



# STUDENT ENROLLMENT AND PERSISTENCE

FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY WEIGH ON STUDENTS AS COLLEGES  
CONTINUE TO NAVIGATE ENROLLMENT CHALLENGES

# Executive Summary

In 2020, COVID19 triggered an unprecedented shut down of colleges in the nation and in California, causing disruption throughout the education system. Despite colleges' best efforts to support students in continuing their education virtually, a large number of students did not return. Additionally, college-going rates of high school graduates during the pandemic declined.

To help the region's community colleges know how to address their declining enrollments, GIA invested in a regional study to gain a better understanding of why this was occurring locally and more specifically what it would take for young adults (aged 18-25) to enroll and persist in a postsecondary education. Specifically, what were/are they doing instead of college? What were the original trigger(s) for not enrolling/persisting? What are the current barriers for enrolling/returning? And what would it take for them to enroll/return to college today?

# Key Findings

While the needs and concerns are nuanced and complicated, three clear barriers to enrollment and persistence emerged:

1. Cost: Students' primary financial concerns were around the supplemental costs (housing, food, books, parking, transportation, and basic school supplies) rather than the cost of tuition.
2. Lack of a clear academic path: Students felt they did not have a clear path to graduation or a credential. They are not clear on what courses to take and are not convinced that their degree or credential will lead to a job once they complete.
3. Access to support services: Students indicated they need a range of simultaneous support services including tutoring, mental health, and medical. While colleges have been grappling with ways to provide additional support for many years, this population is particularly in need. Many struggled with the online learning platforms and fell behind, many come from families who lost income during the pandemic and many lost family members.

## Key Findings Continued

This combination of factors has left a significant portion of young adults at risk of never enrolling in or returning to post-secondary education.

Apart from these barriers, an important finding was that Fear of Failure was an overarching reason that students either did not enroll or return after the COVID shut down. These fears ranged from lack of confidence in their ability to succeed academically, to fear of not being accepted by peers, to completing training but not being able to succeed in a subsequent career.





**"Post-pandemic fear of failure, financial uncertainty, and anxiety calls for more robust and multifaceted support to increase enrollment and persistence in Inland Empire community colleges."**

Yvonne Olivares, PhD



# Participant Recommendations

*Colleges and the region as a whole need to:*

- Develop a more effective communication strategy around financial aid resources, and how to access them, including the FAFSA. This must address not only the direct cost of college but also those supplemental costs (books, supplies, transportation, and childcare) that students perceive as prohibitive to their return and successful completion.
- Take into account that many IE college students are working to support themselves, and sometimes their families. These students have the burdens and needs of working adults and should be supported as such.
- Do more to address the mental health needs of students. The pandemic exacerbated an already present crisis among youth and young adults, and without appropriate support many students simply are not equipped to continue their education.

## Other Considerations and Next Steps

Unlike other recent studies conducted by Dr. Yvonne Olivares with Inland Empire students, this population was difficult to recruit and had a higher than usual attrition due to their heavy economic burden. It would be of interest to identify additional recruitment strategies and draw a larger sample size that would also allow for examination by race/ethnicity, gender, and sub-regions such as whether there were differences between the more populated cities and the more rural desert sub-regions.

The voices of these individuals reflect a small but important subset of young adults who were severely impacted by the pandemic. This report offers insight into the depth of that impact and opens doors for continued discussions with these young people. The true cost of these past two years will not be known for some time but gaining an understanding of this population now can help inform colleges and universities as they begin their return to “normal” over the next year.

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*For a copy of the full report and to learn more about the lives, struggles, and recommendations from these young adults on how to improve enrollment and persistence contact GIA’s Director of Research at [sorrel@inlandempiregia.org](mailto:sorrel@inlandempiregia.org).*