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Student Balancing Act: Worker and Learner Experiences in Los Angeles' Community Colleges

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Student Balancing Act:

Worker and Learner Experiences in Los Angeles' Community Colleges

UCLA Labor Center • July 2023

Executive Summary

This report analyzes the experiences of Los Angeles County community college students who attend school and who work. For our analysis, we subsetting the data of 391 survey responses and nine interviews collected from community college workers and learners and featured in the UCLA Labor Center and Dolores Huerta Labor Institute (DHLI) report *Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County* (2020). We found that many students face an array of barriers such as navigating school and work-life balance, encountering housing insecurities, and handling other pitfalls in pursuing higher education. Many of these stressors are rooted in the lack of paid internship opportunities, a disconnect between work and school experiences, and the need for more financial aid. These inequities were further exacerbated for community college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students voiced particular difficulties with their online classes, mental health, and the constant juggling of schedules, especially for students who were also parents. We recommend supporting Los Angeles community college students through additional online and evening educational services, financial support, work-study, internship access, and promotion of career and technical education (CTE) training. Furthermore, it is crucial to expand the recommended resources and other forms of support to include Los Angeles County community college students so that they can attain their future goals.

Overview and Context of Community College Workers and Learners

California Community Colleges (CCCs) are the foundation for the state's higher education pathway. Community college students in Los Angeles County represent more than three-quarters of undergraduate students in the area based on Integrated Postsecondary Education Data (IPEDS) 2017 data. At their colleges, students engage with their local communities, advance their career aspirations, learn skilled trades, and often prepare for a transfer into 4-year public institutions.

Attending school instead of earning full-time pay is a choice that Los Angeles County community college students negotiate daily. The workers and learners interviewed in this brief believe that pursuing a post-secondary degree will increase their financial security and allow them to engage in meaningful and fulfilling work. To manage the time necessary to focus on their education, workers and learners seek jobs that allow flexibility. Yet these jobs are often low-wage, frontline positions that are rarely connected to their degrees or their interests. Although Los Angeles County community college students gain schedule flexibility working low-wage positions, they often don't make enough to fulfill their financial needs. The resulting income gap compels working students to work longer hours to make ends meet.

Completing community college programs can be a challenging hurdle for many students. In the 2019 Student Success Scorecard, the CCCs reported that only 48.9% of students who started in 2012-2013 and were pursuing a degree, certification, or transfer successfully completed their desired outcomes in six years.¹ This is of particular concern given that 70% of available jobs in the United States in 2018 were filled by employees with postsecondary education and training.² Higher-wage jobs pay employees at a premium for attaining their degrees and/or certifications, meaning that those who are not able to complete their programs most likely experience an income ceiling.³ For a student struggling to balance work and school, being shut out of higher wages because they are unable to complete school can significantly impact their future earning potential and make it more difficult to achieve their career goals.

Working while attending school creates disadvantages that impact workers and learners' ability to fulfill their financial needs and fully engage in campus activities and academics. Although Los Angeles community college workers and learners yearn to focus solely on their studies, work and home obligations impact their degree completion times. These complications interfere with students' ability to excel in their studies and hinder their ability to engage in campus activities, clubs, internships, office hours, tutoring, and networking opportunities.

Students attending community colleges from low-income households often work long hours during the school year to pay for their living expenses and transportation, and to contribute to their families' expenses. Despite educational policies such as the California Promise Plan (formerly the Board of Governors Fee Waiver), which waives the enrollment fees and tuition for eligible California community college students, our report found that Los Angeles workers and learners still struggled to pay for living expenses.⁴ Further, LA County community college students are more likely to have major concerns about financing their education. This tuition and fee waiver, while helpful, does not take into account the high cost of living in Los Angeles County for community college students. According to Fair Market Rent prices set by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the median rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles County in 2021 is \$1,605 per month, not including water or utilities like electricity and gas.⁵ Students must also factor food and transportation costs into their monthly expenses while juggling the demands of school and work.

About This Study and Methodology

In 2018, the UCLA Labor Center and Dolores Huerta Labor Institute (DHLI) conducted a countywide survey of 869 workers and learners. For findings and full methodology, see the UCLA Labor Center and the Los Angeles Community College District-Dolores Huerta Labor Institute's report *Unseen Costs: The Experiences of Workers and Learners in Los Angeles County* (2020). This brief is an analysis of a subset of that data, in which community college students' experiences are compared to California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) students. Our analysis complements *Unseen Costs* and spotlights the experiences of community college students who work and go to school in Los Angeles County. Community college students represented 45% of our overall sample of 869 survey responses.

For this brief's methodology, we disaggregated the community college data from the full study sample to analyze the 391 survey responses and nine interviews from community college workers and learners. The data compiled for this report contain responses of workers and learners representing all community colleges in Los Angeles County and includes additional literature on CCC working and learning experiences. We collected and aggregated research from the *Unseen Costs* research findings. We focused on workers and learners attending community college in Los Angeles County. This resulted in a collection of 391 respondents from past Worker and Learner surveys and 10 interviews that helped guide our understanding and better contextualize our survey data points on community colleges in Los Angeles County. We paired these data with recent research on the impact of COVID-19 to fully encapsulate the varied challenges that Los Angeles County community college students experience.

Table 1: Community Colleges in Los Angeles County

Cerritos College	Los Angeles Pierce College
Citrus College	Los Angeles Southwest College
College of the Canyons	Los Angeles Trade Tech
Compton College	Los Angeles Valley College
East Los Angeles College	Long Beach City College
El Camino College	Mt. San Antonio College
Glendale Community College	Pasadena City College

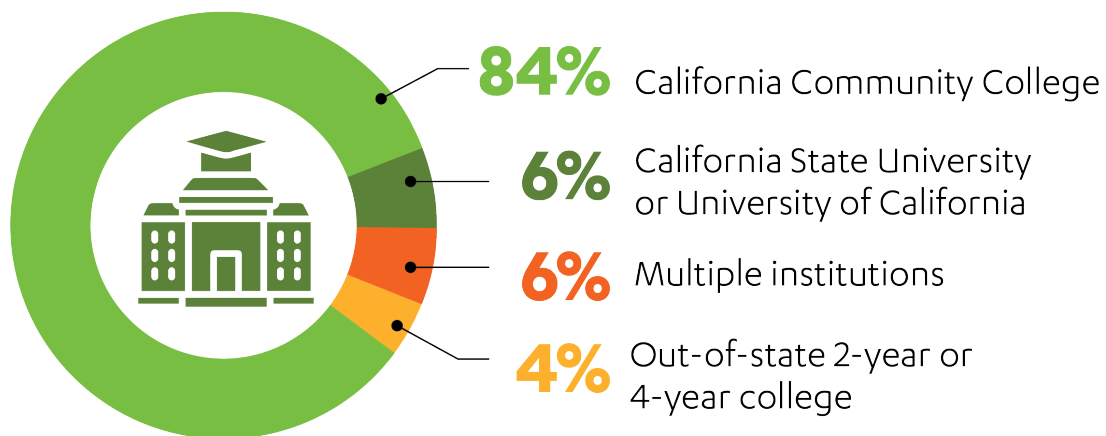
Los Angeles City College	Rio Hondo College
Los Angeles Harbor College	Santa Monica College
Los Angeles Mission College	West Los Angeles College

Findings

Our study found that across Los Angeles’s higher educational institutions, student obligations encompass much more than just school demands. The majority of students work while attending school. After disaggregating the data from the previous study, researchers found that 82% of Los Angeles community college students work between 20 and 40+ hours a week. Surveyed California State University workers and learners reported a similar number of students working 20+ hours per week (82%). Fewer students who were surveyed from the University of California system reported working 20+ hours per week (56%).

Of the Los Angeles County workers and learners who identified as transfer students in this study, 84% reported having begun their academic journeys at a community college within the county. The path from CCCs to 4-year colleges in the Los Angeles County region is a testament to the quality of education CCCs provide.

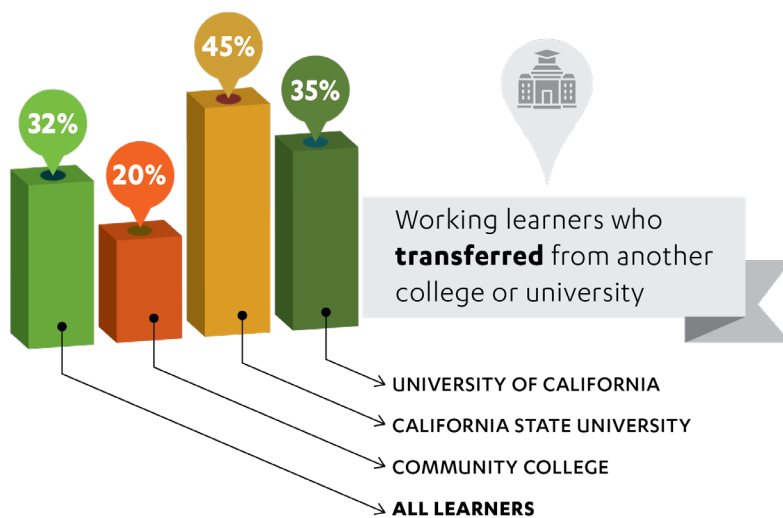
Figure 1: School Type Transferred From



Source: *Unseen Costs data*

Although student transfers were most common from the community college system to 4-year institutions, one-fifth (20%) of surveyed transfer respondents selected an alternative Los Angeles-area community college or left a 4-year institution to pursue their education at the community college level. The ease of course credit transfers between California's higher education institutions allows for greater transfer mobility.

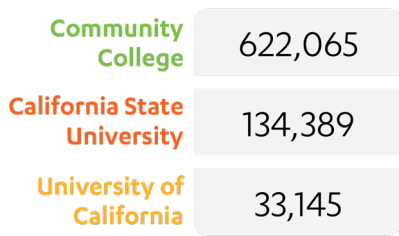
Figure 2: Degree Goals of Workers and Learners Transfer Students by School Type Currently Attending



Source: *Unseen Costs data*

According to 2017 data, community college students make up a majority (79%) of public higher education students in Los Angeles County, where community college students total 622,065.⁶ Close to half of our Los Angeles community college respondents reported attending their institution in hopes of finding a good job. The remainder responded that they attend community college to attain a higher degree. Community college students also reported attending their current institutions due to the financial and geographical advantages. These responses indicate that community college students in Los Angeles County make practical decisions on where and when to attend college based on a holistic view of their circumstances and suggest that CCCs are accessible public goods that can help workers and learners reach their goals. Workers and learners' decisions are informed by many factors, including cost of attendance, financial assistance, proximity to their home, and advice from family and friends.

Figure 3: Number of Undergraduates at CCC, CSU, and UC in Los Angeles



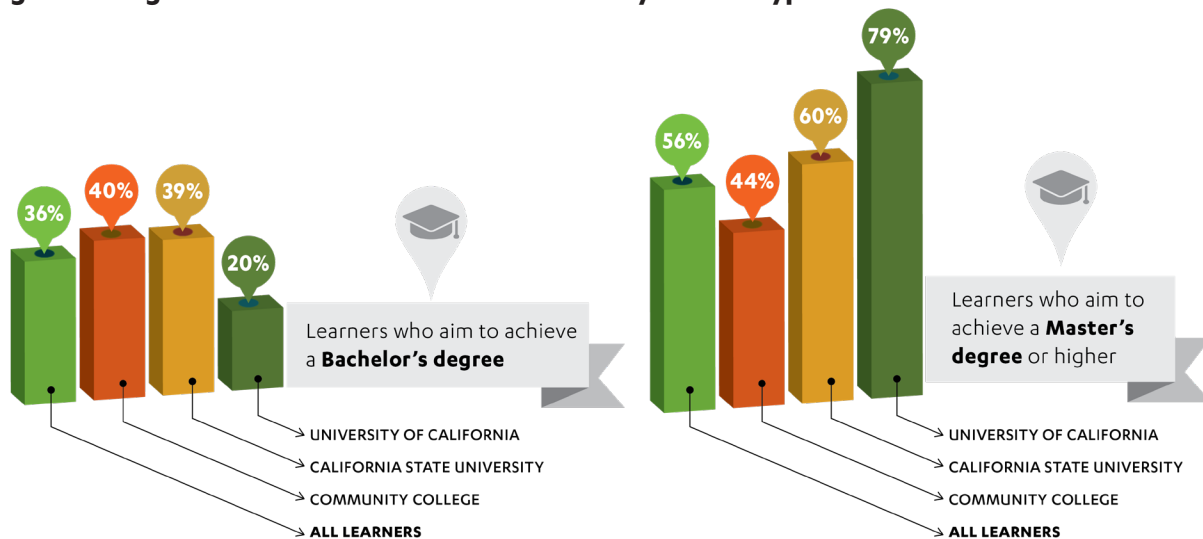
Source: The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) 2017

A nutrition and dietetics student describes his experience transferring from CSU Northridge to El Camino Community College:

After I graduated, I was looking into colleges. I was going to go to Northridge, but I ended up just going to community college... I was going to Northridge, but I did not meet the deadline for my ACT because I wasn't aware of the deadline. I had to wait a whole year and then try again next year when I could reapply, or I could go to community college, get my sixty transferable units, and then go back.⁷

Most workers and learners who choose to pursue their education through the Los Angeles community college system do so to obtain their bachelor's and other postsecondary degrees and/or certificates. Only 40% of Los Angeles community college workers and learners want to finish their bachelor's degrees. Unlike their peers in the CSUs (60%) and UCs (79%), this group was less likely to report being interested in pursuing a Master's or higher degree (44%).

Figure 4: Degree Goals of Workers and Learners by School Type



Source: Unseen Costs data

Understanding Community College and Vocational Training

The career technical education (CTE) course of study offered by California's Department of Education is "a multiyear sequence of courses that integrates core academic knowledge with technical and occupational knowledge to provide students with a pathway to postsecondary education and careers."⁸ In a 2018 study, researchers found that CTE credentials from California community colleges offer positive returns on investment and earnings growth. The same research challenges California Community College (CCC) leadership to better publicize the benefits of a CTE program and create accessible materials regarding these programs.⁹ Explanation of the financial benefits a student can obtain with vocational training could help temper the bias many young students have toward options outside of the traditional 4-year education.

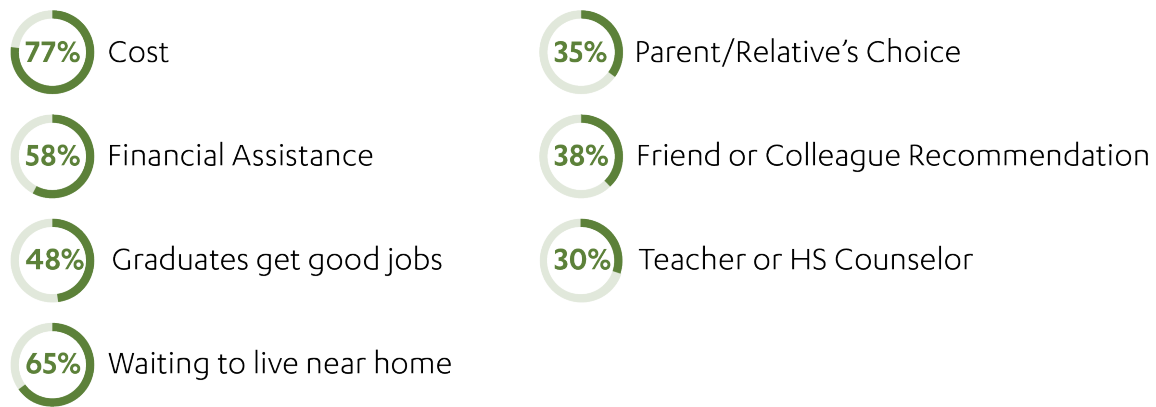
For one former CSU Los Angeles student and aspiring electrician, the decision to transfer from a 4-year institution to a community college was based on information they obtained by researching qualifications for their chosen career:

...I believed that electrical engineering was the right pathway [to becoming an electrician], so that's what ended up making me choose the 4-year college and pursuing electrical engineering. After some years of changing colleges and doing a little more research, I found out the electrician program was offered [at] a different college. It did not require four years of education but rather one year of education and maybe another year of GEs for the associate degree...¹⁰

Students need earlier guidance in navigating their options of study to prepare them for their desired careers.

Financial Impact and Reasons Students Attend CCs

Workers and learners in Los Angeles County choose to attend a community college due to its immediate economic benefits, such as costs, available financial assistance, and wanting to live near home to save on expenses. They are less likely to choose community colleges based on the institutions' social capital (i.e. counselors, teachers, family, friends). Despite community colleges being the least expensive higher education option, workers and learners still experienced hardships when prioritizing school over making money. The money that students spend on school could instead be used to save for housing or food, supporting a family, caring for dependents, or investing.

Figure 5: Reasons Workers and Learners of LA County CCs Chose Their College

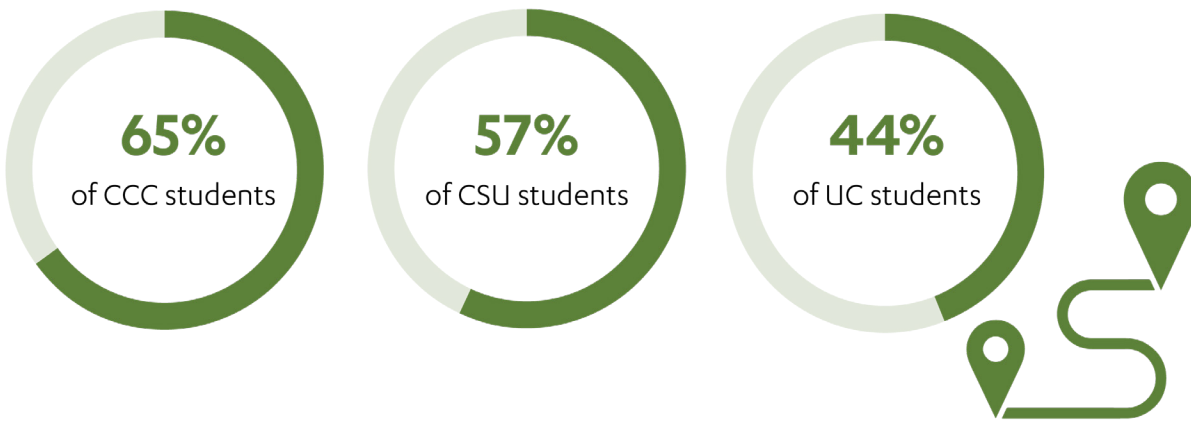
Source: *Unseen Costs data*

One worker and learner who studied child development and sociology described the financial strain that prioritizing school over work exerted on his life:

I went from making forty-two hundred a month to making less than a thousand a month. So the financial hardships that I took have affected my lifestyle. Even though I don't have an extravagant lifestyle, I'm really down to earth. There are times I can't afford a bag of chips or afford to get me a meal at school or something to eat. Sometimes I wonder if I'm doing the right thing.¹⁷

Students face difficult economic decisions when deciding whether to replace a regular job with a more flexible job to pursue a community college education at a lower cost or to prioritize the job and not pursue higher education and thus potentially limit certain options for their future. That is why the most cited reason Los Angeles workers and learners chose their community college was the cost (77%). Too often, students must sacrifice a steady income to attend college.

The second most cited reason Los Angeles workers and learners chose their community college was to stay close to their homes (65%). More community college students selected their institution based on proximity than workers and learners attending CSUs (57%) and UCs (44%) did. Being near home reduces transportation time and allows workers and learners more hours in the day to balance household and caretaking responsibilities along with the demands of their work and education.

Figure 6: Workers and Learners Who Chose Their College Because They Wanted to Live Near Home

Source: *Unseen Costs data*

Although many workers and learners indicated that they chose to attend a Los Angeles community college due to its low cost, over half of our survey respondents (65%) said they opted to attend their college based on the financial assistance opportunities it provided. This statistic was lower at the community colleges than at a CSU or a UC (72% and 76%). Despite having financial assistance, workers and learners attending community college faced many obstacles. Our findings show that 31% of Los Angeles community college students surveyed experienced housing insecurities, while 52% experienced food insecurity, making their college experience additionally challenging and stressful.

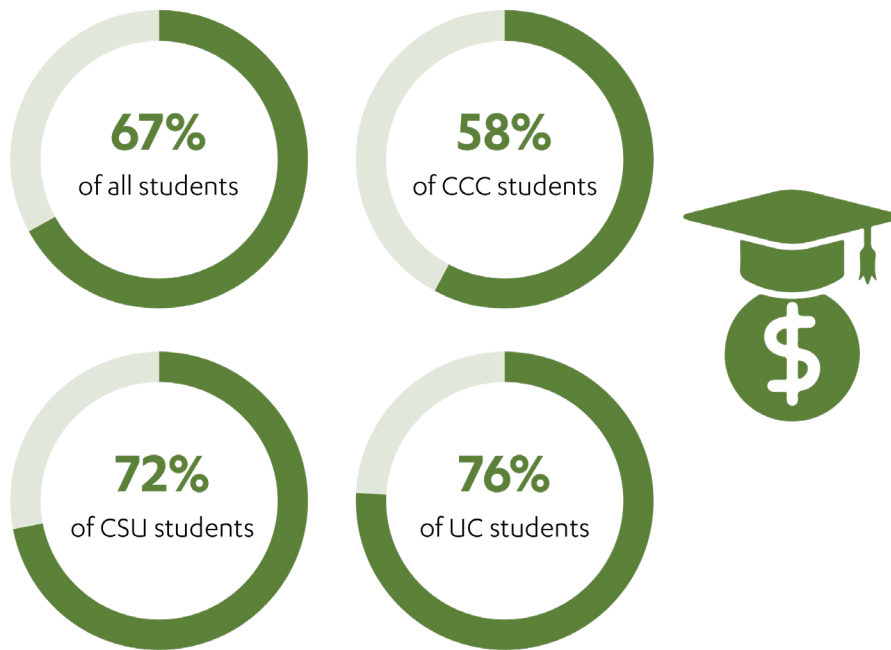
Community college workers and learners face extra responsibilities, as well; 40% have considered withdrawing or taking a break from school, and one-third reported having family obligations that interfered with their schedules, an aspect of life that is often invisible at school and work.

I actually have taken leave of absence from school because it came to the point where I couldn't do both. I couldn't work and go to school at the same time, and unfortunately, I chose to work.¹²

The significant stress of balancing personal responsibilities, work, and school is difficult to manage, leaving students often forced to choose work over school or school over work.

Financing School

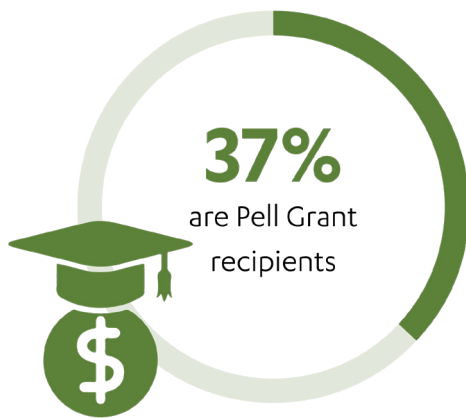
Figure 7: Workers and Learners Who Chose Their College Based On Financial Assistance Opportunities



Source: *Unseen Costs data*

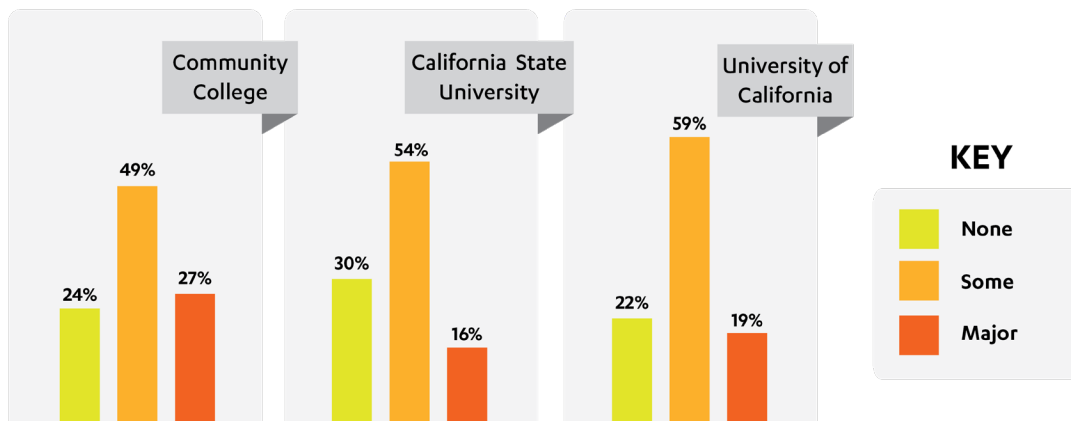
Data from the California Community College (CCC) Chancellor’s Office Data Mart revealed that only 43% of students in Los Angeles County received some form of financial aid in academic year 2019–2020.¹³ However, the lack of financial aid may be contributing to the economic concerns of workers and learners. The majority (74%) of our survey respondents across Los Angeles higher education institutions reported having experienced “some” to “major” concerns over their ability to finance their education. In Los Angeles community colleges, 27% of workers and learners responded that they felt major concern when it comes to funding their education, a higher percentage than their CSU (16%) and UC (19%) peers, compelling learners to take up work to finance their basic needs.

Figure 8: Percentage of CCC Students Receiving Pell Grant



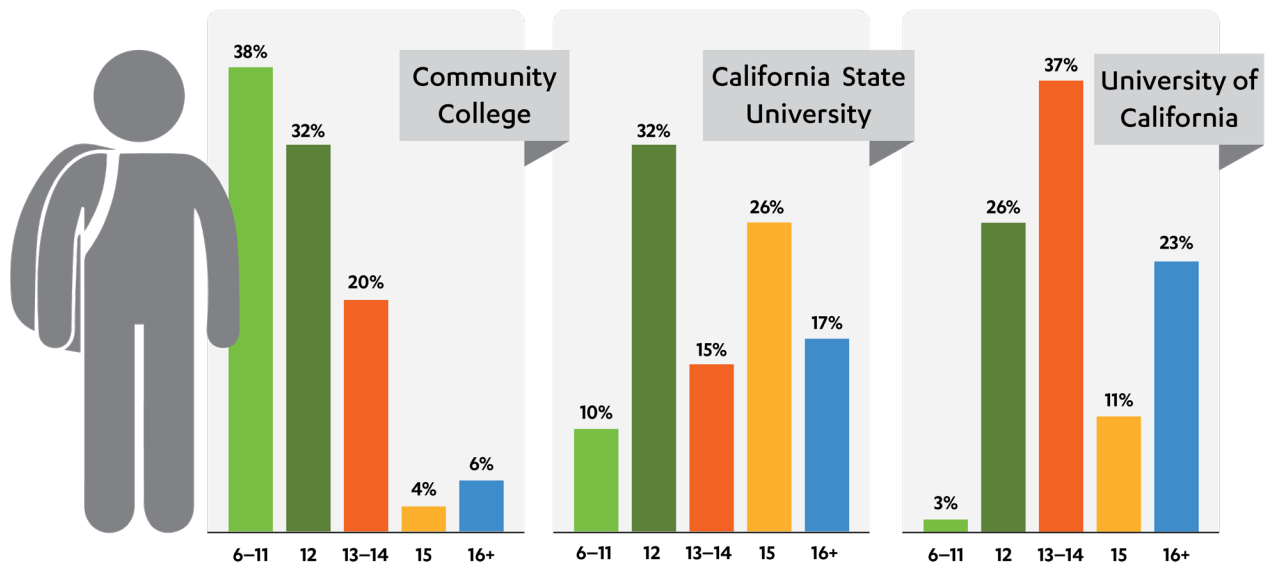
Source: Unseen Costs CCC data

Figure 9: Level of Concern About Financing Education



Source: Unseen Costs data

Workers and learners must meet their institution’s minimum course unit stipulations to receive maximum financial aid. Our survey found that Los Angeles community college workers and learners attend school part-time with greater frequency (38%) than their peers at the CSUs (10%) and UCs (3%). For some, switching to part-time enrollment is a method instead to balance working 20+ hours and attending school. Especially for community college students, workers and learners who have to worry about maintaining a high GPA in order to transfer, students perform a hectic balancing act to maintain work, school, and personal responsibilities.

Figure 10: Number of Units Taken by Workers and Learners by School Type

Source: *Unseen Costs CCC data*

An El Camino Community College student and elementary school tutor describes the impact that dropping their course and working hours to part-time has had on their GPA:

Now, like I said that I am [a] part-time [worker], I have a GPA that I am pretty proud of. But in the past, working full-time, my GPA was suffering. My GPA...plummeted. It was about the lowest it had gotten, which was about a 2.0. Now that I am working part-time and I go to school part-time, my GPA is at a 3.6.¹⁴

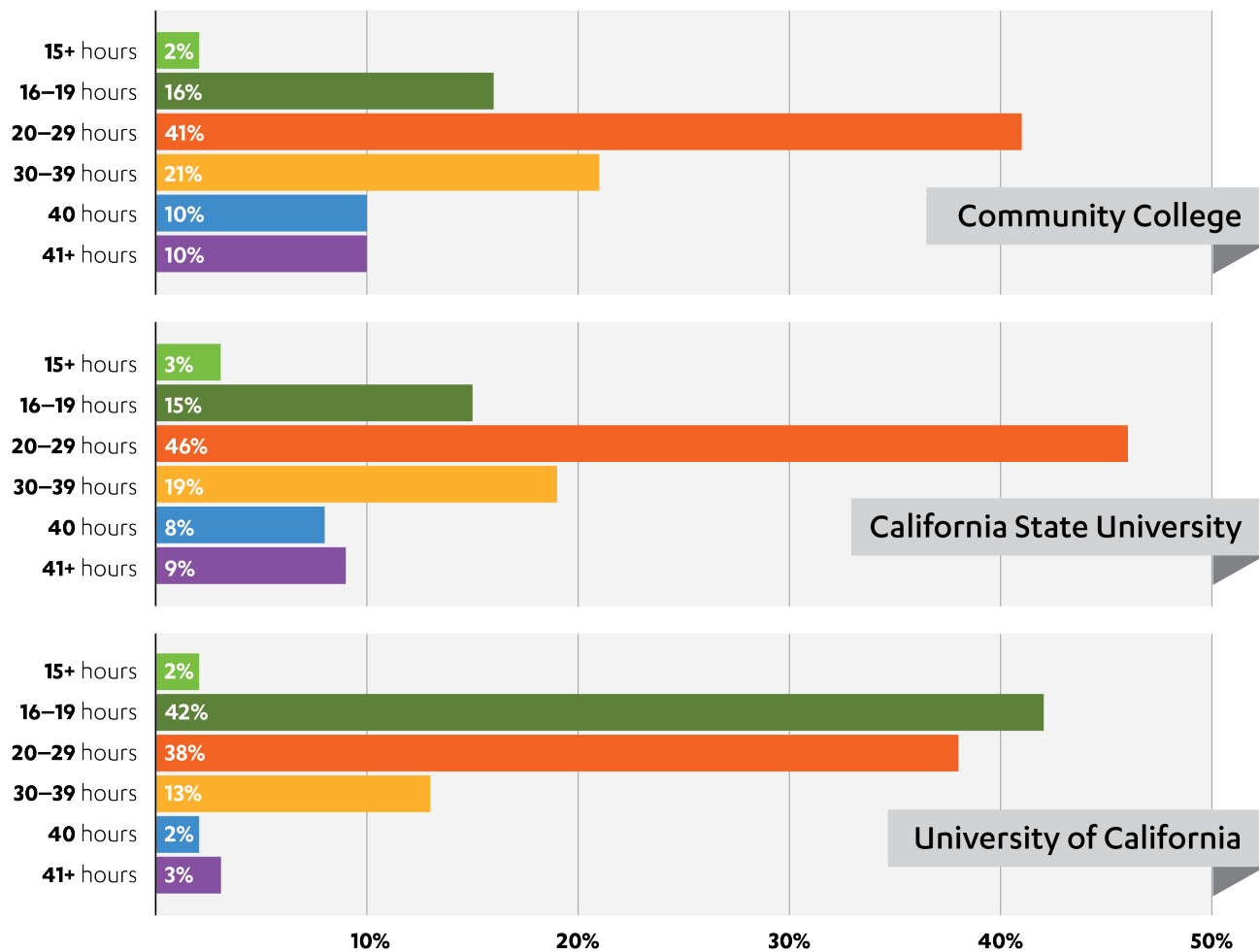
Community college students who are interested in transferring into a CSU or UC need to maintain a good GPA. Therefore, community college students have a higher incentive to take six to 11 units in order to make their workload manageable.

Despite the California Community College (CCC)s' convenience and accessibility, community college workers and learners endure strenuous circumstances and unseen barriers to their educational and career goals. In a 2020 study of community college enrollment trends and completion rates across the U.S., researchers found that those who exclusively enrolled as part-time students have half the completion rates of those who attended exclusively full-time over a six-month period. They also found that almost two-thirds of part-time enrollments are no longer enrolled and could not finish their programs after six years.¹⁵

Our survey showed that workers and learners across Los Angeles’ higher education systems work 15–29 hours per week. A large portion of our survey’s community college population (41%) reported working 30+ hours per week. As for the CSU workers and learners, 36% of survey respondents reported working 30+ hours, while UC participants reported just 18% working similar hours. Workers and learners in the Los Angeles community college system thus spend significantly more hours on the job per week than their peers in 4-year institutions.

Worker Experience

Figure 11: Average Weekly Work Hours at Any Job, by School Type

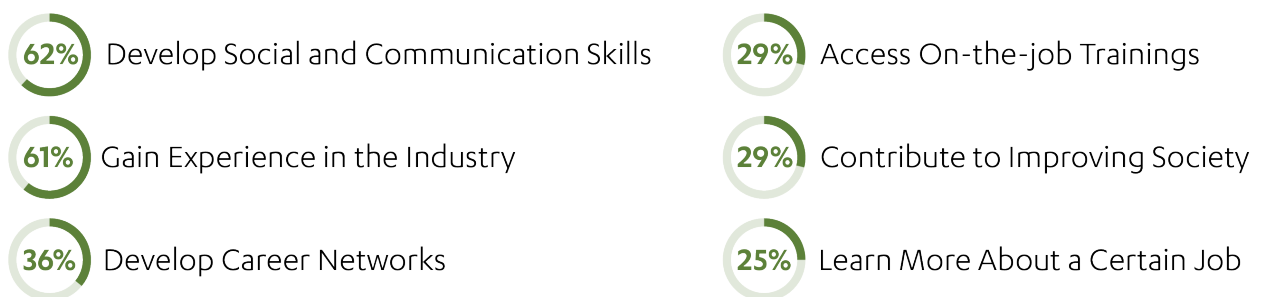


Source: *Unseen Costs CCC data*

CCC Students' Reasons for Working (Other than Financial)

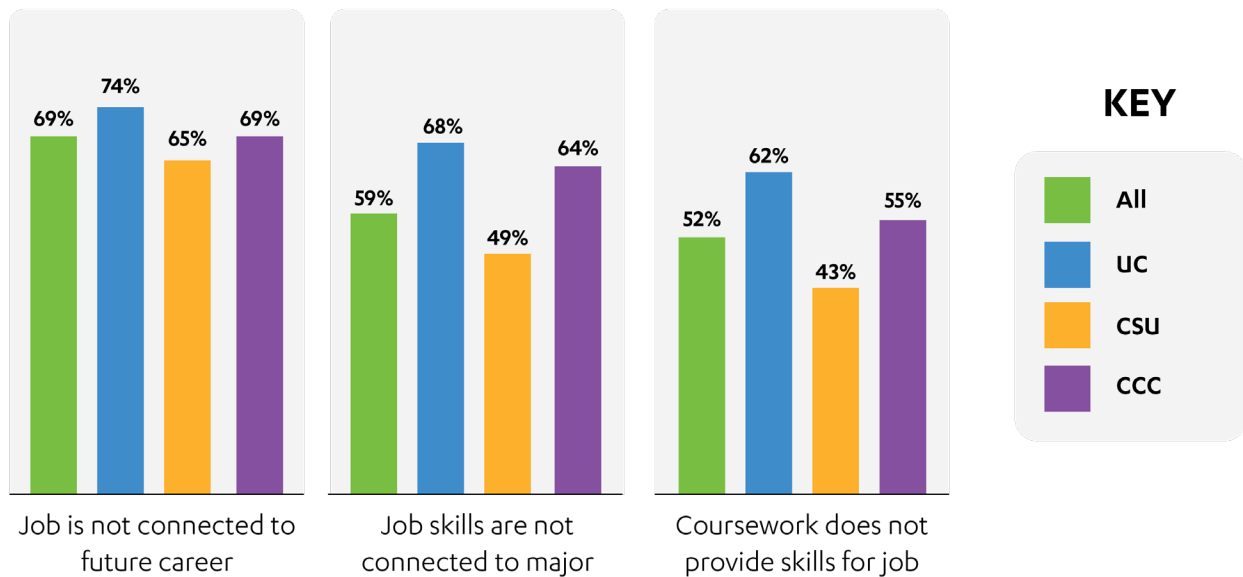
Outside of financial reasons, workers and learners in Los Angeles community colleges reported working mostly to develop social and communication skills (62%) and to gain experience in the industry (61%). Other contributing factors included the ability to develop career networks with their peers (36%) and to access on-the-job training (29%). Workers and learners also reported wanting to contribute to improving society (29%) and explore particular jobs (25%).

Figure 12: Workers and Learners' Reason for Working Current Job



Source: *Unseen Costs CCC data*

Although workers and learners gain skill sets from workplace experience, most Los Angeles community college workers and learners reported feeling that their jobs did not connect with their future aspirations (69%). Our survey also showed that a high percentage of Los Angeles community college workers and learners thought they could not connect the skills they were learning in their jobs back to their majors (64%). These feelings of disconnect also manifested in workers and learners reporting that their coursework did not provide skills for the jobs they currently occupied (55%). Community college students often have jobs that are low-wage, frontline positions. Of the workers and learners surveyed, 69% reported working in low-wage, service-sector jobs like retail, restaurant, and educational services.

Figure 13: Workers and Learners' Disconnection Between School and Work

Source: *Unseen Costs CCC data*

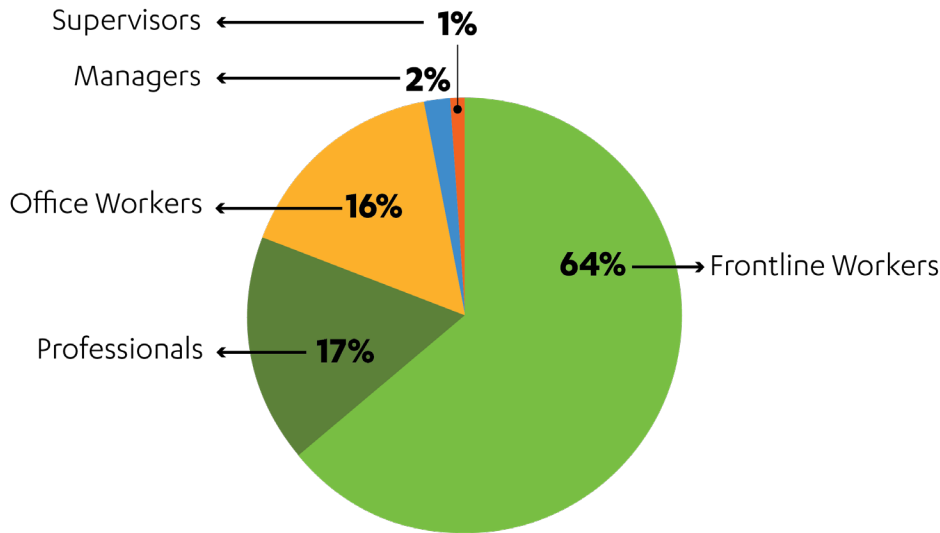
When talking about how their coursework relates to the skills they perform in their current jobs as an opening-shift gym attendant and domestic cleaner, one community college worker and learner who is undecided in their major conveyed a disconnect between the General Education courses they were taking in school and the tasks they performed in their workplaces:

The only thing I am learning from my job is the customer service aspect of it. Like I have to be on top of it, and I have to do two things at the same time... I don't think you learn anything.¹⁶

Therefore, there is a critical need for a work-based learning approach.

Many workers and learners across Los Angeles' higher educational institutions identify as frontline workers; community college workers and learners made up the greatest percentage of frontline workers (64%) in our study, surpassing the CSUs at 60% and the UCs at 48%. Frontline positions far exceed the next most frequent occupation type for Los Angeles community college workers and learners, professionals at 17%, office workers at 16%, managers at 2%, and supervisors at 1%. Interview respondents reported choosing frontline occupations because they were more likely to provide the schedule flexibility necessary to balance work and school obligations.

Figure 14: Workers and Learners' Current Positions Among Los Angeles CCC Students

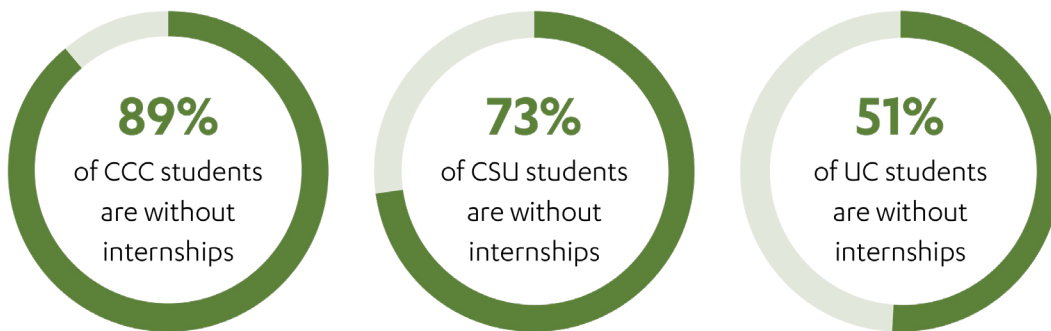


Source: *Unseen Costs data*

To succeed in his studies, one East Los Angeles Community College worker and learner described leaving his pharmacy technician job to work at Little Caesars and CVS, where the pay was lower but the scheduling was more accommodating:

I used to work at CVS graveyard shifts. So [it] is basically stocking, and then I work, right now, at Little Caesars pizza, making pizza. My experiences with them, probably they are the only company that I apply to so far that were willing to work with my school schedule. I can't find a quality job with great pay, with benefits and all that, that would work with my school schedule as a full-time student.¹⁷

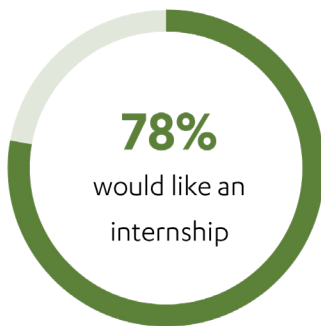
Figure 15: Percentage of Workers and Learners Without Internships



Source: *Unseen Costs data*

While community college workers and learners have jobs, the majority (89%) of workers and learners in Los Angeles' community colleges do not have internships. This number is not reflective of the respondents' lack of interest in the prospect of an internship, as 78% of them said they would like to participate in one if given the opportunity. This suggests that LA County community colleges either do not advertise internships in an effective manner or that students do not have the ability to participate in internships while also dealing with their other household responsibilities. To date, there are no regulations for internships in the California Community Colleges or guided recommendations in pointing to work-based learning opportunities that compensate students properly for their time.¹⁸

Figure 16: Percentage of CCC Workers and Learners Who Would Like the Opportunity to Work in an Internship.

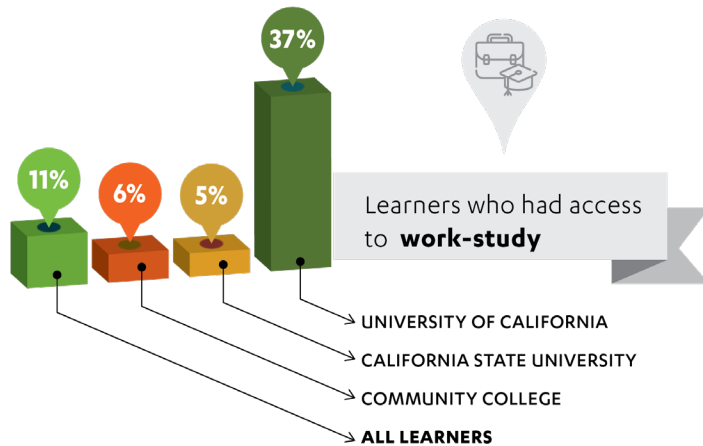


Source: *Unseen Costs CCC data*

The disparity in internship participation between Los Angeles County community college students and those who attend a CSU or UC can ultimately lead to community college students not having the same hiring outcomes because of that lack of internship experience. The annual National Association of Colleges and Employers Job Outlook survey for 2020 identified internship experience as a deciding factor used by employers in hiring decisions.¹⁹ Without this experience, students and graduates may be passed over for employment opportunities.

Our study found that only 6% of Los Angeles community college workers and learners had access to work-study programs through their campuses. Unfortunately, work-study jobs are least available to workers and learners in Los Angeles community colleges, as institutions usually receive minimal funding for work-study positions. As mentioned in *Unseen Costs*, federal work-study serves as a desirable alternative for workers and learners in lieu of an internship.

Figure 17: Access to Work-Study Jobs by School Type: Learners Who Had Access to Work-Study



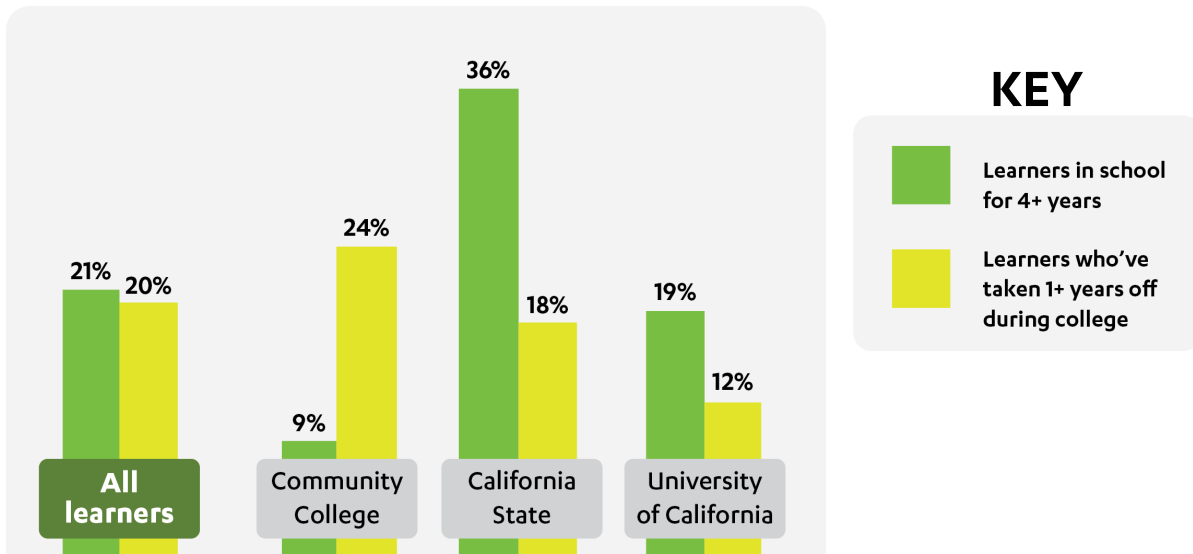
Source: *Unseen Costs data*

Balancing the Two

College is not exactly what I expected. Obviously, you have to get things done, but it's way more challenging and tiring, especially working and going to school at the same time. It's something I've been pretty bitter about sometimes, like knowing that some people don't have to work and knowing how much that must be so nice to not have to work and go to school, you know? That leaves so much time for schoolwork. There was a moment in time in my college experience where I felt low and I felt like I couldn't do anything, like I couldn't do school, and I talked to one of my professors about it and they encourage seeking help. I took a year off from school because I was just really stressed and feeling really low. I missed home, I was working full-time at my job and going to school full-time, and it was just really bad time for me mentally.²⁰

The pressure of simultaneously managing work and focusing on higher education can be very daunting for young students coming straight from high school as well as for mature students returning to the educational system. These stresses have often led workers and learners to interrupt their long-term plans and pause their education; workers and learners in the Los Angeles community college system were more likely to have taken a year or more break from their education. Many factors can contribute to the need to take time off from their education, including work priorities, shifting home priorities, or feeling the need to reevaluate their educational goals.

Figure 18: Workers and Learners Who've Taken More than 4 Years In College and Taken a Year Off, by School Type



Source: *Unseen Costs data*

When asked why they took a leave of absence from their education, one community college worker and learner shared how the time demands of studying conflicted with their capacity to navigate their job:

I think that it was the stress of having to study for school, not just be at school at those set times, so I couldn't just set aside the actual class times in my work schedule. I also had to set aside time to study, to focus, and to get to class. So it was the stress of communicating with my managers and my superiors about what I can and can't do.²¹

Research by the California Community Colleges has found that students who enter CCCs with college-ready academic skills are more likely to complete their study outcomes. Successful student retention in the CCC system skews toward students whose lowest course attempted in math and/or English was at the college level (69.9%), a far higher percentage than those whose lowest course attempted in math and/or English was at a remedial level (41.5%).²²

Our interview respondents in Los Angeles community colleges conveyed a need for guidance in navigating the complexities of higher education. They spoke to their experiences of relying on siblings, extended family, and in-laws for support in navigating academia. Familial aid can be helpful for workers and learners in need of moral support. But if no one in the family understands the academic experience, they can do little to assist the students in their lives.

A retail employee and Los Angeles Trade Tech student details the limitations he and his sibling had entering higher education:

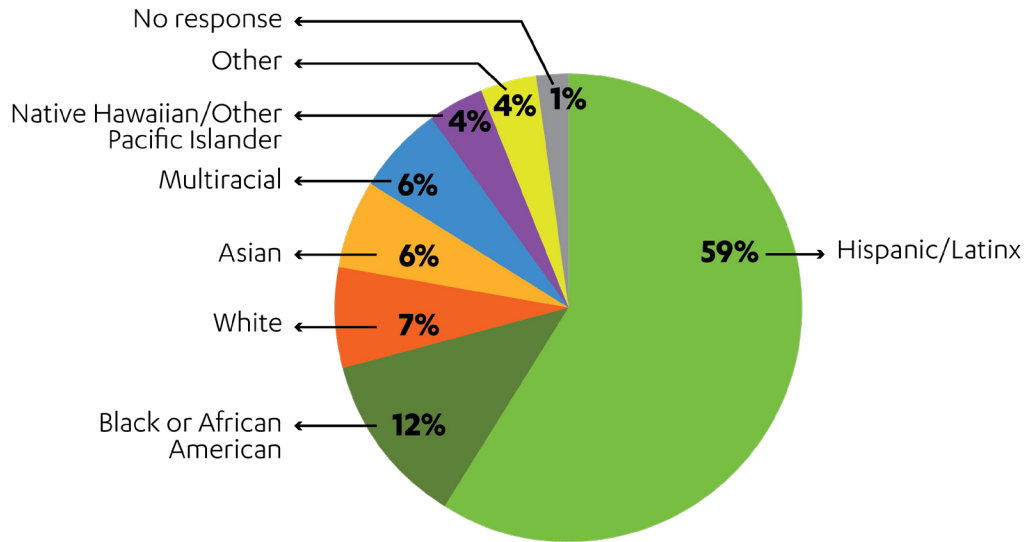
I didn't have too much notion of what college was like just because [the] majority of my family had never gone to college. My brother was going to a community college, and he was only two years older than me, so both of us didn't really have an idea of what exactly college was going to be like besides what we saw in movies. You know, you go [and] party and try to go to courses but that's about it. That's what I had in my mind.²³

Los Angeles community colleges have different support systems like orientation, counseling services, and mentorship programs which guide workers and learners in their balancing act. In our interviews, workers and learners referenced these programs but only participated in some of them, finding them difficult to navigate.

In handling the different aspects of balancing working and learning, students discovered different ways to alleviate stress, like engaging in activities on their days off. For some, the balancing act may be too difficult and they end up sacrificing either school or work opportunities. One thing that helps alleviate stress for community college workers and learners is access to services and networks.

Diversity and Inclusion

Outside of their identities as workers and learners, students' ethnic identities also impact their experiences in higher education. Hispanic/Latinx workers and learners make up the majority of Los Angeles's community college attendance (59%). Our interview respondents expressed the importance of seeing themselves represented in their educational environments. They conveyed to researchers how diverse campuses and programs made them feel comfortable and integrated into their campus communities.

Figure 19: Race/Ethnicity of Respondents

Source: *Unseen Costs CCC data*

An aspiring juvenile detention educational reformer and East Los Angeles Community College student detailed how his college's student educational support program contributed positively to his academic success:

When I first started, I didn't have anyone helping me, so I join[ed] the Puente program, and from there, the students took it upon themselves to show me where to apply for stuff. How to get the best out of my education process here, at East Los Angeles College [ELAC]. Not only that, but they also influence[d] me not dropping out.²⁴

As students follow their educational path, having representation in the community where they invest so much time and energy is important. Feelings of inclusion and acceptance brought about by a school's equitable racial and ethnic composition can lead to greater mental health outcomes for students.²⁵ In other words, when students feel they are learning among peers with similar backgrounds and life experiences related to their ethnic background, they're more likely to have better results in terms of both mental health and learning.

LACCD During COVID-19

Across the United States, community college enrollments declined due to the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶ Experts worry about enrollment drops in community colleges because they serve more students who are low-income than do the 4-year universities.²⁷ In California alone, enrollment dropped by about a fifth during the coronavirus pandemic: over 300,000 fewer students were enrolled in Fall 2021 compared to Fall 2019.²⁸ This loss has increased exponentially since then.

This was no exception for the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD). In fact, Black student enrollment at LACCD decreased by 40% between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020, and Latinx student enrollment decreased by 32%. Community college students in Los Angeles County face a drastically different educational experience because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Community college students voiced their frustrations at not returning back to campus, longing for in-person classes, the need for a mental and physical break from school, and the balancing act of being a student-parent.²⁹ LACCD students also faced the exacerbated impact of the digital divide on existing challenges like managing family responsibilities and caretaking.

What is the Digital Divide?

The digital divide is a long-standing concept that highlights the inequalities individuals face in terms of access to information and communications technologies, which has been especially heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁰ This was especially true for LACCD students. All nine LACCD campuses closed at the beginning of the pandemic, leaving many students without access to computers and the internet.³¹ Upon completing an online transition survey in Spring 2020, LACCD determined that 22% of students lacked vital access to computers and 14% did not have continued access to the internet. Underrepresented minorities attending LACCD also reported preference for asynchronous as opposed to synchronous courses, a phenomenon that could be related to underrepresented minorities reporting hardships in finding adequate and safe spaces to study.³²

Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

Colleges will need to find creative ways to encourage students to return under the conditions of a new normal. Otherwise, and in particular, community colleges risk losing students permanently. Tatiana Melguizo, a professor at the USC Rossier School of Education who studies community colleges, stressed this concern: “The community colleges are the engine of opportunity. If they are not aggressive at reaching out to these students and creating opportunities for them to be on campus, they are going to lose these students.” Many students did not re-enroll because of financial

problems; Eloy Ortiz Oakley, chancellor of the California Community Colleges, said that the \$2.2 billion in federal stimulus aid approved by Congress in March 2021, half of which was dedicated for students, would help bring students back, because they wouldn't have to weigh difficult decisions like paying their rent or paying for their books.³³ Alleviating financial stress can help retain students and thus allow more students to pursue higher education.

Conclusion

Students' complex working and learning experiences create difficult barriers across different public undergraduate institutions, from limited access to internships, navigating work and class schedules, and stresses that come with limited financial opportunities. Los Angeles County community college students are at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts who attend 4-year institutions. Added to that, there are several features of the community college system that make the working and learning experience unique. The programs available to students in California community colleges span career-specific training curriculums compared to those offered in public 4-year institutions in Los Angeles where it specifies major related classes.³⁴ The difference in structure can make it more difficult for workers and learners to navigate higher education.

A defining feature of California community colleges is their low enrollment cost. Our findings show that the low cost of community colleges in Los Angeles County does not relieve learners from needing to maintain a job to cover living costs. Although necessary for most of the workers and learners we interviewed, low costs are not enough to cover the unseen economic burden of attending school in an urban area like Los Angeles County. Most of our interviewees shared that they didn't have to pay for school, but they still had to pay for basic needs and living expenses.

We also found that students' increased need to work has resulted in significant differences in enrollment patterns compared to workers and learners in 4-year institutions. More students in LA County community colleges enroll part-time, which has been a barrier to accessing maximum financial aid. Further, part-time students have lower completion rates than full-time students. More workers and learners from LA County community colleges have taken at least a year off school, disrupting their learning experience and making it harder for them to achieve their initial career goals in a shorter and less costly timeline. It is important that students with competing obligations feel confident that a community college degree can support them in a comparable path to those offered by 4-year institutions.

Community colleges can help offset the incorrect assumption that only 4-year institutions provide a path to good careers. They can provide workers and learners with alternative pathways to jobs with good pay and benefits by educating prospective students about the economic incentives of going to a community college for vocational and certification training, even when workers and learners' job and home obligations may interfere with academic demands.

Los Angeles County community colleges can also help ease working and learning pressures by allowing students access to more paid internships and work-study opportunities. Better opportunities to collaborate with local job creators through these pathways will help workers and learners bridge the disconnect between their work and school experiences.

Recommendations

Workers and learners across Los Angeles County community colleges encounter conflicting priorities and demands on their time that non-working students do not have to navigate, especially during a pandemic. Below, we offer recommendations for how Los Angeles County community colleges can help community college workers and learners maneuver their unique challenges and find opportunities to thrive in both work and school.

1. Embrace Los Angeles County community colleges' diverse populations of workers and learners by offering a wide range of ethnic studies courses transferable to 4-year institutions. Community colleges have a chance to help enrich the lives of their diverse student body by fostering a sense of belonging and representation early in students' higher education pathways. Interdisciplinary ethnic studies help foster cross-cultural understanding among students of color and white students, and aids students in valuing their own cultural identity while appreciating the differences around them.
2. Promote and uplift clubs and organizations dedicated to the diverse student experience. A variety of organizations support educationally disadvantaged students enrolled in colleges and universities in California, and LGBTQIA+ coalitions help affirm and empower the experiences and perspectives of students from diverse backgrounds. Organizations and initiatives like these can support workers and learners in building community and friendships that in turn can help them navigate the college experience.
3. Create additional online and evening educational services, such as hybrid learning. By creating additional time for workers and learners to access guidance and support in spaces tailored to their schedule, workers and learners will be more able to seek categories of professional assistance that they could not otherwise access.

4. Los Angeles County community colleges should intensify the promotion of career and technical education (CTE) training in all the County's secondary schools. CTEs offer a wide range of industrial sector jobs, from arts, media, and entertainment to medical technology, agriculture, engineering, and more.³⁵ The variety of these occupations' earning potential can positively impact workers and learners who participate in the programs.
5. Los Angeles Community colleges should help workers and learners locate and apply for internships in their local communities where they are able to obtain college credit and be paid for their labor. As seen in our data, community college workers and learners are hardworking, multitasking, driven individuals who would be excellent additions to workplaces' paid internship pools if given the opportunity. Exposing workers and learners to internships related to their majors can help students decide early in their educational pathways if their major choice will be a good fit for their long-term career ambitions.
6. Increase financial aid support to Los Angeles community college students through local and federal policy changes. Existing financial aid options for community college students are limited to tuition costs.³⁶ It is time for Los Angeles County community colleges to explore financial aid that covers more than the tuition costs of its students. Los Angeles community college workers and learners' enrollment patterns do not align with the requirements needed for total financial aid, such as full-time class enrollment. Furthermore, the federal government should increase opportunities for work-study at community colleges. Federal work-study is a very accessible and desirable opportunity for workers and learners. These opportunities would help students fund their education and gain work experience without leaving their community on campus.

Appendix A

Table 2: Community Colleges in Los Angeles County

Community College	Number of Respondents
Cerritos College	4
Citrus College	12
College of the Canyons	3
Compton College	2

East Los Angeles College	69
El Camino College	20
Glendale Community College	4
Los Angeles City College	21
Los Angeles Harbor College	33
Los Angeles Mission College	20
Los Angeles Pierce College	54
Los Angeles Southwest College	38
Los Angeles Trade Tech	21
Los Angeles Valley College	34
Long Beach City College	11
Mt. San Antonio College	2
Pasadena City College	3
Rio Hondo College	4
Santa Monica College	24
West Los Angeles College	12
Multiple Colleges	3

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Endnotes

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