

# How Did Pandemic Recovery Funding Support California Community Colleges?

The pandemic created daunting challenges for higher education. The federal government provided California Community Colleges billions of dollars in aid for students and institutions. How did they use these funds? How well did their pandemic recovery activities and investments help reengage students? What will institutions do when the money runs out? Responses from 71 out of 114 colleges PPIC surveyed reveal:

- ▶ Most colleges perceived their use of aid to be successful in achieving key outcomes both for students and the institutions.
- ▶ Instead of providing equal awards to all students, many colleges targeted those with the greatest needs—prioritizing equity over equality.
- ▶ Investments that made college more affordable were perceived to be the most successful for supporting student equity, enrollment, and success.
- ▶ Although both faculty and students benefited, much of the funding went directly to students, even that earmarked for institutional support.
- ▶ Funding facilitated the transition of courses, supports, and services to an online format. Over half of the colleges intend to offer more than 40 percent of courses online in the near future.
- ▶ Colleges intend to continue aid for food insecurity and mental health at the same or an expanded level, and emergency aid at a reduced level.

## How did institutions use the money?

**Students.** Community colleges provided cash transfers in the form of emergency aid to students, targeting those with the highest need. They also helped lower the total cost of attendance by reducing student costs in a variety of ways—from providing free books and laptops, to food pantries and childcare, to forgiving debts and/or fines.

**Institutions.** Most colleges invested in equipment and supplies, faculty and staff training, replacing revenues lost due to closed campuses, distance learning supplies, high speed internet, and additional emergency aid to students. Among these areas, students were the top beneficiaries.

## Which strategies were perceived to be most successful for supporting student equity, enrollment, and success?

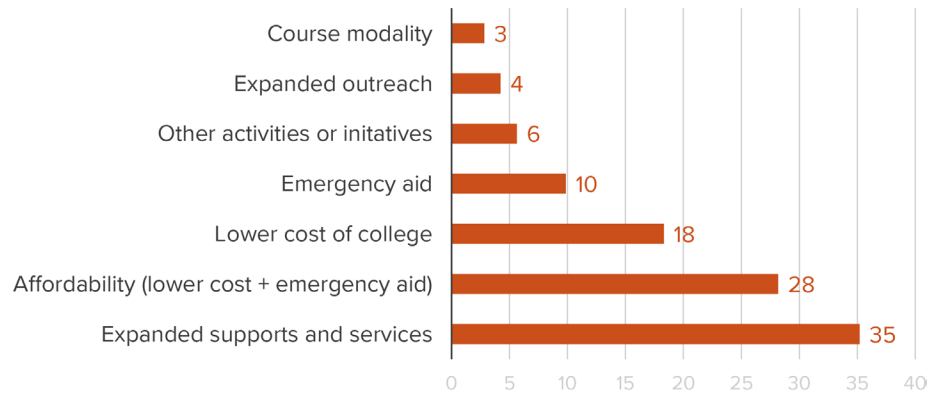
**Making college more affordable.** Just over one-quarter of colleges reported this as among their top strategies to support student enrollment and to facilitate student success, and even more indicating it facilitated equity. Key investments included covering tuition and books, loaning computers or hotspots, discharging unpaid fees, and providing assistance for housing and other basic needs.

**Expanding supports and services.** More than one-third of colleges reported that expanded student supports and services were key for student success and equity. This expansion included both more holistic student support services—like academic advising, tutoring, mental health, and wellness—and online platforms to deliver them.

**Increased flexibility in course modality.** Fifteen percent of colleges indicated that flexibility in course modality was the top strategy for boosting enrollment. However, results from face-to-face versus online or hybrid varied. Some found online courses increased enrollment, others that re-opening the campus did. Either way, pandemic recovery funds were key to making the flexibility possible.

## Perceived most successful strategies for supporting student success

% of colleges



Source: CCC Pandemic Recovery Survey 2023.

Notes: Sample size=71. This sample includes 17 colleges that did not respond to this question or whose response on the top strategy was not clear. Options are mutually exclusive.

**Prioritizing student equity.** Many of these efforts focused on the role of equity-centered professional development and the use of data to uncover and inform equity-focused work at the college. Several colleges indicated working with outside experts. Others specifically noted how the implementation of college or statewide initiatives, like Guided Pathways and AB 705, were used to improve student equity.

## Policy Recommendations

**Prioritize investments that help lower the cost of attending college for low-income students.** These could include actions such as access to safety net programs like CalFresh, Medi-Cal, housing assistance, and subsidized childcare; promoting dual enrollment programs like College and Career Access Pathways (CCAP); providing free laptops and access to affordable and reliable internet; and addressing the challenges to implementing such policy changes.

**Build capacity at college foundations to help maintain emergency aid.** The individual college's foundation (38%) would be the primary funding source to sustain emergency aid going forward. The Foundation for California Community Colleges, the CCC system office, and the broader philanthropic community should help colleges grow and sustain fundraising efforts.

**Eliminate institutional fines and fees that can adversely affect enrollment and completion.** Colleges could explore automatic renewal of library books, free parking, and—for low-income students—automatic free tuition and fees. To defray the potential loss of income, they could continue to charge students who can afford to pay.

**Ensure ongoing investments to support equitable access and success in online courses.** Nearly 60 percent of colleges expect to offer more than 40 percent of courses online in the future. They will need to leverage district or systemwide efforts like those supported by the California Virtual Campus and the Online Education Initiative, as well as strategically braiding federal, state, local and philanthropic support aimed at ensuring digital equity.

**Evaluate the investments' effectiveness.** Further research will be necessary to help inform the future direction of investments. Institutional research offices have capacity constraints, but the [Accelerating Recovery in Community Colleges \(ARCC\)](#) network and the broader policy and academic research community are on track to help fill these gaps.

---

Supported with funding from the US Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences and the Sutton Family Fund.

Source: Adapted by Chansonette Buck from [How Did Pandemic Recovery Funding Support California Community Colleges?](#) by Olga Rodriguez, Daniel Payares-Montoya, and Kevin Cook.