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A Civil Rights Agenda for California's Next Quarter Century



**From Institutions to Individuals:**  
*A Paradigm Shift for California's  
Master Plan for Higher Education*

DECEMBER 2024

Su Jin Jez



**25 YEAR**  
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## About the Series

### *A Civil Rights Agenda for the Next Quarter Century*

The Civil Rights Project was founded in 1996 at Harvard University, during a period of increasingly conservative courts and political movements that were limiting, and sometimes reversing, major civil rights reforms. In 2007 the Project moved to UCLA. Its goal was—and still is—to bring together researchers, lawyers, civil rights advocates and governmental and educational leaders to create a new generation of civil rights research and communicate what is learned to those who could use it to address the problems of inequality and discrimination. Created a generation after the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, CRP’s vision was to produce new understandings of challenges and research-based evidence on solutions. The Project has always maintained a strong, central focus on equal education and racial change.

We are celebrating our first quarter century by taking a serious look forward—not at the history of the issues, not at the debates over older policies, not at celebrating prior victories but at the needs of the next quarter century. Since the work of civil rights advocates and leaders of color in recent decades has often been about defending threatened, existing rights, we need innovative thinking to address the challenges facing our rapidly changing society. Political leaders often see policy in short two- and four-year election cycles but we decided to look at the upcoming generation. Because researchers are uniquely qualified to think systematically, this series is an attempt to harness the skills of several disciplines, to think deeply about how our society has changed since the civil rights revolution and what the implications are for the future of racial justice.

This effort includes two very large sets of newly commissioned work. This paper is part of the series on the potential for social change and equity policies in California, a vast state whose astonishing diversity foretells the future of the U.S. and whose profound inequality warns that there

is much work to be done. The second set of studies is national in scope. All these studies will initially be issued as working papers. They will be brought together in statewide conferences and in the U.S. Capitol and, eventually, as two major books, which we hope will help light the way in the coming decades. At each of the major events, scholars will exchange ideas and address questions from each other, from leaders and from the public.

The Civil Rights Project, like the country, is in a period of transition, identifying leadership for its next chapter. We are fortunate to have collaborated with a remarkable network of important scholars across the U.S., who contributed to our work in the last quarter century and continue to do so in this new work. We are also inspired by the nation's many young people who understand that our future depends on overcoming division. They are committed to constructing new paths to racial justice. We hope these studies open avenues for this critical work, stimulate future scholars and lawyers, and inform policymaking in a society with the unlimited potential of diversity, if it can only figure out how to achieve genuine equality.



Gary Orfield



Patricia Gándara

## Acknowledgements

The Civil Rights Project is grateful to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for their support of this research. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of Civil Rights Project funders.

## Foreword

The Civil Rights Project goal in commissioning this series of research papers on building a more equitable future for all of California's diverse communities, is to inject new ideas and possible solutions into discussions that have been frozen for a long time. California has become a world center of technology and creativity and boasts some of the world's most renowned universities and research institutions. But California is also a deeply unequal society with yawning opportunity gaps for Latino, Black and Native American Californians. Higher education changes lives and creates wealth but has failed to reach large sectors of the society who will determine the state's future as racial and ethnic change continues.

California operates under a higher education Master Plan devised 64 years ago, driven by the need to rationalize a complex system of institutions and to control costs in providing education for a growing population. The Master Plan has received a great deal of praise for fostering the world's most remarkable system of world class, research universities (one of which is the home of our center), but it planned for limited access to four-year colleges that no longer makes sense in terms of current and future labor markets. By the late 20th century almost all the gains of our society were afforded to people with higher education so the importance of a college degree for individual and community success is much higher than when the plan was adopted. California is experiencing a shortage of the college graduates needed for the labor market. From a civil rights perspective, California, when the Master Plan was adopted, had a large white majority. However, it now has a Latino majority among college-age people and concentrates most Latino, Black and Native American students in the community colleges. Disproportionately, these students hail from segregated, concentrated poverty high schools, where they are not adequately prepared for college and so transfer from community colleges and get bachelor's degrees at low rates. The promise of a college education for all often falls far short. The state's white and Asian minorities are far more

likely to gain access to the excellent University of California campuses where they overwhelmingly graduate with a degree in hand.

Over the years several attempts have been made to rethink the Master Plan, in good part to make it more equitable, but these have failed to result in real change. So, we encouraged the author of this paper to think boldly. Thus, it is not aimed at the next legislative session but designed to provoke thought about how to create fundamental transformation. Obviously, any changes to a system so large and complex face huge challenges, but there is growing agreement that change is urgently needed if the state is to sustain its economic edge and successfully educate its changing population.

The fundamental goals of this paper, by Su Jin Jez, are to break down barriers and rigid stratification, to organically link the three major public higher education sectors, and to reduce the entry barriers and the transitions among levels of education. One means of doing this is to place all levels under a single unified system that divides institutions by regions rather than by missions and admissions standards.

This new Master Plan would require a very substantial increase in state funding of higher education, which has been sharply reduced as a share of the state's budget—something that happened across the country in the Reagan Administration years and has not been corrected. If the economic calculations are correct, the increased investment would be handsomely paid back in the long run by a much larger increase in state income, equity, and wealth through tax receipts.<sup>1</sup> Under the existing Master Plan and state priorities, the system's resources have been declining even as needs have intensified. Obviously, this new system would be a fundamental reorientation of the state's priorities

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<sup>1</sup> While precise cost estimates weren't developed, this proposal for the Master Plan focuses on unifying existing structures and potentially realizing cost efficiencies by removing expensive student transition points in the current system. If the underlying economic principles hold true, the increased investment could be recouped through long-term gains in state income, equity, and wealth generated by improved educational outcomes and tax receipts.



and the life plans and choices of many Californians. During a long period beginning in the 1980s, the state chose to pump enormous funds into the criminal justice sector and cut the share going to higher education, a highly questionable set of priorities. As such, the costs of higher education have become out of reach for vast numbers of Californians, especially given the high cost of living in the state.

Direct increases of state spending might not be the only way the costs could be met. There could, for example, be a requirement that students getting free college or job training pay back a small share of the post-education income above their basic necessities for a fixed number of years. Such systems are used in other nations and are an option for federal loan indebtedness. Importantly, such policies would remove the financial barrier to enrolling in college.

One part of this report that seems particularly urgent and doable is the creation of a statewide coordinating board. Despite the very large state expenditure on colleges, universities and programs, the state is operating without any institutional body that coordinates these systems or even provides basic data that would be essential for the rational management, maximum efficiency and coordination of the system. With the current vacuum in coordination, each sector, of course, works to accumulate resources and autonomy on its own without needing to seriously document impacts. The result of this is duplication, inefficiency and hoarding of resources or advantages. The lack of any systematic data, or accountability and sharing of data between the levels is less than optimal. What the coordinating agency would need to have an impact is, of course, an executive director or official reporting to the governor and a professional staff, and the right to require data, conduct evaluations, and make recommendations for needed changes from all segments of the system.

This plan does not discuss graduate and professional training and research centers in any significant way. They are, of course, of extraordinary importance to the state and, outside of state

resources, largely financed from funds raised by the universities, their faculty and institutions. Many of the nationally important departments, programs and research centers are unique and costly, and thus require many years of development to reach and maintain leadership in a field or profession. These centers could not be duplicated in every region, nor could they be easily relocated. The new plan could incentivize regional priorities in making decisions and the creation of collaborative programs between these institutions and various regions. The higher ed coordinating agency could play a role in setting priorities, providing information and counseling and, perhaps, in evaluating, eliminating, or reforming programs that are not performing well. At the highest levels these institutions are not recruiting and staffing from within California but operating in a competitive national and international market for the most important scholars and research projects. Probably a new Master Plan would need to keep intact the graduate and professional programs of the University of California campuses while increasing accountability and collaboration, perhaps including elimination of unneeded duplication, and triggering deeper cross-campus collaboration and involvement of UC faculty in regional institutions. Obviously, the role of the graduate programs in training future faculty for all higher education institutions would remain critical.

Given the complexity of this reimagining of California's higher education system, the paper lightly touches on the relationship between higher education and preK-12 education. However, this is critically important as the K-12 system prepares—or in many cases fails to prepare—students for higher education. Educators routinely rue the fact that many students leave high school without the requisite skills to succeed in higher education. This is particularly the case for those students who are currently poorly served by all levels of our education system and who are becoming the majority in the state. This uneven preparation is also related to why so many students do not complete college. In part to meet this challenge, there has been increasing expenditures on supplemental education, but without particularly good results. How might a reorganized higher education system deal with

the problems in K-12? Since higher education is now as important as high school was a century ago, the separation of these systems makes little sense. Perhaps a new Master Plan could imagine more organic relationships among the various education sectors.

The paper also does not discuss the role of faculty in this new plan and how their voices and choices would be incorporated. Institutions choose faculty, but faculty also choose institutions based on the nature of their roles and the kinds of students they want and are equipped to work with. Figuring out how to better distribute faculty talent would require thinking about resources, incentives, and rewards.

This paper proposes to replace institution-centered politics, policy, and funding with regional and statewide strategies. It proposes to start with the students rather than the institutions, and to create a system that better responds to and supports their needs in a radically changed state. This paper is a serious challenge to the status quo and provide a stimulus to update the Master Plan for future generations. After generations living under an obsolete plan, change of this magnitude is probably needed. Perhaps the first step could be the creation of a statewide coordinating board, initially charged with a systematic, independent assessment of the present functioning of the entire system and with authorization to commission work that fills in the gaps to complement this study.

*-Patricia Gándara and Gary Orfield*

## Table of Contents

About the Series .....	3
Acknowledgements .....	5
Foreword.....	6
Table of Figures.....	11
Executive Summary.....	12
Introduction.....	14
The Enduring Pillars of the 1960 Master Plan.....	16
The 1960 Master Plan Focused Primarily on Institutions, Not Students.....	17
The Dramatically Different Students of Today Require a Dramatically Different Master Plan.....	20
Today’s Students Face Rising Costs and Shrinking State Investments.....	23
The Current Situation Calls for a New Paradigm.....	27
It Is Past Time to Refocus Higher Education on Serving Today’s Wide Range of Students.....	29
Equity Must Be the Key Tenet of California’s New Master Plan .....	32
The New Master Plan for Today’s Student: Introducing the New California University.....	35
What Could a New Coordinating Entity Look Like?.....	48
We Have the Building Blocks of the New Master Plan. Now, Let’s Put Them in Place. ....	51
References.....	53

## Table of Figures

Figure 1. Undergraduate enrollment in the California Community Colleges by race and ethnicity: 1997–2021 .....	21
Figure 2. Median parental income of undergraduate students by selected institution type and median income of all households in California: 1999–2010.....	22
Figure 3. Percentage of women undergraduates, overall and by institution type: 1997–2021.....	23
Figure 4. Average net price of attendance at California institutions, by selected institution type: 2010–2021 .....	25
Figure 5. Most frequently cited factors affecting US adults’ likelihood of pursuing additional education: 2019 .....	34

## Executive Summary

A new Master Plan for Higher Education is long overdue. California's landmark 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education served its time well, but a new plan is needed to better serve today's diverse and economically varied student population. The original plan sought to balance access to higher education with efficient use of state resources by formally articulating the tripartite system of the University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community Colleges (CCC) and establishing a coordinating body. However, this once forward-thinking plan now helps perpetuate inequities and California's inconsistent adherence to the plan has exacerbated its waning usefulness. California urgently needs a new master plan to sustain and strengthen California's economic vitality and this essay outlines a new direction for a new student-centered master plan that eliminates artificial barriers and promotes equitable access and inclusive success. This new Master Plan refocuses California's higher education system on serving the diverse needs of current and future student populations. By prioritizing equity, accessibility, affordability, meaningful education, and adaptability, the reimagined plan envisions a higher education landscape that supports social and economic mobility, fostering a more inclusive and prosperous California.

**Historical context and challenges.** The 1960 Master Plan aimed to address an incoming tide of new college new students and ensure the efficient allocation of state resources. To this end, it codified a differentiated system with a distinct mission for each public higher education segment. UC would focus on research and educating the top eighth of high school graduates; CSU would emphasize undergraduate education and serve the top third of high school graduates; and CCC would offer both lower division undergraduate courses for transfer to UC and CSU, as well as vocational training, on an open-access basis. This arrangement may have been well-suited to mid-century California, but over succeeding decades, the college-going population has shifted dramatically (along with their motivations for attending college), higher education affordability has

declined, and coordination among the three segments has weakened, leading to the current fractured system that hinders student access and success.

**Changing demographics and economics.** California's college students are far more racially, ethnically, and economically diverse than at the time of the Master Plan's adoption. Their needs, backgrounds, interests, and preferences are vastly different from those of their 1960 counterparts, necessitating a higher education system that is more adaptable, equitable, and student-centered. Rising costs and declining state investment have further exacerbated college access and success.

**A new Master Plan for today's students.** This essay outlines a new Master Plan for a unified, student-centered higher education system. It emphasizes the principles of ensuring equitable access and support for all students, streamlining processes to minimize barriers for students, enabling affordable enrollment without excessive debt, aligning programs with career opportunities and personal development, and creating a system that can successfully evolve with changing student needs and societal demands. The proposed plan establishes a single California University system that merges UC, CSU, and CCC into a unified network of regional campuses, each of which offers a full range of educational opportunities from certificates to doctorates. This new configuration eliminates transfer issues, reduces competition for resources, and provides seamless pathways for students through college and into careers.

**Structural and financial reforms.** The new Master Plan also calls for a strong statewide coordinating entity to effectively oversee and align higher education policies and resources. This entity ensures smooth transitions from K-12 to higher education, manages financial aid, and supports regional collaborations among educational institutions, employers, and local governments.

# From Institutions to Individuals: A Paradigm Shift for California's Master Plan for Higher Education

Su Jin Jez

## Introduction

*“The solution of 50 years ago, the Master Plan structure is now a substantial part of the problem.” —Patrick Callan (2012, p. 61)*

The 1960 Master Plan sought a delicate balance of promoting access to higher education to address the increasing demand and need for more Californians to secure postsecondary awards, while safeguarding against the wasteful use of state resources and the unchecked growth of its colleges and universities. The Plan aimed to do this by charging California’s three public higher education sectors—the University of California (UC), the California State University (CSU), and the California Community Colleges (CCC)—with distinct missions based on selectivity, research intensity, and degrees awarded. It also promised a tuition-free education across all three segments and a pathway into higher education for anyone with the ability to benefit.

Over time, the commitment to access has faded and the tripartite missions have blurred some but have largely withstood multiple challenges. This tripartite segmentation and its implications for equity were less consequential in 1960 when demand for higher education was limited to a relatively small and homogeneous slice of the population, but in today’s more diverse society and predominantly knowledge-based (postindustrial) economy, the Master Plan’s three segment system increasingly serves to reinforce inequities between Californians, acting less as a pathway to opportunity and more as a barrier.

In this essay, I propose a new Master Plan that shifts away from centering institutions toward centering students and aims to leverage higher education as a tool for social and economic

mobility, enabling Californians of any means, location, academic background, or other characteristics to successfully pursue a wide range of degrees and credentials. This new Master Plan is student-focused, designed to allow more students to successfully access and complete credentials, which will ultimately best serve the state and institutions themselves.

This new Master Plan begins with the needs of today's students and of society and then considers how to structure public higher education institutions to meet those needs in an equitable and accessible fashion. As detailed in this essay, this new student-centered higher education system starts with equity as the foundational tenet, driving the guiding principles of accessibility, affordability, meaningful education, and adaptability. It realizes those values through a unified postsecondary system, organized by region, that offers a full range of higher education options to Californians no matter where they live in the state or whether they matriculate directly into college after completing a college preparatory high school program or if they are returning to the educational system after working for a decade or two. As a unified system, it eliminates the many challenges caused by transfer and addresses many of the intersegmental issues higher education faces today, such as whether community colleges should offer bachelor's degrees, disputes over college admissions requirements, the sharing of data, and competition over limited resources. Freeing up capacity from engaging in those time-intensive struggles, a unified higher education system could focus on other consequential challenges to serve the diverse needs and preferences of today's students, such as delivering high-quality education in a variety of formats (in-person, online, hybrid) and ensuring affordable and stable housing for students (on-campus residential, off-campus commuter, remote, and emerging alternatives). The new Master Plan makes a commitment to a debt-free path to graduation regardless of financial means, and its inevitable evolution and growth is guided by a strong and effective coordinating entity.



## The Enduring Pillars of the 1960 Master Plan

The adoption of California's Master Plan for Higher Education (Master Plan) was a milestone in the state's history, as it spelled out a clear framework for defining and organizing its postsecondary institutions (Coons et al., 1960), undergirded by California's unheard of promise of universal access to higher education (Rothblatt, 2012). The Master Plan is known for formally articulating California's tripartite system consisting of the CSU, UC, and CCC segments. While the state's institutions had already approximated this structure for decades, the 1960 plan explicitly delineated a specific focus and mission for each segment, addressing different educational needs and aspirations of California's students (Douglass, 2000).

The UC system, as envisioned in the Master Plan, would be a premier research institution, dedicated to advancing knowledge and educating the state's top one-eighth of public high school graduates. This emphasis on research and academic excellence allowed the UC system to become a world-renowned hub for research, innovation, and discovery. Its contributions have not only enriched California's intellectual capital but also contributed to propelling the state into the economic power that it is today.

The CSU system, previously known as the state colleges, was formally tasked with providing high-quality undergraduate education to a broader student population. Serving the top one-third of public high school graduates, the CSU system stood as a place for quality education while ensuring access and affordability. As an engine of social mobility, the CSU empowers students from various backgrounds and life circumstances to achieve their education and career goals. It also awards master's degrees in a variety of fields and, more recently, doctorates in specific professional fields.

The CCC system, formerly known as junior colleges, played a vital role in the Master Plan, providing lower division courses for transfer, vocational training, and a pathway to education for all who can benefit. Guided by its focus on open access and inclusivity, the CCC has become a prime

workforce development tool for the state, training millions of Californians in valuable skills and knowledge critical for success in the job market.

Beyond formalizing the tripartite system, the Master Plan recognized that critical to the success of this multi-entity structure was a coordinating body to oversee and align the operations across the three public higher education segments. As such, it established the Coordinating Council for Higher Education, later becoming the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC), which was responsible for ensuring coordination, differentiation, and efficient resource allocation across the segments. The Master Plan's recognition of the significance of a coordinating entity showcased a commitment to proactive and strategic governance (if perhaps not always realized in practice), laying the groundwork for a well-integrated, high-performing higher education ecosystem. Despite CPEC's subsequent defunding in 2011, coordination remains an essential public goal and unmet need in California's higher education system.

The Master Plan also reviewed and made recommendations related to student enrollment and admissions, college facilities, faculty supply and demand, and higher education funding and finance.

While many aspects of the Master Plan were not officially enshrined in statute, the principles and goals outlined in the plan continue to shape California's higher education system today. The Master Plan's vision for accessibility and the differentiation of roles among institutions have remained influential factors in guiding policy decisions, institutional governance, and educational opportunities throughout the state.

### **The 1960 Master Plan Focused Primarily on Institutions, Not Students**

During the formulation of the 1960 Master Plan, its authors set its primary concerns on reducing “wasteful duplication” within the higher education system, followed by a secondary focus on educational opportunity. In the late 1950s, state lawmakers would have had good reason to

anticipate a surge in college enrollment and to prepare the state's public colleges to accommodate this wave of students in an efficient, systematic, and coherent manner. The postwar economy was expanding rapidly, the oldest members of the Baby Boom generation would start graduating high school in the early 1960s, and California was poised to surpass New York as the most populous state. Moreover, the federal government had already made two substantial investments to make college more affordable: the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the GI Bill) and the 1958 National Defense Education Act. The war also kicked off a massive wave of federal investment in university-led research, particularly at the UC and its affiliated national laboratories. Federal research spending continued at scale through the Cold War as the US sought to match and beat Soviet advances. Against this backdrop, much of the Master Plan concerns itself with creating boundaries of activities for each higher education segment, requirements for facility use, and considerations for campus expansion and the establishment of new colleges.

### **The Master Plan's Structure Still Endures, but Its Commitments to Access, Coherence, and Coordination Have Not Kept Up**

Over the past six decades since the Master Plan's inception, California's economy has witnessed a seismic shift, transitioning from traditional industries to a dynamic landscape driven by technology, innovation, and globalization. This transformation has brought about a profound change in the demands placed on the state's higher education system, necessitating a more adaptable and forward-looking approach to education.

Moreover, key principles and components of the Master Plan that, perhaps, could have kept the plan up-to-date with today's needs have fallen by the wayside. First were the Master Plan's commitments to affordability and universal access. The principle of tuition-free education for state residents was introduced in the 1868 law establishing the UC and was extended in the 1960 Master Plan to include what became the CSU (Coons et al., 1960, p. 14; Organic Act, 1868). But this

arrangement of tuition-free access to all qualified applicants did not persist. Following his election as governor in 1966, Ronald Reagan initiated a series of cuts to the state's university budgets that presaged the end of both tuition-free higher education and of universal access. In 1969, the UC rejected otherwise eligible applicants, and in 1970, it began charging tuition (Nations 2021, pp. 2, 10). By 1984, all three segments were charging undergraduates above and beyond a nominal activities fee, and today UC and CSU charge students thousands of dollars per year and turn away tens of thousands of qualified applicants (Johnson, 2010, pp. 16-17; Rancaño, 2018). The CCC continues to offer open admission and maintain modest tuition that, even today, is the lowest in the nation—and that amount is covered by financial aid for more than half of the students enrolled (Kurlaender, Martorell & Friedmann, 2021; NCES, 2021, table 330.20). Still, many CCC students must work, often full time, to pay for the non-tuition costs of attending college, such as housing and other living expenses, for themselves and their families, making it difficult or impossible to enroll full time or continuously over time (Burke, 2023).

While the community colleges remain open access and have kept tuition low, the CCC struggles in its role as the key access point for most students seeking a bachelor's degree and demonstrates how the 1960 Master Plan has failed to realize its vision of a coherent and interconnected state postsecondary structure. Among community college students who intend to transfer, only one in ten actually does so within two years and one in five does so within four years (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2023). Even those who do manage to transfer institutions find that many of their credits are not accepted, which can extend the time and cost of earning degrees (Simone, 2014). These low success rates and unnecessary level of friction associated with transferring institutions underscore the need to reassess the components around access in the Master Plan, factoring the complex challenges faced by students today.

Key to the success of the tripartite system was a coordinating entity to address intersegmental challenges and provide statewide policy leadership for higher education. But in the absence of strong coordination, California's public higher education system has become fractured, marked by intersegmental competition over mission, students, and funding. The current status of siloed operations not only diminishes the state's economic strength but also negatively impacts its students, leaving over 4 million Californians with some college but no degree (California Competes, 2021a) and 3.8 million Californians owing over \$142 billion in federal student loan debt (Jackson & Starr, 2023).

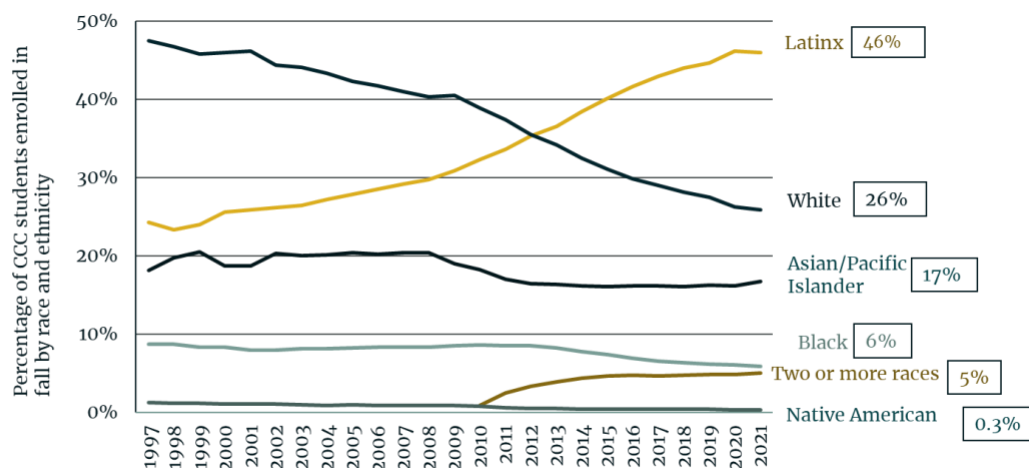
### **The Dramatically Different Students of Today Require a Dramatically Different Master Plan**

The Master Plan correctly forecasted dramatic increases in college enrollment resulting from a combination of demographic, social, and economic factors, and if the college-going population had merely increased in number but continued to be composed largely of white, recent high school graduates supported by middle and upper class families, the Plan's focus on rationing higher education opportunities might have had little effect on equitable outcomes. However, California's demographics, including those who go to college, changed dramatically. This change in student demographics underlines the pressing need to reconsider the college-going process and postsecondary structures, and to prioritize affordability in the new blueprint for the state's higher education system.

Today, California's student body is dramatically more economically, racially, and ethnically diverse from the student population when the Master Plan was designed. When it was adopted in 1960, the decennial US Census did not even have a category for Hispanic ethnicity, and even ten years later, the California population was just 12 percent Hispanic, 77 percent white, and 3 percent Asian and Pacific Islander (Marginson, 2016, p. 138). Over the following decades, though, the proportion of white residents has decreased, while Hispanic residents now form the plurality and the

share of Asian residents has grown as well, exemplifying the state’s increasing racial and ethnic diversity (Johnson et al., 2023). California’s open access community colleges demonstrate the dramatic racial, ethnic shift (Figure 1).

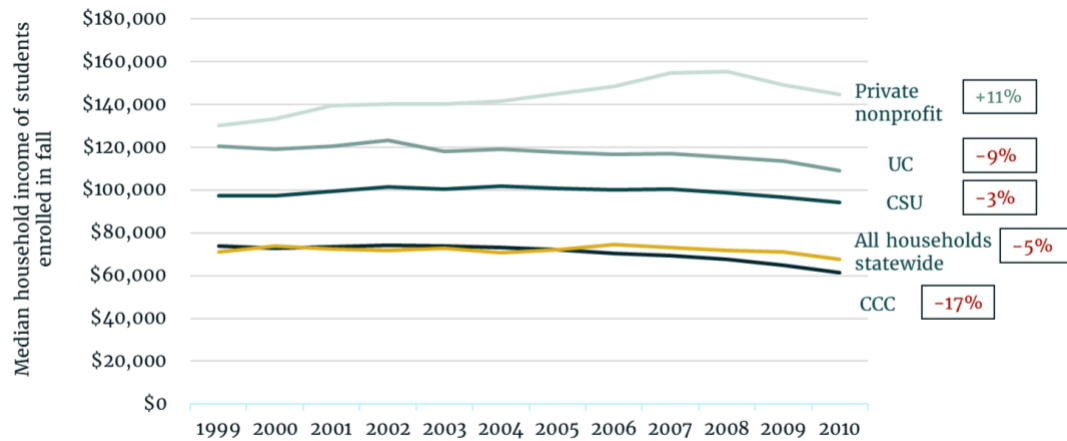
**Figure 1. Undergraduate enrollment in the California Community Colleges by race and ethnicity: 1997–2021**



Percentage of fall enrollment by race or ethnicity from fall 1997 through fall 2021. The category of “Two or more races” was not available prior to 2010 (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office Data Mart n.d.).

A look into the socioeconomic backgrounds of today’s students reveal a rise in the proportion of students enrolling from low-income households, with the median household income of students born between 1980 and 1991, who typically first enrolled in college in the fall 1999 through fall 2010, decreasing from 3 percent to 17 percent across the three public segments (Figure 2). The fact that more students from low-income households are attending college is to be applauded but these changes must be accompanied by shifts to how higher education serves its changing student population.

**Figure 2. Median parental income of undergraduate students by selected institution type and median income of all households in California: 1999–2010**

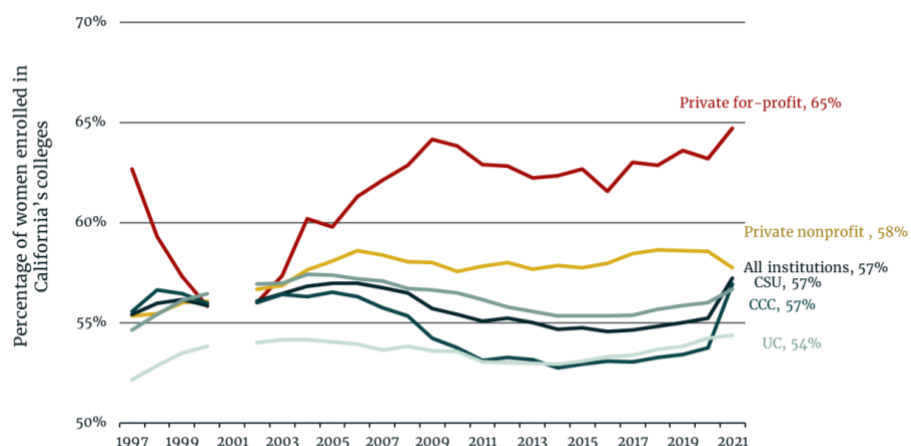


Note: Parental income is measured from students’ parents’ tax returns 19 years prior (approximately when many first-year college students would have been born), adjusted for inflation, and presented in 2015 dollars. Income for all households statewide is adjusted for inflation and presented in 2021 dollars.

Median parental income of undergraduate students attending California private nonprofit institutions, the University of California, the California State University, and the California Community Colleges, from fall 1999 through fall 2010 (Chetty et al. 2017; US Census Bureau n.d.).

The shifting gender dynamics in higher education are equally noteworthy. In the 1960s, the student population was overwhelmingly male-dominated, but today, that makeup has flipped, with women now constituting the majority (NCES, 2022, table 303.10). This demographic change has many implications for how higher education serves its students, most notably how students with dependents, who are predominantly women, are served (Figure 3; Campbell & Wescott, 2019, table 3.4-A). Again, higher education has been slow to update its structures and practices to address the needs of today’s students and prospective students.

**Figure 3. Percentage of women undergraduates, overall and by institution type: 1997–2021**



Percentage of undergraduate students who are women at California private for-profit institutions, California private nonprofit institutions, all California institutions, the California State University, the California Community Colleges, and the University of California, from fall 1997 through fall 2021 (US Department of Education, 2022). Enrollment data by gender were not collected in 2001.

These trends represent just a handful of population shifts California has faced. Recognizing and embracing these population shifts, among others, is paramount in shaping a new Master Plan that sheds the de jure and structural racism and sexism that was pervasive when the 1960 Master Plan was created, informing assumptions about who attends college and how to structure access for them, and then driving the higher education structure that was then crafted. The new Master Plan must foster an inclusive and equitable higher education system—one that empowers students from all backgrounds to thrive academically and professionally.

### **Today’s Students Face Rising Costs and Shrinking State Investments**

Alongside the evolving student population, the landscape of higher education itself has undergone significant transformations, most notably in the surging cost to attend college and the intricacies of funding the state’s higher education system. The price of attending college has increased profoundly since 1960, far exceeding the rate of inflation and growth in personal income.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The *price* of higher education is the amount that students and their families are expected to pay with some combination of out-of-pocket payments and financial aid, whereas the *cost* is what institutions spend on educating students (employee salaries, materials and supplies, debt payments, and other expenses). At public institutions, the price is less than the cost, with the difference made up by state appropriations and private donations (Holzer & Baum 2017, p. 91). The cost of



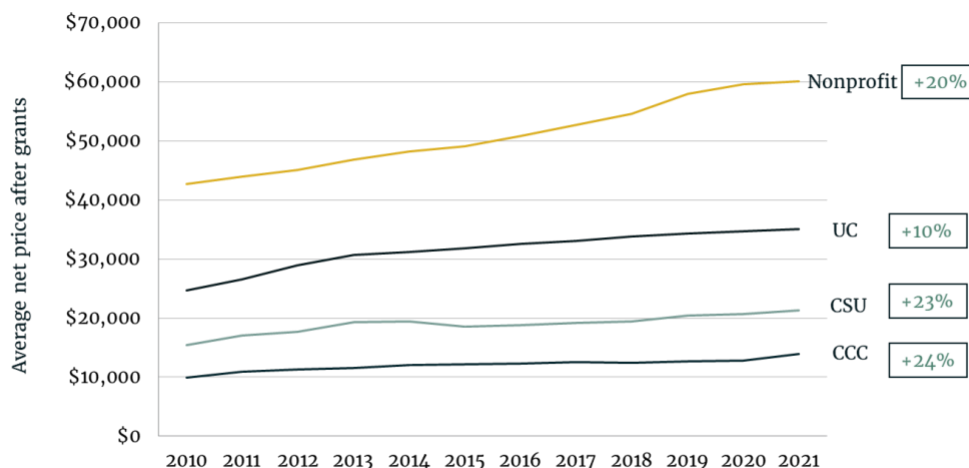
Nationally, the inflation-adjusted price of tuition and fees more than doubled between 1960 and 2006 (Archibald & Feldman, 2011, p. 83). (The steep increases in prices for goods and services spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic caused tuition and fees to grow more slowly than inflation in the first few years of this decade [Ma & Pender, 2023b].)

Various explanations have been proposed for the rising costs of higher education, from its heavy reliance on skilled labor not easily automated or offshored, or “cost disease” (Archibald & Feldman, 2011; Baumol & Bowen, 1965); colleges’ desire to maximize both revenue and expenses (Bowen, 1980); college employees’ preferences for autonomy, prestige, and focusing faculty efforts on research (Ehrenberg, 2002; Massy & Zemsky, 1994); providing increasingly luxe amenities to compete for student enrollment (Jacob, McCall, & Stange, 2013); the growing wage premium for a college degree (Becker & Murphy, 2017); and even the growth of student financial aid (Bennett, 1987; Cellini & Goldin, 2014). Irrespective of the causes, these rising costs, and the resulting increases in prices faced by students and their families (Figure 4), have made higher education less affordable and accessible to all but the wealthiest Californians.

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providing higher education almost inevitably increases each year, resulting in price increases when state funding does not keep up with costs.

**Figure 4. Average net price of attendance at California institutions, by selected institution type: 2010–2021**



The average net price of attendance at California private nonprofit institutions, the University of California, the California State University, and the California Community Colleges, from 2010 through 2021. Net price of attendance equals total price of attendance (tuition, fees, room and board, books, transportation, and other necessary expenses) minus all grants and is estimated by institutions for first-time, full-time, credential-seeking students who received federal financial aid. Values are not adjusted for inflation. Calculated from US Department of Education, College Scorecard, May 2022. <https://collegescorecard.ed.gov>

At the same time costs were rising, state funding for public higher education began to decline, leaving students and their families to make up the difference in higher prices (Delaney, 2023). While the Master Plan promised to make higher education available to a broad swath of Californians, a combination of forces began to undermine this intention over the years, and the state repeatedly reduced appropriations to public institutions. A number of factors drove this decline in state support for higher education: political scapegoating (particularly Governor Reagan’s attacks on the University of California); the enactment of Proposition 13 and the Gann Limit to severely restrict growth in state revenues and expenditures, respectively; a growing share of the budget consumed by other items (most notably prisons in earlier decades); and shifting popular sentiment to view higher education more as a private good and less as a public good (Marginson, 2016; Nations, 2021; Schrag, 1998). Additionally, the growing proportion of Californians attending public colleges meant that even if total funding for higher education held steady, it would shrink on a per-student basis.

Whatever the reasons may be, the state's contribution to its public universities dropped significantly over the decades, notwithstanding the recent and temporary boost supported by federal funds in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. From 1976–77 through 2018–19, state funding per full-time equivalent student fell from \$26,062 to \$13,632 at the UC and from \$11,678 to \$9,387 at the CSU after adjusting for inflation (Johnson, Murphy, & Cook, 2019.) (Funding for community colleges increased over the same period, from \$5,690 to \$8,553 per full-time equivalent student, likely due to Proposition 98's formulas that set a minimum for K–14 education from the state's General Fund.)

Most of this decrease in state support resulted in higher prices for students and their families. In roughly the same time period (1979–80 through 2018–19), inflation-adjusted tuition and fees increased from \$2,200 to \$14,400 at the UC and from \$500 to \$7,300 at the CSU (Rose, 2019). And over the same period, student food and housing costs increased \$4,000 on average, from \$9,800 to \$13,800 after adjusting for inflation, making attendance even less affordable for many prospective students.

Furthermore, federal and state grant aid has not kept up with the rising prices of tuition, fees, and living expenses, putting even more financial pressure on students and their families. As one example, the maximum amount of a Pell Grant, the federal government's primary form of aid for low-income students, now covers just 29 percent of tuition at four-year institutions, down from over 75 percent in the 1970s (Rodriguez & Szabo-Kubitz, 2024, p. 5). Nor have Cal Grants kept pace with inflation, from having covered 16 percent of nontuition expenses in 2000–01 to covering just 9 percent in 2020–21 (Szabo-Kubitz, 2021). One award in particular, the Cal Grant B access award, lost three-quarters of its inflation-adjusted value from its introduction in 1969–70 to 2015–16 (The Institute for College Access & Success, 2016). Even as the price of attendance continues to rise, outpacing grant aid, real median incomes have declined in California and nationally (Fei, 2016).

## **The Current Situation Calls for a New Paradigm**

The shifting landscape of higher education in California has had profound implications across various dimensions, impacting students, the general public, and the institutions themselves. The once well-functioning higher education institutions, tailored for certain populations and purposes at the time of the Master Plan's creation, now face significant challenges in meeting the needs of today's diverse student body and the evolving demands of the state.

The result is that today's college students are forced to navigate a higher education system built for markedly different students in a markedly different era. This incongruence has resulted in low completion rates, longer time to completion, higher debt levels, and challenges transitioning into careers. Just 55 percent of first-time degree-seeking California students graduate within six years, resulting in 6.6 million Californians with some college but no degree (Causey et al., 2023; Lee & Shapiro, 2023, appendix table 21). Three years after leaving California colleges and universities, federal student loan borrowers who did not complete their program were more than twice as likely as graduates to be in default (19% vs. 8%) and only half as likely to have paid off their loans or be making progress toward repayment (16% vs. 32%) (Starr & Jackson, 2022). The unemployment rate for Californians with some college but no degree hovers around 50 percent higher than the rate for bachelor's degree holders (Bohn, 2023). Nationally, college dropouts forgo over \$3 billion each year in earnings (Kirp, 2019, ch. 1) and are less satisfied with their jobs, report less favorable working conditions, and work in lower-prestige occupations (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

Beyond the individual-level, the barriers faced by students have broader implications for the entire society. As beneficiaries of the public good of higher education, the general public suffers when students encounter these obstacles since the public benefits are delayed or ultimately not fully realized. This situation means skilled workforce needs are left unmet, social issues lack the expertise that would advance effective solutions, and the strength of our democracy and civic engagement

weakens. Americans with bachelor's degrees are more likely to vote and to volunteer than their counterparts with lower levels of educational attainment (Ma & Pender, 2023a). College-educated parents confer benefits to the next generation by investing more time in the educational development and success of their children and children in their community. The estimated value of benefits to society adds up to \$42,000 per bachelor's degree holder in 2024 dollars (McMahon, 2009, p. 292, adjusted from 2007 dollars using the Consumer Price Index).

The individual returns to higher education in terms of higher earnings are well documented (e.g., Ma & Pender, 2023a), but these benefits spill over into their communities as well. Even after controlling for local economic conditions and demographics, individual ability, and other factors, high school dropouts, high school completers, and college graduates all earn higher wages in cities with larger proportions of college graduates (Moretti 2004, 2012).

Moreover, higher education institutions grapple with deeply embedded traditions and rigid structures that no longer align with the needs and realities of today's students and other key stakeholders. Many of the state's public colleges and universities face declining enrollment rates, and a significant portion of this decline is attributable to this misalignment between higher education's structures and student experiences and needs today. This situation is made even more precarious by unsustainable financial models built on assumptions that are no longer applicable.

These challenges give rise to growing fissures in the higher education landscape, with elite institutions remaining relatively unchanged, designed to cater to their traditional, privileged students for more exclusive purposes. This arrangement perpetuates a systemic advantage for these institutions and their students, granting them the power to set the rules, and thereby further exacerbating disparities in resources and educational outcomes.

On the other hand, colleges that strive to serve a broader student population with diverse purposes and needs typically have lower per-student funding than more selective colleges, which in

turn leads to lower rates of completion (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010). This resource disparity perpetuates a cycle of inequality within the higher education system, leaving many students without the support they need to succeed.

All in all, California's higher education system, far from providing a broad pathway to opportunity, instead reflects a fundamental mismatch between its structure and the needs of state residents, leading to inequitable and insufficient access. For those who do manage to matriculate, they face poor completion rates, long times to completion, unreasonable and unmanageable debt, and a difficult route to stable and remunerative employment. To address these pressing issues, California must prioritize dismantling this hierarchical structure and its prevailing norms and redefine the role of higher education institutions for today's needs.

## **It Is Past Time to Refocus Higher Education on Serving Today's Wide Range of Students**

California's higher education system was designed to address state concerns of wasteful spending and to meet the needs of select populations of the mid-20th century. However, California and Californians today are different and have different needs and goals; yet the state's public higher education system has not adapted and is far from adequately designed to serve them. While there are institutions doing great work, as a field, the pace of change has been too slow; and this design problem must be fixed.

In response to the state's economic changes, higher education's structural ossification, and the state's declining commitment to the principles and reality of universal access and organizational coherence conceived in the 1960 Master Plan, legislative bodies, academic researchers, and key stakeholders have periodically sought to update and refine the Master Plan's provisions (Breneman, 1998; California Competes, 2017; Commission for the Review of the Master Plan for Higher Education, 1986, 1987; Geiser & Atkinson, 2013; Governor's Office of Planning and Research,

2019; Harrison, 2003; Heiman, 2010; Johnson, 2010; Joint Committee on the Master Plan for Higher Education, 1973; Joint Committee for Review of the Master Plan for Higher Education, 1989; Little Hoover Commission, 2013; Shulock, Moore, & Tan, 2014). They recognized that the state's higher education system is inextricably intertwined with the progress and prosperity of the state as a whole. It became evident that to secure a bright future for California, urgent realignment was necessary to address the emerging realities of the state and cater to the diverse and evolving needs of its people.

Given the gap between what is needed and what is provided, we require more than revision, tweaks, and spot fixes. We must create a new vision and transform higher education based on what California needs, who Californians are today, and the future we want to make possible. To get to that point, California must answer these crucial questions:

- What is the goal of higher education today?
  - What would a successful system do and produce? What would it allow California to do that it can't do today?
- To meet these goals, what would we need to create and what resources and incentives are needed?
- What are the ground level challenges that students face that need to be addressed in this ideal system?

To explore these questions, we must recognize and act on the potential of higher education in shaping California's economy, society, and desired outcomes. By envisioning a new purpose, we can set the vision for higher education that aligns with the diverse needs and people of our state.

### **A New Vision for Higher Education: Supporting California's Democracy, Economy, and Society**

Higher education in California serves a multifaceted role, with the primary goals of supporting the state's democracy, strengthening its economy, and fostering thriving communities.

California's populist democracy requires an educated citizenry that can understand our complex government structure and functions. More than any other state in our nation, California brings more issues directly to voters that demand their time and attention to evaluate the alternatives. Most prominently, California voters face more ballot measures than residents of any other state, on matters ranging from employment rules for gig workers to affirmative action to the production and sale of horse meat. Additionally, Californians vote in a large number of candidate elections, including eight independently elected statewide offices, in addition to elections for city and county governments and special districts. And if these regular elections were not enough, Californians are occasionally asked to consider recalling elected officials, notably including two of the last four governors (Vechten, 2024). To make informed decisions on everything from tax policy, climate change, and stem cell research, California voters must be able to understand the underlying context of policy proposals to make reasoned choices between policy alternatives.

Additionally, as one of the world's largest economies and one dependent on highly skilled industries, California depends on higher education to train the workers that fuel our state economy. The roster of most prominent industries ranges from our robust technology sector to entertainment to agriculture. Jobs that required no formal postsecondary training at the time the Master Plan was written now require some postsecondary education (Burning Glass Technologies, 2014) or offer higher wages and better prospects for advancement to workers with bachelor's degrees (Carnevale & Rose, 2011, pp. 25-30).<sup>3</sup> In fact, by the start of the next decade, an estimated 67 percent of all job openings and 71 percent of net new jobs will require some postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2023). While skeptics may interpret rising educational requirements as evidence of employers taking advantage of a surplus of college-educated workers, this argument fails to explain why even

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in the field of executive assistance, 65 percent of new job descriptions require a bachelor's degree, even though only 19 percent of incumbent executive secretaries and executive assistants have a bachelor's degree (Burning Glass Technologies, 2014, p. 5).



within occupational classes, employees with a bachelor's degree earn substantially more than their coworkers who never attended college (Carnevale & Rose, 2011, pp. 27-28).

Finally, higher education's role in addressing social needs cannot be understated. This ranges from leading scientific innovations; to solving major societal issues, like climate change and homelessness; to preparing students to be engaged participants in their community, such as by volunteering on a nonprofit board of directors. Research produced by higher education institutions can develop new treatments and technology, and the expertise within these institutions can drive better policymaking and implementation.

By addressing these three main roles, California will be positioned to strengthen its global leadership in innovation, industry, culture, and community-driven values. With a strong system of higher education, Californians who have sought but have historically not been able to successfully access and complete college will now be able to, allowing them to learn, contribute, and thrive in our state. It is only through shared prosperity, which today is rooted in securing a college education, will California be able to advance its economic, democratic, and social priorities.

### **Equity Must Be the Key Tenet of California's New Master Plan**

The envisioned system carries the potential to grow a robust state democracy, economy, and society, but in order to unlock the possibilities, California needs to define not only a clear vision but also set up structures to drive all stakeholders within the higher education ecosystem toward its realization. This requires identifying a few guiding principles that can drive the structure for the new Master Plan, and consequently, the wider postsecondary landscape. These principles, anchored in the key tenet of equity, drive *accessibility*, *affordability*, *meaningful education*, and *adaptability* to create the foundation for a quality and inclusive system of learning.

**Accessibility.** Inclusive access to higher education must stand as a cornerstone, with a focus on streamlining processes to minimize administrative burdens for students while fostering

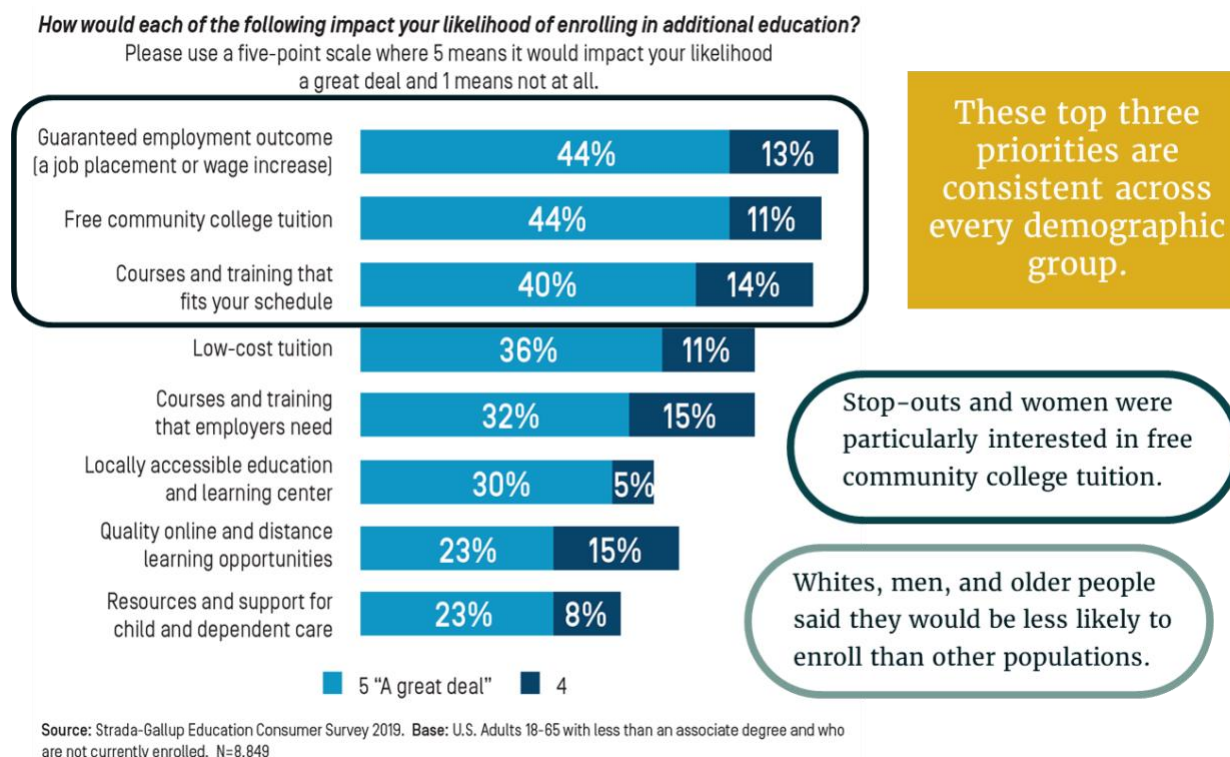
logistically simple structures that facilitate seamless navigation. The vision is clear: students should have clear paths to college at any stage of life, take classes that fit their lives (as most students today balance significant responsibilities outside of college), pivot easily between tracks or programs, and successfully complete their education with minimal uncertainty, regardless of their familiarity with education, financial aid, and related bureaucratic processes. The importance of designing higher education structures, programs, and services around student needs cannot be understated, as the fit of programs, particularly the course schedule, is a top motivator for enrollment (Strada Education Network & Gallup, 2019).

**Affordability.** Key to accessibility is affordability. As the 1960 Master Plan did, the new Master Plan must work to ensure cost is not a barrier to education. The goal of affordability in the 1960 Master Plan has been lost today, and California must reclaim it, particularly as tuition costs have been identified as a key determinant for enrollment (Strada Education Network & Gallup, 2019) and financial concerns is the most frequently cited issue for college students considering dropping out (Sallie Mae & Ipsos, 2024, p. 5). Yet, we must also define affordability as not merely about ensuring that attending college is financially viable but as transforming college matriculation into an enticing incentive. Imagine a scenario where attending college isn't just an investment in one's future but an immediate improvement in one's present circumstances—this prospect would reduce risk for Californians regardless of their circumstances.

**Meaningful Education.** Another key principle is ensuring the education has meaning for students and their life prospects, particularly in creating programs of study that are intricately linked to good job opportunities and provide long-term value for students. Career advancement was cited as the top motivating factor that would impact prospective students' decisions to enroll in higher education (Figure 5), and, as such, a new Master Plan must keep the meaning of higher education to the student front and center in its development and further adaptations.

However, higher education’s value must extend beyond just employment. Higher education should be meaningful in connecting students with the wider world around them—from geopolitical issues to the cultural and historical tapestries that connect individuals and societies. Higher education should develop students’ humanity and deepen their relationship with the world around them, including and beyond work.

**Figure 5. Most frequently cited factors affecting US adults’ likelihood of pursuing additional education: 2019**



Percentages of respondents selecting 5 (“a great deal”) and 4 (not labeled) on a 5-point scale, where 1 represents “not at all,” for how much each factor could impact the likelihood that they would enroll in additional education. Responses are drawn from a nationally representative sample of US adults ages 18–65 with no postsecondary degree who are not currently enrolled. Strada Education Network and Gallup. (2019). *Back to school? What adults without degrees say about pursuing additional education and training*. Copyright 2019 by Strada Education Network and Gallup, Inc.

**Adaptability.** The final principle that I’ll discuss in this essay revolves around enhancing higher education’s agility to deliver value to students and the state with increasingly rapidly changing contexts. A new Master Plan that promotes adaptive structures would recognize and ensure that delivering on accessibility, affordability, and meaningfulness requires continuous assessment and

improvement. This must be at the core of the plan and an automatic part of the operation of the higher education system.

## **The New Master Plan for Today's Student: Introducing the New California University**

A Master Plan designed to serve today's students and prospective students would provide plentiful opportunities for all Californians to benefit from higher education regardless of their prior preparation, their financial means, or where in the state they live. Rather than differentiating campuses by selectivity and institutional mission, with one's educational options largely determined by the offerings of the nearest campus, it would have a single higher education segment with campuses for each region. These regional institutions would weave together the lofty principles and highest aspirations of higher education: seamless transitions between K-12 (or work) and higher education; a clear connection to employment and society; accessibility to a broad range of learning; opportunities for both remote and in-person learning, including an option for a residential experience; prices that are affordable to Californians of any means; and an agile structure that anticipates and embraces change over time. To ensure its success and longevity, this new Master Plan would be stewarded by strong statewide policy leadership, in the form of state coordination. As detailed in the remainder of this section, each of these aspects already exists in some fashion or can be found in recent decades, so any given part of this proposal is hardly novel. The bold vision is to combine these elements together to build a system of higher education that works for all Californians.

***Two Siblings' Journeys Through California University.*** *Guillermo graduates from high school in Fresno and wants to go to college but does not yet know what he wants to study or what type of degree he wants. Fortunately, he has a clear pathway to California University, San Joaquin Valley (CUSJV). Because California University is open access, Guillermo does not have to navigate a complex college-going process that would have started years before he considered whether college was the right path for him. Guillermo seeks a*

*traditional residential college experience, so he moves to the campus and lives in on-campus housing. After his first year, he realizes his passion for chemistry and takes a position as an undergraduate research assistant with a CUSJV professor. This work-based learning opportunity deepens his understanding of chemistry and builds his professional work experience. He decides to pursue a career in research and wants to complete a PhD in chemistry. Before finishing his bachelor's degree, he meets his future partner, who later secures a job in Los Angeles. So, they move to LA where Guillermo continues his educational journey to complete his PhD at California University, Los Angeles—a seamless transition.*

*While Guillermo takes a traditional route through college, Guillermo's sister Rose takes a less traditional but more common route. Rose wants to be a nurse and starts college immediately after high school at CUSJV but stops out after a year to focus on family. A decade later, Rose is ready to return to college. She now lives in Redding, so she enrolls in nearby California University, Far North (CUFN). CUFN pulls up her CUSJV transcript, and she is able to seamlessly continue her educational journey to become a nurse. Because she cares for her two young children, she appreciates the option to take some of her courses online, so she can take classes from home while her children nap.*

*In thinking about her ultimate career goal of becoming a registered nurse (RN), Rose has the option to become an RN with an associate's degree or to continue to a bachelor's degree. She initially isn't sure how far to go but is comforted by the fact that she can progress in her classes and make the decision later. Ultimately, because she secures a good job after completing the associate's degree, she stops there, but knows she can easily return to California University for further credentialing in the future.*

**A single, seamless system.** To ensure coordination across higher education institutions in California, the new Master Plan merges the UC, CSU, and CCC into a single postsecondary segment: California University. This university system would absorb the missions of the current three segments, which currently are moving closer and closer together, to offer a single, coherent postsecondary offering to Californians across the state. Students would enter a California University campus and be able to progress in their educational journeys at either a structured or individualized pace to the credential level of their choice and ability. This could be a short-term certificate in cybersecurity to progress in their current job or the path from their very first postsecondary course to a doctorate.

Additionally, this structure would address persistent inequities in college access. Students would not be sorted at entry, as California currently does with its eligibility requirements for the UC, CSU, and CCC. Access to the courses required for UC and CSU admissions are inequitably distributed, so students whose high schools do not prepare them for college cannot compete for spots in California's public universities. As the new Master Plan removes the current stratified higher education structure, the single university system in the new Master Plan can help counteract K-12's uneven quality.

A single university system would eliminate the competition over degree programs and resources that currently exists among higher education segments, would ease transitions from K-12 to college by creating a single (hopefully seamless) path, could simplify alignment with workforce needs by making engagement with employers simpler since they could coordinate with a single campus in their region and a single university system for statewide efforts, and could ignite the promise of institutions serving as community anchors as they'd be the only public postsecondary institution in the region.

This transformation to a unified postsecondary system would still preserve the healthy aspects of competition. Regions would still contend with each other and with public and private institutions across the country for research grants, philanthropic donations, high-achieving faculty and students, and to garner awards and recognitions. They would continue to develop and refine innovative programs and policies to support students, employees, and their respective communities. But such competition in pursuit of excellence would be channeled toward the benefit of the state's residents rather than protecting turf or maximizing institutional prestige.

***A More Moderate Path to a Unified System.*** *Short of formally merging the UC, CSU, and CCC into a new university system, California could get a long way toward the vision and its hopeful outcomes by creating strong statewide and regional coordination. Such coordination would work to make transitions from K-12 and*

*between institutions seamless, along with improving intersegmental collaboration and connections with communities and employers across the state. Students would face fewer, if any, interruptions resulting from switching institutions and moving across regions. They can keep their on-campus or off-campus housing, child care arrangements, health insurance and other public benefits, work-study and other campus-based positions, and off-campus employment if they can stay local and pursue a higher education. Campuses, too, could leverage economies of scale and reduce unnecessary duplication by sharing infrastructure, particularly campus housing but also classrooms, labs, other instructional and research buildings and equipment, and sports and recreation facilities and venues, with other institutions within commuting range.*

**Robust regional structure.** The new Master Plan acknowledges the state’s large and diverse geography, with its attendant differences in economic and cultural factors, and organizes higher education institutions by region to meet local education and employment needs and to equitably serve residents across the state. Each of the state’s regions will have a California University campus that, across multiple sites and via online education, provides postsecondary education from sub-baccalaureate certificates to doctorates, along with education for enrichment and lifelong learning. One could loosely envision that all the CCCs, CSUs, and UCs in a region merge to become the California University campus and its sites in that region, each working as a single institution to educate students. This regional structure need not start and end with higher education. For example, one proposal would establish entire regional systems of education and work, including county offices of education (representing K-12) and employers, as well as public and private institutions of higher education. The partner organizations would form regional consortia to establish targets for education and career readiness and to align programs and pathways to meet local workforce needs (for details, see Shulock, Moore, & Tan, 2014). With guidance from a dedicated source of labor market information, consortium partners would collaborate to offer work-based learning opportunities and would streamline offerings by eliminating duplicate programs. For efficiency’s sake, relatively few institutions would offer the most specialized programs, and online instruction

(within or across regions) would fill gaps in local course and program offerings. The state would distribute funding by region rather than by education system and would monitor each consortium's progress toward its education and employment goals. (For another vision that would replace the Master Plan's organization of higher education segments with regional collaborations of higher education and K-12, see Breneman, 1998.)

Offering postsecondary educational options across the state is not just a matter of enhancing choice and convenience—it is a vital step toward ensuring equity as well as the other tenets of accessibility, affordability, meaningful education, and adaptability. Today, distance can be a substantial barrier to postsecondary enrollment. Few individuals change residences to enroll in college, and among the 70 percent of US students at public institutions, most attend campuses within 11 miles of home (Hillman, 2016, p. 989). In fact, proximity to a postsecondary institution is a consistent predictor of college attendance for both traditional-age students (Card, 2001; Hillman, 2016; Long, 2004; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Skinner, 2019) and adults 25 and older (Jepsen & Montgomery, 2009).

In the regionally organized state postsecondary system of the future, few students will have to move or commute long distances to earn bachelor's and graduate degrees that today are offered only at the CSU, the UC, and a small number of CCC campuses. Put another way, prospective undergraduate and graduate students in all regions will have equal access to programs at top institutions, whereas today, UC and to a lesser extent CSU campuses are concentrated in the state's coastal and urban areas. No student will lose credits transferring across public institutions because there is only one system and therefore no such thing as transfer. Local resources that are currently unequally distributed across the state (e.g., the multibillion dollar endowments of UC Berkeley, UCLA, and UCSF; UC's vast library holdings; UC's prestigious medical and professional schools) would be more equitably accessible and could allow more Californians to learn, engage, and thrive.



Notably, the regional structure does not imply that every campus and region will have identical offerings or that students would be required to attend the campus closest to home. To the contrary, individual campuses will continue to offer specialized programs that reflect local industries (e.g., agriculture in the central and Sacramento valleys, entertainment in Los Angeles). Students will be free to enroll in other regions of the state to pursue such fields or for any other reason. But for most Californians, crossing regions to attend college will be a choice rather than a necessity.

In addition to bolstering equity, the state's regional postsecondary structure will further the new Master Plan's other guiding principles described above. Offering an extensive selection of programs in each region will bolster accessibility and affordability by sparing students the expense and difficulty of moving. Workers seeking to advance in their careers can continue with their same employers (or clients if they are self-employed) while they are enrolled, eliminating the need to find other means of support, avoiding potential disruption to their career paths, and opening up avenues to meaningfully apply their education to their work and vice versa. And endowing institutions across the state with an identical mission and governance structure and with adequate and equitably distributed resources will permit them to focus more on developing better ways to serve students and their communities and less on competing for a bigger share of funding, prestige, and status.

**Connection to careers.** The new Master Plan also puts first and foremost the primary goal of students and prospective students—preparation for gainful employment—by deliberately and explicitly constructing a clear line of sight from each program toward well-paying jobs. This focus on connecting college to careers not only directly addresses this primary objective of students (and their eventual employers), but also will keep students engaged along the journey (Ashburn, 2023) and reduce disparities in employment outcomes (Palacios et al., 2022).

This is not to say that universities will become solely job training programs, but rather that they will intentionally and systematically build career preparation into every class and certificate or

degree program. Career readiness activities will take all sorts of forms to meet students where they are. Introductory classes, for example, might feature guest speakers who work in related industries or whose jobs use the skills and knowledge taught in the respective courses. More advanced courses would incorporate project-based learning drawn from actual problems faced by employers in cognate fields. Outside of the classroom, institutions would elevate paid work-based learning opportunities (such as internships, apprenticeships, and cooperative education programs) to be a standard expectation for each program if not an outright requirement, similar to student teaching requirements for students in teaching credential programs. Universities could leverage themselves as employers by providing students opportunities to work as student research assistants for faculty, which is associated with both academic engagement and persistence and which promotes gender and racial equity in the sciences (Linn et al., 2015; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020, 2022). Institutions will strongly encourage or require early interaction with career services (Alonso 2023) and to develop essential career skills (such as professional networking, interviewing for jobs, and creating effective presentations) that otherwise may not be formally part of the curriculum.

**Open access with numerous entry points.** As the pace of technological change quickens, workers in every field from accounting to zoology experience a constant need to enhance their skills and knowledge to stay relevant, and the Master Plan for today's student will recognize the broad need for higher education through an open access approach. Rather than restricting access to bachelor's-degree-granting institutions to a select few high school graduates and community college transfer students, the new Master Plan structures higher education to welcome any Californian with an ability to benefit, regardless of their age, academic preparation, or educational objective, similar to the current infrastructure at CCCs, but with a transfer-free pathway to a bachelor's degree and beyond. This arrangement is hardly novel, as today 14 states have open-access public four-year

institutions.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, institutions have been increasingly creating guaranteed admission or direct admission approaches where they proactively notify high school graduates that they have been admitted to college (Dickler, 2023; Ford, 2024; Greenberg, 2023; Knox & Weissman, 2023). These approaches further lessen the barriers to higher education that inequitably impact California’s marginalized residents.

Some students will achieve their educational and career objectives at the certificate and associate’s degree level. Others will follow a seamless progression into specialized fields as guided by its established structures and earn bachelor’s degrees, which in turn opens the door to graduate and professional degrees. The concept of transfer, however, becomes obsolete within this envisioned system, as the educational journey unfolds seamlessly at the regional university that offers a wide range of credentials and does not require transfer from lower division to upper division.

Moreover, movement between regional universities will be more seamless than our current community college to university transfer process, as all regional universities will be a part of the same California public university system. California’s new public universities under the new Master Plan are strategically designed for ease of access, whether physically or virtually, while maintaining educational quality across all modalities.

At the same time, policymakers must take steps to ensure that this new regional configuration of institutions does not exacerbate existing disparities in college preparation and socioeconomic status across regions and does not limit access for rural students who the state has placed colleges and universities further away from (Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021). If residents of Beverly Hills have greater academic or financial resources, on average, than residents of Bakersfield or Barstow, such advantages need not and should not translate into superior educational

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<sup>4</sup> Author’s analysis of US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System*, admissions and institutional characteristics components.

opportunities. One tack to promote equitable outcomes would be to distribute resources in a fashion that deliberately attempts to erase regional differences, investing more in less wealthy communities, monitoring progress toward this goal, and periodically adjusting spending. Other strategies, described in the following sections, would reduce the importance of geography by expanding online instruction and offering alternative versions of the residential college experience. A reconstituted coordinating entity, proposed later in this essay, would be instrumental in proposing funding strategies to maintain regional equity and in tracking progress toward this goal.

Such a change would not be new or unique. Several states have made efforts to minimize boundaries between higher education institutions, often in an attempt to address a financial crisis but sometimes to also improve student success. A few recent examples include:

- In 2018, Wisconsin transformed its two-year colleges into branch campuses of the four-year comprehensive institutions, with the primary goal to address budgetary issues. The regional location served as an entry point to higher education, with other administrative components centralized. While budgetary challenges persist, Wisconsin higher education leaders remain positive about the collaboration and the development of new programs that the consolidation enables (Schonfeld & Radecki, 2021).
- Georgia began the process of merging its public colleges in 2010, which eventually included 18 institutions, with the goal of achieving cost savings and increasing student access and success. While many successful outcomes have been attributed to the mergers directly, other improvements are less clearly tied to the mergers and may have been associated with other policies (Jones, 2021).
- Vermont merged three public colleges and will use a new academic model that includes sharing academic programs across campuses, reducing dependence on physical facilities, and relying heavily on hybrid forms of learning. The merger will not close any physical

locations but will result in shrinking or tearing down some underutilized campus facilities. Vermont will employ a model in which courses will be delivered through a mix of in-person, virtual, and other options so that students across the state can take any course.

**Flexible learning modalities.** The new Master Plan will enable colleges and universities to more effectively leverage in-person and online instruction to improve access and learning. Even in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of US students mixed face-to-face courses with distance learning, with the number growing each year (Ruiz & Sun, 2021). The new Master Plan will extend this trend intentionally, combining in-person instruction's strengths in facilitating interaction and building community with online instruction's ability to reach would-be students whose location, level of physical mobility, transportation options, and work and caregiving responsibilities make them good candidates for attending online. Online education also makes it possible to offer niche and highly specialized courses and programs that are unlikely to attract a critical mass of students in any given region but are feasible to offer if students can be drawn from across the state or beyond.

None of this is to suggest that online learning is the panacea for all of the state's higher education's challenges. It may not be the ideal format for all students, particularly those for whom face-to-face interactions with peers and instructors are an important source of social capital and sense of belonging. Nor might it be the best choice for laboratory courses and other classes that involve substantial hands-on work. Rather, time and experience will guide institutions and systems as they develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the contexts and circumstances where online instruction is most effective.

**Expanded conceptions of campus and the residential college experience.** Colleges will continue to offer the experience of living on campus to students who seek it, but the notion of

campus will stretch to include other locations where students attend classes together and sometimes live in close proximity. For students seeking the experience of attending a traditional residential college, institutions could offer intentional group living, perhaps in a typical residence hall or on-campus apartment, or in less traditional circumstances. Innovative colleges could follow the model of Minerva University, in which undergraduates spend their first academic year in San Francisco and subsequent semesters together in cities across Europe, Asia, and Latin America (Fain, 2018). Or they could emulate recent upstart College Unbound, which keeps costs down by holding classes in rented classrooms (which are sometimes in a workplace for employees to pursue postsecondary credentials together or in other shared community spaces), supplemented with weekly in-person dinner meetings that include childcare, extensive opportunities for online interaction, and an independent study component that awards credit for out-of-classroom experiential learning (Soares & Choitz, 2019, pp. xi, 28).

**A debt-free path to completion.** None of the aforementioned aspects of the future higher education system will mean much if students cannot afford to attend, so an essential component of the new Master Plan is that students must be able to attend without working excessive hours or incurring educational debt. California may not return to the 1960s model where its public institutions charged no more than a nominal activities fee, but it can do a much better job providing financial support to cover both tuition and nontuition expenses. There are already numerous strategies to do this, and a new Master Plan will likely draw on more than one approach. I note some strategies next.

The obvious and straightforward solution to making college affordable would be to expand grant aid to fully cover the total price of attendance, including a realistic amount for living expenses, for every student who needs it. But given the cost to the state of such a policy and the continued

challenges in ensuring students receive the financial aid for which they're eligible, the new Master Plan should design multiple structures to offset students' college costs.

One way to reduce students' costs, while also deepening learning, would be to supplement grants with "earn and learn" programs that combine enrollment with meaningful and relevant work experience—aligning to *career connections* noted above. This effort could be similar to the federal work-study program with the important distinction that the work component would be related to the student's program of study. In addition to facilitating a debt-free college experience, a concurrent earn and learn program would also smooth the transition to employment after graduation. Students would leave college with significant and relevant work experience, and employers who hire them could forgo the risk and recruitment expense by taking on a tried-and-true employee.

Another strategy would be for the state to cover a student's financial gap if the student commits to some post-graduation work requirement, an approach already used by the armed forces in its service academies and Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) programs (California Competes, 2021b). A guaranteed job offer could be used as an incentive for completing a program in specialized fields, as some localities do with their police and firefighting academies. Or college could *follow* a period of employment, as is the case with the GI Bill and other veterans education benefits and AmeriCorps.

Regardless of how the state supports students, research suggests that spending on higher education yields a generous return, making the nontrivial state contributions toward college affordability for all Californians a smart investment. One estimate found that every dollar invested in higher education returns an estimated \$4.50 in increased tax revenues (Stiles, Hout, & Brady, 2012, p. 5).

**Differentiated roles and expectations for faculty.** A unified higher education system would allow faculty to specialize to deliver the greatest benefits to students and the state. Faculty would focus on research, teaching, service, practice (for practitioners in professional fields), or some combination of these. Each category would have its teaching, research, and service expectations align with its specific category, and these expectations would guide promotion and tenure decisions. For example, a current UC faculty member may choose to be research-focused and have no or limited teaching or service obligations. On the other hand, a faculty member whose expertise lies in teaching would have their workload solely in teaching and not have any research expectations. This differentiation would allow faculty to thrive as they could dedicate their time to the role that maximizes their impact.

**A reconstituted coordinating entity.** The new Master Plan needs an independent coordinating entity with responsibility for steering higher education policy across the state and sufficient authority and resources to drive meaningful change to higher education and workforce development. Among its more specific responsibilities, this entity would be charged with:

- ensuring transitions into college (whether from high school, work, or unemployment), such as making it easy for Californians to earn credits from prior learning, matriculate in a timely manner, and understand the pathway from beginning to end;
- making recommendations on resource allocation to meet state and regional educational goals and monitoring progress toward those ends;
- regularly collecting, analyzing, and reporting data on how state institutions' activities align with state policy priorities;
- promoting cooperation in overlapping areas of need, such as the development of programs of study or work-based learning programs that can be shared across campuses;



- ensuring that institutions effectively meet state and regional demand for workers with specific skills and credentials, including by identifying opportunities where neighboring institutions can share instructional capacity and develop joint programs rather than jockeying for funding and enrollment;
- collecting and maintaining data that supports the state’s analytical and practical needs, such as tracking students’ education-to-work pathways, assessing program outcomes, and facilitating college applications (similar to the design of the California Cradle-to-Career Data System that is currently in development);
- administering cross-sector, interagency, and inter-institutional programs that connect to higher education;
- setting rules and distributing state student financial aid; and
- appropriating funding to each institution and designating general purposes, such as general operating support versus capital support or support for specific programs.

### **What Could a New Coordinating Entity Look Like?**

Many possibilities exist for how California could structure a new coordinating entity. Each has pros and cons and none clearly stands out as the winner, particularly once political constraints are considered.

One possible structure for the entity is a cabinet-level state agency that is led by a governor-appointed, senate-confirmed Secretary and would house a Coordinating Commission to provide state-level policy leadership and a Department of Postsecondary Programs that would administer programs (including the provision of technical assistance) related to student aid, career education, cross-regional collaboration, and cross-sector efforts (e.g., efforts with K-12, workforce/labor, social services, and rehabilitation).

The agency's Coordinating Commission would be led by a board made up of top officials representing the state's key constituencies on behalf of their respective state agencies and departments. The members might consist of:

- the head of the newly formed public postsecondary system and the head of its governing board,
- the president of the State Board of Education and the state superintendent of public instruction,
- the secretary of the Labor & Workforce Development Agency,
- the governor,
- the lieutenant governor,
- legislative leaders (or their designated representatives), and
- one or more student members, as is the case with the CCC, CSU, and UC statewide governing boards and the State Board of Education.

This board would provide state-level policy leadership to inform new policy efforts and guide the implementation of the new Master Plan; engage stakeholders and experts to discuss and propose recommendations for commission deliberations; explore, disseminate, and uplift strong state, regional, and local efforts to advance promising and evidence-based policies, practices, and processes.

With the Commission providing policy leadership, the Department would be responsible for implementing programs (including providing technical assistance) laid out in the new Master Plan and other cross-sector state efforts. A key strategy to do this is by bringing currently siloed state entities together under one roof, which would build organizational knowledge and expertise while reducing administrative burdens and duplication across agencies. The Department would be

organized in offices based on programmatic focus to allow the state to bolster its ability to administer complex programs, such as:

- The Office of Career Education to administer and provide technical assistance for cross-sector programs and initiatives that enable Californians to build the skills they need to secure good jobs. Program implementation should include the Golden State Pathways Program; the Learning-Aligned Employment Program; California College for All Service Program; the Teacher and School Counselor Residency and Grant Program; and the many apprenticeship and job corps programs.
- The Office of Inter- and Intra-Regional Collaboration to support regional economic development, planning, and partnerships between education providers, employers, and local governments. This office would administer the K-16 Regional Collaboratives Grant Program and make recommendations on regional capital facilities programs involving educational entities, such as recent investments in affordable student housing.
- The Office of Student Aid to administer student financial aid programs and support college and career affordability efforts.
- The Office of Cradle-to-Career Data to build and maintain the statewide longitudinal data system that will enable students to reach their education goals and deliver information on education and workforce outcomes to educators, policymakers, and analysts.

Regardless of how it is structured, the entity or entities would have professional and administrative staff to support its functioning. These civil servants would help ensure that the benefits of the new Master Plan are distributed efficiently, equitably, and in accordance with state policy goals and would propose evidence-based reforms as needed. A higher education department would help implement the commission's agenda through technical assistance to regions and by

steering collaboration across regions. Offices within the department would administer programs and provide technical assistance in specific areas such as career education, regional collaboration, student aid, and the state's Cradle-to-Career Data system, all in support of broader state goals.

**Phased implementation.** A restructuring as profound as the one proposed here calls for an incremental approach to develop specifics, earn stakeholders' buy-in and address their concerns, implement changes, evaluate the effects of these changes, and propose course corrections based on those interim assessments. The proposed new coordinating entity, with the backing of the state's elected leaders, would be ideally positioned to steer this process.

## **We Have the Building Blocks of the New Master Plan. Now, Let's Put Them in Place.**

The 1960 Master Plan articulated a public higher education system, with specifically delineated roles and objectives for institutions, just as the state was about to experience a surge in college enrollment. This model was widely admired, and even today it still works well for the population of Californians similar to those who attended college in the 1960s. But public higher education in California has been slow to adapt to the state's profound demographic, political, and economic changes since that era, and the state has lost touch with the Master Plan's key principles of affordability and access, while also dropping a critical component of the Master Plan—higher education coordination. Any one of these challenges would be enough to justify revisiting the Master Plan. All together, they demand a wholesale reenvisioning of public higher education in California because it no longer meets the needs of many, if not most, Californians.

With the rising costs of higher education and related expenses and the falling state investment in public institutions, a college education is increasingly out of reach for all but the most privileged. Too few Californians enroll in and complete college, leading to shortages of college-

educated workers and unfulfilled dreams. Many who do enroll still face a long, difficult, and uncertain road to graduation, often leaving with substantial debt.

It is time to organize higher education around people, not institutions. By understanding and acknowledging the preferences and needs of today's students, in the context of economic needs and trends, the state can take the necessary steps toward moving beyond the traditional focus of high school graduates, which the Master Plan initially had in mind. Instead, by understanding the imperatives of the present, the state can make the structural shifts required to address the needs and aspirations of a broader spectrum of learners, essential for sustaining California's economic strength now and in the future.

By recognizing the demands and aspirations of today's learners (including prospective students who want to pursue a higher education), embracing flexibility and regional engagement, and fostering innovative learning approaches, California can lead the way in shaping a higher education system that propels its economy and society forward. Now is the time to reset the foundation through a reimagined Master Plan and build a higher education system that truly serves Californians and paves the way for a brighter future.

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