosed) or less commonly by the school. Typically, this proportion is approximately 10 percent. Since individual students with blocked records are not identified, they cannot be distinguished from students who truly did not enroll in another four-year institution. This means that there is a proportion of students who did enroll (and possibly earned a degree) that show up as “no record found” in the NSC data. We have NSC data through fall 2023, so it is possible that some “no record found” students have enrolled after that. In this figure “no record found” = Did not enroll in a four-year institution.

12. Between 2019 and 20023, low-wage workers experienced historically fast real wage growth (Gould and DeCourcy 2024).

Admission Rates Are High for CCC Applicants to CSU

The good news is that the vast majority of CCC students who *last* applied to CSU between fall 2018 and fall 2023 were admitted to at least one campus (92%; Figure 5). This suggests that most community college students who go through the application process have met the minimum academic criteria to be eligible to transfer (see text box above).¹³

Figure 5
The vast majority of transfer students who apply to a CSU campus are admitted



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: Included are 460,524 students who last applied to CSU in a fall term between 2018 and 2023. For these students, we account for all their application history (including any spring, summer, or winter applications) through spring 2024.

Admissions are determined at the campus level and are influenced by department-specific requirements and capacity limitations.¹⁴ This means that a competitive applicant at one campus may not be competitive at another. So, it is not surprising that students often apply to multiple campuses and apply in more than one term.

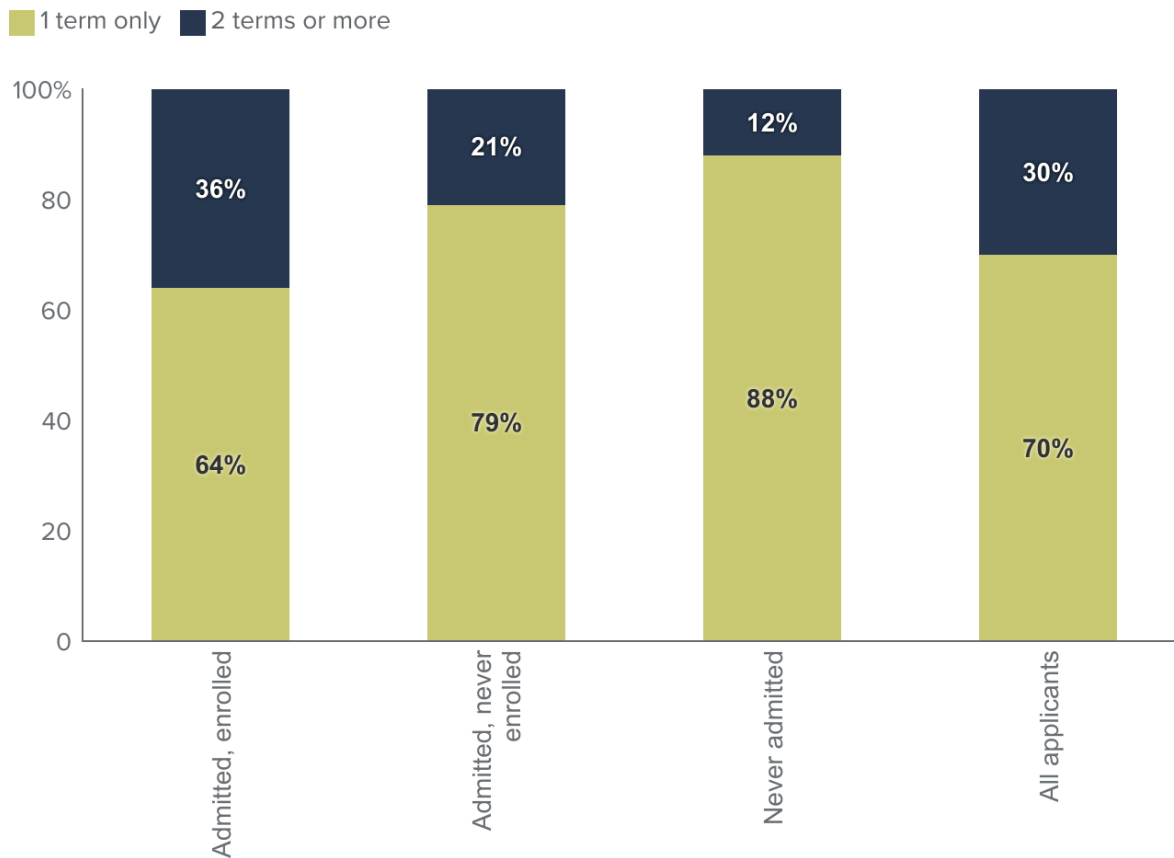
13. According to official systemwide data for fall 2020 through fall 2024, 36.6 percent of all denied applicants were denied because they were ineligible, 29.6 percent because their application was incomplete, and 33.8 percent were denied despite being eligible (see Technical Appendix Table B7).

14. Some campuses and some majors are “impacted,” meaning there is not enough capacity to admit all qualified students. For example, if applying to an impacted program, students may be admitted at the campus of their choice but be placed in another major that is not impacted or may be redirected or referred to another campus where that major is available.

Persistence seems to pay off. A large share (36%) of those who end up enrolling applied in more than one term (Figure 6). It is possible that these students were initially rejected from the campus of their choice (or to all campuses), took more community college classes, and then gained admission. Indeed, 47 percent of students who applied in more than one term had all their applications denied the first time around but were admitted at a later term (see Technical Appendix Figure B4).

At the other extreme, the vast majority of students (88%) who were never admitted applied in one term only, and 61 percent of those applied to only to one campus. These students might have been discouraged by the initial rejection or did not see other campuses as viable options. (As we will show later in the report, some of these students enrolled elsewhere but many decided not to pursue a four-year degree.)

Figure 6
Students who were admitted and enrolled were the most likely to have applied in more than one term



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: Included are 460,524 students who last applied to CSU in a fall term between 2018 and 2023. For these students, we account for all their application history (including any spring, summer, or winter applications) through spring 2024.

Admission Rates Are High across a Broad Set of Applicant Characteristics

Although there is some variation across applicants' academic and demographic characteristics, admission rates are high across the board (see Technical Appendix Table B8).

Across racial and ethnic lines, the admission rate for Black applicants, 88%, is 3.8 percentage points below the overall rate. The difference remains even after we control for other demographic and academic characteristics.¹⁵

Early markers of academic success in CCC made applicants slightly more likely to get admitted (Figure 7, panel 2).¹⁶ For example, admission rates for students who took transfer-level math or English in their first year were 1.5 percentage points higher than those who did not meet that early milestone. The same was true for those who earned a high first-year GPA and those who earned 24 transferable units or more in their first year. CCC dual enrollment students—those who took community college classes while still in high school—were admitted at the same rate as non-dual enrollment applicants. Applicants who did not state a transfer goal while in community college were least likely to be admitted (88%), suggesting that stating a transfer goal early on seems to be correlated with successful outcomes.

Not surprisingly, the primary predictor of admittance is a transfer applicant's overall academic record (Figure 7, panel 3). Virtually all ADT applicants were admitted (97%, or 5.2 percentage points above the overall admission rate).¹⁷ Having a high GPA (3.25 or higher) was also associated with high rate of admittance (+2.2pp).

15. Compared with all applicants, Black applicants were more likely to apply to CSU Dominguez Hills, CSU East Bay, CSU San Bernardino, CSU Bakersfield, CSU Los Angeles, and CSU Sacramento.

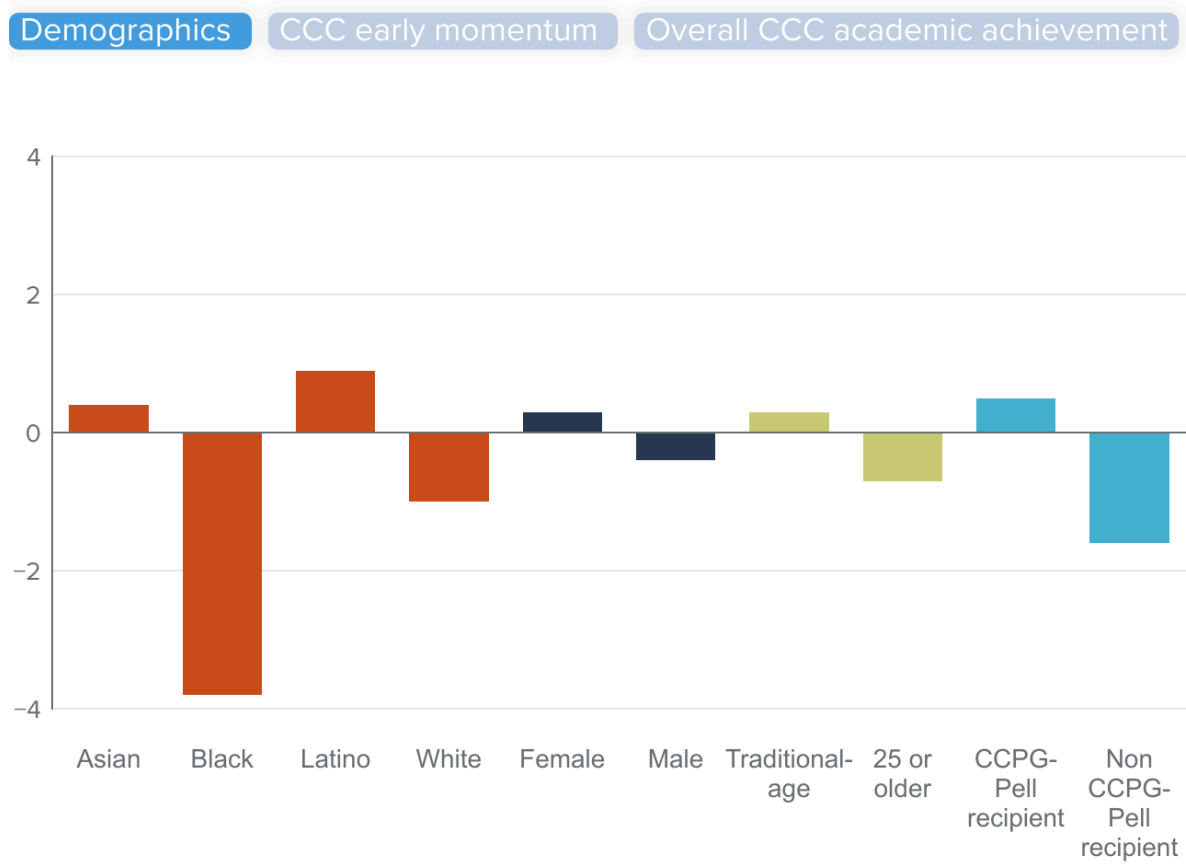
16. All differences highlighted in this report are statistically significant.

17. ADT earners who were not admitted (about 6,000 in our sample) most likely applied to a major that was not considered similar to their ADT.

Figure 7

Despite high acceptance rates, Black applicants lagged behind peers

Percent point difference from the average admit rate in our sample (92%)

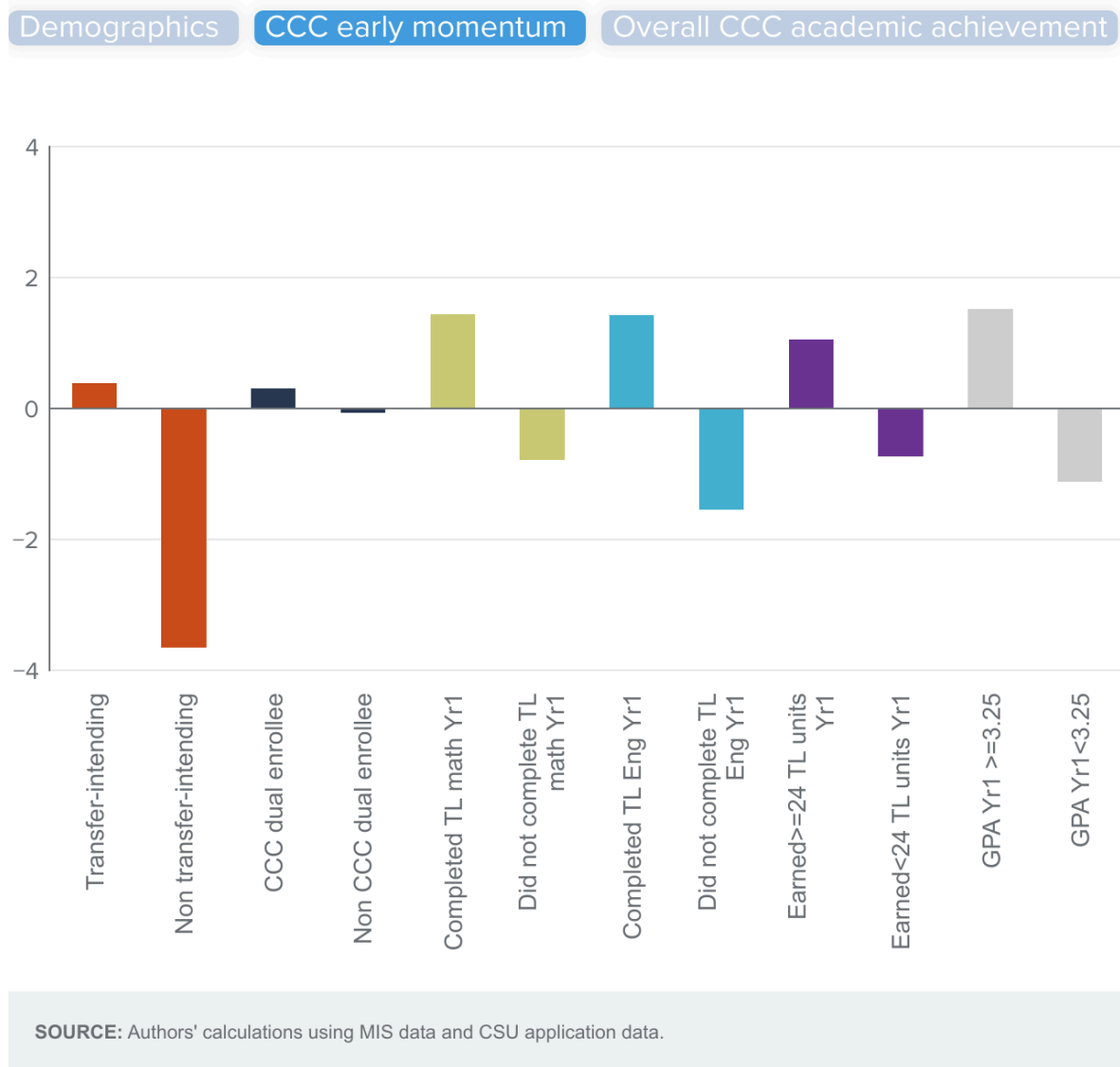


SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data and CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: Traditional-age refer to students 24 and younger. CCPG stands for California College Promise Grant.

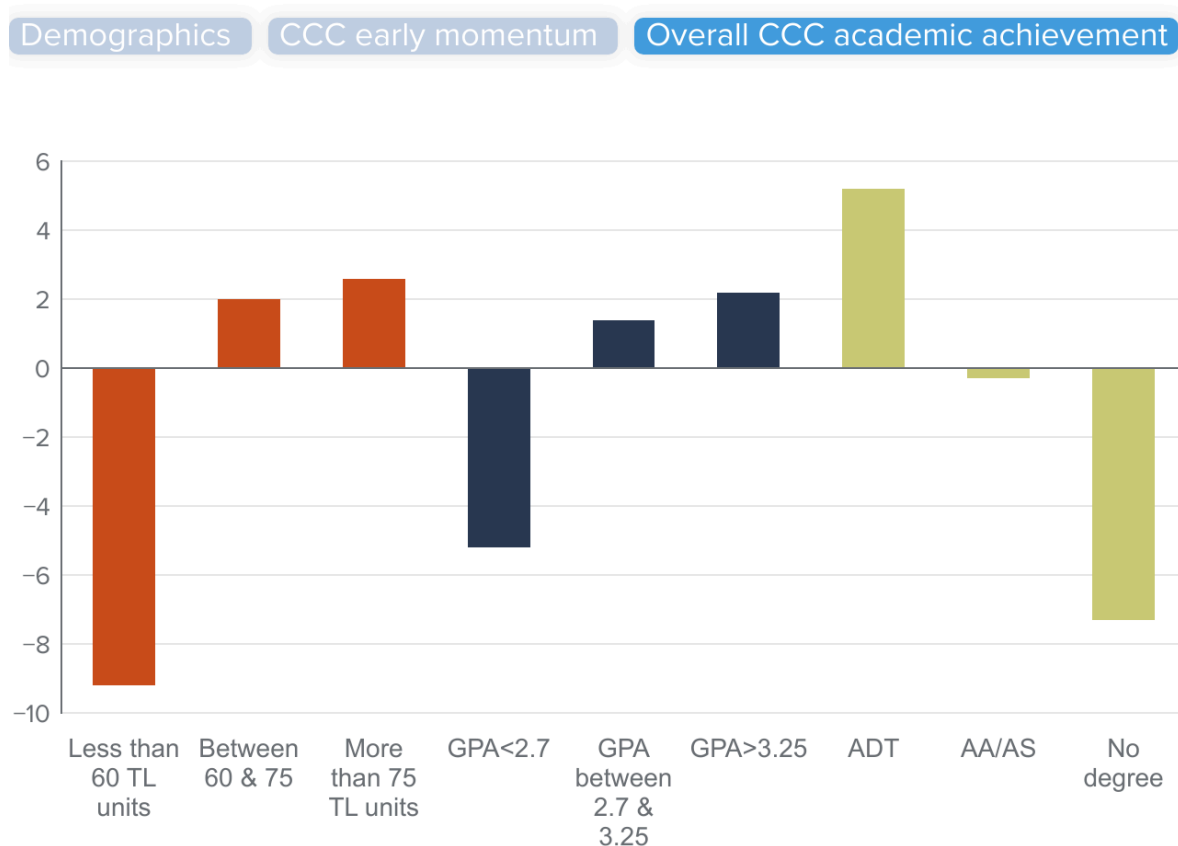
Students who demonstrate strong academic performance in their first year in CCC were slightly more likely to be admitted than those who did not

Percent point difference from the average admit rate in our sample (92%)



Most students who earned less than 60 TL units are ineligible so it is not surprising that they see lower admission rates

Percent point difference from the average admit rate in our sample (92%)



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data and CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: It is possible that some of the students that earned less than 60 TL units in CCC, earned credits through standardized external examinations, or had credits from other colleges and therefore could be eligible. Unfortunately, we cannot track those units in our data.

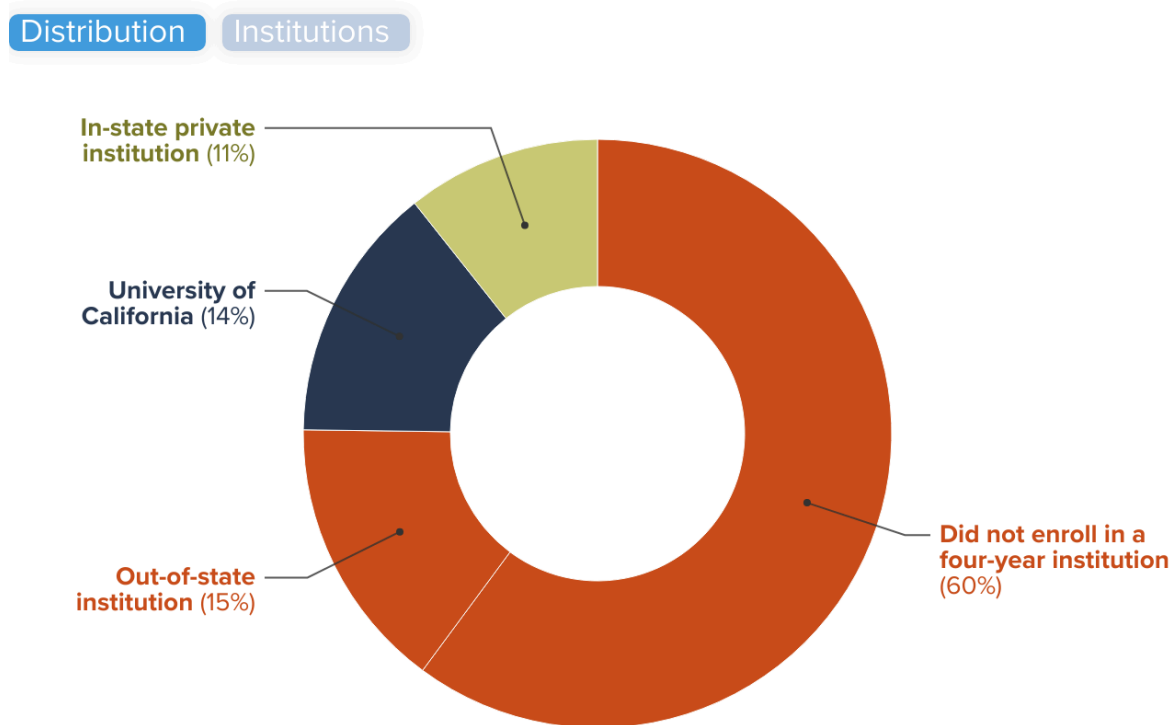
What Happens to Those Who Are Never Admitted to CSU?

In our sample, almost 38,000 applicants (or 8%) were never admitted to a CSU campus.¹⁸ Six in 10 students in this group did not appear to have enrolled in a four-year institution in California or elsewhere, according to our analysis of NSC data (Figure 8). Of the remaining 40 percent, 15 percent went to out-of-state institutions, 14 percent to UC, and 11 percent went to a private college in California.

18. This sample is composed of those who applied for the last time to a CSU campus in the fall terms between 2018 and 2023.

Figure 8

Six in ten applicants who were never admitted to a CSU campus did not enroll in another four-year institution



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using National Student Clearinghouse (CCC match) and CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: Based on 37,631 applicants who were never admitted to a CSU campus. One limitation of the NSC data is record blocking. Records can be blocked by the student (i.e., under FERPA the student indicates that they do not want their college records to be disclosed) or less commonly by the school. Typically, this proportion is approximately 10 percent. Since individual students with blocked records are not identified, they cannot be distinguished from students who truly did not enroll in another four-year institution. This means that there is a proportion of students who did enroll (and possibly earned a degree) that show up as "no record found" in the NSC data. We have NSC data through fall 2023, so it is possible that some "no record found" students have enrolled after that. In this figure "no record found" = Did not enroll in a four-year institution.

Main destinations of those who were never admitted to CSU

Percent

Distribution **Institutions**

Institution	Type	State	Segment	Acceptance rate	Graduation rate total cohort	Students with federal student loans	Share exclusively in distance education	Share of never admitted CSU applicants
UC San Diego	PUB	CA	UC	25	88	24	1	7
Arizona State University Campus Immersion	PUB	AZ	OOS	90	68	28	6	6
UC Riverside	PUB	CA	UC	63	77	33	1	5
UC Santa Barbara	PUB	CA	UC	28	85	20	0	5
UC Davis	PUB	CA	UC	42	85	23	0	4
UC Los Angeles	PUB	CA	UC	9	93	21	0	4
UC Irvine	PUB	CA	UC	26	86	22	1	4
UC Santa Cruz	PUB	CA	UC	63	74	29	1	4
National University	PNFP	CA	ISP	n.d.	50	23	75	3
UC Berkeley	PUB	CA	UC	12	93	18	0	3
Grand Canyon University	PFP	AZ	OOS	60	43	53	67	3
California Baptist University	PNFP	CA	ISP	74	60	63	20	2
Western Governors University	PNFP	UT	OOS	n.d.	51	43	100	2
Southern New Hampshire University	PNFP	NH	OOS	96	45	59	97	2
West Coast University-Los Angeles	PFP	CA	ISP	n.d.	44	88	2	1
University Of Phoenix-Arizona	PFP	AZ	OOS	n.d.	20	60	100	1
Fresno Pacific University	PNFP	CA	ISP	58	56	47	21	1
University Of Southern California	PNFP	CA	ISP	10	92	25	0	1

SOURCE: Authors' calculations using National Student Clearinghouse (CCC match), CSU student-level application data, and IPEDS data.

Those who were never admitted to a CSU campus and enrolled in a UC campus (about 5,300 applicants in our sample) represent an interesting group. Almost half (48%) of the applications submitted by these students were for three campuses: San Diego State (19%), Cal Poly San Luis Obispo (17%), and Cal State Long Beach (12%).¹⁹ These are the most selective CSUs, with acceptance rates of 57, 21, and 54 percent, respectively, for fall 2024. This pattern is consistent with the fact that these applicants had strong academic records despite being turned away by CSU (see Technical Appendix Table B9). UC San Diego received 18 percent of all CSU “never admitted” applicants that enrolled in a UC campus; UC Riverside and UC Santa Barbara were next in terms of enrollment.

A similar number of never-admittees to the CSU (5,675 applicants) enrolled in an out-of-state institution (58% enrolled in a public institution, 26% in a private nonprofit institution, and 16% in a for-profit institution). Arizona State University, Grand Canyon University, Western Governors University, Southern New Hampshire University, and University of Phoenix together enrolled 36 percent of these applicants (Figure 8, panel 2).²⁰

While the flexibility that some of these out-of-state institutions offer could be very attractive to some students, the fact is that these particular institutions have low graduation rates (Guzman, McGuinness, and Turner 2025). White and Black students were overrepresented among those enrolling in out-of-state colleges (see Technical Appendix Table B9). Almost half of these students (47%) earned less than 60 transferable units while in CCC, indicating that their CSU admissions were most likely denied because they did not meet the minimum requirements for admission. Moreover, students who enrolled in these five universities had a median GPA of 2.7, which is noticeably below the median GPA among all applicants admitted to CSU. For those who enrolled at an in-state private institution, National University—which also has a large online presence and a low graduation rate—was the main destination.

Unsurprisingly, applicants with weaker academic backgrounds (lack of early momentum, less than 60 transferable units, lower GPA, no degree), and older applicants were overrepresented among those who do not appear to have enrolled in any four-year institution (22,600 applicants). However, about 7,500 applicants in this group (a third) either earned an ADT or earned at least 60 transferable units with a GPA of 3.25 or higher.

Enrollment Rates Are High Too

The large majority (69%) of admitted transfer applicants choose to enroll in CSU.²¹ In general, as shown in Figure 9, we find that those most likely to enroll were students with an ADT (+5.7pp), students with mid-range GPAs (+3.9pp), and students who earned between 60 and 75 transfer-level units (+2.8pp). Across racial and ethnic lines, Latino students were more likely to enroll than their peers (+3.2pp). This is consistent

19. The distribution of applications submitted by those applicants who were never admitted is the one deviates notably from the overall distribution of applicants (see Technical Appendix Figure B5, panel 3). We find that, in general, these students were more likely to apply to campuses with lower admission rates.

20. The increased popularity of these “mega universities” seems to be driven by the flexibility and accessibility that comes with their large online offerings, which appeal to a growing segment of the student population seeking alternatives to traditional higher education models.

21. It is hard to compare yield rates with other universities anywhere in the country because of the outsized role that transfers play in our state. In the University of California, yield rates are higher overall and among transfer students.

with the fact that CSU is a highly popular choice among Latino students, with 21 of the system's campuses designated Hispanic-Serving Institutions.²²

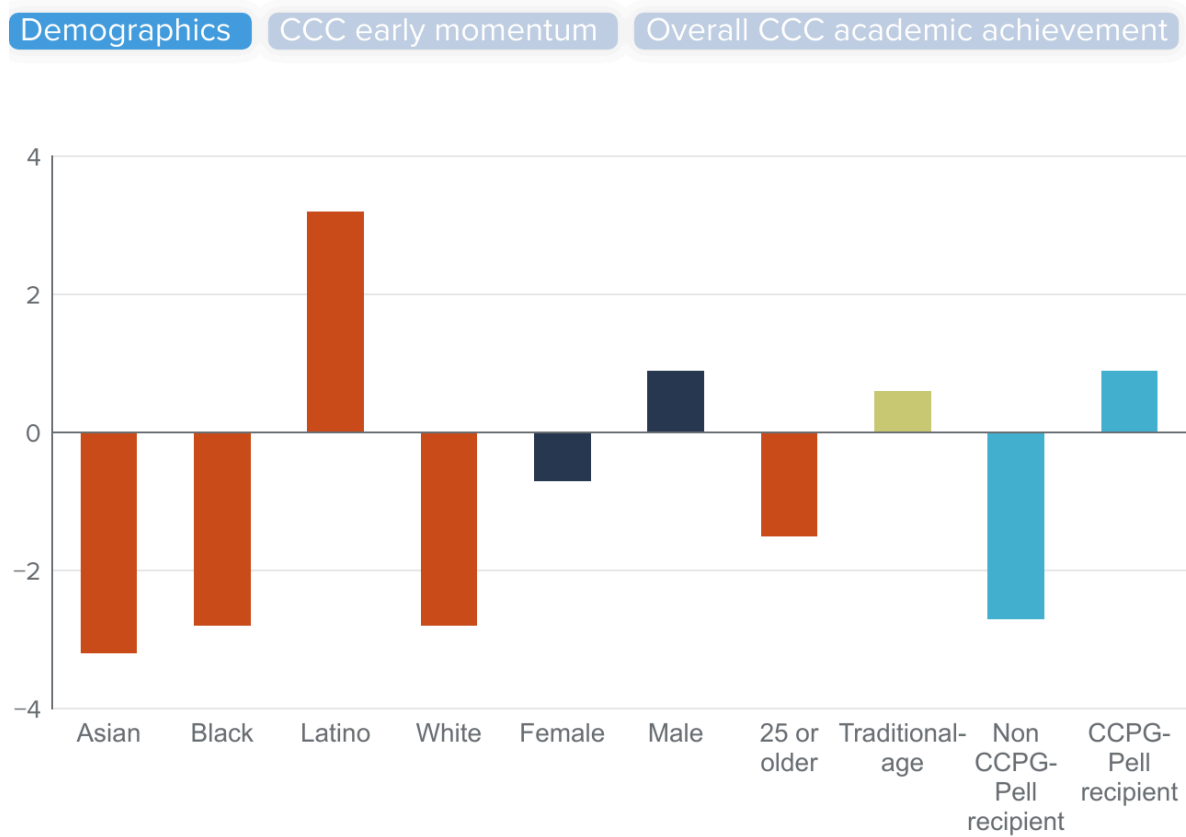
Meanwhile, 31 percent of those admitted do not enroll at CSU. The students least likely to enroll were those who never declared a transfer goal (-4.4pp), those without any degree (-6.6pp), those who earned less than 60 transferable units (-7.2pp), and those in the higher GPA band (-4.2pp).

22. Hispanic-Serving Institutions are colleges or universities where at least 25 percent of the undergraduate, full-time enrollment is Hispanic; and at least half of the institution's degree-seeking students must be low-income. This designation has historically allowed eligible institutions to compete for federal funding to expand and enhance educational opportunities for their students, including those of Hispanic descent.

Figure 9

Latino applicants admitted to CSU are the most likely to enroll

Percent point difference from the average yield rate in our sample (69%)

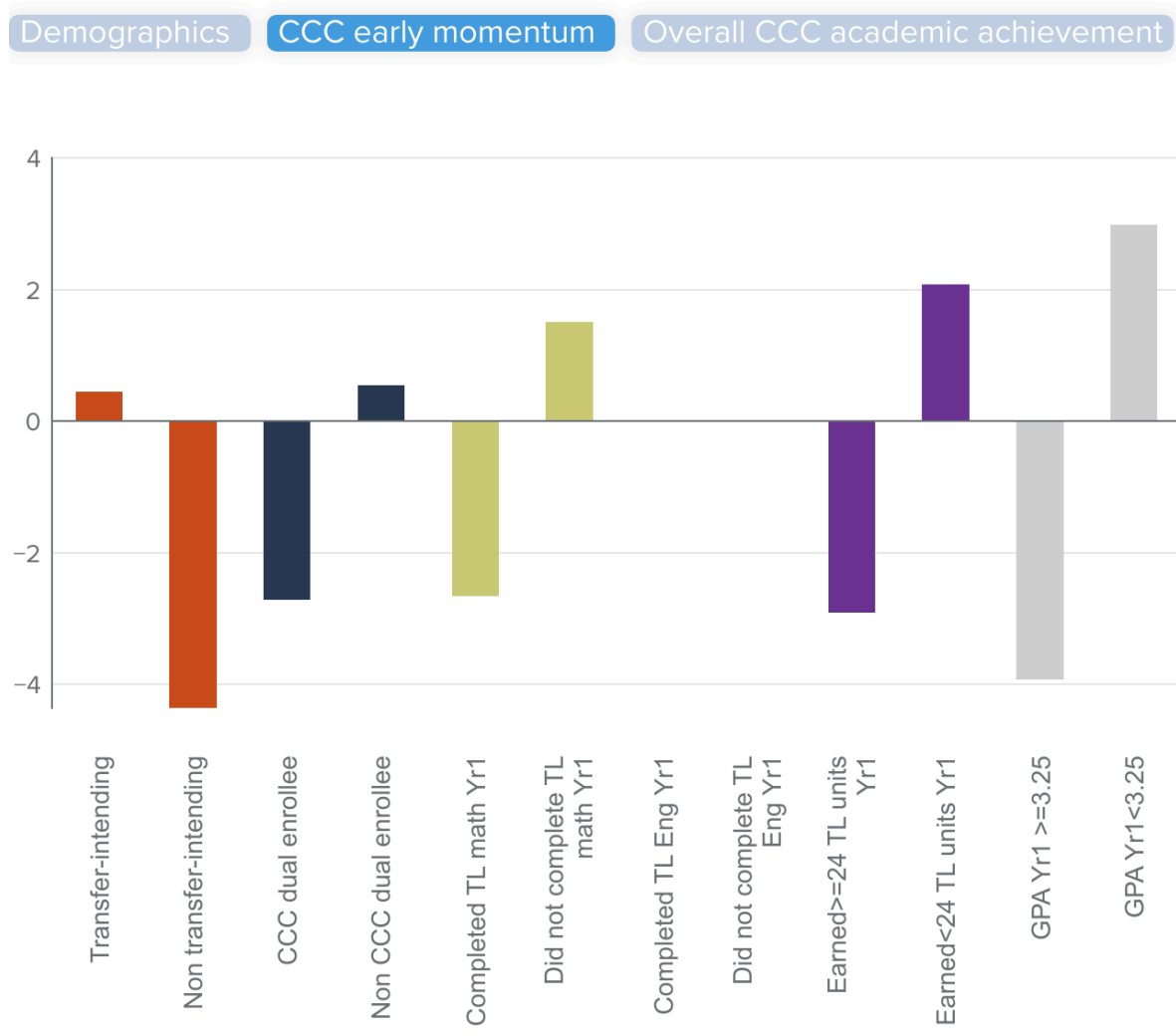


SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data and CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: Traditional-age refers to students 24 and younger. CCPG stands for California College Promise Grant.

Yield rates among applicants with better early CCC educational markers are lower than average

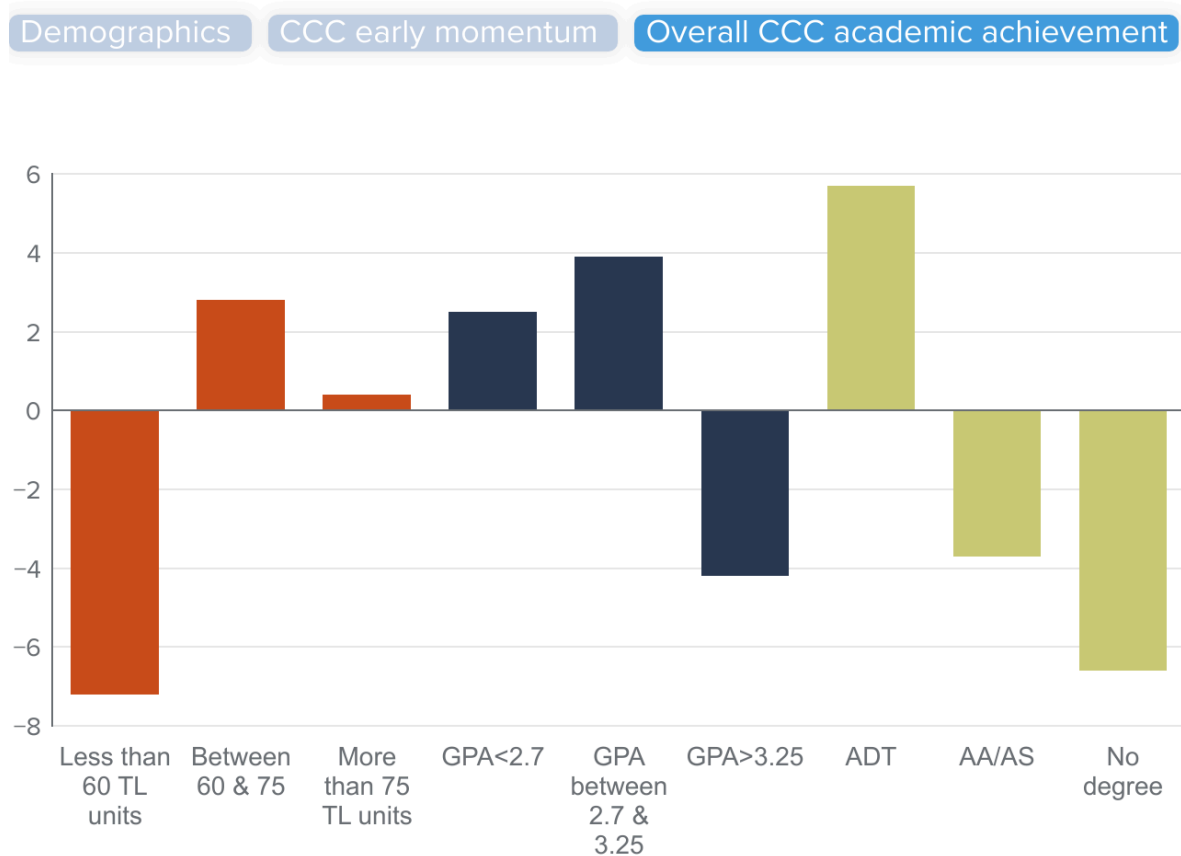
Percent point difference from the average yield rate in our sample (69%)



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data and CSU student-level application data.

Yield rates are higher among ADT earners who are admitted to CSU

Percent point difference from the average yield rate in our sample (69%)



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data and CSU student-level application data.

What Happens to Those Who Are Admitted but Do Not Enroll?

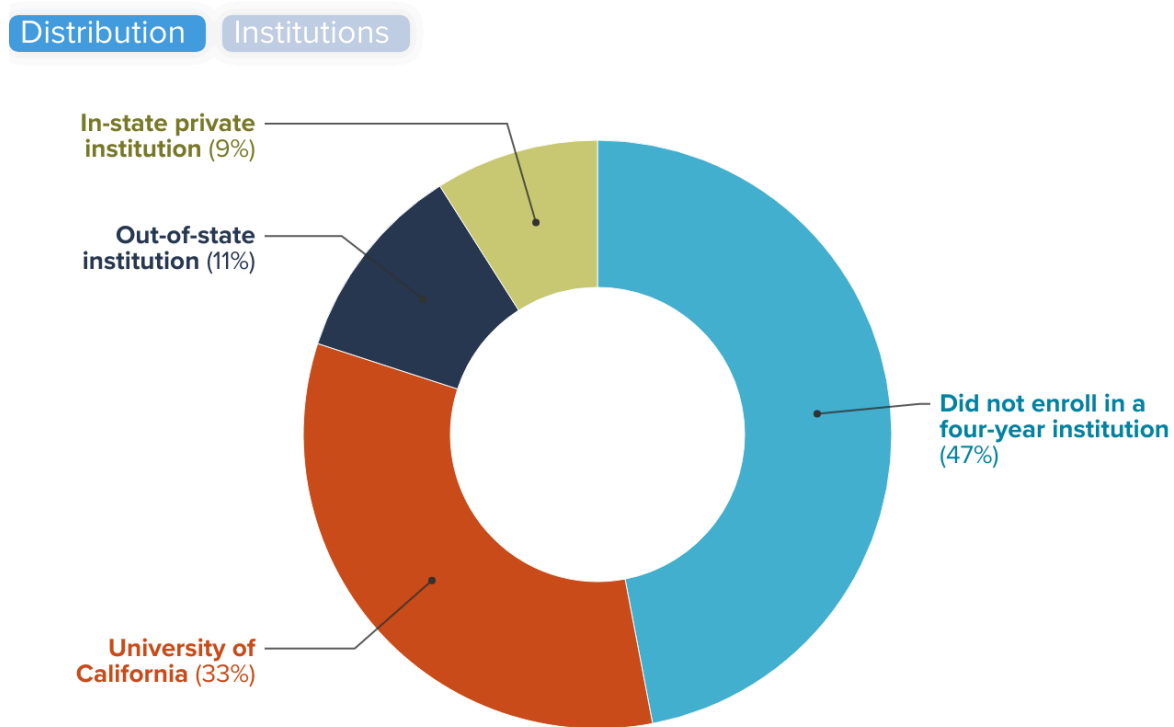
A third of CSU applicants who were admitted but decided not to enroll ended up in an UC campus instead (Figure 10).²³ UC San Diego, UC Irvine, and UCLA were the preferred campuses.²⁴ Students making this choice were more likely to be Asian and of traditional college-going age. They were also more likely to have taken dual enrollment courses, completed math/English in their first year in CCC, earned a GPA of 3.25 or higher, and accumulated more than 75 units before transferring.

23. 43,000 applicants in our analytical sample, which is composed of those who last applied to CSU in a fall term between 2018 and 2023.

24. These three campuses were the only ones who met the UC goal to enroll one new California resident transfer student for every two new California resident freshmen, or 67 percent new resident freshmen to 33 percent new resident transfer students.

Figure 10

A third of students who were admitted but did not enroll in CSU, enrolled in UC



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using National Student Clearinghouse (CCC match) and CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: Based on 131,883 students who were admitted to at least one CSU campus but did not enroll in CSU. One limitation of the NSC data is record blocking. Records can be blocked by the student (i.e., under FERPA the student indicates that they do not want their college records to be disclosed) or less commonly by the school. Typically, this proportion is approximately 10 percent. Since individual students with blocked records are not identified, they cannot be distinguished from students who truly did not enroll in another four-year institution. This means that there is a proportion of students who did enroll (and possibly earned a degree) that show up as "no record found" in the NSC data. We have NSC data through fall 2023, so it is possible that some "no record found" students have enrolled after that. In this figure "no record found" = Did not enroll in a four-year institution.

Top 21 destinations among CSU applicants who enrolled in a 4-year university

Distribution

Institutions

Institution	State	Segment	Admitted to at least one campus but did not enroll
UC-San Diego	CA	UC	9.6%
UC-Irvine	CA	UC	9.4%
UC-Los Angeles	CA	UC	8.9%
UC-Davis	CA	UC	8.7%
UC-Berkeley	CA	UC	7.1%
UC-Santa Barbara	CA	UC	6.4%
UC-Riverside	CA	UC	6.4%
UC-Santa Cruz	CA	UC	5.0%
Arizona State University Campus Immersion	AZ	OOS	3.2%
University of Southern California	CA	ISP	1.8%
National University	CA	ISP	1.3%
Grand Canyon University	AZ	OOS	1.3%
California Baptist University	CA	ISP	1.0%
Western Governors University	UT	OOS	1.0%
Southern New Hampshire University	NH	OOS	0.9%
Chapman University	CA	ISP	0.8%
Fresno Pacific University	CA	ISP	0.7%
UC-Merced	CA	UC	0.7%
University of San Francisco	CA	ISP	0.7%
West Coast University-Los Angeles	CA	ISP	0.6%
University of Phoenix-Arizona	AZ	OOS	0.6%

SOURCE: Authors' calculations using National Student Clearinghouse (CCC match) and CSU application data.

NOTES: Restricted to students who enrolled in a four-year institution any time after applying to CSU for the first time. These 21 institutions represent 76 percent of those admitted to at least one CSU campus but who decided not to enroll (69,183 students). Caveat: While the NSC provides extensive data, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations due to non-participating institutions and student privacy choices when interpreting the data.

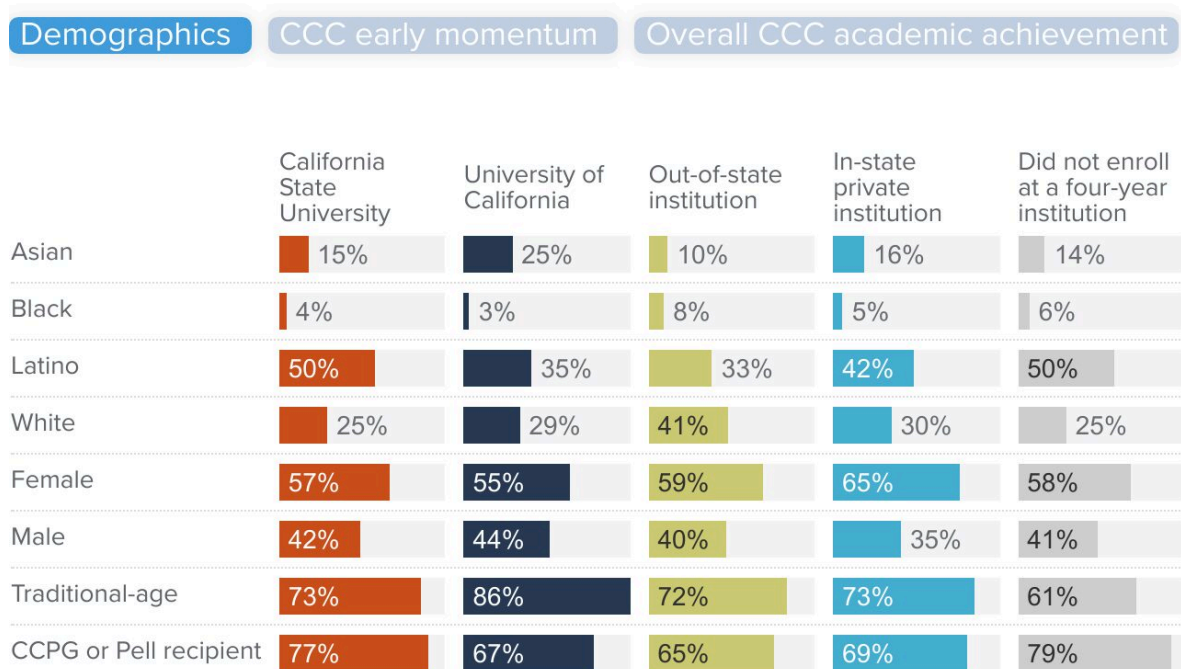
In contrast are the students who did not enroll in a four-year institution in California or anywhere else; this group comprises almost half of those admitted to CSU but who decided not to enroll (47%, or 62,700

applicants).²⁵ Black students, Latino students, students with GPAs below 2.7, those who earned less than 60 transfer-level units in CCC, and those without a degree were more likely to be in this group (Figure 11; Technical Appendix Table B10).

25. This number needs to be examined with caution: while the NSC provides extensive data, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations due to student privacy choices when interpreting the data. Nonetheless, assuming a 10 percent blockage rate, it is likely that at least 42 percent of admittees who did not enroll in CSU (or 56,000 individuals) did not attend any four-year college. This represents a lost opportunity for CSU and for those applicants and should be a central focus in improving transfer rates.

Figure 11

CSU admittees who end up enrolling in other institutions have distinct characteristics

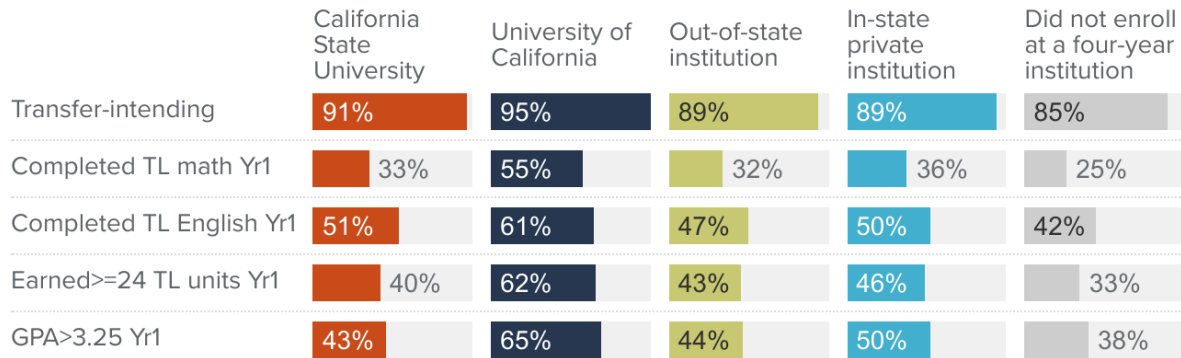


SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data, National Student Clearinghouse (CCC match), and CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: The figure shows the share of students in the category among all admittees who enrolled in a given institution type (i.e., 16% of CSU admittees who enrolled in an in-state private institution are Asian). Included are students who enrolled in CUS (291,010); students who were admitted to at least one CSU campus but decided to enroll in another four-year institution (69,183), and students who did not enroll in another four-year institution (62,700).

CSU admittees who did not enroll in another four-year institution were less likely to have shown early momentum

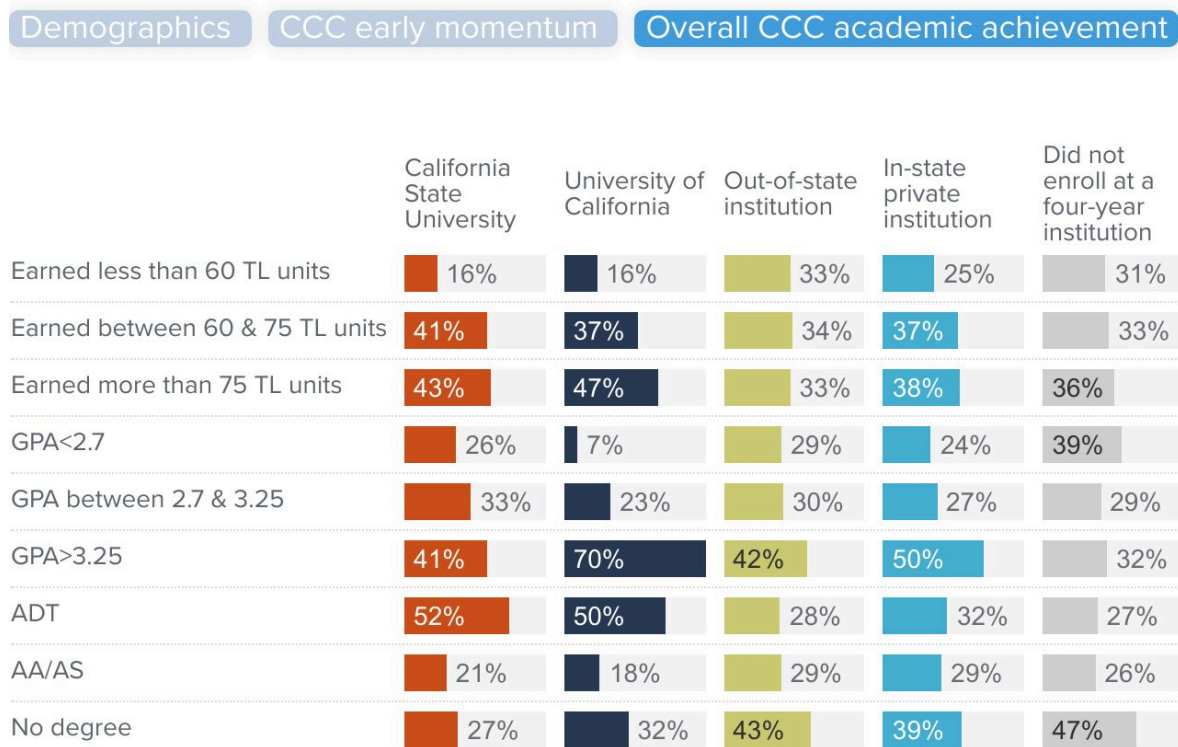
Demographics **CCC early momentum** Overall CCC academic achievement



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data, National Student Clearinghouse (CCC match), and CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: The figure shows the share of students in the category among all admittees who enrolled in a given institution type (i.e., 36% of CSU admittees who enrolled in an in-state private institution completed math in their first year in CCC). Included are students who enrolled in CUS (291,010); students who were admitted to at least one CSU campus but decided to enroll in another four-year institution (69,183), and students who did not enroll in another four-year institution (62,700).

CSU admittees who did not enroll in another four-year institution had weaker academic backgrounds



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data, National Student Clearinghouse (CCC match), and CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: The figure shows the share of students in the category among all admittees who enrolled in a given institution type (i.e., 36% of CSU admittees who enrolled in an in-state private institution earned an ADT). Included are students who enrolled in CUS (291,010); students who were admitted to at least one CSU campus but decided to enroll in another four-year institution (69,183), and students who did not enroll in another four-year institution (62,700).

In all, the group of students who were admitted to a CSU campus but did not enroll is a bifurcated one. On the one side are students with strong academic backgrounds, while on the other are those with relatively weak records. The first set of students was significantly more likely to enroll at a UC campus, while the second was more likely to enroll in institutions like Western Governors, Grand Canyon University, Southern New Hampshire University, or Arizona State University, or not enroll at all in a four-year institution.

Proximity, Cost, and Selectivity in Enrollment Decisions

There are many factors behind student enrollment decisions including location, academic reputation/selectivity, flexibility, and financial considerations ([Chavan 2024](#)). Alternative college options and work opportunities also play a role.

Interestingly, we find that proximity to CCC of attendance or net price—cost of attendance after subtracting grants and scholarships—do not seem to be deterrents for the typical CSU-admitted applicant who ended up enrolling in another four-year institution. In fact, the typical applicant who is admitted to CSU but decides

not to enroll there ends up attending colleges that are farther away and more expensive compared to the typical applicant who enrolls in CSU (Figure 12).²⁶

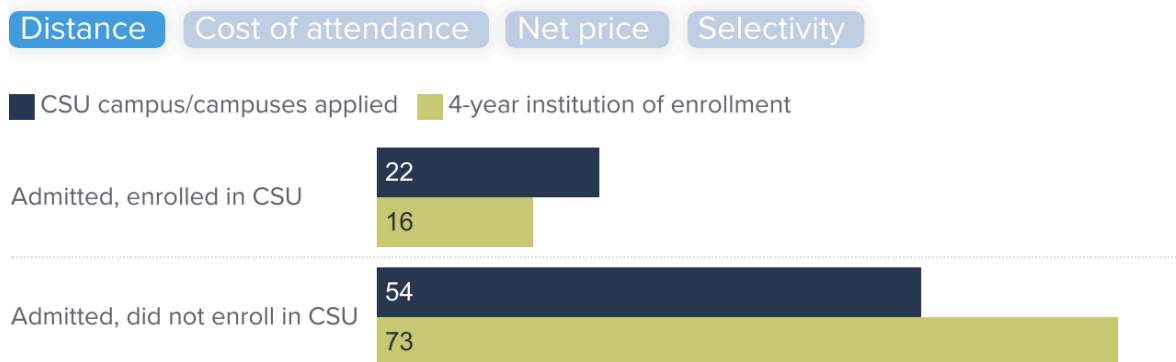
They also end up enrolling in colleges that are more selective. The median acceptance rate of the four-year institutions chosen by those admitted but who did not enroll in CSU was 42 percent compared to a median acceptance rate of 92 percent of the CSU campuses chosen by those who did enroll. These trends hold true across different populations of students.

26. This information is all based on CSU applications; we do not know all the different colleges where CSU's applicants applied to.

Figure 12

Admitted applicants who do not enroll in CSU went to colleges farther away from the CCC they attended

Median distance from CCC of attendance, miles

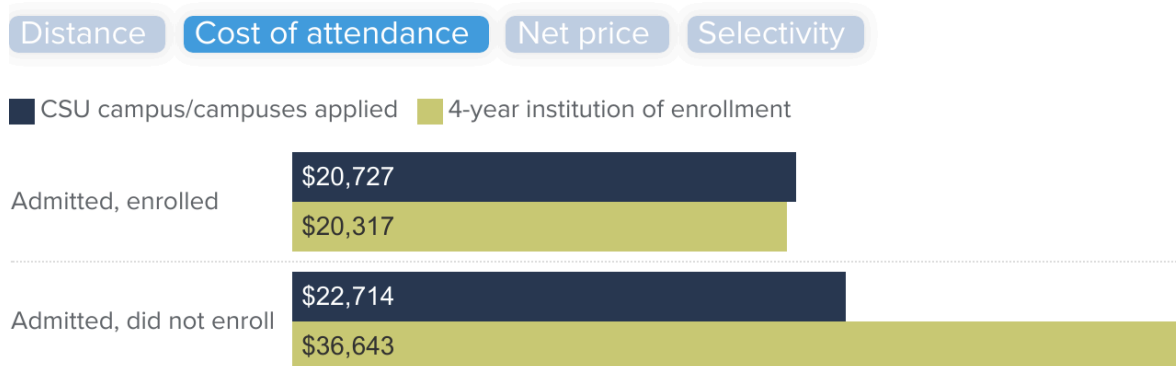


SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data, CSU student-level application data, and IPEDS data.

NOTES: Restricted to admitted applicants who enrolled in a four-year institution.

Admittees who do not enroll in CSU end up going to more expensive colleges

Median annual cost of attendance, dollars

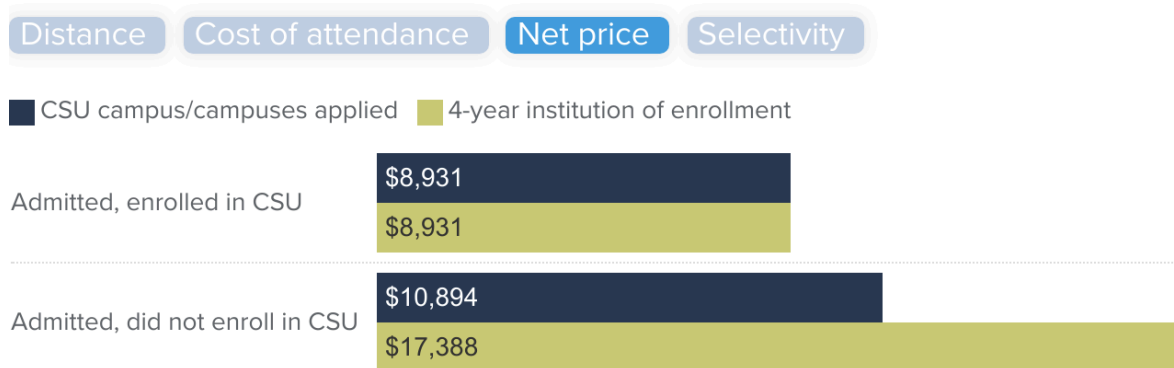


SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data, CSU student-level application data, and IPEDS data.

NOTES: Restricted to admitted applicants who enrolled in a four-year institution. IPEDS report the average annual total cost of attendance of each institution, including tuition and fees, books and supplies, and living expenses for all full-time, first-time, degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates who receive Title IV aid.

Admittees who do not enroll in CSU go to colleges where they end up paying more

Median net price, dollars

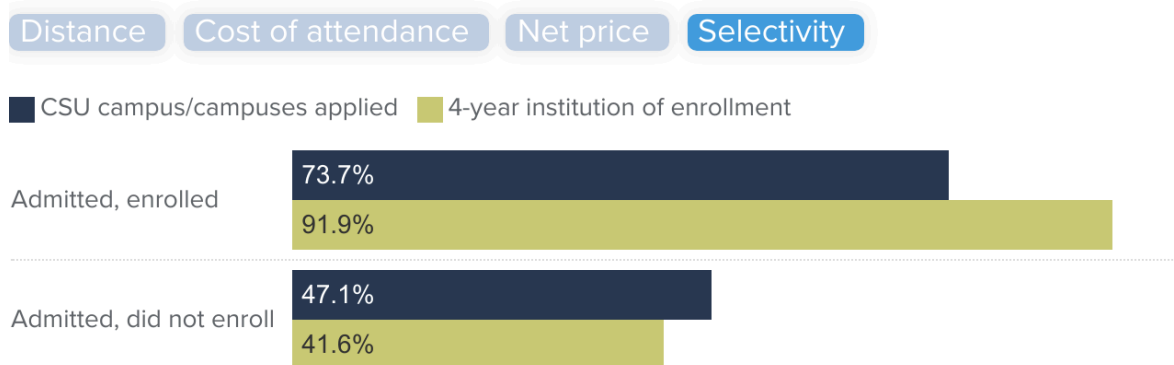


SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data, CSU student-level application data, and IPEDS data.

NOTES: Restricted to admitted applicants who enrolled in a four-year institution. Net price is the average annual total cost of attendance, including tuition and fees, books and supplies, and living expenses, minus the average grant/scholarship aid. It is calculated for all full-time, first-time, degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates who receive Title IV aid.

Admitted applicants who do not enroll in CSU went to more selective colleges

Median admission rate, percent



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data, CSU student-level application data, and IPEDS data.

The story is different when we look at admittees who ended up not enrolling in any four-year institution (Table 1). We find that the median distance from applicants' community college of attendance and the CSU campuses they applied to was significantly shorter for applicants without enrollments in any four-year institution compared to that for applicants with enrollments (28 vs. 54 miles). In terms of costs, we find that the net price of the campuses that students without enrollments in any four-year institution applied to was 11 percent lower than for students with enrollments in a four-year institution. Although we are not doing a causal examination, this analysis suggests that proximity and/or cost could have been deterrents for those who did not seem to have enrolled in any four-year institution.

Moreover, applicants without enrollments in any four-year institution applied to institutions that were less selective: the minimum acceptance rate of all the CSU campuses to which they applied was 80 percent. For those with four-year enrollments, the acceptance rate was 47 percent.

Table 1
Admitted applicants who do not appear to have enrolled anywhere applied to CSU campuses that were closer, less expensive and less selective

CSU campus/campuses applied

Group	Median distance from CCC (miles)	Median net prices (\$)	Minimum acceptance rate (%)
Did not enroll four-year institution	28	9,792	80
Enrolled in a four-year institution	54	10,894	47
Percent difference	94	11	-41

SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data, National Student Clearinghouse (CCC match), and CSU student-level application data.

NOTES: Based on 69,183 CSU admitted applicants who enrolled in another four-year institution, and 62,700 CSU admitted applicants who do not appear to have enrolled anywhere.

CCC Transfer Students Have High Graduation Rates

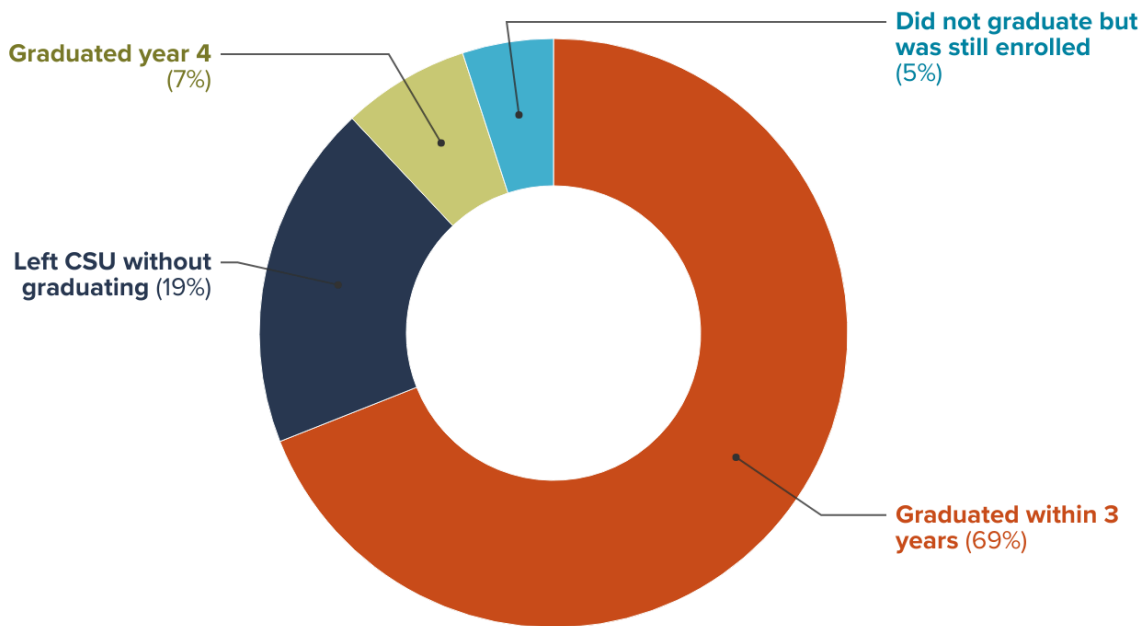
Students who transfer from CCC to CSU have high graduation rates, about the same as CSU students who persist to junior standing. Among the cohort of fall 2020 enrollees, 76 percent graduated with a bachelor's degree by spring 2024, and of those 69 percent graduated within three years (Figure 13).²⁷ Notably, the typical transfer student in the fall 2020 cohort, who graduated within three years, earned 48 units in CSU before graduating and the typical student who graduated in their fourth year earned 61 units (See Technical Appendix Figure B6). Meanwhile, the typical student who left the system without graduating (19%) did so after earning only 13 units.²⁸

27. We focus on fall 2020 enrollees because is the most recent cohort for which we have enough time to follow them to graduation. Results for the 2018 and 2019 entering cohorts show higher rates of students graduating within three years (75% and 74% respectively), which likely reflects the negative impact of the pandemic on the outcomes of the fall 2020 cohort (see Technical Appendix Table B11).

28. Of these students, 43 percent left CSU within the first year of enrollment (see Technical Appendix Table B12).

Figure 13

69% of transfer students in the fall 2020 cohort graduate within 3 years



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using CSU student-level data.

NOTES: Fall 2020 cohort followed through spring 2024 (55,629 students).

Not surprisingly, we find that students with strong records of academic achievement while in CCC (including early momentum) were more likely than others to graduate and to do so within three years.²⁹ Specifically, we find that having a CCC GPA of 3.25 or more, earning an ADT, and number of units accumulated in CCC are correlated positively with bachelor's degree completion.³⁰ Black, and older students were particularly less likely to graduate (Figure 14).

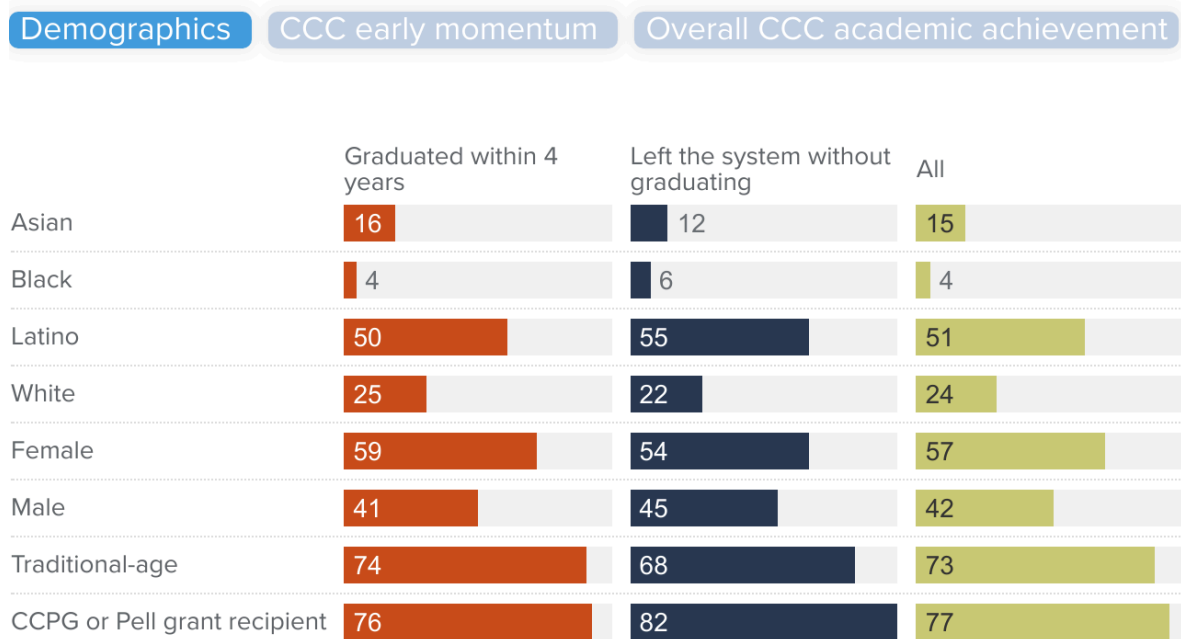
29. We used logistic regression models to predict the likelihood of bachelor's degree completion.

30. This is consistent with recent research that finds clear evidence that the ADT has led to more efficient bachelor's degree attainment for students who transfer from CCC to a CSU campus for all student subgroups; and suggestive evidence that the ADT has led to a higher probability of students earning a bachelor's degree (Baker, Friedmann, and Kurlaender 2023).

Figure 14

Transfer students who left without graduating were more likely to be Black, Latino, male, older, or had financial need

Percent, fall 2020 cohort

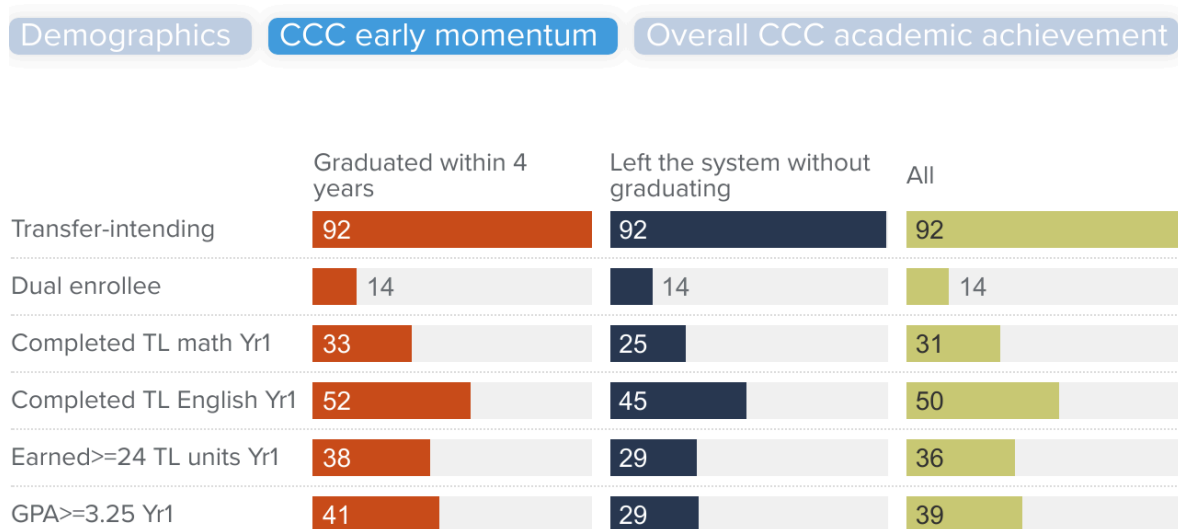


SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data and CSU student-level data.

NOTES: Fall 2020 cohort followed through spring 2024 (55,629 transfer students). Traditional-age refers to those 24 and younger. The California College Promise Grant (CCPG) and the Pell Grant are both financial aid programs designed to help students pay for college.

Transfer students who left without graduating were less likely to have reached early milestones while in CCC

Percent, fall 2020 cohort

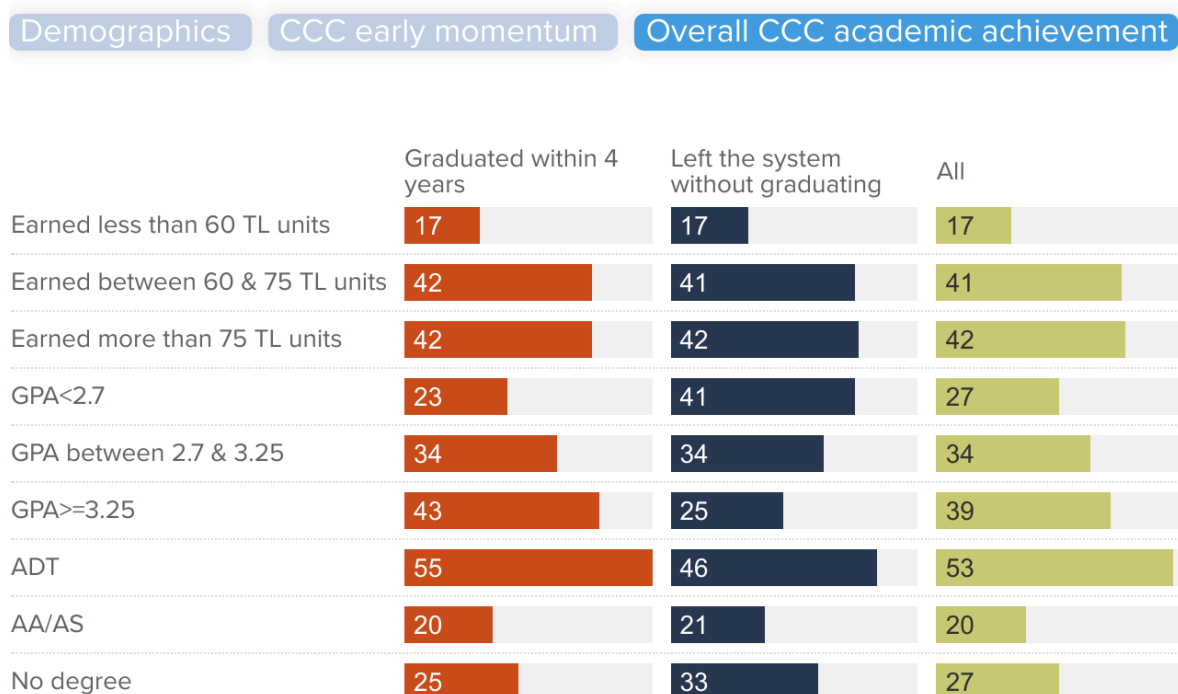


SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data and CSU student-level data.

NOTES: Fall 2020 cohort followed through spring 2024 (55,629 transfer students).

Transfer students who left without graduating were less likely to have earned an ADT prior transferring and more likely to have lower GPAs

Percent, fall 2020 cohort



SOURCE: Authors' calculations using MIS data and CSU student-level data.

NOTES: Fall 2020 cohort followed through spring 2024 (55,629 transfer students).

Time to graduation is a key concern for transfer students. Among those who were still enrolled after three years, we find that most were in computer science and engineering majors. This finding is consistent with the fact that there is no ADT for engineering.³¹ Engineering is a heavily sequenced and rigorous field, and the lack of an ADT pathway means that transfer students may face challenges in course articulation, credit transfer, and the availability of required lower division courses—all of which might slow down progress toward a bachelor’s degree.³²

Conclusions and Recommendations

A key component of the state’s higher education framework is the ability to transfer from the community college system to a four-year college. Our findings show that when the transfer pathway works, it works well. High graduation rates at CSU among successful transfers validate investments in improving access to this proven route to baccalaureate completion.

In this study, we find many encouraging results: the vast majority (92%) of community college transfer applicants are admitted to at least one CSU campus, and the large majority of those students choose to enroll in one of these campuses (69%). Importantly, the diversity of transfer students admitted and enrolled in CSU closely reflects the demographic composition of the state’s high school graduates. The ADT seems especially significant in improving admission and enrollment rates of transfer applicants. And the vast majority of transfers to CSU (69%) earn a bachelor’s degree within three years. However, as our [previous research](#) has shown, most students who wish to transfer never do, with large variation across racial and ethnic groups.

Multiple policies and programs have been enacted to improve transfer enrollment overall and for subgroups. These efforts span many points on the educational pathway, focusing on high school students to community college students who are nearing graduation.³³ These ongoing efforts, in addition to the goals set forward in [CSU’s new systemwide strategic plan](#), seem to be steps in the right direction. Our findings point to four important areas of opportunity:

Supporting early momentum in community colleges. Early in this report we showed that students who reached important milestones in their first year in CCC were able to apply for transfer sooner. Efforts to help students navigate and succeed during their first year should be prioritized. [AB 705 implementation](#)—which has helped many more students to complete introductory transfer-level math and English courses during their first year—and the [expansion of dual enrollment](#), which allows high school students to take community college classes, have helped. But getting students to enroll in a full course load remains a challenge. The

31. The Transfer Alignment Project (TAP) is making progress on advancing transfer model curricula for ADTs in the seven science, technology, engineering, and math disciplines: math, physics, chemistry, computer science, biology, engineering (currently focusing on electrical engineering), and environmental science (AB 928 Committee 2024).

32. Course articulation is a formal process where colleges compare their courses to ensure students’ credits will transfer to another institution for degree or program requirements. It involves institutions creating and publishing agreements that specify which community college courses can be used to fulfill requirements at a university.

33. They include a broad range of programs, including dual enrollment, in which middle or high school students take community college courses; dual admission (known as the Transfer Success Pathway), which provides contingent admission to CSU upon entry to a community college; developmental education reform, which ensures that community college students enroll directly in transfer-level courses in English and math; and the Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT), which guarantees admission to a CSU campus.

California's Student Success Completion Grant is an important effort in this area but more efforts are needed. Better and more proactive advising, flexible scheduling, and increasing both on-campus work opportunities and work-based learning programs could potentially also help.

Understanding why some admitted students do not enroll. About 62,700 students (14% of admittees in our sample) were admitted to CSU but did not end up enrolling in any four-year college. Our data cannot determine precisely why these students did not enroll.³⁴ Having information on the labor market outcomes of these students—as well as that for the roughly 59,000 ADT earners who do not apply/enroll—would help to explain students' decisions and identify ways to help them find a place at CSU. Importantly, factors such as cost, selectivity, and proximity are ripe for inquiry and innovation. Our initial examinations suggest that these factors might deter many of these students in their pursuit for a bachelor's degree, but more granular work is needed. A survey of students who were admitted but did not enroll could cast light on the primary barriers faced by these students.

Exploring campus-specific variation and student choice. Because there is high variation across individual CSUs in both acceptance and enrollment rates, the systems would benefit from a better understanding of challenges faced by specific CSU campuses and majors. Moreover, about 69,000 CSU-admitted applicants in our period of analysis decided to enroll in another four-year institution. Most (43,000) of those enrolled in UC, but many of the remaining 27,000 students enrolled in colleges with higher costs and lower graduation rates than CSU. Enhancing communication and support with prospective students throughout the matriculation process is one way to improve enrollment rates to CSU. In particular, CSU should actively and consistently provide information about the advantages of a CSU pathway, including low levels of student debt and high graduation rates. In the future, the state's new Cradle to Career longitudinal data system should be leveraged to automate the admissions system, including alerting students about their eligibility for financial aid and safety net programs.

Ensuring more openings at the system's most selective campuses and on-demand majors could be one way to improve transfer outcomes. Despite improvements, some CSU campus/majors continue to be impacted (Drummer 2025). From our analysis we know that some of the students who were never admitted to CSU were competitive applicants, but they applied to the most in-demand campuses (Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and San Diego State). With the goal of increasing capacity, further consideration should be given to strategies such as flexible course scheduling, co-locating CCCs and CSUs through shared campuses or satellite centers, and enhancing and expanding online degree programs. CSU's new systemwide strategic plan aims to increase the flexibility of their offerings to better meet the needs of current and future students, including adaptive, personalized learning programs. Both co-location and online programs—which are gaining traction in some circles—have the potential not only to address capacity constraints that some CSU campuses/majors face but could also address location issues for students who cannot attend a college far from home. The efficacy of such innovations should be analyzed rigorously.

34. Recent research (Gentsch et al. 2024) identified and quantified for the first time the “transfer melt leakage point” (i.e., term for cases in which a student is accepted to transfer to a bachelor's program but does not matriculate). According to this study, ensuring that students who have been accepted for transfer are supported in all the steps related to bachelor's matriculation, from application to registration, and that these steps occur quickly and efficiently, could decrease transfer melt.

Ultimately, the biggest challenges in improving transfer from CCC to CSU are twofold. More California community college students must get to the point of applying to a four-year institution. And both CCC and CSU must work to ensure that students who have become transfer-eligible are able to successfully navigate the transfer process. The benefits of a four-year degree—both for individuals and the state—are notable and long-lasting. Improving the CCC to CSU transfer pathway is a critical way for California to spread those benefits widely.

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