

Trends in Higher Education

# Student Outcomes

Legislative Analyst's Office **2024**



# Introduction

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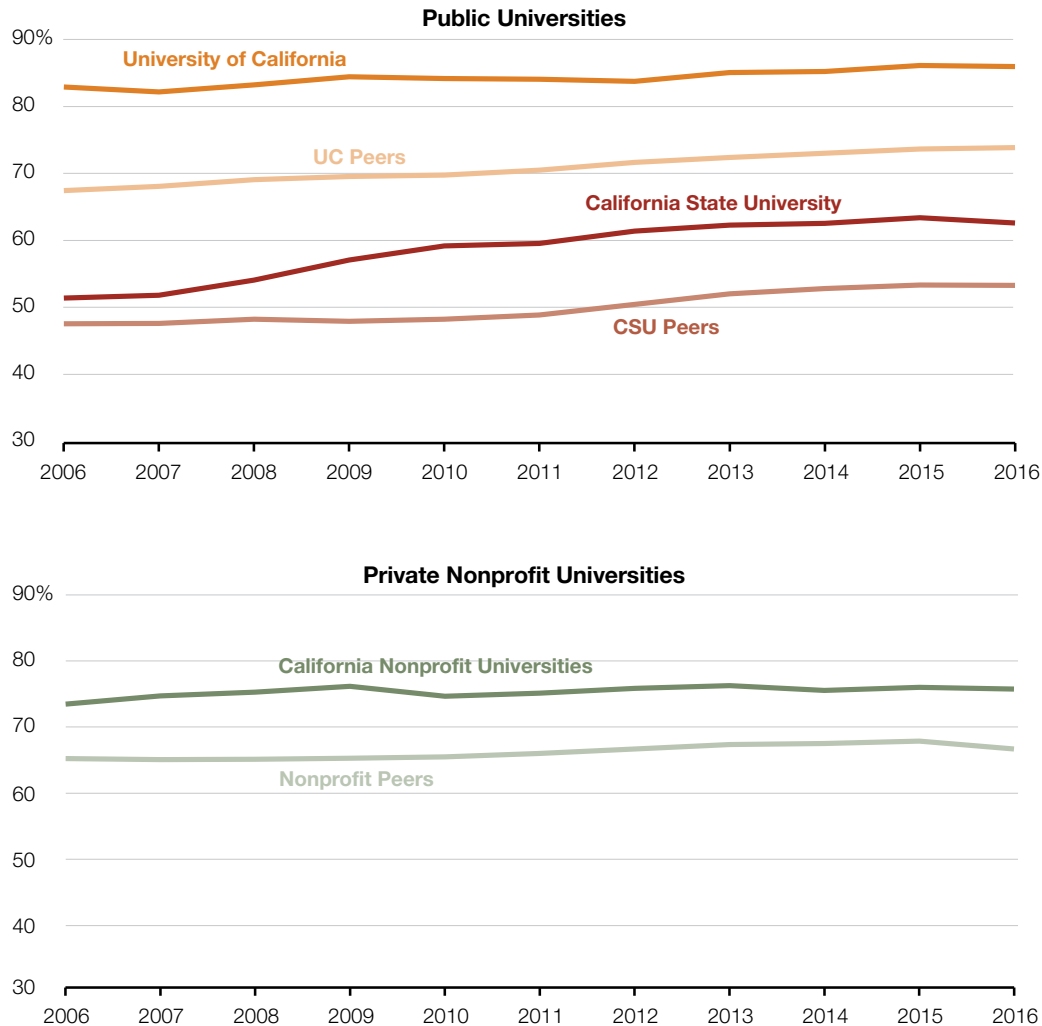
This is the third brief in a six-part analytical [series](#) focused on higher education trends. Each brief in the series covers a major area of higher education, with the first two briefs covering student access and college affordability, respectively. This third brief covers student outcomes. Forthcoming briefs focus on higher education finance, faculty and staff, and facilities. The series has two main objectives. The first is to help legislators, staff, and the general public track many of the key changes that higher education has undergone over the past few decades. The second is to help legislators and staff leverage their better understanding of the past to aid them in better navigating the future. To this end, each brief is punctuated by key issues for legislators to consider as they move forward in making higher education policy and budget decisions.

This brief focuses on an array of student outcomes—from graduation rates and time to degree to course completion and persistence rates. In some cases, divergent takeaways can be seen in a single chart. For example, some charts show public universities in California have higher graduation rates, on average, than their peers across the country. The same charts, however, also show that graduation rates at the California State University (CSU) and California Community Colleges (CCC) are still low. Similarly, some charts show that graduation rates for most student groups have been increasing over the past decade. The same charts, however, also show that gaps between some student groups, including low-income students and their peers, have barely budged at CSU and the University of California (UC). In some cases, the takeaways are more clearly positive. For example, prior to the pandemic, time to degree at CSU and UC and excess unit taking at CCC had been trending downward steadily.

As with the other briefs in this series, this brief contains a set of infographics highlighting trends over time, with data drawn primarily from sources at the federal, state, and segment levels. We tend to provide data for the past one to three decades. We select the exact time period for each chart by considering the availability of the particular data at issue, comparability of the reported data over time, and the most interesting trends emanating from the data.

## Graduation Rates at California's Universities Continue to Exceed Their National Peers

Six-Year Graduation Rates by Cohort for First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen



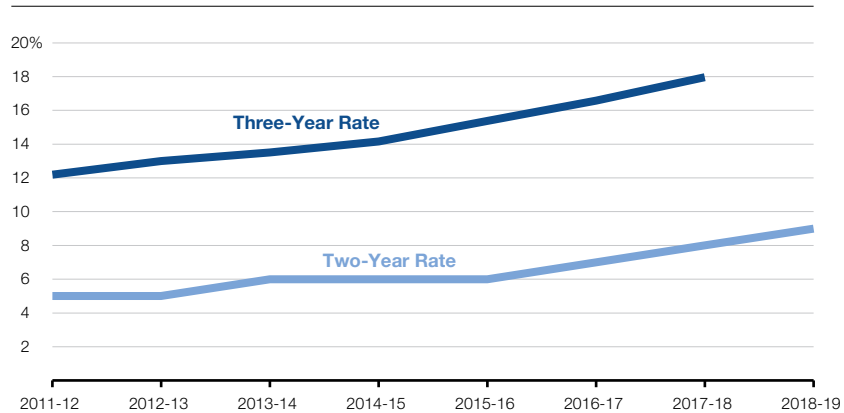
**Technical note:** Cohort-based charts show data by the year each cohort entered college (for example, the percentage of freshmen entering in fall 2016 who had graduated before fall 2022). "UC Peers" reflects the national average graduation rate of public doctoral universities with very high research activity. "CSU Peers" reflects the national average graduation rate of public master's universities, doctoral/professional universities, and doctoral universities with high research activity. "Nonprofit Peers" reflects the national average graduation rate of four-year nonprofit colleges and universities. In all cases, we exclude California from the national average. Graduation data at the for-profit sector is less reliable, but the data indicate that graduation rates at this sector are much lower than graduation rates at the other sectors.

### Key Issue

Though graduation rates have improved more in percentage-point terms at CSU than at UC or private nonprofit universities, CSU's rates remain low. More than one-third of freshmen at CSU still do not go on to graduate within six years. Not graduating at all or taking more than six years to graduate is associated with significantly higher college costs and more foregone opportunities. Moving forward, a key legislative issue will continue to be monitoring the effectiveness of CSU's efforts to improve its graduation rates.

## Community College Completion Rates Have Ticked Up Over Time but Remain Very Low

Two- and Three-Year Completion Rates by Cohort

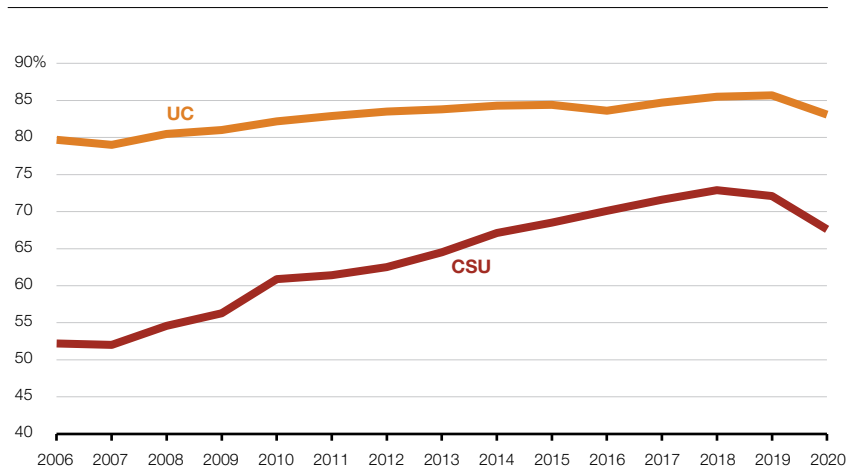


**Technical note:** The chart includes all first-time, nondually enrolled students who enroll in at least one credit-bearing course in either fall or spring term. "Completion rate" is measured as the percent of these students by entering cohort earning an associate degree or certificate or transferring to a four-year institution. The CCC data is only available beginning with the cohort entering in fall 2011 and spring 2012. Comparative national data has notable limitations. In particular, the national data excludes part-time students and does not count as completions those students who transfer to a four-year institution without earning an associate degree.

Younger CCC students (ages 18-24) continue to have notably higher completion rates than older students, with younger students completing at about twice the rate of older students. Even younger students, however, have completion rates of less than 30 percent.

## Transfer Student Graduation Rates at CSU Have Risen Significantly but Remain Lower Than at UC

Three-Year Graduation Rates by Cohort for Transfer Students Attending UC or CSU

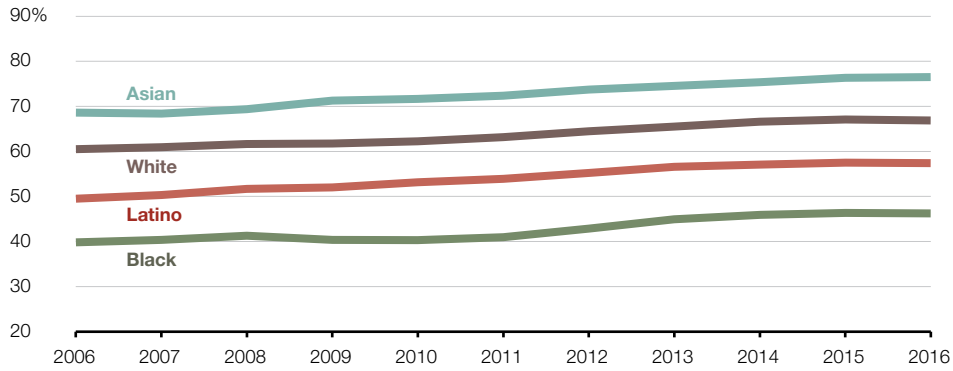


**Technical note:** Cohort-based charts show data by the year each cohort entered (for example, the percentage of transfer students entering in fall 2020 who had graduated by fall 2023).

After trending upward for more than ten years, graduation rates for transfer students declined notably for the 2020 cohort—likely an impact of the pandemic and shift to remote instruction.

## Nationally, Graduation Rates Among Student Racial/Ethnic Groups Have Improved but Gaps Persist

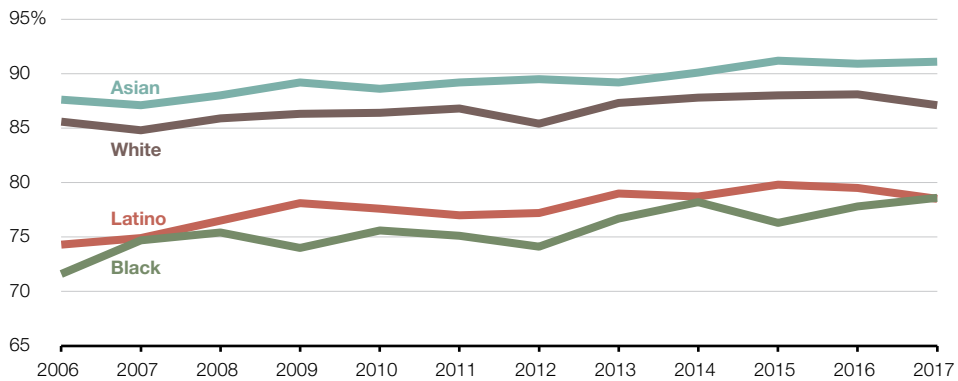
Six-Year Graduation Rates by Cohort for First-Time Freshmen at Public Universities



**Technical note:** The chart includes all public four-year universities, including those in California. Cohort-based charts show data by the year each cohort entered college (for example, the percentage of freshmen entering in fall 2016 who had graduated before fall 2022).

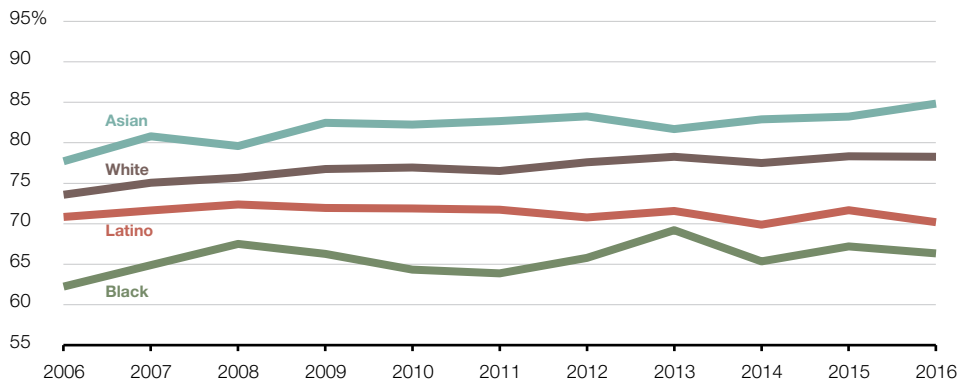
## At UC, Graduation Rates Among Student Racial/Ethnic Groups Also Have Improved but Gaps Persist

Six-Year Graduation Rates by Cohort for First-Time Freshmen



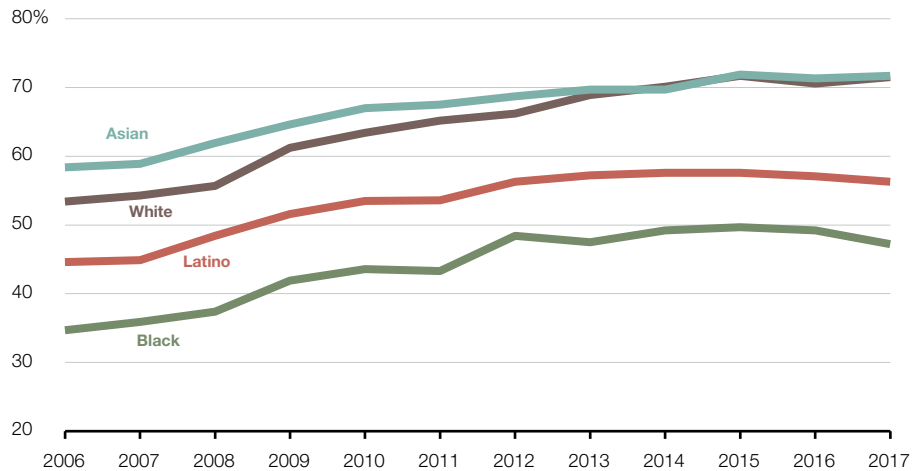
## Trends at Private Nonprofit Colleges and Universities in California Are Similar

Six-Year Graduation Rates by Cohort for First-Time Freshmen



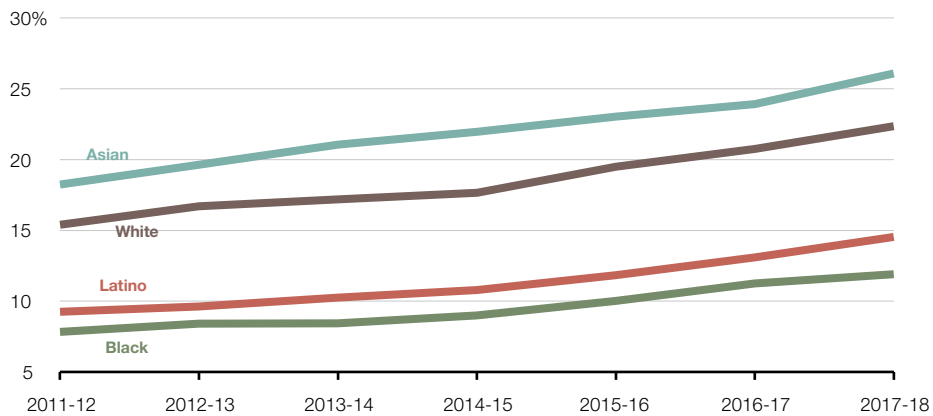
### Graduation Rates Among Student Racial/Ethnic Groups at CSU Have Improved but Gaps Persist

Six-Year Graduation Rates by Cohort for First-Time Freshmen



### Completion Rates at CCC Also Have Improved but Gaps Among Student Racial/Ethnic Groups Persist

Three-Year Completion Rates by Cohort

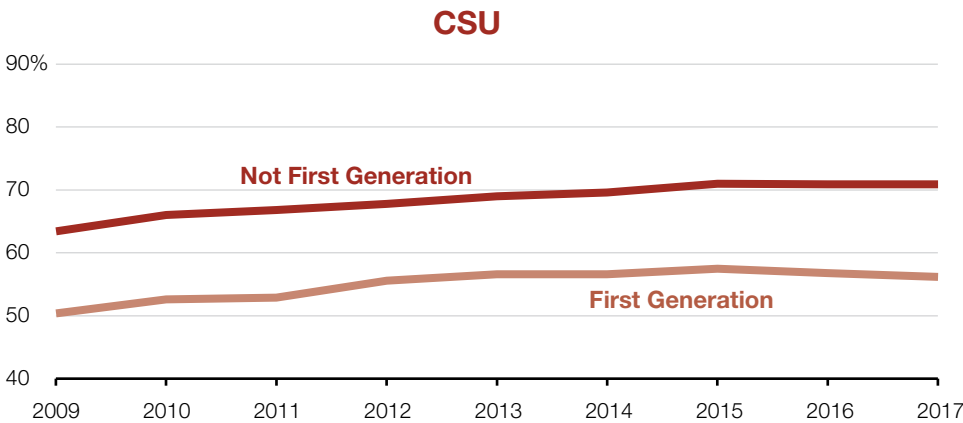
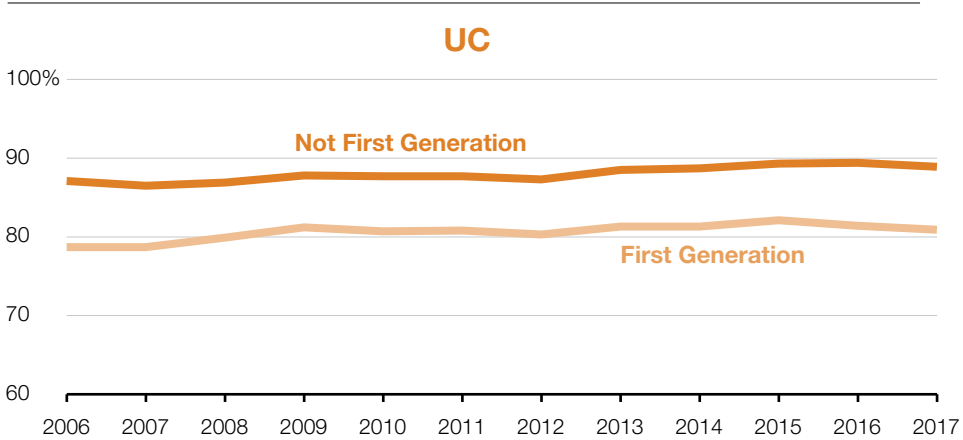


#### Key Issue

Though the Legislature has created several programs over the years to better support students and reduce gaps in graduation rates among student groups, gaps have persisted. Moving forward, a key legislative issue will be assessing the cost-effectiveness of existing student support programs and comparing them to other existing state programs focused on equity, including employment and housing programs. Another related legislative issue will be considering whether to use more performance-based funding to promote desired results.

**Virtually No Change in Graduation Gaps  
 Between First Generation Students and Their Peers**

Six-Year Graduation Rates by Cohort for First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen

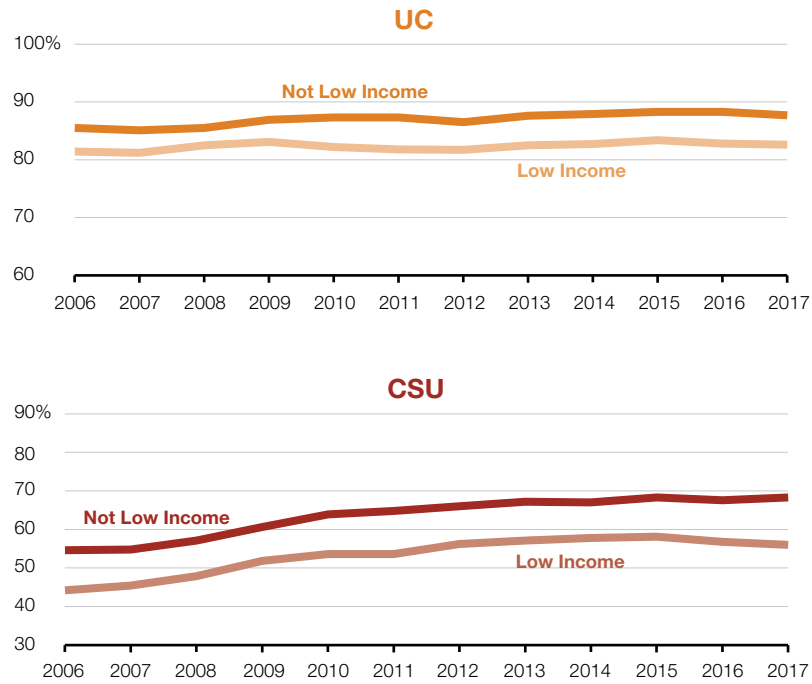


**Technical note:** UC and CSU define "first generation" somewhat differently. For UC, first generation is defined as neither parent having a four-year college degree. CSU defines first generation as neither parent having attended any college. CSU data on first-generation students began with the 2009 cohort. CCC does not report graduation rates for first-generation students.



## Graduation Gaps Between Low-Income Students and Their Peers Also Have Not Narrowed

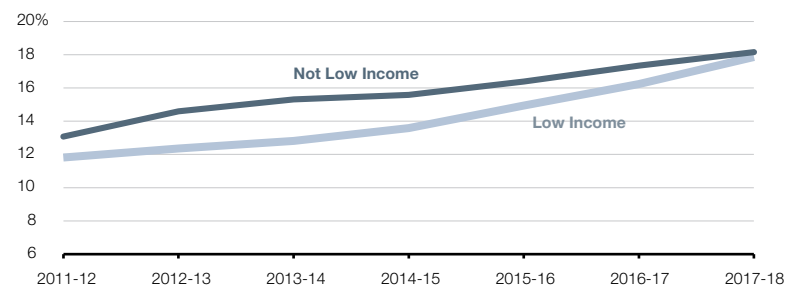
Six-Year Graduation Rates by Cohort for First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen



Technical note: At UC and CSU, "Low Income" refers to students receiving federal Pell Grants.

## Completion Gap Between Low-Income Students and Their Peers Has Almost Closed at CCC

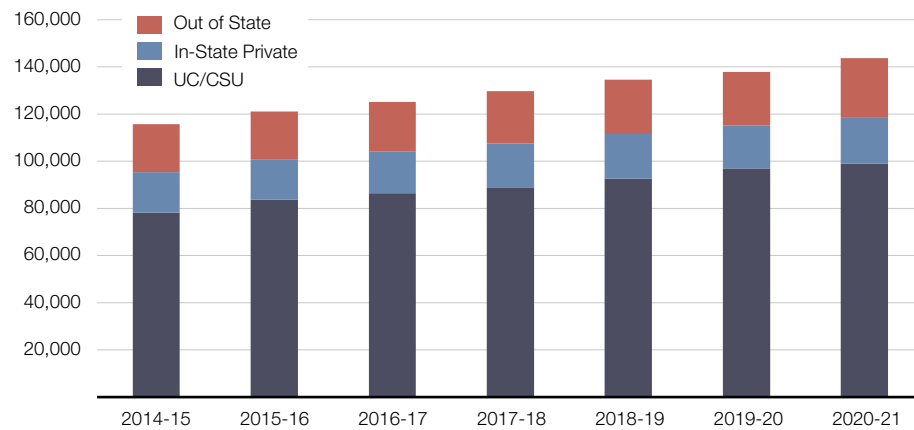
Three-Year Completion Rates by Cohort



Technical note: At CCC, "Low Income" includes students receiving federal Pell Grants as well as students receiving state fee waivers (Promise Grants) or certain other public assistance.

### CCC Transfers Continue to Rise

Number of CCC Students Transferring to a Four-Year Institution



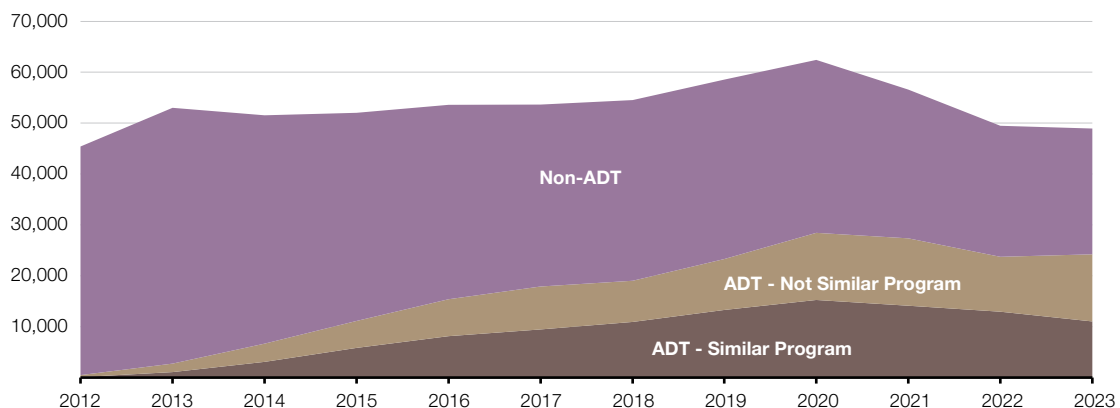
**Technical note:** The Chancellor's Office has transfer data only through 2020-21, but other available data indicate the total number of CCC transfers fell in 2021-22 and 2022-23, likely connected to the pandemic and job market.

### Key Issue

While over 100,000 CCC students transfer to a four-year university each year, many more likely enroll at a community college with such a goal but end up not transferring. The state does not know how many students are in this latter category because it lacks comprehensive and reliable data on the goals of each student. Moving forward, the Legislature could direct the CCC Chancellor's Office to explore ways of collecting such data to better measure the success rates of transfer-seeking students.

### A Greater Share of Students Are Entering CSU With Streamlined Transfer Degrees

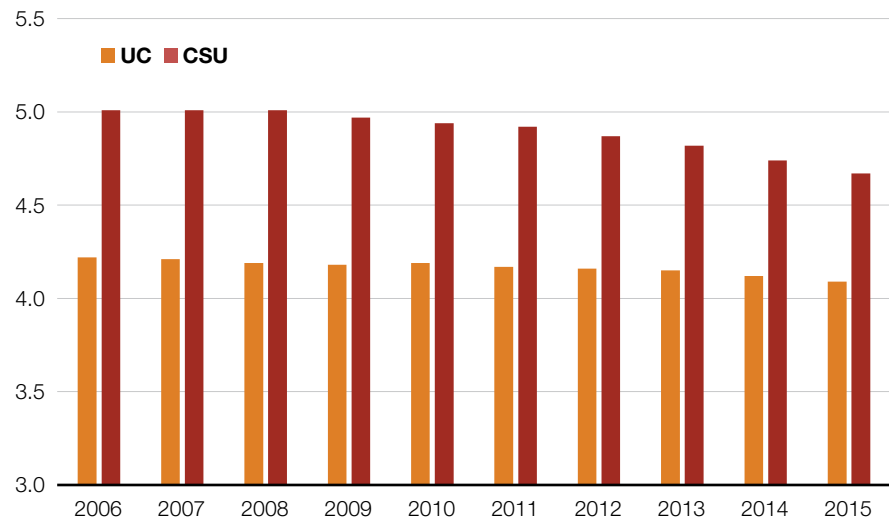
New CSU Transfer Students by Transfer Pathway



**Technical note:** Since 2012-13, community college students may earn a streamlined transfer degree intended to promote timely degree completion without excess unit-taking at either CCC or CSU. Students who earn a streamlined, Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT) are guaranteed admission to a CSU bachelor's degree program that can be completed within 60 upper-division units, if they choose a similar program (for example, their ADT is in biology and they enter a CSU biology program). Some students who complete an ADT in one program ultimately enter CSU enrolled in a different program such that they may need to take additional units to graduate.

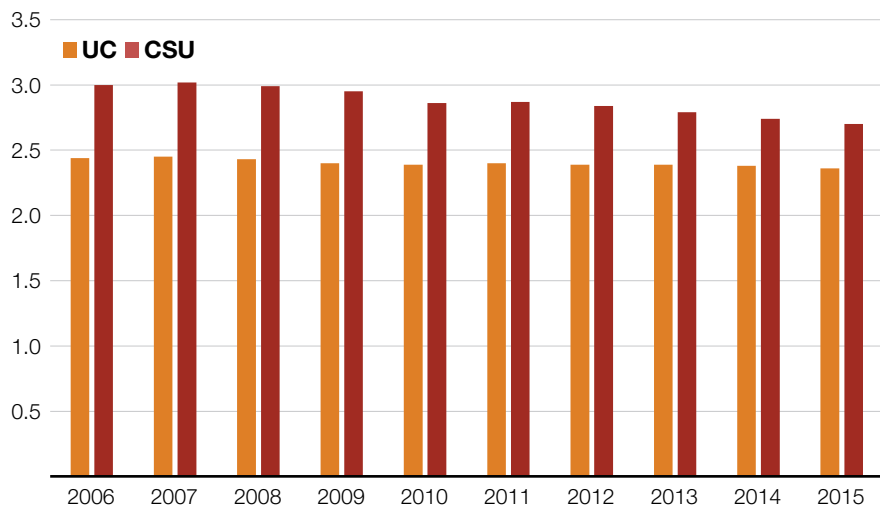
### Students Entering UC and CSU as Freshmen Are Graduating in Less Time

Number of Years Taken to Obtain Degree by Freshman Cohort



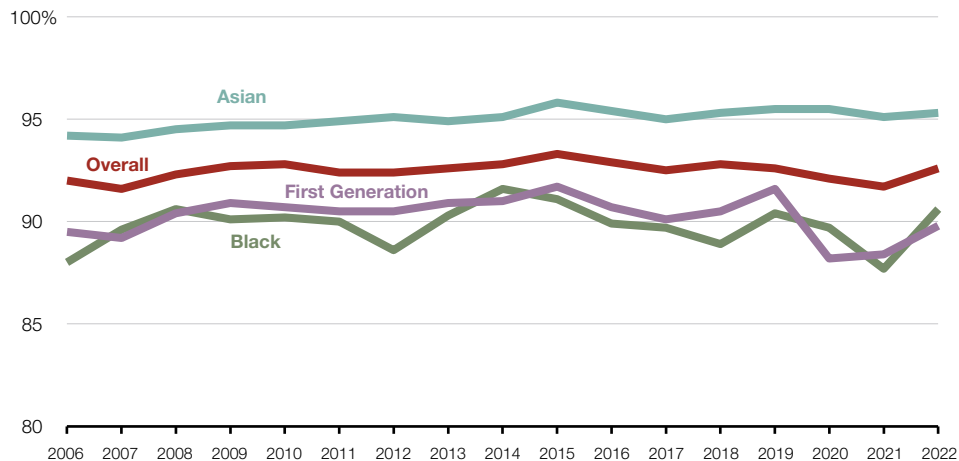
### Transfer Students Also Are Graduating in Less Time

Number of Years Taken to Obtain Degree by Transfer Cohort



## Until Pandemic, the Overall Persistence Rate of UC Freshmen Generally Had Held Steady

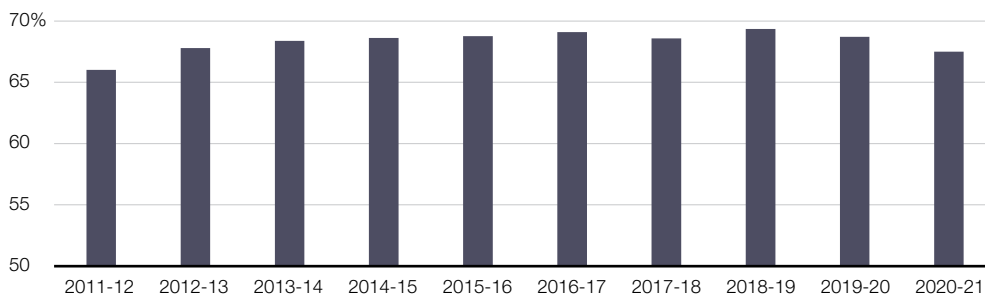
Percent of First-Time, Full-Time Freshmen at UC Who Return for a Second Year



**Technical note:** Chart shows persistence rates for select student groups at UC. Persistence rates for select student groups at CSU are shown on the next page.

## CCC Persistence Rate Remains Below 70 Percent

First-Time Credit Student Cohort Returning to CCC the Next Term

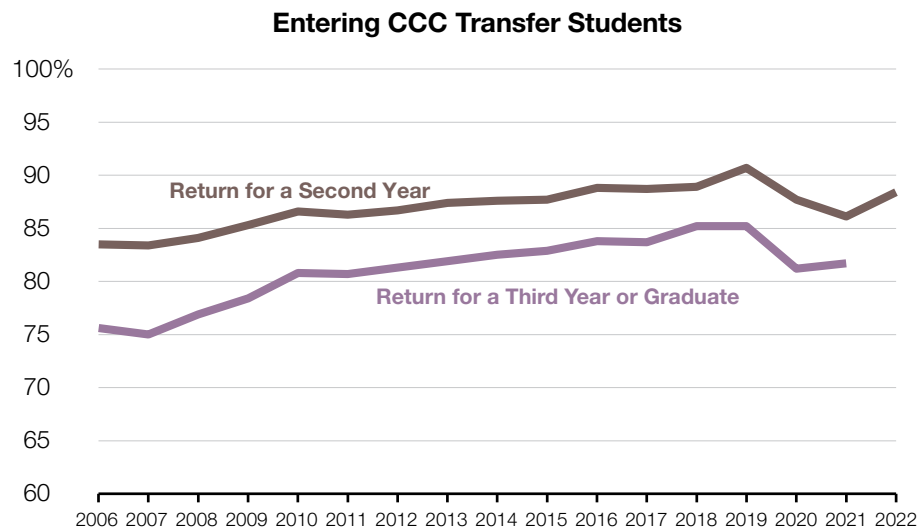
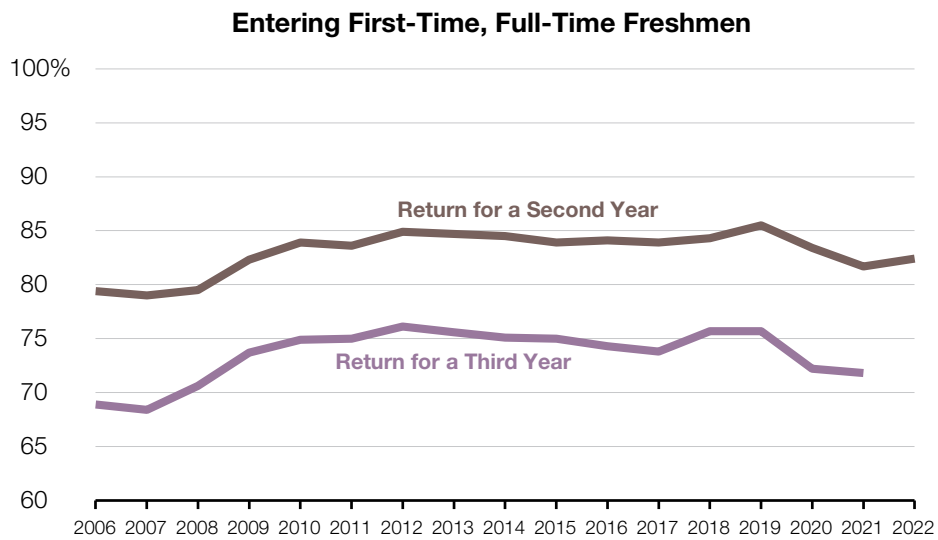


### Key Issue

With about one-third of first-time credit students not returning for a second term at CCC, a key legislative issue continues to be how the community colleges could improve their persistence rates. Improvement strategies could include using more of a case-manager approach by connecting first- and second-year students to tutoring, mental health services, internships, other academic support, and other opportunities on campus or in the community.

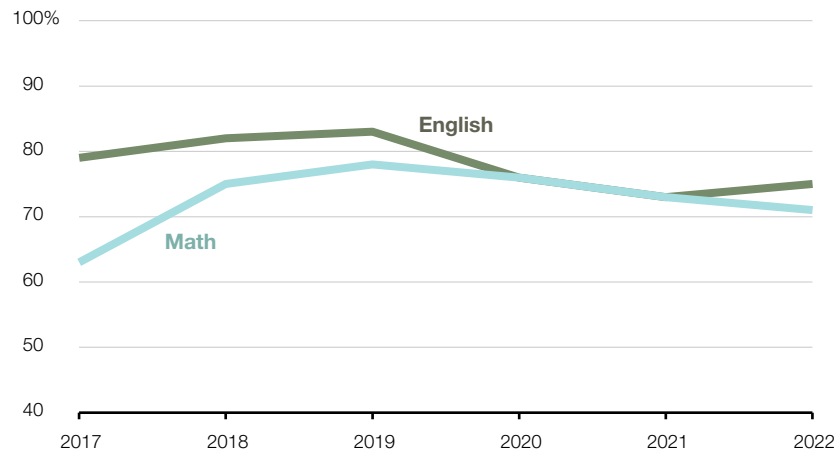
## At CSU, Persistence Rates of Transfer Students Continue to Be Higher Than Freshmen

Percent of Students at CSU Who Return for a Second and Third Year



### Mixed Results for CSU Students Completing College English and Math

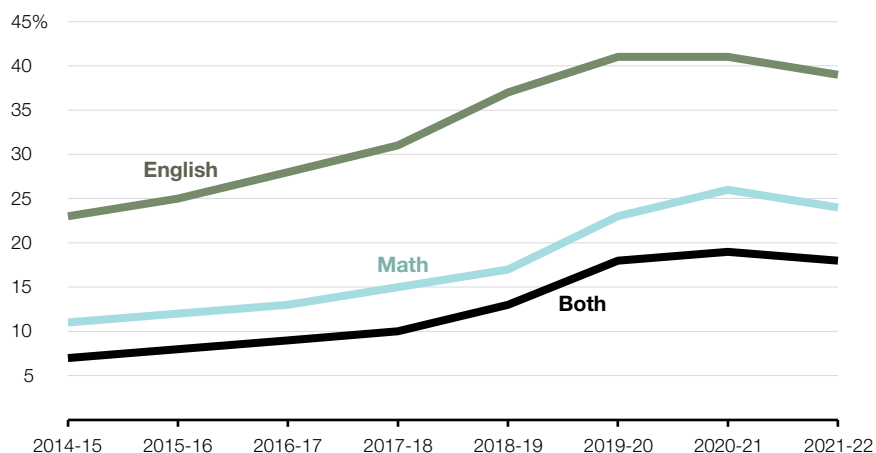
Share of Fall Entering Cohort of Students Meeting Requirements for Written Communications and Math Within Their First Year



About five years ago, CSU revised its policies relating to placement of first-year students into college-level English and math/quantitative reasoning courses. Specifically, beginning in 2018, CSU replaced stand-alone, precollegiate courses with alternative instructional modes that give students the opportunity to enroll directly in college-level courses. The data show that the share of students passing college-level English and math classes within their first year increased in the early years of the new policy (2018 and 2019) before declining during the pandemic.

### More CCC Students Are Passing College Math and English

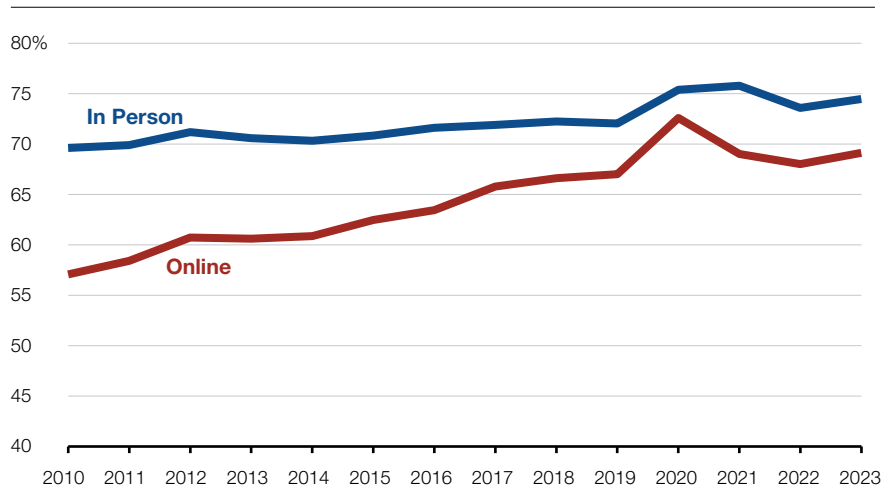
Share of CCC Students Completing College-Level Math and English Within Their First Year



Recent legislative changes could be contributing to these improved CCC results. In 2017, the state began requiring colleges to place students into transfer-level math and English courses as a default, and CCC's funding formula (implemented starting in 2018-19) rewards colleges for every student who successfully completes these courses within their first year.

## Gap in CCC Completion Rates Is Narrowing Between In-Person and Online Classes

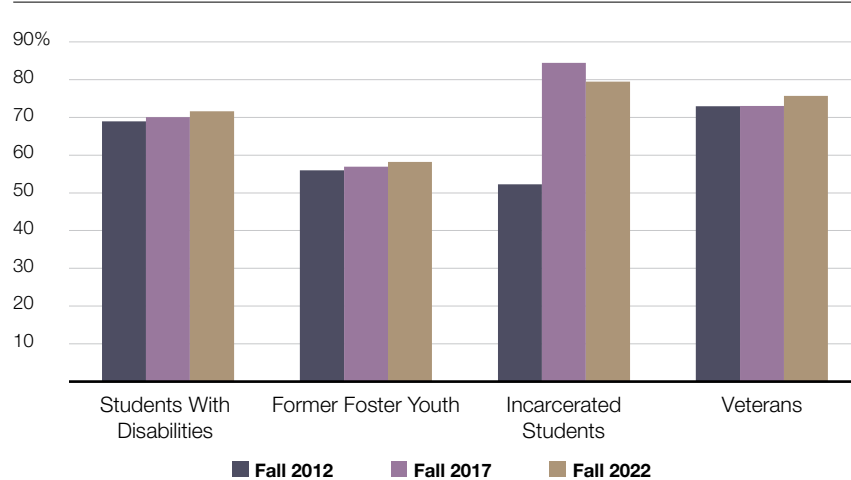
Share of CCC Students Completing Credit Courses by Instructional Modality, Fall Term



**Technical note:** Community colleges define a course as "online" when more than 50 percent of content is delivered through the internet. "Course completion" is defined here as when a student earns either a passing grade or course credit.

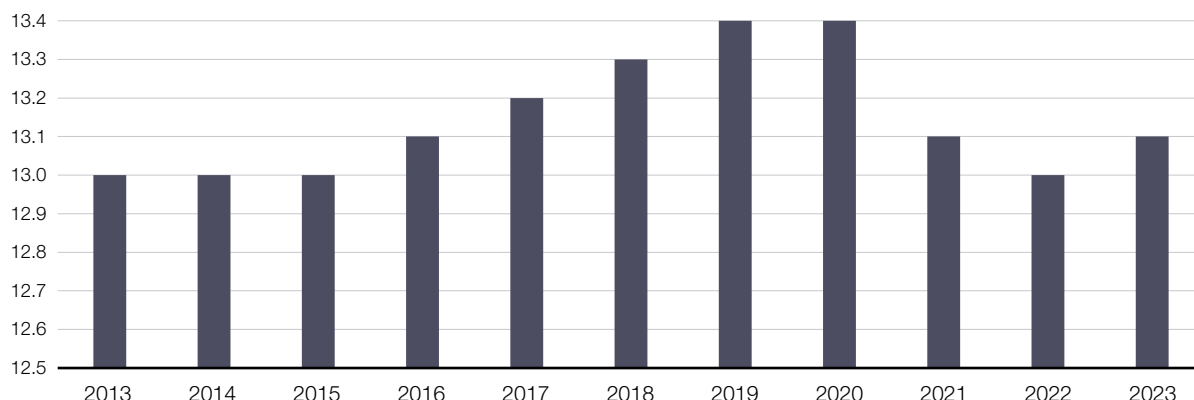
## Course Completion Rates Generally Have Improved for Certain Student Groups

In-Person CCC Course Completion Rates for Select Student Groups



### After a Period of Gradual Increases, CSU Unit Loads Have Declined in Past Two Years

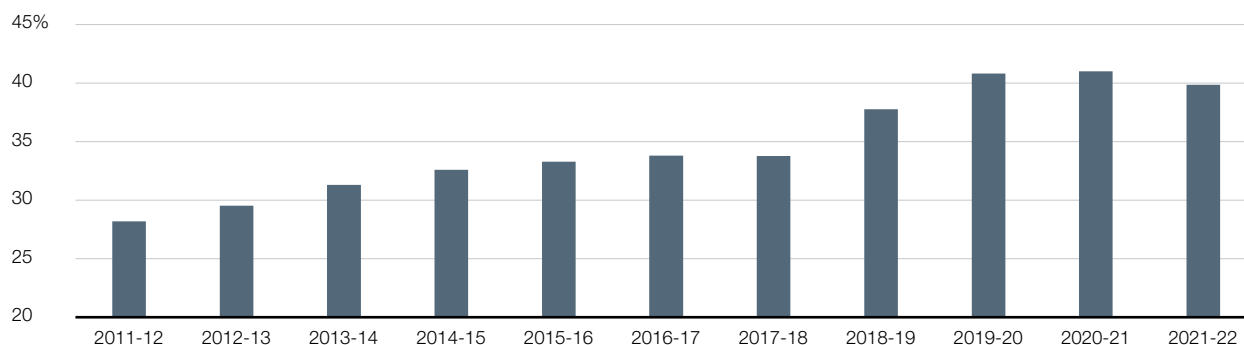
Average Number of Course Units That Undergraduate Students Took Per Fall Term



**Technical note:** To graduate within four years, a student needs to average 15 units per primary term (fall and spring).

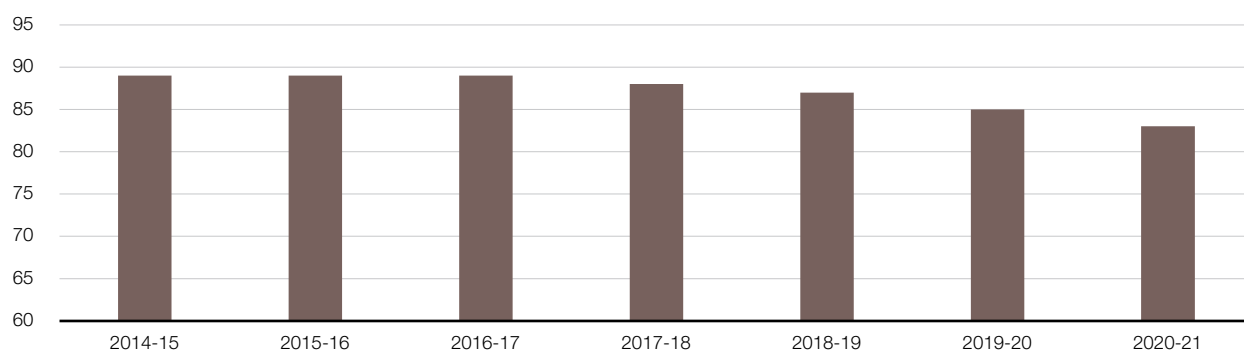
### More Incoming CCC Students Are Enrolling Full Time

Percent of First-Time Students Who Attempted 12+ Units Both Semesters of Freshman Year



### Excess Units Earned by CCC Students Is on the Decline

Average Number of Units Accumulated by CCC Associate Degree Earners



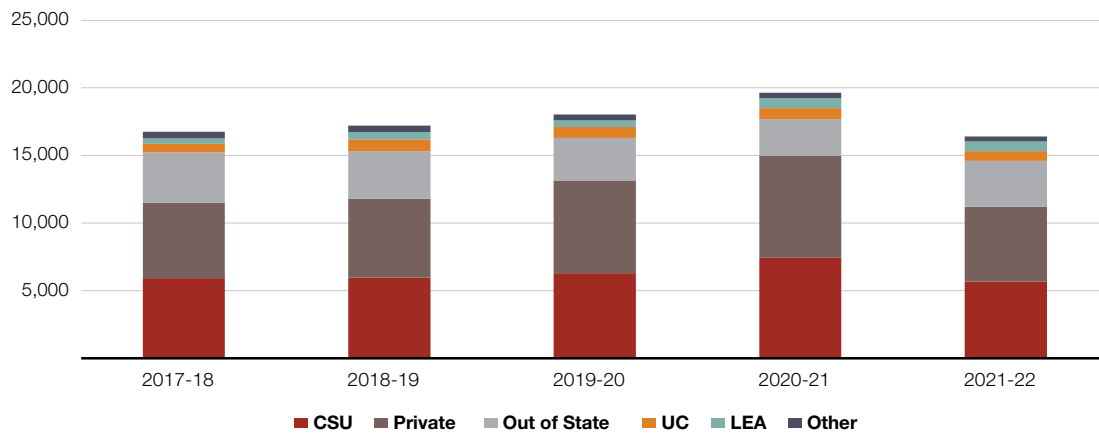
**Technical note:** Associate degrees typically require students to earn 60 units.

Recent legislative changes also could be contributing to improved results in this area. In particular, the state's focus on establishing clear community college pathways, advising students during their first year of college, and promoting streamlined transfer degrees could be leading to fewer excess units.



## After Peaking in 2020-21, Number of Teaching Credentials Issued Dropped in 2021-22

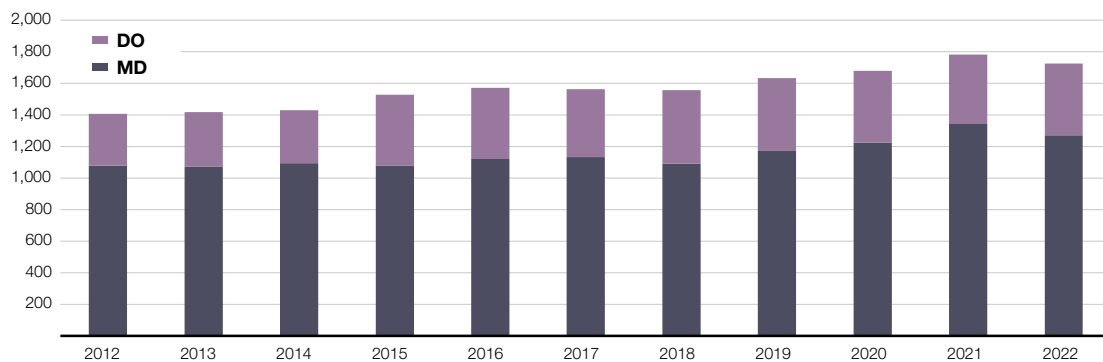
New Credentials Issued for Individuals Completing a Preliminary Teaching Program by Segment



**Technical note:** "Out of State" refers to individuals who attended an out-of-state or out-of-country teacher preparation program. "LEA" refers to local education agencies (school districts and county offices of education) that operate their own teacher preparation programs. "Other" refers to individuals who had their teacher preparation program requirement waived or who were not required to complete a preparation program (for example because they had certain Peace Corps or private school experience).

## More Students Are Graduating From California Medical Schools

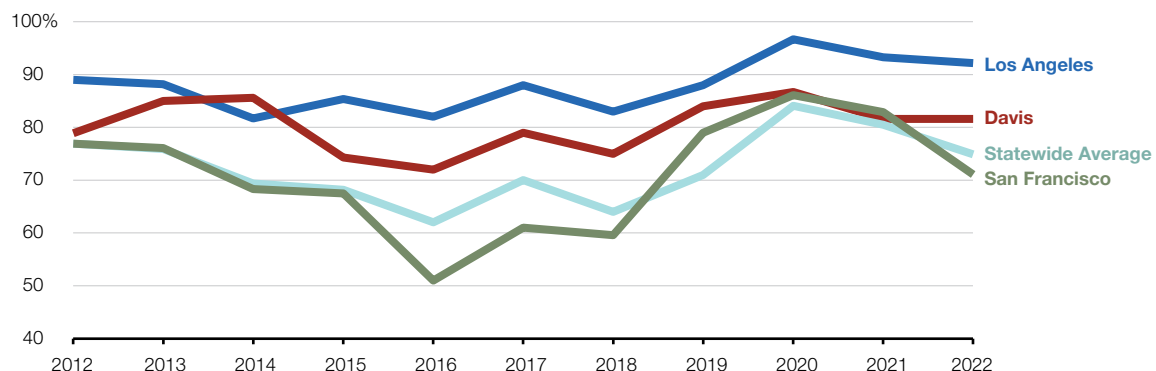
Number of Students Graduating From California Medical Schools by Degree Type



**Technical note:** California has 13 medical schools that award Doctor of Medicine (MD) degrees, six of which are part of UC and seven of which are private. California also has three private medical schools that award Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO) degrees.

## Law School Student Exam Results Have Fluctuated Over Past Decade

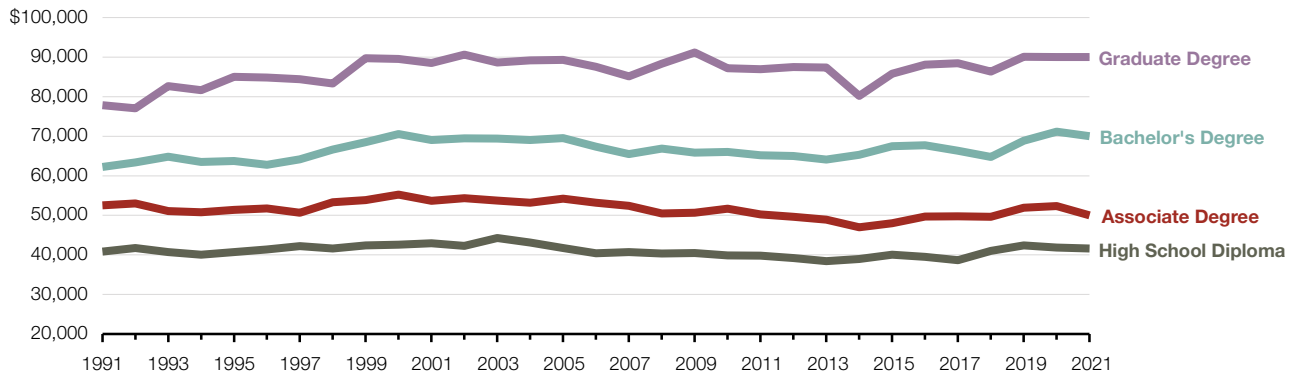
California Bar Examination First-Time Pass Rates for Selected Law Schools



**Technical note:** The chart shows the pass rates for law-school students at UC Los Angeles, UC Davis, and UC Law San Francisco (formerly known as Hastings College of the Law), along with the statewide average pass rate of all American Bar Association-approved law schools in California.

## Higher-Educated Workers Continue to Earn Notably More Than Less-Educated Workers

Median Earnings of a Full-Time, Full-Year U.S. Worker Ages 25-54 by Educational Attainment, 2021-22 Dollars

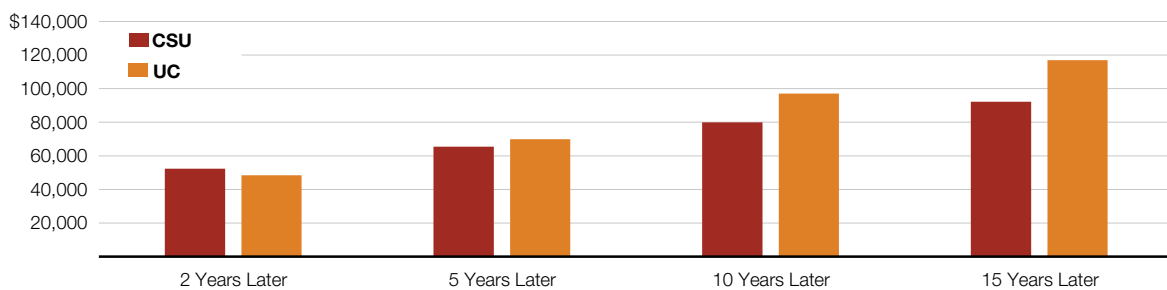


### Key Issue

College education can have both public and personal benefits. Public benefits include an informed citizenry, a more skilled workforce, and lower welfare costs. Private benefits include higher lifetime earnings, greater economic mobility, better health, and more stability. Moving forward, a key legislative issue will continue to be weighing these benefits when deciding how much to subsidize higher education versus how much students should be expected to contribute.

## Bachelor Degree Holders From UC Ultimately Earn More on Average Than Those From CSU

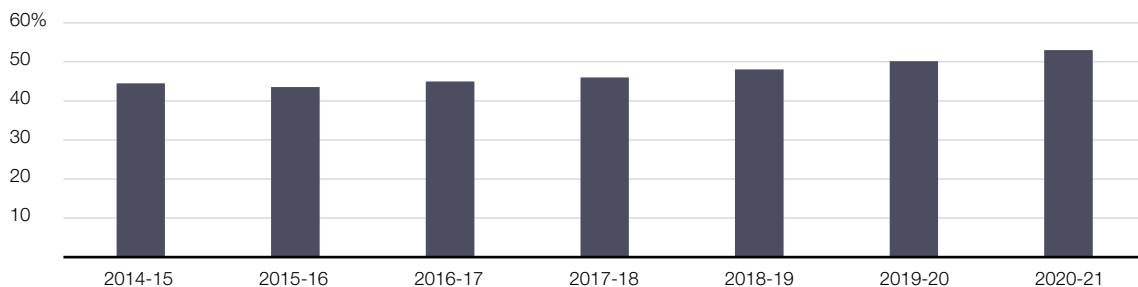
Median Annual Earnings by Years Since Receiving Bachelor's Degree, 2022 Dollars



**Technical note:** Chart compares undergraduates who graduated from CSU or UC with a bachelor's degree and never went on to earn a higher degree.

## Share of CCC Students Earning a Living Wage Has Increased

Percent of Employed Former Students Earning the County Living Wage



**Technical note:** The chart shows the percent of nontransfer students who, upon exiting the CCC system and obtaining employment by the second quarter of exit, attained a living wage for a single adult in the county of their community college district. Calculation of a living wage takes into account average living costs such as food and housing, which vary by county.



## **LAO PUBLICATIONS**

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This report was prepared by Paul Steenhausen, with contributions from Ian Klein and Lisa Qing. It was designed by Vu Chu and reviewed by Jennifer Pacella. The Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) is a nonpartisan office that provides fiscal and policy information and advice to the Legislature.

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