

COVID-19: California Community College Student Challenges



Student Senate for
California Community Colleges
Survey Report
May 2020

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Executive Summary

In March 2020, the California Community Colleges system moved all instruction from both physical and online environments to online because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the governor's requirement for Californians to shelter in place. The change to this new learning environment for most community college students caused a significant disruption in how students learn. The Student Senate for California Community College (SSCCC) Board of Directors surveyed students to better understand the challenges they are facing and to better advocate on their behalf. Over 1,690 students from 64 colleges responded to the survey. The results of this survey will be shared with students, system partners, constituent groups, and other interested parties.

Key Findings

- Challenges reported by students because of Covid-19 were as follows:
 - The top three responses from students regarding challenges they are facing were higher levels of anxiety, stress, depression, and/or any other mental distress than usual (67%, n=1140), doing well besides from having to adapt to online learning (41%, n = 691), and income loss (40%, n = 671).
 - Many of the students who reported higher levels of anxiety also reported loss of income (45%, n = 508), an inability to pay their mortgage/rent/utilities (27%, n = 305), and having to drop one or more courses due to financial or other reasons (26%, n = 294).
 - Of the students who indicated they were doing well other than having to adapt to the online environment, many revealed that although they felt they were doing well overall, they suffered from anxieties and stresses because of the online environment and life circumstances.
- Areas where students could use SSCCC's help include the following:
 - Forty-five percent (764) of the students responded to this question. The top three types of assistance indicated included assistance with financial aid or needed grants and funds (22%, n = 169), considerations to make online courses better for students (19%, n = 143), and general comments related to advocacy, communication, or community needs (13%, n = 97).

Conclusion and SSCCC Commitment

The SSCCC survey was conducted to understand the challenges students are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the survey results, students are struggling with the move to an all-online environment, particularly those who depend on the services available to them through campus-based resources such as library, counseling, EOPS, college jobs, financial aid, grants, and health services. In addition, students who do well in a face-to-face environment may not do as well in an online environment and need additional resources to help them transition, including clear expectations, ability to engage with faculty, and consistency as well as leniency. The survey provides important information that will help the SSCCC better advocate for, communicate with, and support students across the state. The SSCCC is committed to increasing support for students by advocating for more resources to help them succeed, communicating student needs broadly, and keeping students informed.

The SSCCC is committed to serving students and will continue to provide an opportunity for them to communicate their challenges as well as provide them a forum to let their voices be heard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the SSCCC considered the survey results and comments, the SSCCC recommends the following to some of our system partners:

Chancellor's Office

- Maintain direct and regular communication with the SSCCC to ensure that the student voice is heard and respected regarding decisions made due to the COVID-19 crisis.
- Ensure that student representatives are included on all committees and task forces that develop recommendations or make decisions regarding college and system operations during the COVID-19 crisis.

Local District and College Administrations

- Ensure that student representatives are included on all committees and task forces and in all discussions intended to develop recommendations or make decisions regarding district or college policies, processes, and procedures during the COVID-19 crisis.

Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC)

- Establish a direct liaison connection to the SSCCC in order to ensure that student perspectives are being included in the development of ASCCC recommendations.
- Work with the SSCCC to help inform faculty statewide of student challenges and needs regarding the online environment.
- Work with SSCCC to help both students and faculty statewide develop a mutual understanding of the need to balance accommodating student needs during the COVID-19 crisis with maintaining standards and fulfilling course requirements.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Background

In March 2020, the California Community Colleges system moved all instruction from both physical and online environments to online only because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the governor's requirement for Californians to shelter in place. The change to this new learning environment for most community college students caused a significant disruption in their academic experience. The Student Senate for California Community College (SSCCC) Board of Directors surveyed students to better understand the challenges they are facing and to better advocate on their behalf. The results of this survey will be shared with students, system partners, constituent groups, and other interested parties.

In This Report

The report framework includes the methodology and survey findings. The survey findings contain challenges students are experiencing, how the SSCCC can assist students, and advice for faculty to promote student success in conducting their online courses. The report concludes with the SSCCC's next steps, commitments for the future, and recommendations for partner organizations.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was administered online via Google Form during April 2020. A survey link was sent via the SSCCC listservs and SSCCC social media as well as during additional statewide meetings in which students participated. Over 1,690 students from 64 colleges responded to the survey. Of the 1,690 who responded, 199 did not provide their college information.

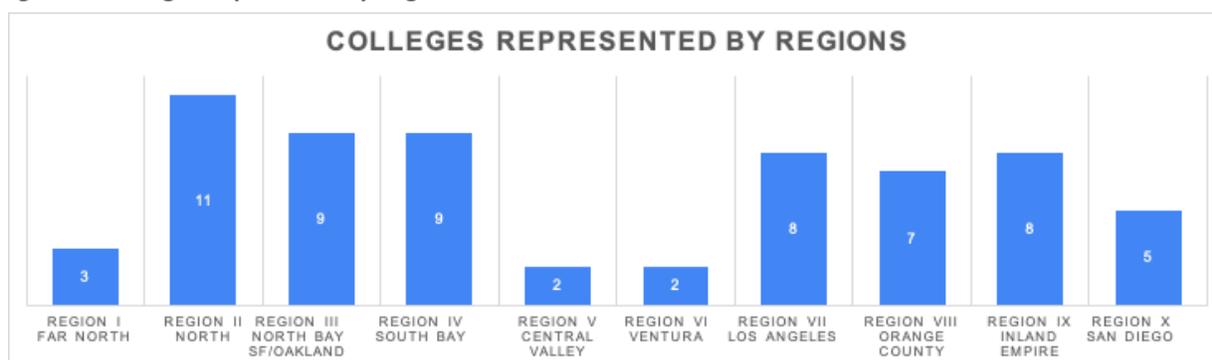
Survey limitations

When examining the results of this survey, one should note that the results may not be generalizable to all California community colleges; however, these findings do provide a snapshot into what students are experiencing under today's COVID-19 pandemic. Another limitation is that since this survey was administered online, the results exclude those students who did not have access to online forms or internet access.

SURVEY FINDINGS

The respondents to the survey represented 64 colleges in the California Community Colleges system. The SSCCC is comprised of 10 regions, and colleges within each region responded to the survey (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. College Respondents by Region.

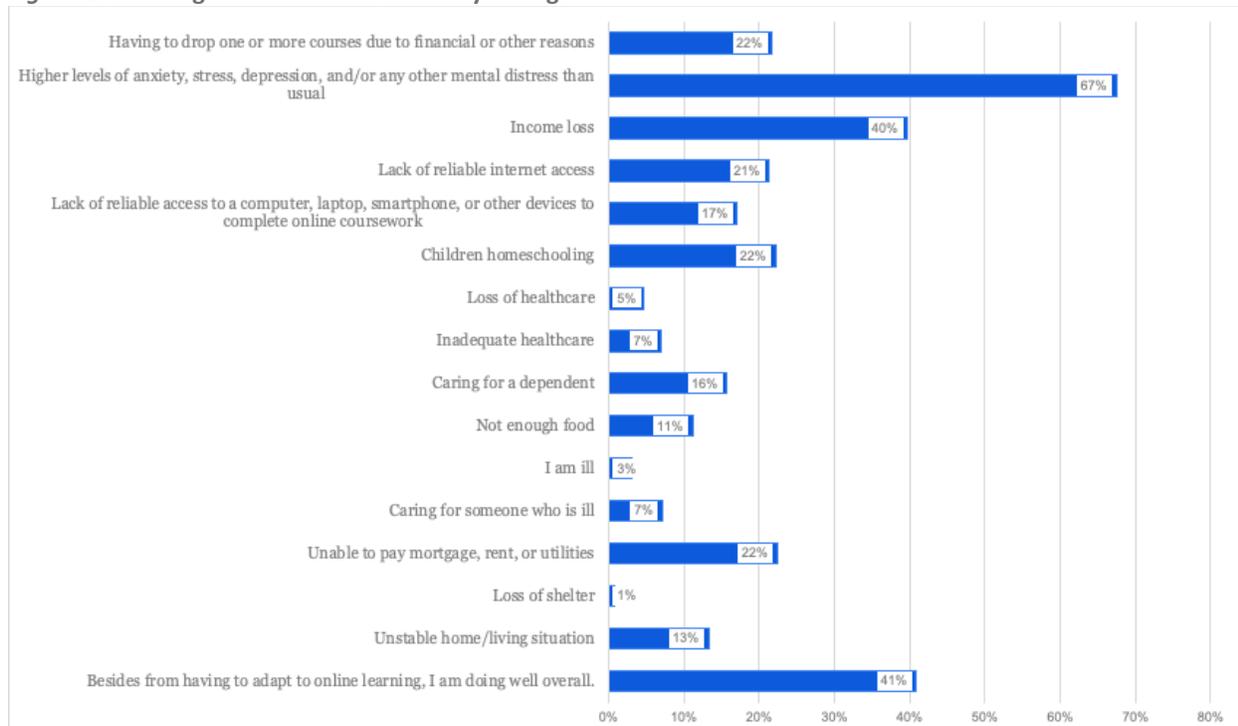


Challenges Students are Currently Facing

Figure 2 displays the student responses when they were asked, “What challenges are you currently facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?” A majority of the respondents (67%, n = 1140) checked that they were experiencing a higher level of anxiety, stress, depression, and/or any other mental distress than usual, 41% (n = 691) of the respondents selected that “Besides from having to adapt to online learning, I am doing well overall,” and 40% (n = 671) selected they had an income loss. Other responses received 22% or less as displayed on Figure 2.

In addition, 1% of the respondents reported that they have experienced a loss of shelter. This limited number might be explained by the fact that those who do not have access to the internet or online forms were not able to participate in the survey.

Figure 2. Challenges Students are Currently Facing



IN THEIR WORDS: Below are some of the comments students shared about challenges that are causing anxiety, stress, depression, or other mental health issues:

- *Mental and emotional health are getting in the way of distance learning.*
- *I'm a disabled veteran and mental health issues have worsened since shelter in place order.*
- *My mental health has plummeted and I [am] hanging on to the edge with just the tips of my nails. My grades should not have to suffer just because all the systems in America are overwhelmed and in shambles. Pay attention to your students. WE ARE NOT OKAY!! Put*

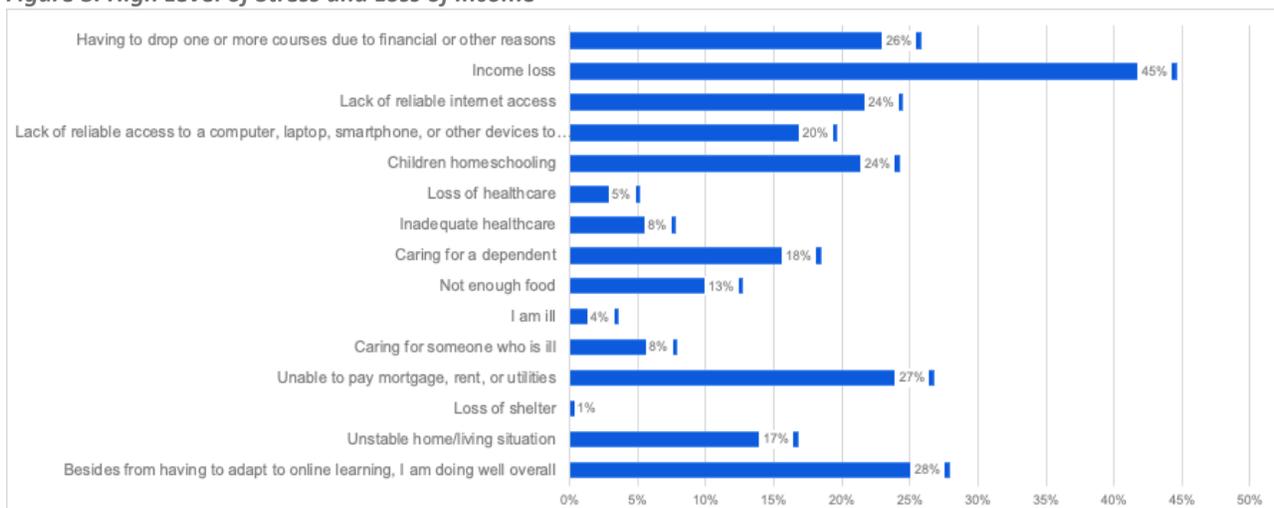
the semester on hold and we can resume. Not all professors are understanding. Please don't overlook our struggles just because you have passed yours.

- *My mental health has drastically declined and I cannot attend therapy anymore because of loss of healthcare.*
- *I am a disabled student and I make college work for me with the help from the helpers learning center and because of this Covid-19 I'm lost not to mention I know but don't know my way [around] a computer [and] the online class has increased my anxiety and makes me sad and [feel] like a failure.*
- *I'm worried about my GPA dropping because my depression/anxiety is getting the better of me, but I can't drop classes because of my reliance on the GI Bill for income at this time.*
- *The whole situation is mentally draining. Going to school physically was helping me with my anxiety and depression by allowing me to have a routine and look forward to doing something besides sitting in the house.*
- *Online courses have been even more overwhelming because it requires more discipline and having the entire world's lifestyle change within days [does not leave] enough time to adapt to this new way of learning.*
- *Due to the pandemic it has caused me to struggle a lot in school, it has also caused my anxiety and depression to exceed, and I have been struggling financially due to the lack of no work.*

Higher Level of Stress and Loss of Income

Out of the 67% (n = 1140) students who responded that they were experiencing a higher level of anxiety, stress, depression, or any other mental distress than usual, 45% (n = 508) also checked that they experienced a loss of income, 27% (n = 305) indicated they were “Unable to pay mortgage, rent, or utilities,” and 26% (n = 294) stated they were “Having to drop one or more courses due to financial or other reasons” (See Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. High Level of Stress and Loss of Income



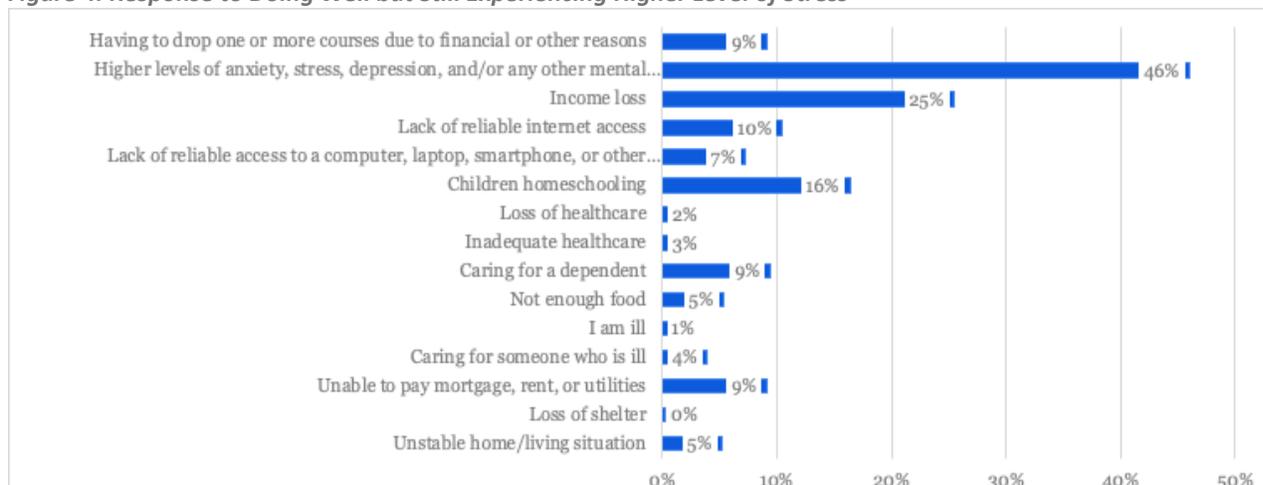
IN THEIR WORDS:

- *Having a hard time with bills, being behind on bills, everyone lost their jobs, trying to keep the house with food and necessities but it's hard at times. Use of only 1 computer in the house having to share with my sibling that also needs it for school.*
- *I was moved out of my living situation (dorms), all classes were switched to online, I lost my job, I have had trouble getting ready to register for classes in the upcoming semesters. I know that this situation is difficult, but I am trying to finish my classes at the best I can with a terrible wifi connection and unreliable computer.*
- *I'm a dependent so my mom is struggling to pay the bills.*
- *I am a foreign student and I am having a really hard time to get the funds to pay for school my family in my country is not working as many hours due the COVID-19. I am also having a hard time to pay for rent since I have not as much support economically talking from my parents due to this situation.*
- *I've had to work as much as possible between multiple jobs due to having an unstable fluctuating income. It's harder to stay in school/be full time.*
- *As I am a first generation college student, I also help my parents out with bills. I had my hours cut to 8 hours a week, which doesn't cut any of my family's bills.*
- *I really need financial help. Several people depend on me, this makes it hard to focus most of the time when I need a head to study.*
- *The loss of 5 part-time jobs has been hard, have to work part-time job overnights and professors not understanding that we have priorities right now as having food for the family or a roof on our heads is our priority.*

Higher Level of Stress and Doing Well Overall

Of the 41% (n = 691) of respondents who selected “Besides from having to adapt to online learning, I am doing well overall,” Figure 4 displays that 46% (318) of those students responded that they were experiencing a higher level of anxiety, stress, depression, or any other mental distress than usual. At first, the two responses might seem at odds with each other, but based on the comments from respondents, while students are doing well overall, the high-level of anxiety appears to be caused by the online environment and other life circumstances.

Figure 4. Response to Doing Well but Still Experiencing Higher Level of Stress



IN THEIR WORDS: Students share some of their experiences in the online environment and what else might be causing stress.

- *Doing online [classes is] very hard especially Math because that's one of my weak subjects. I'm more of a visual [learner] I choose to do face to face classes in person and not doing online classes because I knew it would be a struggle to pass.*
- *I would have to say managing class online and attending is pretty hard when being an essential worker.*
- *Losing needed hours from school, the one place [I] thought could protect me.*
- *I am a student athlete and I am currently unable to practice. Moreover, I play a fall sport and with all of the rumors going around about classes still being virtual in the fall, I may not get to play my season. This is very stressful for me as I was relying on being recruited and receiving a scholarship to continue my schooling, as I cannot afford to continue without it. I am now trying to come up with a back-up plan in case I will not get that chance to play and be recruited and will have to find a job with only an Associate Degree.*
- *I learn far better when sitting in person, inside of a class rather than over a computer.*
- *If members of my household are all streaming on wifi, video/sound gets cut off and we miss half of the explanations.*
- *It's extremely difficult trying to adapt, being that I've always struggled with online classes which is why I never chose to enroll in them. I'm more of a visual learner. I prefer to be in class and ask questions rather than waiting hours or days for a response. Everything that's going on is inconveniencing me, specially [sic] with having to attend to children [that are] out school as well, but I am trying. I just wish everything would go back to normal.*
- *Not very good with computers it seems like everything is just going too fast it's confusing the smartphone is much too small to have to do my work on every day.*
- *The teachers all use Canvas differently and it has been incredibly stressful to navigate.*
- *I have a special needs adult son who is forced to homeschool. His school has provided online learning and has sent materials to use at home. However, we need more hands-on help to assist my son in his learning because we aren't always the best at managing his autistic behaviors during learning.*

How Can the SSCCC help you?

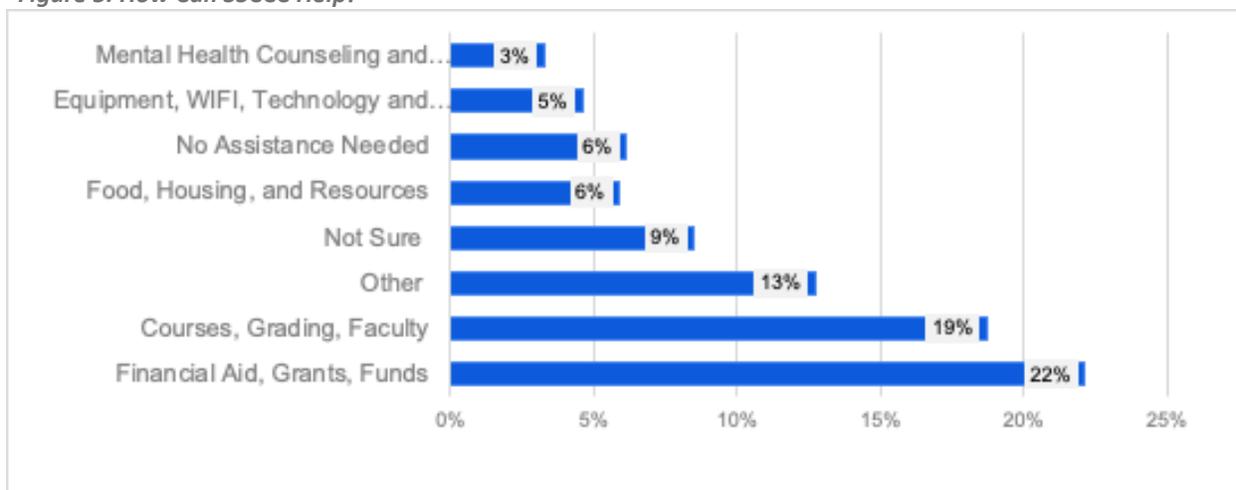
In the survey, the last question asked was “How can the Student Senate for California Community Colleges help you?” Only 45% (n = 764) students responded to this question. The comments were grouped into the following themes:

- 1) Financial aid, grants, or additional funds;
- 2) Courses, faculty, and grading;
- 3) Equipment, WIFI, or technology;
- 4) Food, housing, and resources;
- 5) Mental health counseling and support;
- 6) Other (advocacy, communication, etc.);

- 7) No assistance needed; and
- 8) Not sure what assistance can be provided.

A summary of the themes shows that 22% (n = 169) asked for assistance with financial aid or needed grants and funds, 19% (n = 143) provided comments about how to make online courses better for students, and 13% (n = 97) provided other comments related to advocacy, communication, or community. Figure 5 displays the themes.

Figure 5. How Can SSCCC Help?



Nineteen percent (n = 143) of the respondents who commented on the courses and faculty offered advice to improve their experience in the online environment. A majority of their comments centered on the transition and the need for more leniency and flexibility both in assignments and grading. In addition, respondents indicated the need for access to support for disabled students, library resources, free textbooks, and software. They also wanted to remind faculty that they did not sign up for online learning and many acknowledged that they do not do well in online environment, which is why they take face to face classes.

Some of the students commented that faculty should be lenient in grading or give less homework. While these suggestions seem like a good alternative given that students are struggling with balancing their coursework with all other life situations, as well as adjusting to a new environment for many, they might also have the negative impact of reducing the quality of the education, which does not appear to be the intent of the comments. The SSCCC will need to work with its faculty partners to find viable solutions to ease the transition of online education for students while ensuring that quality education is delivered in a manner through which students can succeed.

IN THEIR WORDS: Students offer recommendations to faculty and others about how they could be better served to increase student success.

Support for Disabled Students and Other Services

- *Inform professors that it is much more difficult to keep up with certain class tasks as a blind person because it takes us twice as long to get things done. also please let them know that PowerPoint does not work very well so we have to take the time to convert it to PDF. Truthfully the best way that the SSCCC can help is becoming aware of visually impaired individuals who attend colleges. Please help us visually impaired individuals become more than one percent who actually achieve a successful career.*
- *Allow libraries to mail checkout books (reading on a tablet has been a challenge).*
- *Find tools that can assist with tutoring.*
- *It would be helpful if they were able to also help teachers by getting them equipment to better their classes.*
- *Do drive through school supplies for EOP&S.*
- *Have online counseling over Zoom or email to talk to school admin about classes, major changes, etc.*
- *Provide more open windows of resources such as access to electronic devices, e-books, aids to help pay school utilizations.*
- *Make resources more applicable over the phone not waiting for email replies.*
- *Maybe having rent free books so I won't drop any courses.*
- *Make sure teachers are properly trained in using canvas.*
- *Available counseling for mental health.*
- *Having zoom meetings on how to manage stress and difficulties during these times.*

Need for Leniency

- *Allow classes to be repeated without a withdraw*
- *Allow the teachers to be more flexible with deadlines and schoolwork.*
- *Let us retake the classes we needed to drop or were dropped from because of Covid-19 and not get it in our transcript.*
- *Offering the ability to drop courses without it negatively impacting my record.*
- *Allow greater leeway for classes, it is hard enough trying to keep up with one online class but now I have 5 online classes and professors are adding even more work for us to complete not realizing we have other priorities now due to Covid-19.*
- *Be patient with students who are struggling academically and mentally this is mainly on teachers that are putting strain on students.*

Course Recommendations

- *[I]t would be easier for students if professors put up all of the assignments that we need online so students can see it and work on it on our own time as long as they finish them before finals.*
- *Notify faculty members to adjust syllabus.*
- *Promote an extension on our homework. Not all of us are at home, some of us have to work and study at the same time, and with all the changes is hard to do so.*
- *Be aware of our situation and help adapt a more effective remote learning environment.*

- *Ensure PROFESSORS that we cannot fail due to their lack of communication due to technical issues. We are all adjusting but our grades are being affected.*
- *Help find a way to make it easier for us students to do all the work we have online. Some of us aren't use [sic] to online classes and we're still trying to get the hang of it.*
- *Maybe find an alternative to those students whose classes are meant to be hands on, such as theatre classes, because I feel as if I'm not learning to the extent I normally would be.*
- *Bring awareness to the teachers and school administration about the unfair managing of their online classes. I am really stressed because I'm not sure if I will be able to pass my classes thanks to the lack of resources and the overly demanding workload. I already am investing so much time and effort into my classes, and I think that it is time that teachers began to do the same.*
- *Explain to the professors that it's OK for them to fall back a little bit and let's just get the main assignments taking care to be able to grade is accurately and drop all the unnecessary noise.*

CONCLUSION AND COMMITMENT

The SSCCC survey was conducted to help the organization understand the challenges students are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the survey results and the student comments, students are struggling with the move to an online-only environment, particularly those who depend on the services available to them through campus-based resources such as library, counseling, EOPS, college jobs, financial aid, grants, and health services. In addition, students who do well in a face-to-face environment may not do as well in an online environment and need additional resources to help them transition, including clear expectations, ability to engage with faculty, and consistency as well as leniency. The survey provides important information that will help the SSCCC better advocate for, communicate with, and support students across the state.

1. Advocating for the resources students acutely need to support their success.

The following list indicates resources and services of which students are in dire need right now due to Covid-19: Mental health services, online tutoring, access to counselors, resources for visually impaired, telephone access to admissions and records, equipment resources (computers, WIFI, software), EOPS supplies and resources, library access and book rentals, and other student services and resources to support them in this online environment.

2. Continue to elevate the voices of students and their needs broadly and consistently.

The survey highlighted the need for the SSCCC to elevate the voices of students. In this current climate, decisions are being made on behalf of the students, and at times, without their participation in the conversations. The SSCCC needs to continue to provide a forum for

students to tell their stories and share their challenges. Respondents shared that they want the SSCCC to do the following:

- continue to advocate and represent California community colleges students;
 - monitor how they are doing emotionally, academically, and economically;
 - create two-way communications between associated student bodies and the SSCCC; and
 - give power to their voice through communication with system partners and the public about their needs.
3. Keep students informed of current changes in the higher education system or resources that support their educational experience.

When students were physically on a college campus, they had a variety of ways to find information about issues that affect them such as through communication with students or faculty in class, standing in line at the cafeteria or library, bulletin boards or newspapers, or just by walking by a group of students. However, after moving to an all-online environment, students are finding that they are less informed. In the survey comments, respondents wanted to be kept informed about a variety of areas affecting their educational experiences, including the following:

- changes taking place that will affect their education and courses;
- information about future campus opening or closures;
- links to resources such as food banks, online mental health therapy, basic needs support, and undocumented student support;
- grants, financial support, and free resources; and
- any other information that can help them to be successful in the new environment.

The SSCCC is committed to serving students and will continue to provide an opportunity for them to communicate their challenges as well as provide them a forum to let their voices be heard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As the SSCCC considered the survey results and comments, the SSCCC recommends the following to some of our system partners:

Chancellor's Office

- Maintain direct and regular communication with the SSCCC to ensure that the student voice is heard and respected regarding decisions made due to the COVID-19 crisis.
- Ensure that student representatives are included on all committees and task forces that develop recommendations or make decisions regarding college and system operations during the COVID-19 crisis.

Local District and College Administrations

- Ensure that student representatives are included on all committees and task forces and in all discussions intended to develop recommendations or make decisions regarding district or college policies, processes, and procedures during the COVID-19 crisis.

Academic Senate for California Community Colleges

- Establish a direct liaison connection to the SSCCC in order to ensure that student perspectives are being included in the development of ASCCC recommendations.
- Work with the SSCCC to help inform faculty statewide of student challenges and needs regarding the online environment.
- Work with SSCCC to help both students and faculty statewide develop a mutual understanding of the need to balance accommodating student needs during the COVID-19 crisis with maintaining standards and fulfilling course requirements.

Appendix: 2020 Survey on Student Challenges during the COVID-19

COVID-19 Survey for CCC Students

Due to the spread of the COVID-19, more than 2.1 million students from the 115 California Community Colleges are being affected in various aspects, academically, financially, mentally, and so much more. This survey is to serve as a platform for the students' concerns to be addressed, so they can be included in conversations of the Chancellor's Office, state legislators, college administrators, and other parties that play crucial role supporting the education system.

* Required

Student Senate for California Community Colleges is the officially recognized organization that represents and advocates for the interests of more than 2.1 million students in the California Community College system.



1. Which California Community College do you attend?

2. What challenges are you currently facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
(Select all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- Besides from having to adapt to online learning, I am doing well overall.
- Unstable home/living situation
- Loss of shelter
- Unable to pay mortgage, rent, or utilities
- Caring for someone who is ill
- I am ill
- Not enough food
- Caring for a dependent
- Inadequate healthcare
- Loss of healthcare
- Children homeschooling
- Lack of reliable access to a computer, laptop, smartphone, or other devices to complete online coursework
- Lack of reliable internet access
- Income loss
- Higher levels of anxiety, stress, depression, and/or any other mental distress than usual
- Having to drop one or more courses due to financial or other reasons

Other: _____

3. Besides the answers above, is there any other comments or concerns that you would like to share with us?

4. How can the SSCCC help you?

5. Can the SSCCC use your responses to post on our social media anonymously? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No