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**Date:** November 15, 2018  
**To:** Interested Parties  
**From:** Scott Lay  
**Re:** New PPIC Report: *Californians and Higher Education (October 2018)*

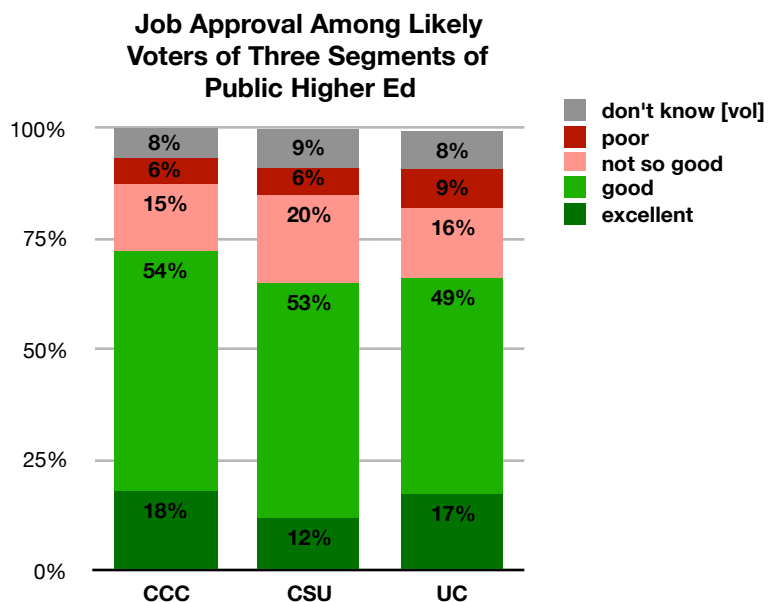
The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) [has released a statewide survey](#) [crosstabs: [all adults](#) | [likely voters](#) | [PPIC briefing slides](#)] primarily on the attitude of voters toward California’s three segments of public higher education. This is part of the nonprofit, nonpartisan series of such surveys conducted annually since 2007, except for a few years during the recession.

**Conclusions**

- ◆ As Gavin Newsom assumes office, the state is in a very strong financial position and public higher education is in high regard.
- ◆ There is deep concern about public higher education opportunity for students of lower income and minority groups.
- ◆ Across most groups, there is a stronger concern about tuition and fees than of housing and other living costs. Student debt is of deep concern.
- ◆ Voters believe the state needs to invest more in scholarships and grants, although that conclusion is not weighed against other non-aid investments.
- ◆ Likely voters give overwhelmingly positive (“excellent” or “good”) job approval ratings to all three public segments.
- ◆ Likely voters express support for a public higher education bond, although at 57%, an active effort to explain the need would be required if there is opposition.
- ◆ After years of an “access crunch,” voters are now equally concerned with the quality of programs and services provided students.
- ◆ Californians expect more online certificates and degrees for community colleges.

**Kudos**

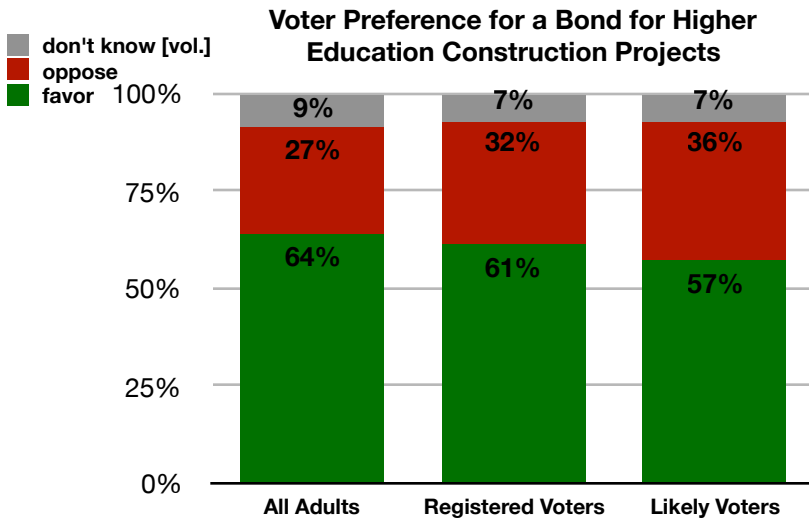
Generally, California’s three segments are held in high regard across all demographic groups, regardless of voter registration status, race, and region. The only group that collectively rates the systems as “good” or “excellent” below 60% are registered Republicans, and that applies to all three segments, for which the respondents rate CCCs at 57%, CSU at 48%, and UC at 50%. In all three, it’s generally about one in four of those who rate each segment as “excellent.”



**Higher Education Bond**

Voters are generally supportive of a voter approval of a general obligation bond for higher education construction projects.

Among likely voters, the “yes” vote on the generic higher education bond has ranged from a low of 44% in 2014 to a high of 60% in 2016. The 2016 number, however, is from a poll that sampled immediately following the presidential general election, which had a K-12 and community college on the ballot (Proposition 51).



Support for a higher education bond is strong among Democrats (78%) and independents (58%), but trails among Republicans, of which the survey found support from only 28% of adults. That said, self-identified “conservatives” responded that they would support a higher education bond at the rate of 56%. This likely reflects the greater number of traditionally moderate Republican voters expressing “no party preference.”

Any planned campaign, though would need look at a voter turnout model and would need an active campaign, as 57% is not a great “starting point” for any ballot

measure. The barometer normally used in ballot measure campaigns before launching is 60% —proponents want to be above that mark if any opposition could surface.

**Leadership on Higher Education Issues**

It may be considered irrelevant to look at voter attitudes toward Governor Jerry Brown’s handing of public higher education at this point, but it is important in determining whether Gavin Newsom should or can pivot upon the issues assuming the office.

The October survey finds approval of 44% of the voters of Brown’s handling of public higher education, while 37% disapprove. His approval is up 5 points since last year and at this highest point of his governorship. That said, the number is one that gives Newsom latitude should he choose to do exercise it.

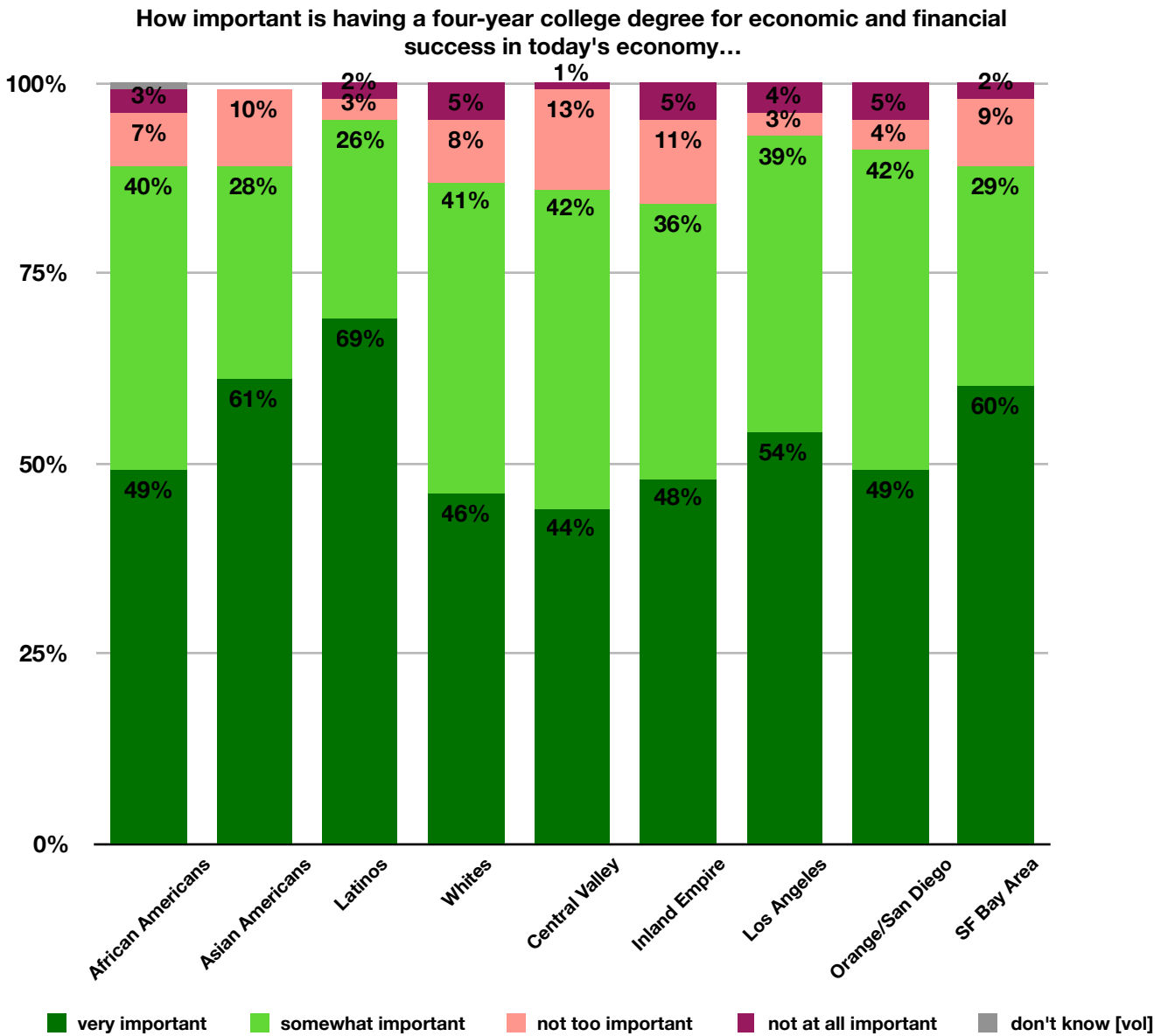
Likely voters give the Legislature a 35% approval rating on public higher education issues. That ties December 2016 at a high point since the higher education survey began in 2007. The low point was 8% in November 2009, which after rounds of significant budget cuts in February and July, had looming multi-billion dollar projected deficit. I think we can all agree that we don’t want to test that low bar again.

**Value of Higher Education**

Californians continue to heavily weigh the value of higher education attainment across demographic groups and regions. Support is lowest among registered Republicans, but it is still 77% when “very” and “somewhat” are combined.

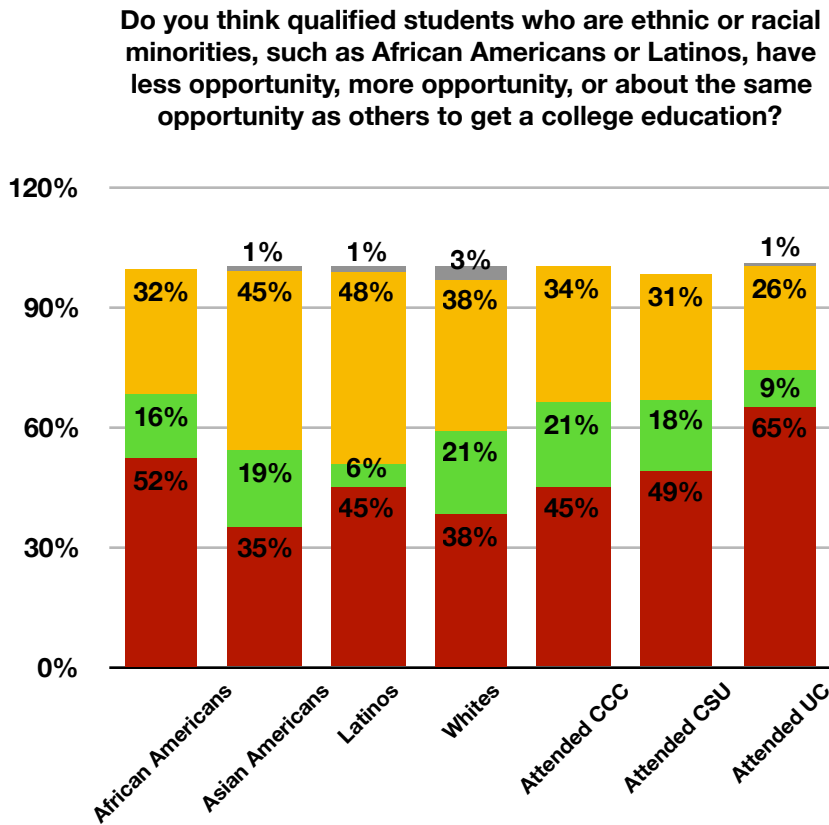
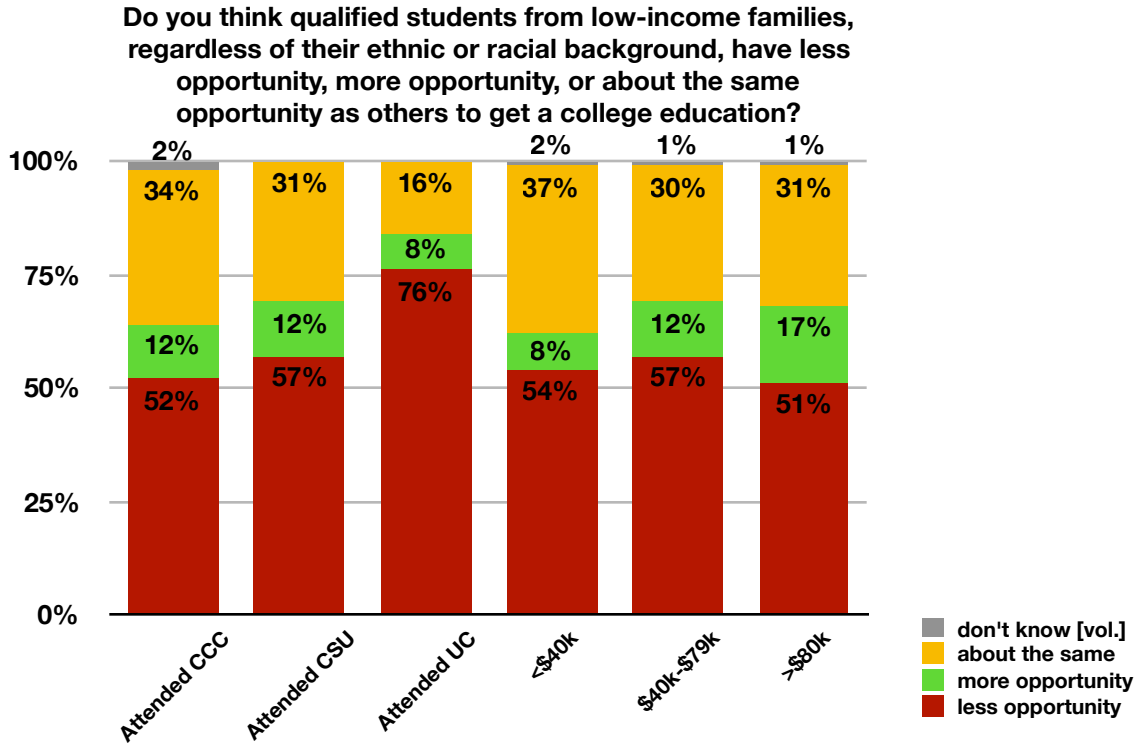
However, only 37% of likely voters believe that a college education is necessary, with 62% of both African Americans and Whites believing there are many ways to be successful in today’s work world. Latinos, at 67%, are the largest group who believe that a college education is very important to be successful.

While seen as important across all regions, voters in the SF Bay Area and Los Angeles put the value as the most important.



**Access and Opportunity**

These numbers have been largely consistent when surveyed over recent years. The most interesting takeaway is that Californians who have attended a UC—the least socioeconomically diverse—are most likely to believe that there is a socioeconomic opportunity gap in college education.



**Budget Priorities**

The state budget is in great condition, something I wondered if I would ever have the opportunity to write. All three segments have crafted large budget requests for incoming governor Gavin Newsom. The requests are already being evaluated by staff at the Department of Finance who will present them for consideration to the governor-elect’s team long before Newsom is sworn in January 7. The budget decisions are generally made by mid-December, the narrative is written before the holidays, and the budget is ideally “put to bed” by the beginning of the New Year.

The January budget proposal is required to be released by January 10. While it won’t be perfect coming out of the gate, it’s an important policy statement for Newsom. While a familiar face, he knows he will be judged based on his policy chops—no easy feat following Jerry Brown.

The PPIC survey asked respondents where they would like to see increased funding. The numbers are pretty consistent across demographic groups. Among likely voters, 55% would like to see funds go to increase resources to help current students, 35% to increase enrollment. In volunteered answers, 6% said “both,” 2% said “neither,” and 2% said they don’t know. I’m not sure what neither means, but I’m guessing they reject the concept of any additional funding.

Respondents in the SF Bay Area and Los Angeles are modestly more supportive of helping current students than increasing enrollment.

This is notable because the “access, access, access” demands of the public and response by system leaders has subsided. It is just as popular to increase quality as it is seats.

**Affordability: Aid, Student Tuition and Fees vs. Housing and Living Expenses**

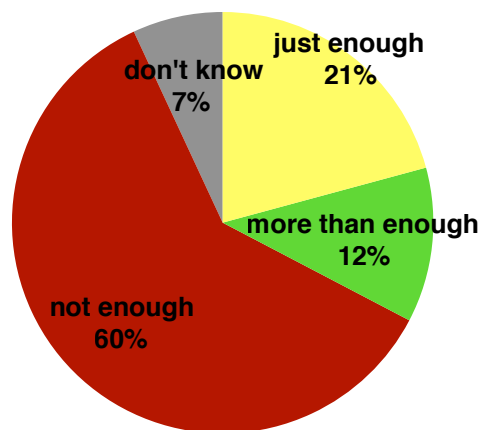
While the state has stemmed the increasing tuition and fees over the last few years after substantial increases as it has a healthier state and as many community colleges have provided a “promise” year or more of “free” community college, there is still a strong perception that tuition and fees are the biggest financial burden facing students.

In fact, 45% of all adults and 50% of likely voters believe that tuition/fees are a bigger burden than living expenses. The only geographic region that believe housing and living expenses are more of a burden is the SF Bay Area, and the only demographic is Asian Americans, which could be correlated.

Interestingly, Republicans (55%) are more likely to believe tuition and fees are a bigger burden than Democrats (48%) and Independents (39%).

Meanwhile, survey respondents are quite concerned about the debt burden incurred

**Do you think that there is more than enough, just enough, or not enough government funding for scholarships and grants for students who need financial help to attend California's public colleges and universities?**



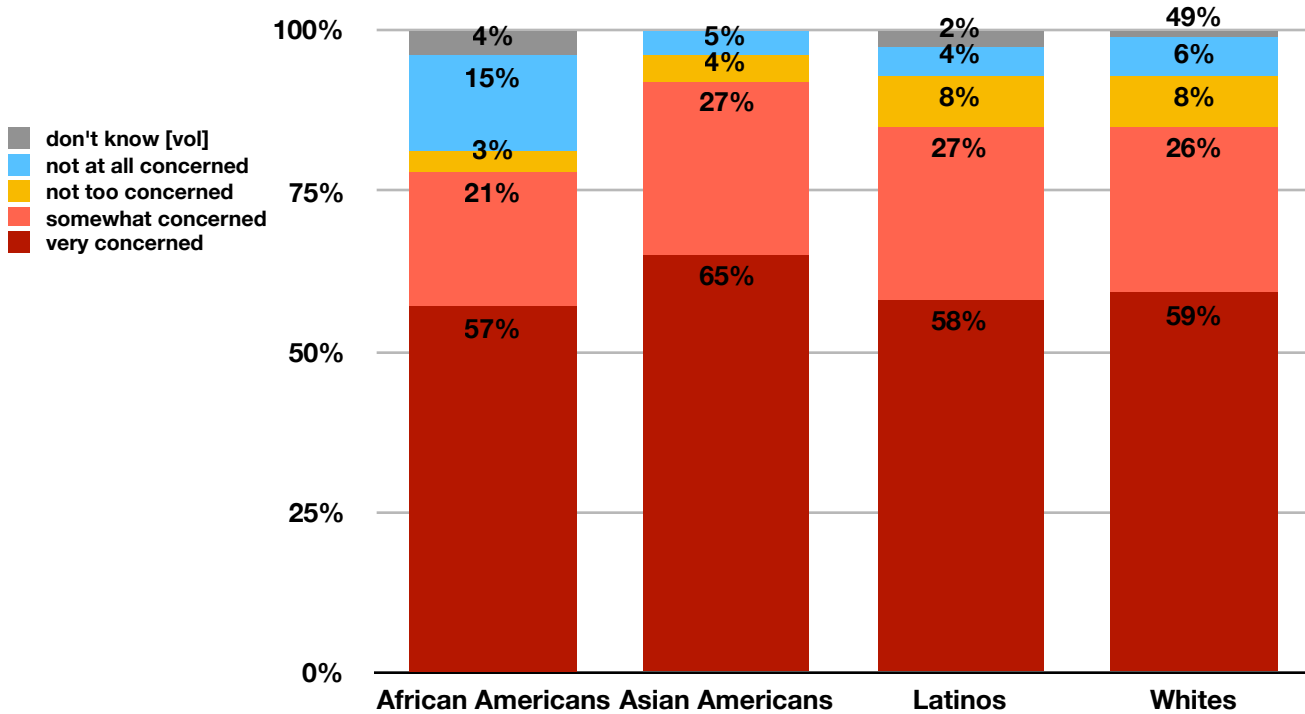
*likely voters*

by students who attend California’s public colleges and universities, of course, which is most often from the non tuition/fee side.

From a policy standpoint, this is a challenge for higher education leaders and policy makers. While the state has made significant progress in restraining the “net cost” of tuition and fees through the change in state policy (CCC “BOG waivers”) and private support, voters still emotionally connect to the top-line price tag and aren’t aware of the net cost until after they (or their student) has enrolled.

As always, the real challenge for policy-leaders and higher education institutions is communicating to students and families about planning for costs beyond tuition and fees.

**How concerned are you about students who attend California's public colleges and universities taking on too much debt to pay for tuition and living expenses?**



The California Community Colleges are seeking a change to Cal Grants to cover “access costs” beyond fees, like the Pell Grant does. It’s admirable a longstanding goal, but will be a fight as the non-Proposition 98 General Fund cost upon full implementation is estimated to be around \$1.5 billion—in competition with funding outside the K-14 education guarantee.

The national effort by policy leaders to make the first two years of community colleges free is very popular across demographic groups, with 75% of likely voters supporting it. While it’s essentially a statistical tie around 44% among self-identified Republicans, it leads among “conservatives,” 66% in favor and 31% in opposition.

It is no surprise that Californians don’t believe the state is doing enough in the way of providing financial assistance to students. That will always be the case. I guess to me, the surprise is that 12% of likely voters and 11% of African Americans believe that the state provides “more than

enough” in scholarships and grants. That said, pretty much across-the-board, the share that say “not enough” is in the 60s.

While this is good news for advocates for expanding the Cal Grant program, it continues the dilemma faced by the segments. Policy leaders know of the qualitative deficits facing the segments—faculty and staff hiring and support services, professional development, infrastructure, and much more, the public will always side with their pocketbooks and perception over quality of education.

In addition to the current “hard” needs, all three segments face out-year cost increases in the areas of pension fund contributions and retiree health benefits that will outpace the inflation augmentations provided by the Legislature in “good” budget years.

While explaining to a voter that having more full-time faculty is easy, explaining that new money is needed to pay for pension contributions—let alone retiree health benefits—is not as easy.

There will be opportunities for new investments, even while maintaining healthy reserves in advance of the next recession. The challenge will be about the balance of where those new investments end up.

**Online Community College Programs: Strong Support**

Survey respondents overwhelmingly support the idea of expanding online degree and certificate programs at California’s community colleges.

From a “top-line” perspective, that’s no surprise. While recently subsided, the for-profit sector had been blanketing the airwaves in time slots targeted at unemployed and disaffected workers.

Online courses are nothing new for California’s community colleges, although they have often been complementary to, rather than instead of, on-campus instruction.

It’s not for me to weigh in to the debate whether the programs should be primarily state-run, state-coordinated or locally run. However, Californians want them expanded.

The bigger policy issue, which is nothing new but will be of increasing importance, is how students can be engaged while not in a campus setting.

**Do you think that the expansion of online certificate and degree programs is a good thing or a bad thing for students at California community colleges?**

