

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

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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.