

The Enrollment Crisis at CSUCI: Data from a K12 Partner

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Before the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020, Cal State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) had always experienced robust growth in enrollment. While the shift to online learning understandably caused a decline in our numbers, we assumed that students would return at the same levels as before the crisis. That viewpoint was mistaken. The pandemic changed the calculus of young adults seeking higher education; at the same time, declining enrollment among our K12 partners is catching up to CSUCI¹. However, there are opportunities to increase our enrollment numbers while also helping area students maximize their chances of graduating with a 4-year degree in a timely manner.

This Data Champions pilot project aimed to quantify CSUCI's enrollment situation using data typically inaccessible to the university. In partnership with Santa Paula Unified School District (SPUSD), we compiled 10 years of high school graduating senior data and merged it with data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). In doing so, we obtained a comprehensive view of the post-secondary educational pathways of nearly 4,000 graduated seniors from SPUSD. Since it takes several years to complete a 4-year degree, the numbers below are for students who graduated high school between 2014 and 2019.

The trends we quantified align with other research on post-secondary educational pathways.² Among the highlights:

- SPUSD has successfully encouraged students to pursue higher education, with an average of **77.5%** of all graduating students **enrolling** in either a 2- or 4-year institution.
- Community college was the preferred setting for the vast majority of students, as **78.2%** of the above matriculating into a **2-year college**. A significant **87.8%** chose **Ventura College** as their destination.
- Unfortunately, most of these students who begin in community college will not complete a degree or certificate of any kind, with only **30.0% actually completing a 2-year degree** (2014-2019 cohort). **Of all students who begin at a 2-year college, only 13.0% will complete a 4-year degree.**
- When a student chooses to matriculate to a 4-year school first, the success rates change dramatically. Although **only 21.6%** choose a 4-year school first, **66.2%** of all of these students will **complete their 4-year degree** (2014-2019 cohort). **CSUCI was the top choice** by far of these students (29.4%); Cal State Northridge was next at 9.7%.

There is much nuance to these high-level numbers, as alarming as they are. However, with targeted interventions, there are opportunities to increase the success of our K12 partners' students while also increasing the enrollment at CSUCI, even amid the declining K12 student population overall.

¹ "Ventura County public school enrollment drops again. Here's what that means", Ventura County Star, 5/31/2024, accessed 8/6/2024: [Ventura County public school enrollment drops again \(vcstar.com\)](https://www.vcstar.com/news/ventura-county-public-school-enrollment-drops-again)

² "Tracking Transfers: The Path to Achieving a Bachelor's Degree", National Student Clearinghouse, 5/7/2024, accessed 8/6/2024: [Tracking Transfers-The Path to Achieving a Bachelor's Degree \(studentclearinghouse.org\)](https://studentclearinghouse.org/research/tracking-transfers-the-path-to-achieving-a-bachelors-degree)

Educational Pathways and Graduation Rates

The mantra among high school counselors for years has been that every graduating senior should go to college. For the majority of students, this has meant enrolling in a local community college with the goal of transferring to a 4-year college to get a bachelor's degree. However, there is a growing public concern that a college degree and the debt that invariably comes with it may not be as worthwhile as it once was. Even still, while one can make a living wage without a degree, the data unequivocally shows that those with a bachelor's degree will, on average, earn substantially more than their non-degree counterparts.³

Equally clear is the fate of those who start a degree but fail to complete it. The same Pew Research Study that showed the public's growing skepticism of a degree's worth also indicates that those with only some college education are only slightly better off than their non-college peers on several employment and wage measures.⁴ This is before considering hidden costs like student debt, the opportunity cost of being in school instead of the workforce, and the missed career experience that inevitably impacts wage growth.

Starting at a 4-Year College versus a 2-Year College

Given the importance of finishing a bachelor's degree, it is vital to examine the choices students have to achieve that goal. According to this particular dataset for SPUSD students, the likelihood of earning a bachelor's degree is highly correlated to the chosen pathway. If a student goes straight to a 4-year college, they have a 66.2% chance of graduating with a degree, with an average completion time of 4.12 years.

This compares much more favorably to those students who choose to attend a 2-year college first. Students who graduate with a 2-year degree have a 42.8% success rate in obtaining a 4-year degree. This is different from CSUCI's internal graduation rate for transfer students because it includes students who never took the next step into a 4-year college. Not inconsequentially, the average 2-year student takes 5.38 years to earn their 4-year degree.

Even more concerning are students who never complete their 2-year degree. A full 71.0% of all 2-year students will never earn a 2-year degree or certificate. For instance, the graduation rate of Ventura College, the single most attended institution, is only 31.7%. Fully 2 out of 3 students do NOT complete their studies within a minimum of 6 years. Factoring in those 2-year non-completers into the graduation rate, only 13.0% of all students who start at a 2-year college will graduate with a 4-year degree. If the messaging students receive when making their choices for higher education is to start at a 2-year college, it is clear we are putting them on the least likely path to achieve a 4-year degree. An astonishing 87.0% of these students will not reach the goal of a 4-year degree.

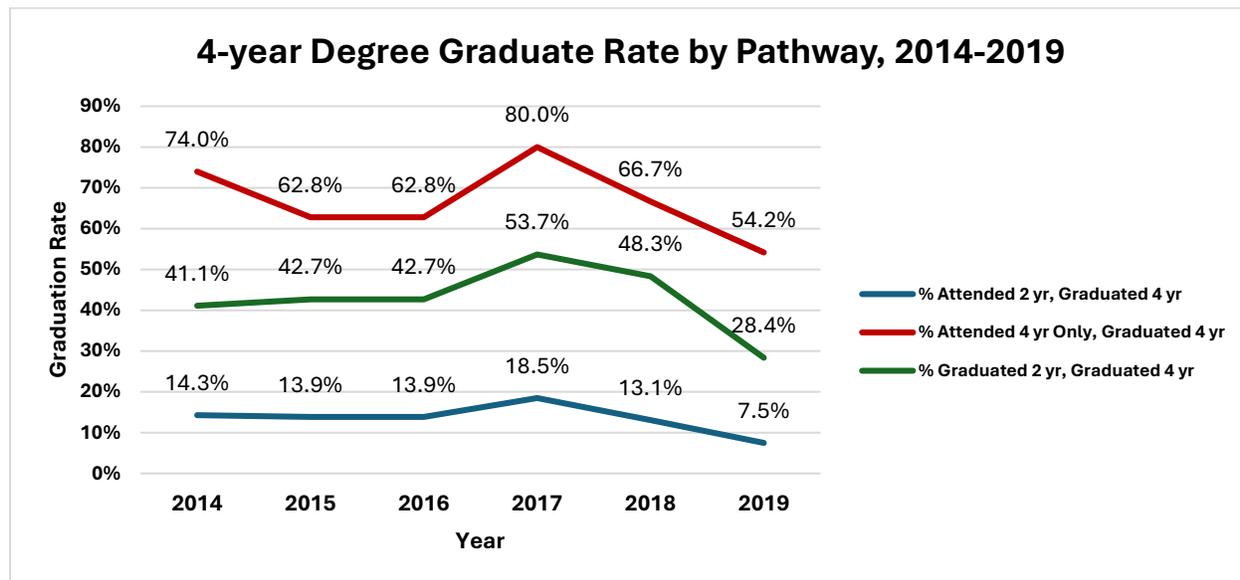
The data gleaned from this one partner is corroborated from a recent study from the California State Auditor.⁵ Out of those community college students that intended to transfer to a four-year school like CSUCI, only 1 in 5 managed to do so, and even less so for disadvantaged students like

³ "Is a College Degree Worth It?", Pew Research Center, 5/23/2024, accessed 8/7/2024. [Is a College Degree Worth It in 2024? | Pew Research Center](#)

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ "2023-123 California's Systems of Public Higher Education", California State Auditor, accessed 10/31/2024. [2023-123 California's Systems of Public Higher Education - California State Auditor](#)

Latinos. Given the benefit of earning a four-year degree, the pathway starting at a four year university may well be worth the increase in tuition over those initial years.



Degree Choice

These numbers admittedly overstate the underlying problems—not everyone who enters a 2-year college intends to transfer and earn a 4-year degree. However, we can gain some insight into how many might intend to do so by analyzing the 2-year graduates and their degrees. One limitation of the National Student Clearinghouse is that we can only see the degree pathway if the student has graduated either at the 2-year or 4-year level, and sometimes not even then. By examining the 2-year degrees, we see that several of these degrees do indeed terminate at the associate’s level. These include degrees for teacher assistants, executive assistants, and dental hygienists, among others. Our best estimates are that about 20% of these 2-year degrees would end at that stage. Factoring this into the above numbers would improve the outlook for 2-year graduates, but only by a modest amount.⁶

Preferred Destinations and Degrees for a 4-Year College

As important as it is to understand the choices students make between community college and a 4-year college and the consequences of those choices, it is equally important to understand which institutions students choose when they transition to a 4-year school. As stated above, Ventura College is the preferred destination for graduating high school students, with 68.7% starting their careers there. Many of these students major in Liberal Studies, Psychology, and Sociology, which account for 67.2% of all 2-year degrees. This positions CSUCI favorably; however, only about 30% of students choose CSUCI, either as transfer students or graduating seniors. This does not include the many students who give up on completing a 4-year degree altogether.

⁶ For instance, for those who graduated from a 2-year college and has a degree title listed, 36.0% of those will earn a 4-year degree. If we subtract out the 2-year graduates that have terminal degrees, that 4-year college graduation rate increases to 41.3%.

CSUCI Competition

For both graduating seniors who go to a community college first and then transfer or go straight into a 4-year college, CSUCI's main competition is Cal State Northridge (CSUN) and Cal Lutheran University (CLU). What might be surprising, however, is that the degrees students graduate with at these institutions are largely in departments that we have at CSUCI: Psychology, Social Sciences, and Business. While there are specific degrees at those institutions that we don't currently offer, like Criminology and Agricultural Studies, for most students, it comes down to a choice of institution rather than a choice of major.

The irony is that CSUCI arguably offers a significantly better value than its peer institutions. Looking within this population of SPUSD graduates, compared to CSUN's graduation rate of 49.4%, a student is 18.1 percentage points more likely to graduate from CSUCI (graduation rate = 67.5%). CSUCI's graduation rate compares less favorably to CLU's (78.1% graduation rate, or 10.6 percentage points higher than CSUCI) but at a fraction of the tuition cost. A student from SPUSD is more likely to graduate from CSUCI than any other CSU.

Top 5 Community Colleges	Graduated?			
College	N	Y	Grand Total	Graduation Rate
VENTURA COLLEGE	875	407	1282	31.7%
OXNARD COLLEGE	33	13	46	28.3%
MOORPARK COLLEGE	38	1	39	2.6%
SANTA BARBARA CITY COLLEGE	11	1	12	8.3%
COLLEGE OF THE CANYONS	5	4	9	44.4%

Top 5 Four Year Colleges	Graduated?			
College	N	Y	Grand Total	Graduation Rate
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIV CHANNEL ISLANDS	69	143	212	67.5%
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY- NORTHRIDGE	39	38	77	49.4%
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-SANTA BARBARA	9	25	34	73.5%
CALIFORNIA LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY	7	25	32	78.1%
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA - MERCED	8	19	27	70.4%

Opportunities for Increasing Student Success and Enrollment

There is much more data available to analyze, but this initial analysis suffices to offer some direction for future discovery, especially given that this is only a pilot project utilizing data from one school district. Besides encouraging CSUCI to partner with other area school districts to compile more data, some tentative recommendations can be gleaned from the present work.

To increase student success, more graduating seniors should be encouraged to matriculate straight into a 4-year college. The success rate is significantly higher for this pathway, CSUCI degree

programs align well with what 2-year students are already selecting, and the time to completion is significantly shorter. CSUCI should work with area high schools to better explain the value proposition of CSUCI and highlight the most in-demand majors like Psychology, Sociology, and Business.

A longer-term goal would be to align our degree offerings more closely with the demand for what students are choosing. While CSUCI's academic master plan has considered industry demand and other peer institutions' offerings, this data gives a clear picture of the degrees students are choosing and the institutions from which they are getting their degrees. Such data should factor into the planning of new majors.

Finally, CSUCI needs to work more closely with the Ventura County Community College District, especially Ventura College, to ensure student success at that level. Our focus should be on aligning curricula more tightly to reduce the time for degree completion, engaging community college students more broadly to maximize the likelihood of completing their 2-year degrees, and working with both the community colleges and our K12 school districts to ensure that students are academically and socially prepared for the rigors of higher education.

Not every student will choose to further their education, and not every student will choose to do so at CSUCI. But there is a critical need for us in higher education to ensure that those who wish to pursue a higher degree are afforded the best chance of success. We can no longer be satisfied with merely getting students into higher education. We must take a systemic approach to ensure they can achieve the goal of a 4-year degree.

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