

COMMENTARY

Implications of Evolving Registration Priority Policies in California's Community Colleges

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PUBLISHED: October 29, 2013

With the passing last year of California's Proposition 30, the [California Community College \(CCC\)](#) system received a small reprieve from years of grueling budget cuts exacerbated by soaring student demand. Consequently, the number of course sections being offered is on the rise, and the number of waitlisted students per college has dropped from an average of 7,157 in 2012 to 5,026 [this fall](#) (2013). Unfortunately, [too many students](#) still are unable to pursue their educational goals in California's community colleges—a result of the current state of *de facto* "seat rationing," which threatens the capacity of the colleges to continue their foundational open-access policies.

As one of many policy initiatives aimed at confronting financial and enrollment pressures, the legislatively-mandated Student Success Task Force took up the issue of system-wide registration priority policies in 2012. Such policies give priority in course selection and enrollment to certain students while simultaneously de-prioritizing course selection and enrollment for other students. The stakes involved in the design and implementation of registration priority policies are extraordinarily high because, under conditions of institutional impaction, they essentially pick "winners" and "losers" in terms of meaningful access to postsecondary education. Regardless of the specifics of the policy scheme, inevitably some students will be prevented from making progress toward their goals or excluded entirely from a college education.

One result of the work of the Student Success Task Force is a new statewide policy concerning registration priority that is soon to be implemented, though even under this mandatory framework there still will be [significant autonomy](#) at the college level to adapt priorities to local contexts. Unfortunately, California's efforts to revise registration priority policies in the CCC system are occurring in a near vacuum of empirical evidence. Our study of registration priority policies across the colleges of the CCC system contributed to resolving this problem. We found that college registration priority policies, though seemingly similar when viewed from a distance, in fact are highly variable on a number of important dimensions.

Both the new statewide policy and the college-by-college variability that is likely to remain in the wake of this policy underscore the urgency of inquiry and debate about registration priority. In that regard, we draw from our findings a number of implications and recommendations.

First and perhaps most pressing, more research is needed on the short- and long-term effects of the varied registration priority schemes. For example, the limited evidence available suggests that registration priority schemes that favor enrollment behaviors typically associated with conventional academic goals (e.g., upward transfer, associate degree completion) tend to disadvantage Black and Hispanic students, older students, and male students. To facilitate future research on this issue, we recommend that the

Chancellor's Office of the CCC system begin to collect from the colleges, and to incorporate into the system database, information on students' assigned registration priority in each academic term.

Second, it is imperative that colleges implement strategies to communicate to students both their registration priority policies and the avenues by which students may take advantage of these policies.

Third, we recommend that colleges establish inter-institutional agreements that make registration priority portable from one college to another, which is important in light of what we know about the high frequency of student transfer *between* community colleges.

Fourth, colleges should seek to improve processes for helping students identify alternative courses when first-choice courses already are full. One possible approach is to build on existing course registration systems to match students' preferences and goals with open courses, providing a list of recommended second- and third-choice courses, just as the award-winning Sherpa system does in the South Orange County Community College District. Over time, such systems could be expanded to offer automated, intelligent, web-based advising about course selection, similar to the manner in which web-based businesses "advise" about product selection based on consumer preferences and past buying behavior.

Finally, we encourage consideration and inquiry into the value judgments that are implicit to the various registration priority schemes. For decades, the ideals of access and opportunity have dominated discourse on community colleges. Recently, the principles espoused in this discourse have begun to shift to fiscal responsibility and credential completion. It will be critical going forward to interrogate the assumptions associated with particular registration priority policies so that decisions about the future of community colleges may be circumspect and informed.

The full study is in P. R. Bahr, J. L. Gross, K. E. Slay, and R. D. Christensen, "First in line: Student registration priority in community colleges," Educational Policy, 27, in press.

Suggested citationBahr, P. R., & Gross, J. L. (2014, October). *Implications of evolving registration priority policies in California's community colleges* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/implications-evolving-registration-priority-policies-californias-community-colleges>



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