

# Portraits of Resilience

## Southern California Community College Students Navigating Challenges Amid the Pandemic

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At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, community colleges faced a sudden imperative to adapt and transform the ways they served the needs of their diverse student populations (Cooper et al., 2020). In California, the community college system saw a 14% decline in enrollment by spring 2021, with larger declines for male (18%) and Latinx students (17%) (Linden et al., 2022). As campuses transitioned their classes online, students experienced heightened challenges, including loss of wages and employment, increased housing and food insecurity, and the need to provide care for their families (Nguyen et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, many students and colleges alike showed resilience and creativity in finding ways to sustain educational trajectories. A deeper understanding of the challenges that community college students faced during the pandemic can provide valuable insights to help shape future initiatives and practices to meet the diverse needs of the community college student population.

Drawing from narratives by five Southern California community college students, this brief offers insights into the evolving needs, concerns, and challenges students faced as they navigated community college during and after the pandemic. In highlighting these voices and students' own recommendations for college improvements, this brief seeks to inform future initiatives and practices to address student needs and support their success in the post-pandemic period.



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# The Impact of the Pandemic on Community College Students

The pandemic exacerbated the racial and socioeconomic inequities that marginalized community college students were facing before the pandemic. Prior disparities in access to the Internet and to technology became more pronounced once college courses shifted completely online (The Education Trust–West, 2020). Students attending a California community college were twice as likely to lack access to a computer as their University of California (UC) peers (Reed et al., 2021). Students at community colleges, students from low-income backgrounds, and Black and Latinx students were also more likely to miss class because of work or caregiving responsibilities and experienced higher weekly food and monthly housing expenses (Reed et al., 2021). Students intending to enroll at a community college reported affordability issues or changes to their financial aid as reasons for not enrolling at almost twice the rate of students intending to enroll at a four-year institution (Brock & Diwa, 2021). In this context, the experiences and perspectives of community college students offer invaluable insight into their resilience and struggles during an unprecedented time of uncertainty.

## Why Community College?

The five student panelists profiled in this brief enrolled in community college at different times during the pandemic period and had various reasons for choosing community college. A theme that emerged from the students' narratives was their perception that community colleges were the only accessible and affordable option for pursuing their education in light of the challenges the students faced.

Community colleges were seen as spaces that provided educational opportunities and as gateways to future careers. Alexx's experience enrolling and reenrolling in community college reflects community colleges' role in providing students with second chances. While Alexx enrolled in community college right after high school in 2008, their experience was impacted by personal challenges, which led them to attend community college on and off until 2015. It was not until the pandemic began that they decided to reenroll again. Although Alexx shared that they had been unhoused on and off during their first year back at college, they refused to let that stop them from pursuing their goal to be a counselor and "to give back to fellow community college students."

Oscar's decision to enroll in community college provided him an opportunity to better himself by rebuilding his life through education after being incarcerated. Oscar started college while he was in the system for two years. When he reentered society, he decided he wanted

## Data Source

Data for this brief are drawn from five student narratives shared during a February 2024 student panel presentation at a convening of the Accelerating Recovery in Community Colleges (ARCC) Network. We sought to include a mix of experiences and perspectives and recruited these students by contacting various student centers and programs at Santa Monica College (SMC), West Los Angeles College, and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Two of the participating students were enrolled at a community college, and three others had transferred to a California State University (CSU) or UC. Students candidly described their experiences navigating the challenges of the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. We recorded their presentation—*see video links within this report*—and extracted excerpts to capture key points and perspectives shared. We invited students to read our summary and analysis of their presentation, provide their feedback, and edit their written narratives for clarity. Therefore, some written versions of their narratives might differ slightly from the original audio recordings.

# Featured Community College Students



## Alexx

College: Santa Monica College  
Major: Women and gender studies  
Minor: Psychology  
Goal: Academic counselor at a community college



## Amber

College: Southwestern College | UCLA  
Major: Psychology  
Minor: Education  
Goal: High school/community college academic counselor



## Karina

College: West Los Angeles College  
Major: Health professions  
Goal: Registered nurse



## Kimberly

College: MiraCosta College | UCLA  
Major: Labor studies  
Minor: Community engagement and social change  
Goal: Career in a community college



## Oscar

College: Santa Monica College | CSU Northridge  
Major: Accounting  
Goal: Certified public accountant

to continue studying and chose to attend SMC because a friend had told him about its program for system-impacted people and because it was more affordable. “I really was interested in bettering myself and trying to do something different with my life,” he said.

The decisions of other student panelists were also driven by personal and familial financial considerations. Kimberly enrolled in community college right after graduating high school in 2020. As a participant in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program,<sup>1</sup> she applied to and intended to enroll in a four-year college, but the pandemic changed her plans. While she was accepted to a few four-year colleges, as a first-generation, low-income student, she and her parents could not afford the costs.

For Karina, a student parent who earned an associate degree in 2014 and decided to enroll again in community college to further her career, finances influenced her decision to go to a community college instead of a four-year college. However, a sense of belonging also played an important role. “I started going to different community colleges and ... I didn’t feel like I belonged in any of them until I went to West LA College and I saw how helpful they were and how resourceful everyone was, and I was like, ‘Okay, this is the campus for me,’” she shared.

For these students, affordability was one of the important factors influencing their decisions to enroll in community college. This was heightened during the pandemic due to job losses and reduced working hours. While some students opted for community college as the most economical choice, it is important to note that financial strains have also led students to leave or pause their enrollment at community college (Belfield & Brock, 2020; Nguyen & Cheche, 2024). This underscores the importance of increasing financial aid and support for community college students, including expanding aid to cover non-tuition costs needed for continuous enrollment (e.g., supports for housing, childcare, transportation, etc.) (Cook et al., 2021).

Amber, an English learner and *transfronteriza*<sup>2</sup> student who crossed the U.S.–Mexico border to attend classes, highlights the role that her high school counselor played in deciding to enroll in community college. She shared that as a first-generation student she did not know how to apply for college. She was not offered the opportunity at her California high school to take all of the English and history courses necessary to be eligible for a four-year university, and her counselor did not help her figure out what she needed to do to apply. She shared that she was initially reluctant to go to a community college because of the stigma associated with it but decided it was the only way to continue her education. “I really ended up liking it, and I didn’t want to leave,” she said.

## Challenges Imposed by the Pandemic: The Online Learning Environment

The pandemic posed significant challenges for all five students that affected their course engagement, academic success, and mental health. Karina was working as a certified nurse assistant and struggled to balance school with work at a hospital

heavily impacted by COVID-19. The shift to online classes led her to prioritize her hospital work, which caused Karina to lose some financial aid and be placed on academic probation:

*I was doing part-time school and full-time work ... and when the pandemic hit, I mean ... we were doing so many hours, like way beyond what you were even supposed to be doing, and everything went online. I know I'm young and I should be computer savvy, but I'm an old soul and I like paper and I like in-person, so I was like, "What is this?" Like, you know, everything went online, and you know, you come home from 10-, 12-, 16-hour shifts and it was like, "I'm supposed to stay up and do this homework or do these assignments?" And unfortunately, I was like, "The patients need me, the hospital needs me," and I ended up going towards work instead of my education. ... I fell behind in my education and ... I ended up losing some of my financial aid. ... So, of course I went into probation and everything. I was like, I felt like the hospital needed me more. And I wish I wouldn't have thought that way, but that was my choice then. So, yeah, I ended up dropping out of all my classes and then here I'm back again.*

Additionally, the shift online made it harder for Karina to connect with professors, which made it challenging for her to complete assignments when she had questions not answered during the lecture.

Disruptions caused by the pandemic likewise had financial and academic repercussions for Kimberly, who also noted the impact on her mental health:

*So, like many people, mental health really affected me. I did suffer from severe depression and anxiety. As I'm pretty sure everyone knows ... the pandemic really pushed a mental health crisis, and that caused me to drop out from most of my classes my first semester, which at the end of the day cost me financially. To lose some of my financial aid, some of my scholarships, even though I, like, petitioned and explained, you know, my reasoning for it, that still caused me to lose that financial aid, which ended up hurting me since one of the reasons I went to community college was because of finances, because I did not have enough money.*

Having never taken classes online, Alexx experienced a culture shock. They shared that interacting with instructors was difficult and said they preferred in-person interaction:

*Sometimes it feels like some instructors, they're just, like, reading from the textbook and it's not really, like, personable. ... I prefer in-person, like, straight away because I feel like I'm able to interact with the instructor, like, one-on-one, and I feel like I'm heard.*



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How has the pandemic impacted your overall community college experience?

Similarly, Amber shared the difficulties she faced in online classes and emphasized the lack of hands-on experiments in her lab courses, which impacted her engagement and ultimately led her to change her major. However, Amber also noted that the shift to online classes made school easier to manage as a transfronteriza college student. She shared that not having to cross the border every day to go to classes in person benefited her, underscoring the complex interplay of challenges and benefits that online classes may create for community college students.

Kimberly and Karina also valued the flexibility of online courses but said these courses were only effective when they were interactive and engaging. Kimberly shared,

*I think asynchronous classes or classes that are just completely on your own help students that have other jobs or commitments, especially during the pandemic. I know a lot of my peers, they needed to help out their family financially, so their focus was a little more on those finances rather than their classes, and that flexibility allowed them to do classes at any time; you know, [at] 1:00 a.m. they could be on there doing their classes. But [on] Zoom—sometimes, you know, all those black boxes—people aren't engaged. So, it definitely depends.*

Understanding how to address challenges around online courses is important given that some of the largest course enrollment drops were seen in spring 2020 at the onset of the pandemic, and withdrawals increased by 55% from spring 2019 to spring 2020 (Jackson & Perez, 2020). In one recent study, faculty shared that there was less connection between students and their instructors and peers in an online learning environment (Swanson et al., 2023). The study underscores the need for community colleges to address these challenges by recognizing the importance of course flexibility and providing courses in different modalities to cater to differing needs.

## Challenges and Barriers Faced in (Re)Enrolling

In light of the large enrollment declines, we asked students to share some of the challenges or barriers they or their peers faced in enrolling or reenrolling in community college during the pandemic. Oscar shared his experience of being transferred between prisons, where he faced obstacles in enrolling in community college classes as priority was given to those who had been in the facility longer. This disrupted his ability to complete courses required for his associate degree:

*So, where I was at ... [the] college program was great. It was on site, and teachers were everywhere. But once I got transferred to a different facility, it was a whole different story. Like, the program was, how could I say it, not up to par, and they were not accepting anybody that was just coming into the institution. It was a process. If you knew somebody, they'll help you get in. Other than that, you weren't going to be able to participate in the program, so I took an absence of about 18 months. ... Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get my AA due to the pandemic, but I didn't let that stop me continue my education.*



## Watch the Video

Were there challenges or barriers you faced in enrolling in community colleges during the pandemic?

The shift to online classes to provide continuous access to courses amid the pandemic (Hart et al., 2021) highlighted an existing digital divide impacting marginalized communities in California (Hayes et al., 2024). Amber, who was living in Tijuana, México, while enrolled in community college in Chula Vista, California, noted this digital divide and its impact on her family and education:

*Where I come from, there was very little accessibility to the Internet. So, getting Internet was really difficult because everyone was in need of the Internet, so the prices were increasing at that time. [Before the pandemic,] we never had Internet because we were never at home. So, when the pandemic happened, it was a need because I was in school, my mom was taking English classes, which made an increase in our expenses.*

Additionally, Kimberly described the broader economic challenges that the pandemic exacerbated for her and her family:

*I'm a low-income student. I tried to apply to EOPS [Extended Opportunity Program and Services]<sup>3</sup> since they provide priority enrollment at my institution. They provide you with, like, gas cards, especially during the pandemic. And since that was based off previous years' financial aid information, my family initially didn't qualify. But my parents lost their job during the pandemic, and it took me, like, a semester and a half to get into that program because I had to, like, keep emailing back and forth—because the in-person office was not open—with, like, financial aid and EOPS to try to pretty much prove that I qualified for this program.*

Although the federal government provided community colleges in the state with emergency funds to offset students' financial hardships during this time (Daniels Sarica et al., 2024), the financial assistance was not always easy to navigate, and low-income students faced great uncertainty.

While the availability of childcare was an important factor in her decision to enroll in West Los Angeles College,<sup>4</sup> Karina noted the challenges she encountered when courses were provided when childcare was unavailable and suggested that expanding course availability throughout the day would encourage more students to return:

*I'm currently taking a lot of science classes, and it seems like they're offered more in the evenings rather than in the morning times, and, like, for myself, childcare is an issue. So, my campus offers childcare, one of the reasons why I chose that campus. So, I have childcare available in the morning but not in the evenings, and a lot of science classes are offered in the evenings only. Or if they're, like, fully online, and—I can only speak for myself—but*

*I feel like you can't learn anatomy through, you know, virtual. We can, but it's much better if you're in person. And, like, that's one of the things that for me, like, when I'm looking at classes, I'm like, "Okay, is this going to be offered in person or is it going to be offered online only?" Because if it's online only, then, you know, you want to, or I want to, look into a different campus that will offer it in person. But then it's the whole, well, "Am I going to have childcare? How far is this campus? What time does it end?" ... So, I think if maybe more classes were spread out evenly throughout the day or being offered mornings and evenings evenly, maybe more students would enroll or come back to campus.*

## How Community Colleges Supported Students During the Pandemic

Despite these challenges, the students profiled here described several ways that community colleges showed they cared about them inside and outside the classroom. Many emphasized the importance of lasting relationships with advisors and mentors who provided guidance throughout their community college journey and beyond. Oscar, for instance, decided to enroll in SMC after a friend mentioned a program that was intended for formerly incarcerated individuals, which had a significant impact on his community college experience:

*So, that program for me was, like, everything because they helped me. The counselors were great. They were guiding me, making sure I was taking the right classes. And even though I'm an adult and I don't need to be told what to do, it's always good to have that person behind you and trying to push you and motivate you, in other words. So, I had a counselor, great counselor. She always was on top of me, like, "Are you taking classes? ... How are you doing? And how are you managing your work?" ... I still thank her to this day, and she's still helping me out with certain things, like, "Oh, if you need a job, I'll try to help you out." So that was, for me, one of the biggest benefits of going to SMC, like meeting people that really care and want to see you succeed in whatever your goals are in school and life and everything in general.*

Likewise, Amber emphasized the significant influence her EOPS counselor had on her and said that she maintained that relationship with her community college counselor even after transferring to UCLA:

*So, when I came to community college, I was automatically eligible for EOPS and the services they offer, such as academic counseling. I had an appointment with a counselor when I was*



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What are some things community colleges are doing to show that they care about you?



*enrolling, and she helped me a lot through enrolling in classes, selecting courses, financial aid, transferring services, and more. After that meeting, I never let her go, and she was the only counselor I ever seeked support [from]. ... Even though we started in person and transitioned to online due to the pandemic, she was still a very helpful resource. She became a mentor to me when I transferred here and still today is one of the most inspiring people in my life. I still see her, and those are kind of, like, the people that I still look at because I feel like those are the people that are very, very supportive throughout my pathways.*

Similarly, Alexx, also part of EOPS, shared the importance of connecting with a mentor on an academic and personal level:

*I'm an EOPS student now, and my EOPS counselor is the only one I see. And sometimes I feel sorry because I'm always venting to him about, like, not just classes, but, like, life in general and, like, being stressed with, like, okay, am I, like, doing the right classes? and everything. ... It's like [he is] pretty much my mentor and pretty much is always willing to listen to me.*

## Student Recommendations: Identifying Support Systems and Resources

Students shared several recommendations for what colleges could do better to help students achieve their goals of obtaining a degree and/or transferring. The following recommendations may help community colleges identify ways to strengthen support systems and resources to improve students' degree attainment and/or transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution.

**Increase student support through counseling, mentorship, and tailored programs for marginalized students.** Several students noted the importance of developing connections on campus with counselors, mentors, and other students who shared similar backgrounds and interests. Alexx emphasized the importance of having access to counselors who genuinely care about students' academic success, highlighting a need for more accessible and assertive counseling:

*Even, like, being able to see a counselor to make sure, like, you're taking the right classes. So, because I feel like there's only a limited amount of time to see the counselor, so for like [a] 30-minute time—so, like, if you're new or if you're coming back to school or even if you're, like, a freshman coming into community college, like, you don't know what you're doing, like, you don't know what classes to take, so you need that help and that experience.*

Kimberly noted the importance of mentorship and reflected on her own role as a mentor after transferring:

*I think institutions, specifically community colleges, need to bridge that gap between starting off at the community college and once you transfer, even—but, like, I'm talking about, like, your first semester: what classes to take ... how to finance it. I know last year I worked at UCLA for the Center for Community*

*College Partnerships, where you get paired with a current student at community college. And I wish I had someone like that to tell me, that came from a similar background that I did, that came from the institution that I did, so I could see myself at a place like UCLA. And I really love that I was able to mentor someone and that one of my mentees actually currently comes to UCLA.*

Students also mentioned the importance of accessing educational programs and being aware of available resources, which plays an important role in their engagement on campus. For Amber, being a *Puentista*<sup>5</sup> at her community college provided her with guidance, mentorship, and empowerment to apply and get accepted to four-year universities. While this was a positive experience for her, she also acknowledged the limited number of students these programs could serve:

*Programs such as Puente and Umoja,<sup>6</sup> yeah, they're wonderful programs. But it's just, like, a very limited capacity because it's only, like, 30 students. And I always heard this about other students, like, they're competitive and like, what if I don't get in? They're just, like, there for you to support you. But if you don't get in, there's, like, then you don't know what to do because you're not being supported. So, I guess that limitation of being only, like, 30 students is so hard for many students to join and be able to use their resources as well.*

Similarly, Oscar shared that raising awareness of programs tailored for formerly incarcerated individuals is critical:

*I think bringing it to the attention of more individuals that really want to seek their education when they come back to the society [is important]. ... The only reason I wanted to go to Santa Monica [was] because it was the program that they had. And they asked me this, like, "What could we do to help more students in your situation, bring them to college after they come back to society?" Well, bring it to their attention because they don't know you guys have this program. And a lot of people, when I was in there, they did want to seek their higher education as they got out because they didn't want to keep through that cycle—in and out, in and out. So, I think bringing awareness to these programs that are available to us ... to continue our education would be a great thing to do.*

**Expand and continue basic needs support on campus.** Students emphasized the need to expand support for a diverse set of basic needs. For Karina, finding a college that had a childcare center where she felt her daughter could be safe and develop was essential:



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What can colleges do better to help students achieve their goals?

*I know not every campus has childcare, but I think that's a really big thing. ... Not all of us are the traditional fresh-out-of-high-school students without children. ... Some of us are returning adult students, and we need that childcare. ... If you're a student like myself and you're not working, you can't afford to pay for those services outside of the campus, or not every place that offers free childcare is a great center for your child. And a lot of people don't know this, but the lab schools in the community colleges, they actually abide by all the licensing regulations, and those are the best schools for the children.*

Kimberly emphasized the importance of the basic needs resources that were provided before the pandemic, such as food pantries and financial support in the form of emergency grants:

*My community college had food pantries, and they shifted all of that to be, like, monthly and put those basic necessities in your vehicle, and [I] actually ended up receiving that and then giving back to that by being a volunteer for that. Additionally, I guess since one of my big topics of my community college experience was that I didn't have enough money, so all of those emergency grants that were provided definitely helped me.*

Other students also emphasized the critical need for basic needs support to address the precarity in their lives, reflecting findings from a survey of California community college students, which found that more than two thirds experienced at least one basic needs insecurity (The RP Group and the Chief Executive Officers (CEO) Affordability, Food & Housing Access Taskforce, 2023). During the pandemic, the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF), along with other state and philanthropic aid, was designed to support students. This support included direct financial aid for students, as well as additional support for transportation, housing, childcare, and food pantries, among other resources to help students address these barriers (Rodriguez et al., 2024). Because much of this relief aid has come to an end and students' needs remain great, continuing and expanding aid to support basic needs that can disrupt enrollment is critical.

**Recognize that “community college is college.”** Students' decisions to enroll in community college reflected their realities and aspirations. Yet, students like Kimberly felt stigmatized when making this choice:

*There was a stigma just because most people around me were like, “Oh, you're going straight to a four-year, that's great.” And then when I switched my plans to go to a community college, I was always, like, stigmatized. Like, “Oh, like, did you not get accepted to a four-year? Is that why you didn't choose to go?” But for me, definitely it was finances [that] was the biggest barrier.*

Kimberly's experience highlights the prevalent misconception that community college is the second-best option for those who cannot gain admission to a four-year university. In reality, financial barriers often play a significant role in students' decisions, which highlights a need to understand and destigmatize students' decisions to enroll in community college. Kimberly challenged these perceptions by stating

that there is a need to recognize that “community college is college.” Karina echoed these sentiments, urging students not to overlook community college due to the societal stigma and emphasizing the importance of finding supportive individuals within the community college.

Building on this, Amber discussed the important role that community college counselors had in advocating for community colleges in high schools and countering the stigma that is often associated with enrolling in community college. Moreover, when considering transfer options, she mentioned the importance of providing information on college costs, given that attending a CSU may be perceived as more affordable, yet attending a UC can also be an affordable option with financial aid:

*I feel like we also need more students to go back into their community college and talk about finances, how to afford universities. And I know many students want to apply to UCs, but they have that feeling that they’re not going to be able to afford it, so they just don’t end up applying. So, I feel like also having that conversation and how to afford college, how to look for scholarships, grants, and donors even—I think that’s something that community colleges and even alumni can help with.*

## Conclusion

These narratives highlight the critical importance of actively seeking out and listening to student experiences to drive improvements within the community college system and beyond. Community college enrollment declines during the pandemic have been well documented. Understanding the many challenges students faced during the pandemic is critical to transforming institutions to better meet diverse student needs and to bring students back to community college. Students know what they need, and college leaders should incorporate student voices to help identify and guide changes. By embracing student-centered approaches and leveraging the lessons learned from the pandemic, community colleges can create more inclusive environments that support the success of all students.

## Endnotes

- 1 The AVID program is designed to support students by preparing them to be college eligible and to apply to college. To learn more, please visit <https://www.avid.org/>.
- 2 Transfronteriza/o/x students cross international borders—in Amber’s case, the Tijuana–San Diego border—to attend schools in the U.S. To learn more about transfronteriza/o/xs, please see Relañó Pastor (2007).

- 3 The Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) program is committed to supporting students facing social, economic, educational, or linguistic challenges by providing academic support and counseling, financial aid, and other resources to help students enroll and succeed in a California community colleges. For more information, see <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Educational-Services-and-Support/Student-Service/What-we-do/Extended-Opportunity-Programs-and-Services>.
- 4 West Los Angeles College has a Child Development Center that provides a learning environment for children ages 1–5. This is available to student parents, staff/faculty, and community parents. More information can be found at <https://www.wlac.edu/student-services/spr/cdc>.
- 5 The term Puentista refers to students who are part of the Puente Project. For more information, see <https://www.thepuenteproject.org/>.
- 6 At Southwestern College, these are learning communities that provide students with counseling, mentorship, and support that aim to increase the number of students earning a degree and/or transferring. The Puente Project seeks to meet the needs of students who have historically had low rates of four-year college enrollment. Umoja seeks to increase the number of African American students who transfer to a four-year institution. For more information, see <https://www.swccd.edu/student-life/learning-communities/index.aspx>.

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For more information about the ARCC Network, visit [ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/arccnetwork/](https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/arccnetwork/)

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