Set Up to Succeed

Meeting California's Postsecondary Education Attainment Goal

With a nominal gross domestic product that ranked fourth in the world in 2024, California has long been an economic powerhouse, driving innovation that shapes the way people live and work not only in the state but also across the globe.[1] As industry continues to evolve, maintaining this success will require an educated workforce with the knowledge and skills to meet ever-changing needs on the job and engage in civic life and democracy.

To ensure California's continued economic prosperity and provide opportunity for its more than 39 million residents, in the FY 2023 budget, Governor Gavin Newsom set a state goal of 70 percent postsecondary attainment by 2030.[2] Reaching that goal will require restructuring the existing higher education system to set up students, and therefore industry and the state, to succeed. It will involve changing policy, perspective, and practice to expand opportunity by better serving current students so they can complete their credentials and degrees, better recruiting high school students, and better reaching additional populations of potential students.

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1   Governor Gavin Newsom. (2025, April 23). *California is now the 4th largest economy in the world*. https://www.gov.ca.gov/2025/04/23/california-is-now-the-4th-largest-economy-in-the-world/

2   Governor Gavin Newsom. (n.d.). *The California blueprint: Strengthening our world-class higher education system*. https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Higher-Education-Fact-Sheet.pdf

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To view the full report, go to **completecollege.org/set-up-to-succeed.**

Strategies to Meet the State Goal

This playbook, created by Complete College America (CCA) and The Campaign for College Opportunity, provides an overview of where California stands in relation to its ambitious attainment goal and outlines specific strategies the state can implement and scale to meet the 70 percent goal by 2030. The playbook builds on focus areas established by the governor and legislature in multiyear compacts with the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) and a multiyear roadmap with California Community Colleges (CCC).

The strategies include the CCA Core Strategies, which are part of CCA's four Pillars of Transformation that work together to create higher education systems that work for every learner on every campus. They also build on the deep expertise of The Campaign for College Opportunity in scaling evidence-based policy transformation and maximizing statewide investments to ensure that more students access and succeed in college.

Improving Intersegmental Collaboration and Standardization to Benefit Students

While the compacts and roadmaps have common focus areas and call for the systems to collaborate on certain issues, they do not update the current higher education master plan, which has largely allowed the state's higher education systems to operate in isolation. They also do not create a formal structure to facilitate collaboration.

California has taken some critical steps in this direction with the passage of Assembly Bill 1098 and Senate Bill 638, which establish the venue and bold priorities to convene the state's Transitional Kindergarten (TK)–Grade 12 system, CCC, UC, CSU, private colleges, and workforce systems to be accountable to students and support their ability to go to college and succeed for a stronger state economy.[3, 4] With these bills, California is working to reimagine a more connected higher education system that responds to students' needs through shared decisionmaking and partnership across TK–12 and workforce partners. To succeed, the state needs to further these steps by:

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- Updating the higher education master plan, which was created in 1960, to reflect the realities of today's higher education landscape;

- Building a strong foundation and guiding principles for the coordinating body, including a targeted mission and vision, dedicated leadership and support staff, and balanced representation among its members; and

- Fostering collaboration across regions and sectors to address the unique needs of different regions and populations across the state.
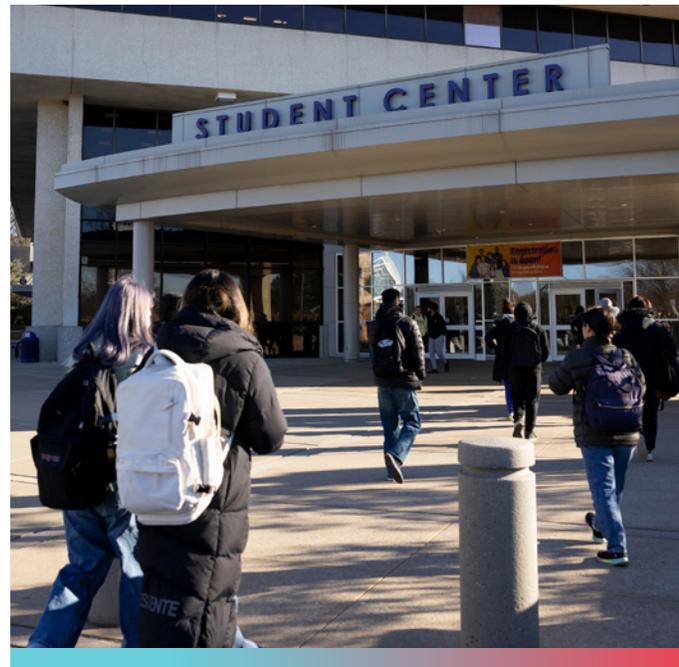
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3   California Education Interagency Council, A.B. 1098, 2025–2026 Reg. Sess. (CA 2025). https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260AB1098

4   California Education Interagency Council: California Career Technical Education Incentive Grant Program, S.B. 638, 2025–2026 Reg. Sess. (CA 2025). https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260SB638

Expanding Access to Public Postsecondary Institutions

Despite declining enrollment trends, the UC and CSU compacts require the systems to increase annual Californian undergraduate enrollment by 1 percent each year between 2023 and 2026. With almost two-thirds of public postsecondary students in California enrolled in community college, the system will play a key role in not only meeting the overall statewide goal but also increasing access to UC and CSU to meet their enrollment goals. Key strategies to implement and scale include:

- *Dual Enrollment:* Provide high school students opportunities to take college classes while they are still in high school so they can get an early start on college.
- *First-Year Experience:* Develop structures to connect students with resources that foster their academic and career goals.
- *Active Academic Support:* Provide students with programs and services to help them develop the academic skills needed to be successful.
- *Multiple Measures:* Consider a variety of placement options that include high school grade point average to provide more ways for students to take a college-level class in their first semester.
- *Math Pathways:* Identify the appropriate gateway math course that is aligned with the skills students need for their chosen program of study.
- *Corequisite Support:* Design structures and pedagogical approaches for students needing or requesting additional support to succeed in college-level foundational math and English courses, allowing students to complete requirements in a single academic term.
- *Student Engagement:* Proactively communicate the benefits of a degree or other credential of value to address the unique needs and goals of students.

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- *Credit for Prior Learning:* Recognize the prior learning, skills, and knowledge that students possess and establish mechanisms to award appropriate credits*.*

Increasing the Affordability of Higher Education

Even as a postsecondary credential or degree is increasingly required for a job that pays a family-sustaining wage and offers opportunities for advancement, students are faced with rising costs for higher education. These financial barriers prevent many students from enrolling in college. Some believe they cannot afford it and choose not to enroll, while others attempt to work while attending school, often leading them to stop out or drop out if their income or class schedules cannot support continued attendance. Recent congressional actions related to Pell Grant eligibility threaten to exacerbate these challenges.

Many of the strategies discussed throughout the playbook will lead to fewer excess credits and faster completion of degrees and credentials, reducing overall costs. But specific key strategies to implement and scale include:

- *Funding for Transformational Change:* Structure the higher education budget to return to funding stability and predictability while maximizing investments in college access and success.
- *Student Basic Needs Support:* Ensure that students have access to food, housing, child care, physical and mental health services, financial assistance, and transportation.

Supporting Workforce Preparedness and High-Demand Career Pipelines

The purpose of the postsecondary attainment goal is to enable all Californians to secure a job that pays a family-sustaining wage and offers opportunities for advancement and to ensure that California continues to be an economic powerhouse. Therefore, in addition to the overall postsecondary attainment goal, the CCC roadmap and the UC and CSU compacts include specific goals around workforce preparation. Many of the strategies discussed in other sections will support workforce preparation, but additional action steps and strategies that California can take include:

- *Career Exploration:* Create a structured, intentional process to help students discover, investigate, and connect with potential career pathways aligned with their broader sense of purpose—including their interests, values, skills, financial goals, and civic aspirations.

- *Academic and Career Alignment:* Align academic programs with workforce needs and career opportunities to ensure that students graduate with the skills, credentials, and experiences required to thrive in today's job market.

- *Meta Majors:* Group related academic programs into broad categories or "families" of majors that share common foundational coursework, career pathways, and skill sets.

- *Academic Maps and Milestones:* Create term-by-term course schedules that reformat degree requirements from institutional catalogs into clear, sequential roadmaps for graduation.

- *Smart Schedules:* Use data analytics, predictive modeling, and student-centered design principles to optimize course scheduling and improve student access to required coursework.

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- *Stackable Certificates and Credentials:* Create sequences of certificates, certifications, badges, and degrees that are designed to build on one another, allowing students to accumulate qualifications over time as they advance toward higher-paying employment opportunities.

- *15 to Finish/Stay on Track:* Invest in coordinated communications efforts, institutional policy changes, adviser engagement, and financial incentives to match student credit loads with the credits needed for on-time graduation for both part-time and full-time students.

- *Proactive Advising:* Require advisers to take the initiative to reach out to students, monitor their academic progress, and provide timely interventions rather than waiting for students to seek help.

- *360° Coaching:* Provide students with a designated coach to contact whenever issues arise in and outside of the classroom.

- *Degree Reclamation and Targeted Reengagement Efforts:* Ensure that colleges use and improve upon existing student information database systems to audit student progress toward degrees and credentials as well as retroactively award those credentials to students if they are no longer enrolled.

Funding for Transformational Change

When implemented comprehensively and at scale, the strategies described in the playbook will lead to the transformational change California needs to meet its postsecondary attainment goal. But implementing and scaling them comes with a cost, which is challenging at any time, much less when budgets are shrinking and uncertain.

To meet the 70 percent postsecondary attainment goal by 2030, California must structure its higher education budget investments to:

■ Ensure funding stability and predictability by maintaining strong implementation of the Student Centered Funding Formula for CCC and honoring state commitments to pay outstanding funding deferrals;

■ Invest to fuel economic mobility by streamlining access to financial aid and targeting state resources to students with the most unmet need; and

■ Continue to invest in targeted intersegmental coordination efforts.

Using Metrics to Drive Action

The success of any transformational reform effort rests on continuously monitoring progress toward the goal to uncover areas of success that can be shared and scaled to benefit more students—or to make adjustments in areas in which progress is slower. While the UC and CSU compacts and CCC roadmap laid out some goals and metrics, most were based on each individual system's plans. They lacked definitive, explicit expectations that these goals should work in tandem and ultimately drive progress toward the overall 70 percent attainment goal.

The new California Cradle-to-Career Data System will provide a central source of information that can serve as a starting point for developing a measurement system that can truly monitor progress across all three systems and drive action. Best practices for developing this system include:

■ Selecting 6–10 student-centered key performance indicators that align with the postsecondary attainment goal and reform strategies and then identifying related leading indicators and real-time metrics to monitor progress;

■ Disaggregating data by student characteristics, including academic factors, support service use, and cohort tracking for specific interventions, to uncover and address institutional performance gaps;

■ Starting with data that is available and refining the metrics over time; and

■ Remaining focused on the ultimate goal of improving student outcomes and closing institutional performance gaps.

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Ensuring that 70 percent of California residents have a postsecondary degree or credential by 2030 will not be easy. It will require urgent, comprehensive action; continued focus; and sustained investment. But reaching the goal is critical to power California's economy and provide all of its residents the opportunity to secure good jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage and provide opportunities for advancement.

Implementing and scaling the strategies in this playbook in California will help the state create public higher education systems that work in tandem. Taken individually, the strategies will move the needle, but the real power of the strategies lies in how they work together to address changes at the state, system, regional, and institutional levels. The strategies build on one another and, when implemented and scaled in tandem with a focus on students' realities and needs, have a multiplier effect in their positive impact.

Ultimately, implementing these strategies and reaching the postsecondary attainment goal is about more than making sure a certain percentage of adults in the state have a credential or degree. It is about ensuring that California residents have the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the workplace and to engage in civic life and democracy. It is about ensuring that businesses have the workforce they need to thrive and fuel the economy. And it is about ensuring that California continues to drive innovation and function as an economic powerhouse.

COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

Complete College America (CCA) builds movements for scaled change and transforms institutions. Since its founding in 2009, CCA has paired bold, innovative thinking with practical actions that colleges and policymakers can implement across every level of higher education. CCA's work centers on researching and refining education reforms, providing coaching and support, and advocating for change. Across these areas, CCA uses data to identify barriers and design successful strategies; aligns policy, perspective, and practice so complex systems operate effectively; connects experts to amplify their insights; and builds shared accountability. The organization is at the center of the broad CCA Alliance, which is driving change that works for every leader, every campus, and every system. To find out more, visit completecollege.org.

The Campaign for College Opportunity

The Campaign for College Opportunity is a nonpartisan policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring all Californians have an equal opportunity to attend and succeed in college and achieve economic prosperity. By bringing together a broad-based coalition of business, education, and civil rights leaders, the Campaign works to build a strong workforce, vibrant economy, and thriving democracy. The organization is at the forefront of championing student-centered higher education policies and the dismantling of inequitable systems to advance racial equity and economic justice across California. To find out more, visit collegecampaign.org.