



# Turning on a Dime

## California Community College Transformation in Response to COVID-19

By Susanna Cooper, Cassandra Hart, Michal Kurlaender, Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, Francisco C. Rodriguez and Cameron Sublett

**IN THE EARLY DAYS** of March 2020, when COVID-19 was lurking but had yet to sweep across the U.S., most community colleges in California were approaching spring break and the clockwork rituals that come with the end of another academic year. Within two weeks, as the pandemic quickly spread across California and the nation, nearly every community college and university in the state had closed its physical campus, shifted courses and operations online, and found radically new means to serve students and mitigate community spread of the virus.

At the college leadership level, presidents and chancellors (CEOs) worked urgently to prioritize the health and safety of students, faculty and staff, while maintaining the integrity of teaching, learning and business environments, and sustaining operational continuity of their institutions. CEOs weighed fears and unknown risks as they made a staggering number of rapid decisions to mitigate risk and sustain the education mission. State and local health orders and guidance had to be interpreted

“In higher education we have convinced ourselves we are like these big barges and we can’t move quickly. But this has definitely shown me we can.”

JOANNA SCHILLING, PRESIDENT, CYPRESS COLLEGE

moment to moment. In a hurry, students, staff and faculty statewide had to adapt to new modes of learning and work.

By mid-April, it was clear to many that this was no temporary disruption. Graduation ceremonies were postponed, cancelled, held remotely or creatively conducted as “drive-throughs.” First these workarounds and pivots were meant to last just through the spring academic term. Then they extended to the more distant horizons of summer and fall. Costs associated with the unforeseen transition and risk mitigation were mounting, while state budget clouds darkened.

### TOPLINES

- > COVID-19 forced rapid and unprecedented adaptation for community colleges. The broad shift to remote learning presented challenges in a few “hard to convert” disciplines but gave rise to creative solutions in others.
- > Community colleges have played central roles in meeting student and community needs, from providing laptops, internet access, food and emergency grants for students to donating and manufacturing essential medical equipment for local hospitals.
- > The leadership and adaptive demands of an extraordinary crisis have brought stress and generated significant concern about disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students, but opportunities for institutional transformation have also been seized.
- > Colleges face significant challenges and uncertainty ahead. Just as high unemployment drives higher enrollment demand and the colleges move to support California’s economic recovery, their budgets are vulnerable to cuts due to the economic downturn.

Then, the month of May brought the senseless killing of George Floyd, following the killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and many, many others. California and much of the rest of the country exploded in protest against long-standing police brutality and systemic racism. As one CEO described it, colleges are now navigating rapids “at the confluence of three rivers”: a pandemic, an economic calamity, and a fundamental national reckoning with anti-blackness and entrenched racism.

Informed by a set of 20 interviews with community college CEOs statewide, this brief captures leadership and institutional navigation of the first two rivers: the pandemic and its economic consequences. A companion brief, *Toward a More Perfect Institution*, documents the third, because the topic of racism raises distinct and long-standing issues that demand to stand alone. With their institutions buffeted by biological, economic and societal forces beyond their control, CEOs were sober about challenges ahead and deeply concerned about profound and disparate impacts on students, staff and faculty. Many of those we interviewed, however, saw potential and opportunity for necessary transformation amid crisis and chaos.

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“My philosophy faculty member says this will go down in history as ‘The Great Shift.’ [For] us, that has...meant moving 9,000 students, 750 courses, hundreds of employees and dozens of academic and student supports off site in two weeks flat.”

JULIANNA BARNES, PRESIDENT, CUYAMACA COLLEGE

Together, these companion briefs do not offer recommendations or best practices. Rather, they document first-hand narratives and lived experiences of how leaders of the nation’s largest and most diverse system of higher education have adapted within multiple layers of crisis. It is a story told midstream, with an ending not yet in sight.

## The Great Shift: Colleges Move Rapidly to Remote Instruction

Shifts to online instruction/remote learning were generally very fast, with many leaders reporting transitioning to fully-online models within one to two weeks. Most campuses reported that a major challenge was providing training for faculty, some of whom had no prior experience teaching remotely. Training included practical instruction in the use of learning management systems such as Canvas for online instruction or the use of Zoom for course lectures, and the installation of specialized software programs to simulate face-to-face learning objectives. Some campuses included training related to the intersection of student equity and remote teaching and learning.

Training was especially important for instructors in courses that had never been taught online before at their college. Colleges varied substantially in the percentage of courses that had offered at least one section online. As of Spring 2019, a year prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the percentage of the courses at each college that had offered at least one section online in the prior academic year ranged from 6.8 to 73.8%, with an average of 24.1% (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Readiness to deliver remote instruction varied not just between districts but within them as well. For instance, while 21.8% of courses in Los Angeles Community

## DATA AND METHODS

Multiple methods and sources of data informed this brief. We drew on qualitative data on leaders’ experiences gathered through Zoom interviews with 20 leaders (CEOs) of California community colleges. All CEOs were former Wheelhouse fellows, and represented a mix of campuses by demographics, geographic location, urbanicity, and extent of prior penetration of online course-taking. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, summarized and coded by multiple researchers to capture the major themes identified here. We verified all quotes presented using the original audio to ensure accuracy.

We also drew on rich statewide administrative data from the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office to capture the share of students who had taken at least one

online course prior to the pandemic. We draw on IPEDS data to characterize the urbanicity of campuses. In addition, we reviewed campus and district surveys of students’ needs in areas ranging from technology to food and mental health support.<sup>1</sup>

We acknowledge some limitations to our data, which may not be perfectly representative of leadership in the system as a whole (our sample of Wheelhouse Fellows are slightly earlier in their CEO tenures than the statewide average). The leaders that we interviewed represented campuses that were slightly more likely to serve suburban communities and slightly less likely to serve urban communities compared to the statewide system as a whole, but these differences were not statistically significant.

College district colleges had been offered online at least once in the prior year, this number varied from 6.8% at Los Angeles Trade Technical College to 47.5% at West Los Angeles Community College. Shifting courses with no prior online presence to be taught in a virtual environment presented a massive challenge.

Colleges also faced considerable challenges in making sure that all students were equipped to engage remotely. As of Spring 2019, only 41% of enrolled students statewide had taken at least one online course during the previous academic year. However, the share of students with prior online experience varied considerably by campus. On 18 campuses, fewer than one-third of spring enrollees had prior online experience, while on nine campuses, over two-thirds of spring students did (Figure 2). The sizable share of students without prior online course-taking experience presented potential challenges because these students may have been less equipped to make the adjustment—either because they lacked the technology to connect, or because they lacked experience or desire to interact in online learning environments.

### Leadership Moved to Ensure Student Access to Learning

All CEOs interviewed knew there was considerable variability in student access to the technology and connectivity needed to learn remotely, as well as in levels of experience needed to be proficient online learners. Many colleges surveyed their students on their specific needs, and survey results at many campuses underscored the challenges: Substantial numbers of respondents (from 5% to 20% at different campuses) reported using only their phones to access courses. Surveys at several colleges revealed lack of reliable internet for 10% to 25% of students and that needs were, not surprisingly, greatest among students receiving financial aid or participating in CalWORKS or other programs serving under-resourced or first-generation college students.

All campuses represented by our interviews quickly began distributing devices to students and, in some instances, staff and faculty. Some CEOs acknowledged, however, that computers and WiFi connectivity were an incomplete solution. For example, Foothill College hired 30 students to serve as “technology ambassadors” to provide comprehensive technical support to faculty and students. Recognizing that some students live “in tight quarters” or in “very stressful” homes, many colleges converted their parking lots into internet hubs

Figure 1. Share of Courses Taught in Spring 2019 with at Least One Section Offered Online during Academic Year 2018-2019, By College<sup>3</sup>

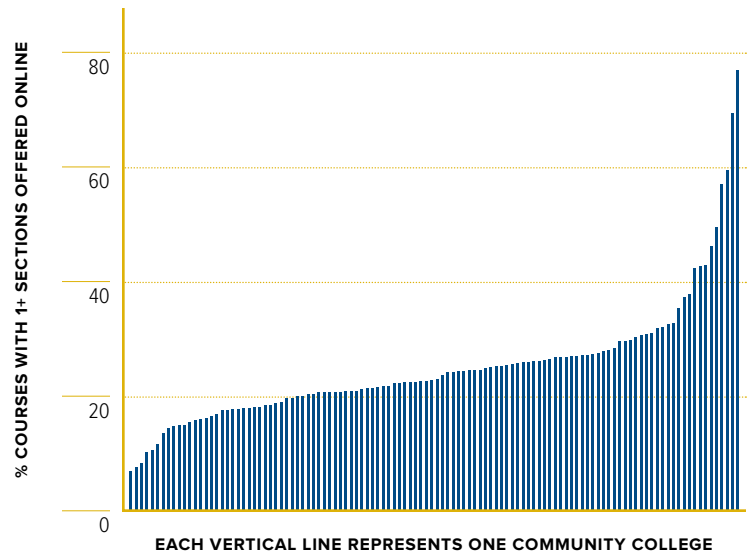
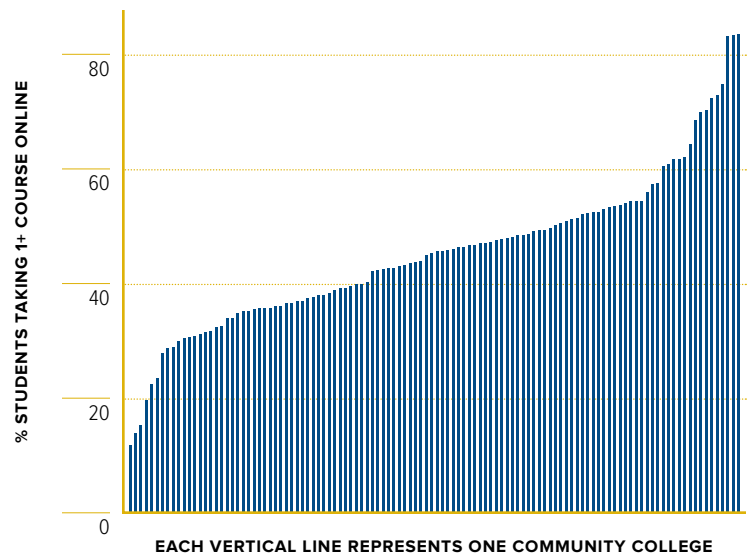


Figure 2. Share of Students Enrolled in Spring 2019 Who Had Taken at Least One Online Course in Academic Year 2018-2019, By College



Source: Authors' calculations from 2018–19 California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data.

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“We’ve also been giving out headsets. People need to think about this: Students are not able to do coursework in tight quarters.”

THUY THI NGUYEN, PRESIDENT, FOOTHILL COLLEGE

and allowed community members to park and access WiFi from their cars. Cabrillo College developed a contract with the Sheriff’s department to allow students to study in the WiFi-connected parking lot. Santa Monica College negotiated with internet service providers to temporarily offer free internet to students.

Distribution efforts could be quite extensive. Some campuses reported providing webcams or headsets to allow students to participate in classes without disturbing or being interrupted by others in their households. Lake Tahoe Community College’s distribution center was so comprehensive—offering students a place to acquire “Chromebooks, WiFi hotspots, lending library textbooks, food pantry items, art supplies, art easels, science experiment [materials]”—that it was nicknamed “Amazon Jr.” Similarly, some went to particular lengths to provide low-contact distribution options. For instance, Solano Community College ran a drive-through technology pick-up option, while Compton College mailed laptops to students.

With these efforts, campuses reported that most classes were able to shift online successfully. A few course subjects presented particular challenges to move online, such as welding, performing arts, and nursing, all of which required particular equipment or in-person interaction. Requirements from professional certification bodies drove some of these difficulties; multiple CEOs mentioned the difficulty in satisfying Board of Registered Nursing requirements for clinical hours without violating social distancing regulations.

However, campuses also reported significant innovation in the transition. For instance, automotive repair instructors at Butte made creative use of video to prompt students to demonstrate their understanding of repair procedures: “Our automotive faculty are filming themselves...doing specific tasks and then uploading those to YouTube and asking students to...demonstrate that they understand what those tasks are... [The instructors

ask students] to explain what they see, [so they] show that they understand it.” Similarly, culinary students at Cuesta Community College filmed themselves prepping ingredients and displaying the meals they had cooked. Cabrillo College capitalized on a pre-existing program in which nursing students conducted “telehealth rounds” in senior centers and retirement homes. These responses exemplified the flexibility with which many instructors approached the shift.

### **CEOs Had Deep Concerns about Student Success and Equity**

Student success in classes that had shifted online was less certain. Leaders raised concerns—backed, in some cases, by surveys of faculty—that a high number of students were not connecting to their online courses. As one CEO reported, “In the faculty survey...faculty said that something like 20% of their students had not logged into Canvas...So I do think that there are students that are getting lost by the wayside, despite our best efforts to reach out to them.” While many leaders interviewed in mid-April hadn’t yet seen sizable student withdrawals from courses, leaders interviewed at the end of April and beginning of May reported that, as the academic terms drew to a close, their campuses were seeing accelerating rates of excused withdrawals as the academic terms drew to a close, making use of a systemwide grading designation to allow students to withdraw from classes after the official drop deadlines without incurring financial or academic penalties.<sup>4</sup>

Campus leaders also expressed concern that the sudden shift to remote education would disadvantage some populations of students more than others. Several brought up concerns that students with disabilities or English language learners may face added challenges in adapting to remote learning environments. One CEO raised concerns that distribution of Chromebooks didn’t allow full access for students with disabilities. Other leaders highlighted potential challenges facing students with greater family obligations (e.g., children to homeschool, or siblings competing for access to devices to complete coursework) or who have suffered family job losses. In addition, leaders were concerned that students with less technology savvy may also suffer from the shift; for instance, while training in how to succeed as an online student was offered by many colleges, the trainings were offered online, where they ran the risk of not reaching the students who needed them most.

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“One of the areas that really surprised me, that has been super creative and that had great outcomes is our culinary program. Students are shooting short videos of themselves doing the prep work, and the finished product. They’re carrying on, and they’re having a ball doing it.”

JILL STEARNS, SUPERINTENDENT/PRESIDENT, CUESTA COLLEGE

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“We developed a web page called ‘Cerritos Cares’ ... where the students can find information about all the services that we offer and make emergency requests for anything, all the way from laptops to help with rent.”

JOSE FIERRO, PRESIDENT/SUPERINTENDENT, CERRITOS COLLEGE

Campus leaders discussed several efforts to identify and support student needs. Several had streamlined and organized services so that students would be better able to address multiple needs in a single location. For instance, Cerritos College launched “Cerritos Cares,”<sup>5</sup> a one-stop web page where students could find out about services offered and lodge requests for emergency aid. Sacramento City College established a call center that students could contact for help navigating the transition. Leaders at Merced College and Cosumnes River College described efforts by faculty and staff to personally call students who drop classes—or simply seem to be disengaged—to try to determine what needs they have that the colleges could meet. One CEO reported, “We’ve been monitoring the number of withdrawals that we’ve had since the pandemic and aggregated that data. So we’re doing...targeted outreach and making phone calls to those to those students to find out the reason why they withdrew...[to see if there are] any barriers that we can address.” These efforts represent different approaches to support students and minimize the burdens on them to get help they need to succeed.

Campus leaders also described efforts to ensure continual improvement in online instruction quality as distance education continues into summer and fall. For instance, while normal campus requirements around training for distance education instructors were waived during the emergency response period in Spring 2020, many leaders anticipated more systematic efforts to train faculty for the Fall 2020 term. In some cases, this has entailed a new financial commitment from the campus. Ventura Community College District, for example, offered supplemental pay for faculty who voluntarily complete distance education certification training. Other colleges reported faculty providing peer mentorship to support colleagues going through distance education professional development programs. One CEO reported “We have 60 faculty members who signed up to volunteer as [online education] mentors...It’s been a beautiful thing.” Still other colleges were developing new professional development programs partially in response to the pandemic: At Foothill College, for instance, the equity office and distance education division worked “hand-in-hand” to create equity-focused professional development opportunities focused on remote course delivery.

## **Beyond Instruction: Colleges Worked to Meet Students’ Basic Needs**

COVID-19 has not only revealed health and economic disparities but exacerbated them for vulnerable student populations who were already under-resourced before the pandemic. Gaps in students’ basic needs—such as food security, housing, employment and mental health—are now more pronounced. Many of the CEOs interviewed were focused on efforts to ensure that this pandemic does not worsen the performance gap that existed before the virus.

Well before the pandemic, extensive research revealed high levels of food and housing insecurity among community college students in California, and disproportionately high levels among Black and Latinx students.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing that student needs would expand with pandemic-driven job losses and other disruptions, many campuses in our sample surveyed students to gauge type and depth of need. Results from those internal campus or district surveys we were able to review revealed needs for food (from 13% to 33% of those responding), housing (from 10% to 25%) and health care (from 9% to 40%).

Colleges drew on external support to help shore up students’ basic needs. Colleges disbursed millions in federal CARES Act funding directly to low-income and needy students. Institutional foundations stepped up their fundraising efforts, securing private donations to fund supplemental emergency grants. Southwestern College applied an incentive/equity formula to these emergency distributions by basing grant size on student need and the number of course units taken. Many CEOs expressed concern about how quickly available resources were exhausted; at one college, all available funds were claimed by students in need within 24 hours. Others grappled with pragmatic challenges,

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“Students were already housing and food insecure before. We’ve now just exacerbated these things, and there’s the fact that these folks have families who have lost jobs, too.”

TAMMEIL GILKERSON, FORMER PRESIDENT, LANEY COLLEGE  
(NOW PRESIDENT OF EVERGREEN VALLEY COLLEGE)

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“There’s a lot of reassuring that needs to happen: showing students, first of all, that we got your back, we’re here for you, we can do this; and then for faculty: this is a less-than-optimum situation.”

SAMIA YAQUB, SUPERINTENDENT/PRESIDENT, BUTTE COLLEGE

such as delivering grants to students in homeless shelters, and developing criteria to ensure aid went to those most in need.

Colleges also leveraged their long-standing partnerships with social service agencies and food banks to meet students’ basic needs. Compton College worked around transportation gaps and virus fears by arranging for Everytable and Grubhub to deliver food to students in need. Solano Community College sent grocery gift cards to students of low income and established a partnership with a local food bank to secure access. Southwestern College distributed diapers and other essential goods.

Several CEOs reported decisions to maintain work for student employees through the end of the academic year, though all of it shifted remotely. Others expressed their understanding that many who are no longer able to come to campus had lost a primary safe space where they had strong adult relationships, accessed important support services, and felt they belonged. “The loss of that was unnerving for many of our students.”

Leadership teams were also working to support the mental health of students, faculty and staff under high stress. Their student services teams reported increasing anxiety and depression being registered through student health centers. They worried that the economic uncertainties facing families could become additional barriers for enrollment and degree progression. One CEO shared student survey results revealing that nearly a third of the students in her multi-college district reported needing mental health support.

Concern over faculty workload and wellbeing was also top of mind: “This has been emotionally taxing for faculty for a number of reasons. You know, [faculty] are teaching at home, they have families; a lot of our faculty are partnered with folks in health care or other kinds of public safety areas. And so there is an

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“I just made the executive decision to keep going, and I felt that as long as our [nursing] faculty, our students and our local clinicians and partners were willing to get these students through, then I considered it an essential component of our community responsibility.”

CHRIS VITELLI, SUPERINTENDENT/PRESIDENT, MERCED COLLEGE

## COLLEGES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

Community College CEOs are no strangers to crisis leadership; many have experienced shutdowns as a result of catastrophic wildfires, active shooters, or other emergencies and have adapted their postures for response and recovery. While nothing had prepared them for COVID-19, the CEOs we interviewed described campuses that transformed themselves into essential resource centers for their communities.

Responding to early concerns that California would need additional nurses and health care technicians to fight the virus, Merced College, working with clinical sites willing to remain open, expedited fourth-semester nursing students to degree completion. Colleges also rallied by providing in-demand resources to frontline health workers. Virtually every campus represented in our interviews donated some combination of personal protective equipment (PPE), thermometers, probe covers, lab safety goggles and even hospital beds and volunteers to local clinics and hospitals.

Non-credit sewing classes at College of the Siskiyous got busy making facemasks for local health workers, and a staff technician used the campus 3D printer to manufacture “ear savers” to make mask wearing more comfortable. In addition, several colleges activated their campus makerspaces and 3D printers to fabricate face shields and other in-demand PPE.

Colleges also extended efforts to help address community basic needs. Cabrillo College’s weekend farmers market stayed open as an “essential service” to the community. Southwestern College reported launching a “pilot project for Wi Fi so that people can use our parking lot and have access.” Butte College’s Small Business Development Center was “working overtime six days a week into the evening” to help local small businesses navigate questions like how to negotiate loans during the pandemic. In these ways, colleges tried to provide service not just to their students, but to the broader community as well.



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“My pandemic coordinators met every single day to talk about issues that are happening on campus. Every day I was writing an email to the campus about what’s going on. We got control of the situation.”

KEITH CURRY, PRESIDENT/CEO, COMPTON COLLEGE

added stress that folks are dealing with.” And more broadly, the need to protect the safety and well-being of college employees was also at the forefront of all decisions. “We do have some employees [for whom] just the nature of their work doesn’t allow them to work remotely—custodians and gardeners, for example, are on campus, of course. Since most of our students are off campus that minimizes their exposure, but there’s still logistics questions about the hazards that they encounter.”

### Leadership in the Time of COVID-19

How do you lead in the midst of so much ambiguity? CEOs frequently experienced the early days of the pandemic as chaos. “We were all just trying to get information,” said one CEO. The need for constant agility in decision-making, with teams working long hours and weekends remotely, was widely shared. One CEO noted that so much happened during the first month of the pandemic that his team referred back to it as “the year of March.”

What set this crisis apart from past disasters was its unknowns. These two CEOs captured the fear and uncertainty of mid-March:

*“You don’t really know what you’re dealing with, it’s something you know requires you to respond. But... it’s so new. What is it when someone gets [COVID-19]? How does it move from one person to another person? How long will it last? And how are we as a community of responders dealing with something that we didn’t know at all before this happened.”*

*“As well prepared as we were for emergencies, as many plans as we had for active shooters, here we were in uncharted territory, a kind of administrative wilderness. In the first days, I was trying to figure out how much risk I was putting my people in. Then once we had a death, that was it. This was real.”*

Some also described obstacles that prevented the kind of agility needed in the moment. While a number of CEOs were able to work closely with county public health officials, others struggled to get the necessary information required to make critical decisions about campus closures and protocols. Leaders in multi-campus districts also expressed some challenges of

coordination. As one campus leader put it: “I felt a deep sense of frustration at the lack of what I think is responsiveness and timeliness, having to talk through everything.” Others had tense deliberations with faculty unions over teaching expectations and working conditions.

Most, however, expressed gratitude for an “all hands on deck” mentality that marked the early months. Strained relationships within governance structures (i.e. faculty senate and administration, CEOs and boards of trustees) were eased in many instances. “The challenge for our faculty to migrate [online], really a tip of the hat to them,” one CEO recalled. “They didn’t complain. They just did what they could.”

Leaders also had to seek a point of balance between sharing their own vulnerability in navigating uncertainty with institutional need for precise decisions based on imperfect or incomplete information. In this context, the time and capacity to rebound from a prolonged period of “sustained urgency” was elusive for many CEOs who struggled with work-life balance even before the pandemic struck.

### Communication and Coordination Was Paramount

College leadership teams held Zoom meetings daily (sometimes hourly) to stay abreast of fast-breaking developments. Some campuses used existing teams, while others created new, emergency response teams with expedited decision-making authority to coordinate responses to the pandemic. As the pandemic entered its third month and beyond, some leaders declined to call this situation a “new normal” and described it instead as “extended emergency” mode.

Communications took center stage for many CEOs who needed to be transparent and accessible to their campus communities. “I’m hopping into every council and committee, even at the first five minutes just to say, ‘Thank you. Hello. How are you doing,’” said one. Many convened remote town halls to reach large numbers of faculty, students and staff efficiently. A number of CEOs admitted they were still trying to figure out the best modes of communication with different campus constituent groups. Many grappled with how to effectively ensure continuity of shared/participatory governance, how to nurture trust and empathy—so often achieved through face-to-face, unspoken communication—in a remote environment.

### CEOs Found Themselves “Riding the Adrenaline”

CEOs uniformly recognized the intensity and stamina required to lead their institutions through this extraordinary period “without a playbook,” in the words of one. Looking back, one recalled that his team “didn’t realize how physically, emotionally spent they were because we were all just riding the adrenaline, the need to make decisions.” Another recognized that she needed to delegate more to protect her time: “I was rushing into the burning house over and over again. I had to slow down and hand some things off to colleagues or put them off for later.” Yet another questioned the sustainability of the level of intensity required during March and April: “I don’t think we could sustain this level of urgency and change all the time even though we’ve handled it well and we’ve embraced it. And I also don’t think that the extreme nature of the change we put in place is sustainable for the long term for our students.”

### Leaders Searched for Opportunity in Crisis

Many of the leaders we interviewed reflected that the agility with which their campuses responded held lessons for what kind of transformation is possible when people work together with urgency. They also identified process improvements and other innovations they hope will stick after the pandemic is past. Cherished, paper-dependent processes gave way to electronic substitutes. Some standing meetings, typically by Zoom, got shorter and more efficient.

On the instructional front, some leaders anticipated a lasting increase in student and faculty comfort with online instruction and learning. Some predicted future increases in the proportion of courses offered online or through hybrid environments, with an increasing share of faculty certified to teach at a distance. One anticipated the opportunity to study how online environments can best be leveraged for greater equity. Several welcomed the broader management discovery that the work of the college could be accomplished by employees with more flexible, work-from-home schedules. Others believed their campuses would be much better prepared for any future disaster or crisis.

Several CEOs also recognized that the economic challenges wrought by COVID-19 presented an opportunity for the community college sector to play a pivotal role in aiding

the state’s economic recovery. CEOs noted that in general, community colleges provide crucial opportunities for workers to retrain during economic downturns, and also noted that community colleges were well-positioned to develop or expand program offerings responsive to emerging needs. For instance, the community college sector plays a major role in training workers in “essential” fields, such as health care and other frontline services. Community college leaders were also thinking through how campuses could anticipate new fields—such as transportation or logistics—that may become more important in a post-COVID-19 world and develop programs accordingly.

### Community Colleges Anticipate an Uncertain Future

When we asked CEOs to look ahead, three big unknowns were dominant in their responses. The first was the course of COVID-19, what they might expect from an anticipated future wave or waves of infection and how soon they could bring students back for face-to-face instruction at scale.

The second unknown was around how student attendance decisions would change in light of COVID-19. While higher rates of withdrawals and uncertain prospects for face-to-face options left some CEOs concerned that enrollments might decline in the fall, many others predicted surging enrollments. Several CEOs suggested that the shift to online education at four-year universities might make students opt for more economical local community colleges instead. This inspired action among some CEOs. Several planned to send letters to local high school seniors touting the community college option and congratulating them on “automatic admission.” Others saw opportunity to capitalize on community colleges’ greater experience, and thus “bench strength” in online/remote learning. Students’ desires to stay closer to home could also feed higher community college enrollments. A number of CEOs projected that, because community college enrollment traditionally climbs in eras of high unemployment, the economic downturn could also contribute to enrollment spikes. But the timing of any such spike was uncertain, and some community colleges were, at the time of this

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“I’m finding myself switching to a mindset of looking for the opportunities in the midst of the other challenges. What does disruption look like right now for our institutions? How can we move forward with this agenda of completion, equity and student success in the face of this environment?”



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“I’m developing an educational master plan and, of course, it’s really difficult to look out 10 years right now. But one thing we know for sure is there’s going to be some profound disruption to the workplace environment for our students. I see this as a window of time to reassess where we want the college to go, and there’s a certain adrenaline around having to figure that out. There’s value in that to me.”

LUIS SANCHEZ, PRESIDENT, OXNARD COLLEGE

writing, reporting lower than typical registration for the coming fall. And, of course, enrollment will be dependent on the supply of courses and programs—a supply that shrank along with state appropriations during the Great Recession despite increased student demand.

The final unknown was the depth of the damage the economic downturn would visit on their budgets as state funding became more uncertain. A number of campuses were instituting soft hiring freezes in anticipation of funding cuts. One shared the dilemma around long-held plans to hire a new manager to focus on diversity, equity and inclusion; despite budget uncertainty, she opted to move ahead to have a leader to focus on faculty professional development and diversity in hiring. “We’re facing difficult times ahead, but we also need to stay focused on the students we have now, and (on those) we will have in the future.”

Other CEOs were looking at equity-based approaches to funding reductions to do the least harm to students who have been historically underserved. These equity-driven approaches were often informed by concerns about how an influx of new students might impact opportunities for students who have traditionally relied on the community colleges. Given these considerations, some CEOs were actively making the case to state and federal lawmakers that “this is not the time to under-invest in the colleges.”

Though the interviews that informed this brief revealed challenges, uncertainty and mounting concern about increasing disadvantage and divides among students, these conversations were also marked by a pervading sense of personal resolve and institutional resilience. College leaders drew strength from a spirit of camaraderie and from the ways in which their campuses were able to adapt or transform rapidly, under their direct leadership and that of other staff and faculty.

Our immediate capacity to anticipate, much less define, the long term impacts of a watershed event that is still in the early stages is limited. Over time, data will paint a more complete picture of how students and institutions experienced the impacts. Right now, however, these interviews of CEOs in midstream offer a view of broad, urgent transformation in community colleges as they respond to an unfolding crisis for which none could have been prepared. From the “great shift” to remote learning, to the community support roles colleges have assumed, to concern for and mitigation of disparate impact on already disadvantaged students, and now the economic challenges ahead, community colleges and their CEOs are looking for ways to not just sustain but improve educational and economic opportunity.

## Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> While nearly all CEOs reported that their institutions conducted surveys, we were able to review surveys from Cuyamaca College, Cypress College, Foothill College, Laney College, Oxnard College and the Peralta Community College District.
- <sup>2</sup> Note that these figures are distinct from the actual share of course sections offered online (and necessitating no switch in format). As of Spring 2019, 16.3% of course sections were offered online.
- <sup>3</sup> Calbright College, the all-online community college sometimes referred to as the "115th college," is not represented in Figure 1 or Figure 2 because it did not begin offering courses until Fall 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> Specifically, excused withdrawals did not adversely affect students' progress probation or dismissal calculations, and colleges were authorized to return fees for classes for which students exercised the option of excused withdrawals. <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/Files/Communications/COVID-19/2020-01-executive-order-student-withdrawal-regulations.pdf?la=en&hash=086726884C05E2BABE60C55D713B49F91CC1654E>
- <sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.cerritos.edu/cerritoscares>
- <sup>6</sup> California Student Aid Commission. "2018-2019 Student Expenses and Resources Survey: Initial insights – An initial look at the obstacles students face affording higher education." Retrieved from [https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2018-19\\_student\\_expenses\\_and\\_resources\\_survey\\_web.pdf?1575327209](https://www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/2018-19_student_expenses_and_resources_survey_web.pdf?1575327209)