A Better Start to College in California

ideas42

Simplifying the application and matriculation process

Each year, hundreds of thousands of students across California earn degrees and certificates from colleges in the California Community College system (CCC) which set them up for success in their future careers. However, many students find the process of applying to and matriculating at a community college challenging, and may not finish applying or ultimately enroll. We applied behavioral insights to the CCC application system (CCCApply) and college-level post-application processes to improve the process across the state so more students can get a strong start to their college education.

Summary

The college application process is notoriously challenging. On the path to college, students must make complicated decisions and complete a steady stream of paperwork and forms. Seemingly minor hassles like administrative tasks or unclear steps have real consequences: prospective students may get knocked off track and may not submit their applications. Students who successfully apply and are accepted to college then navigate complex systems to get financial aid and select courses, all while transitioning to a new phase in their educations and lives. As a result, between 10 and 40 percent of students who are accepted to college don't matriculate, a phenomenon known as melt.[1] Community colleges offer economic opportunity to millions of Americans. While community colleges are more affordable than private institutions and generally open their doors to all students interested in attending, complexities in the process can still prohibit many students from getting to day one.

Highlights

- Between 10-40% of students accepted to college don't matriculate, a phenomenon known as 'melt.'
- Seemingly minor hassles on the path to college may knock students off track, such as not submitting their applications or unsuccessfully navigating financial aid.

The California Community Colleges (CCC) together form the largest system of higher education in the United States, with 115 colleges. Almost all CCC applications are managed through a central portal called CCCApply. While CCCApply effectively collects and sends applications and data about millions of students to colleges around the state, the system can often be challenging for applicants to navigate. Many students find questions ambiguous or difficult to answer and without the right information their application process can be delayed. These barriers can even prevent some students from completing an application altogether. Internal data from the CCC system also shows a high degree of attrition between application and matriculation.

---

[1] Benjamin L. Castleman and Lindsay C. Page, "A Trickle or a Torrent? Understanding the Extent of Summer Melt Among College-Intending High School Graduates: Summer Melt Among College-Intending Students," *Social Science Quarterly 95*, no. 1 (March 2014): 202–20, https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12032.

ideas42, the Foundation for California's Community Colleges, and the CCC Chancellor's Office worked together to help students successfully apply to and matriculate at community colleges across the state using behavioral science. We had two goals:

1. Help more students successfully complete applications, and help them do so faster, with fewer hassles, and with more confidence.

2. Reduce melt to help more students get to the first day of classes once they've applied.

We did this by leveraging behavioral science research and investigating the context in which students apply and the barriers they face. These efforts produced new, evidence-based designs for CCCApply as well as a comprehensive toolkit for making the application and matriculation process more seamless. Many of the insights are ones that other educational institutions can adopt.

Making it easier to apply

Obstacles in the application system

Because CCCApply is a system-wide tool used by colleges across the state, we kicked off our project with a masterclass designed to introduce a diverse array of staff from across the CCC system and administrators from specific CCC colleges to the fundamentals of behavioral science to equip them with effective tools for supporting students. We walked the group through each stage of the application, prompting them to attempt to fill it out to learn firsthand about the challenges of applying.

We then conducted extensive interviews with dozens of students and administrators at five community college campuses across the state. We observed areas on campus where students might go for help during their application process. Application data from across the state highlighted trends where students drop off or pause the application. We also interviewed expert academics about common challenges applicants face.

From these activities and the masterclass, we diagnosed several behavioral barriers that students face in successfully applying to college. For instance, we found that the application process was filled with unintentional ambiguity. Many students were confused about the meaning of words like "academic term" and "noncredit" that were common knowledge for college administrators.

A new CCCApply

We worked with individuals across the CCC system to design solutions to address these behavioral barriers. Insights from this project are currently being applied throughout the CCC system. Some of the bottlenecks that we found lent themselves to simple solutions that are easy to implement. For instance, we found that many questions on the application were not relevant to all students, and that skipping these questions was a significant hassle for many. The CCC system is currently implementing improved skip logic so that students see only the questions that are relevant to their particular circumstances. Similarly,

we found that many legally-mandated questions about student identity—particularly those about gender and sexual orientation—felt evaluative to some students. New language in this section will help affirm students of all identities and clarify that answers to these questions will only be used for aggregate data collection.

Our designs also suggested larger changes to CCCApply that can improve the student experience. We found that many students struggle with the section of the application that requires them to select an academic goal. We designed an interactive questionnaire that walks students through the process of choosing a major, and refers them to in-person help as needed. The CCC system is currently working on a new redesign of CCCApply that would include substantial changes like this.

We also held design sessions with college administrators and students to think broadly about how the application process could be redesigned from the ground up using behavioral science. These design activities yielded several design principles and ideas, which we used to sketch a new version of CCCApply. For instance, many high schools across the state are well-connected to their local community college, so students applying to a community college right out of high school in California often have many effective channels and supports that can help them through the process. However, we found that older students are applying to college in a very different context, they don't have these natural connections and thus have a harder time getting help when they are stuck. Solving this problem will require more extensive redesign of the application to include better help text and clearer ways to contact the college for support.

Tackling summer melt

What prevents matriculation?

Finally, we focused on the steps that come after the application to help more students make it to day one after being admitted. We reviewed the robust behavioral literature around summer melt and identified gaps in our knowledge. We then conducted further rounds of student interviews to hone in on specific challenges that students in the CCC system face. For instance, we found that deadlines within the matriculation process can often be hard to pinpoint, and that balancing a welcoming tone with urgent reminders can be challenging. From these insights, we produced a toolkit that individual colleges can use to incorporate behavioral best practices into their existing communications with students, like emphasizing deadlines and using checklists that can be applied at colleges across the state.

A toolkit for success

Our toolkit of behavioral best practices for post-application steps is being distributed to colleges across the state, and is available online here. Our hope is that the principles outlined in the toolkit will help colleges across the state and the country use behavioral science to get more students through the matriculation process and into their first day of classes.

Takeaway

For many students, enrolling at a community college is a crucial step towards earning a degree and launching a new phase of their career. Behavioral science can help us understand more clearly why some students who want to apply and enroll don't always make it through the process. The behavioral design principles that we defined through this project will be used by the CCC system in the years to come. With over one million applications being submitted though CCCApply each year, this project has the potential to millions of students make it through the college application process and into classes that will help them build a better future.