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# Supporting Student Parents in Community College CalWORKs Programs



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Technical appendices to this report are available on the PPIC website.

Many Californians face difficulties connecting to good jobs because of limited education. This is especially true for poor families who receive cash assistance from the state's CalWORKs (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids) program. Few CalWORKs parents have more than a high school degree, and many struggle to balance family and work responsibilities. Quality jobs provide family-sustaining incomes and opportunities for growth that can buffer families from the shocks of recessions, like the current pandemic-induced downturn.

California's community colleges provide education and vocational training that can fulfill CalWORKs work requirements, and every community college offers targeted programs for students receiving CalWORKs benefits. These programs provide additional services and supports to address the specific challenges students may face both inside and outside the classroom as low-income, predominantly single parents.

This report examines the role California's community colleges play in building skills and credentials to support the economic mobility of CalWORKs parents. We examine the trajectories of more than 43,000 students who received CalWORKs cash assistance and services from a college CalWORKs program between the school years 2012–13 and 2018–19. We also surveyed CalWORKs program directors at community colleges to learn more about the programs and services they provide to students. We find:

- **On average, CalWORKs students enroll for six terms at a community college and receive support services through college CalWORKs programs for four terms.** During this time, CalWORKs students complete a substantial number of credits—earning nearly 40 units on average.
- **CalWORKs students have low completion rates.** Less than one in four CalWORKs students complete a credential, and far fewer (12%) transfer to a four-year college within three years of entering a college CalWORKs program.
- **About one-third of CalWORKs students pursue career education pathways based on their course-taking.** Most of these students enroll in business (33%) and family and consumer sciences (31%) (predominantly early childhood education). Far fewer students enroll in health (15%) or public and protective services (14%) programs—the two career education fields that provide the highest economic returns.

- **College CalWORKs programs offer a wide range of services.** While all programs offer a core set of supports like counseling and case management, colleges vary in offering services like transportation and food assistance, child care, tutoring, and laptop loan programs.
- **CalWORKs students do better when they are enrolled in college CalWORKs programs compared to when they are not.** Specifically, CalWORKs students are more likely to enroll full-time, successfully complete their coursework, and persist to the next term—all important factors related to college completion—when they are receiving additional services through a college CalWORKs program.

Understanding how community colleges can respond to the current recession and prepare CalWORKs students for better jobs when the economy recovers is crucial information. At the same time, these lessons may have applications for the broader student body at community colleges, many of whom struggle to make efficient progress toward a credential, and who may face mounting challenges amid the economic realities in California.

# Introduction

Higher education is a route to economic mobility, but California has room to improve in making it an equitable, effective route for more Californians (Johnson, Cuellar, and Bohn 2019). Expanding access to college for students from low-income backgrounds is a focus for all higher education segments in the state. In today’s pandemic-induced downturn, the financial constraints of attending college may affect more students and may be more severe than just a year ago.

Community colleges are well positioned to provide access for low-income students; they are located throughout the state, offer targeted and short-term training for in-demand jobs, and have programs to support economically disadvantaged students. However, the community colleges themselves face financial constraints because they rely on state funding, which can limit the programs and services available, especially when state revenues falter (Bohn, Reyes and Johnson 2013).

In this report, we focus on the pathways of student parents who receive benefits from the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program and who receive additional services and supports from community college CalWORKs programs. CalWORKs is the state’s primary cash assistance and Welfare-to-Work program.<sup>1</sup> Students in the program have very low incomes—to qualify, their family’s annual income must be less than \$17,000 for a family of three—and have children. In addition, many CalWORKs students face work requirements and time limits for receiving cash aid. As a result, CalWORKs students often are working toward building skills and credentials to improve long-term economic prospects, as required by the CalWORKs program ([Technical Appendix A](#) contains details of CalWORKs program requirements).

In the 2018–19 academic year, about 20,000 CalWORKs students were enrolled in community college programs.<sup>2</sup> Of these, about two-thirds were single mothers and nearly 70 percent were Latino or African American, groups underrepresented in higher education and overrepresented among the state’s poor. The number of CalWORKs students is likely to grow, as more Californians enroll in safety net programs due to the economic downturn (during the Great Recession the number grew by about 38%).<sup>3</sup> The state estimates the CalWORKs caseload will double in the 2020–2021 fiscal year due to the COVID-19 crisis (California Department of Finance 2020).

At the same time, more individuals typically turn to higher education to build skills and credentials in economic downturns when jobs are scarce. How well educational institutions and programs like CalWORKs can support skill-building matters for the economic recovery of individuals, their families, and the state as a whole.

We examine the trajectories of CalWORKs students in California’s community colleges, with a focus on career education pathways, in light of the role these pathways can play in providing economic mobility and supporting students to achieve middle-income earnings levels (Bohn, Jackson, and McConville 2019).

In addition, we survey the financial and academic assistance that colleges provide to CalWORKs students, seeking to understand the most effective ways to support the success of this economically disadvantaged group. Though access varies across colleges to some extent, CalWORKs students are offered a wide range of services not widely available to other students—including counseling, case management, tutoring, child care, and

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<sup>1</sup> CalWORKs is the state’s version of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) federal block grant program that provides funding for states to operate their welfare-to-work programs. The TANF program was created in 1996 and California implemented CalWORKs in 1998.

<sup>2</sup> When the CalWORKs program started more than 20 years ago, about 50,000 adults receiving cash assistance were enrolled in California community college programs; by the 2018–19 school year, about half as many (21,000) enrolled, reflecting a substantial decline in participation in CalWORKs (see [Technical Appendix Figure A1](#)). About 10–15 percent of CalWORKs adults are enrolled in community college in any given year. In the last recession, the CalWORKs caseload increased 50 percent and enrollment in CalWORKs community college programs grew by 24 percent.

<sup>3</sup> See [Technical Appendix Figure A1](#) for more information.

emergency aid. College and system leaders across the state have acknowledged the importance of addressing student basic needs, which include things like financial stability and access to adequate food and housing, and the role supports beyond academic services may play in the educational trajectory for students generally (California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) 2018a; Regents of the University of California 2020). We aim to draw insights for what works from existing programs, like CalWORKs.

## What Pathways Do CalWORKs Students Take at Community Colleges?

Like many enrolled in the community college system, CalWORKs students pursue their educational and career goals along different pathways. They also may face many barriers by virtue of their low income levels and parental responsibilities. CalWORKs students are often single parents who must navigate the responsibilities of caring for children along with managing college coursework and jobs. Many adults who receive CalWORKs benefits have multiple barriers to employment that can make college success more difficult (Danielson and Thorman 2018).

In this report, we define “CalWORKs students” as those receiving county CalWORKs benefits while also enrolled in a community college CalWORKs program.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that we do not have information on the receipt of CalWORKs benefits beyond knowing that a student is enrolled in a college CalWORKs program. Compared to other community college students, CalWORKs students are considerably older; more than seven in ten are over age 25 compared to about four in ten non-CalWORKs students (CCCCO 2019). A similar age distribution occurs with community college students enrolled in career education programs (Bohn and McConville 2018). In addition, African Americans are overrepresented among CalWORKs students relative to their share of all community college students (17% vs. 6%).

To understand the trajectories of CalWORKs students, we first look at their course-taking while they are enrolled in college CalWORKs programs. We examine their enrollment at any community college in the two years before they enter a college CalWORKs program and the two years after they exit the program. Again, because we do not know whether students receive CalWORKs benefits when they are *not* enrolled in their college CalWORKs program, we cannot determine whether students *could* be eligible for a college’s CalWORKs program during these pre- and post-periods.

We focus on students who enrolled for the first time in a community college CalWORKs program between school years 2012–13 and 2016–17. Starting in 2013, work requirements and other program rules for adults who receive CalWORKs changed because of state-level policy reforms.<sup>5</sup> These changes were intended to help CalWORKs adults engage in welfare-to-work activities—including education—as early as possible, and made options around meeting work requirements more flexible (Davis, Karoly, Barnes-Proby, Weidmer, Iyiewuare, et al. 2020). Because of these changes, current students had different requirements and incentives from CalWORKs students who had enrolled during earlier periods.

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<sup>4</sup> There may be other community college students that receive CalWORKs benefits from the county/state, but do not enroll or receive services from the college CalWORKs programs. These students are not captured in our CalWORKs student definition.

<sup>5</sup> SB 1041 (2012) made significant policy changes to the CalWORKs program including changes to the participant time limits on aid, work requirements, and earned income disregards. Earlier reforms also made changes to exemption categories, which allow CalWORKs adults to not meet work requirement standards.

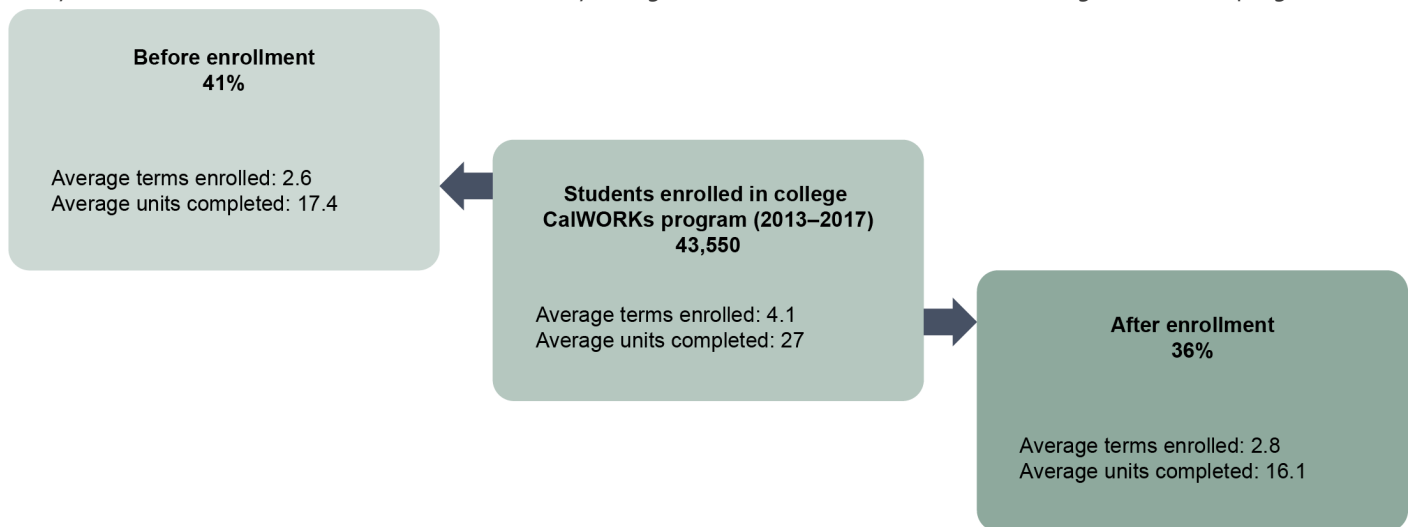
## Enrollment Patterns

More than 43,500 students were enrolled in a community college CalWORKs program sometime between the 2012–13 and 2016–17 academic years. On average, CalWORKs students enrolled in a total of four terms in their college’s CalWORKs program and completed 27 units during this time.<sup>6</sup> Most students were also enrolled in college before or after joining a college CalWORKs program, which may signal a desire to complete other goals beyond fulfilling the requirements to receive CalWORKs assistance.<sup>7</sup> About 30 percent of CalWORKs students are only enrolled at the community colleges while they are in college CalWORKs programs; most likely because they were referred by the county to meet CalWORKs program requirements.

As Figure 1 shows, 41 percent of CalWORKs students enrolled in at least one term in the two academic years before they entered a college CalWORKs program, with an average of 2.6 terms enrolled. Likewise, 36 percent of CalWORKs students continue at community colleges in the two years after they exit the college CalWORKs program. Overall, about seven in ten CalWORKs students were enrolled in terms before and after receiving services through college CalWORKs.<sup>8</sup>

**FIGURE 1**

Many CalWORKs students are enrolled in community colleges before and after enrollment in college CalWORKs programs



SOURCE: Author’s calculations from MIS data.

NOTE: Includes community college students who first enrolled in a college CalWORKs program sometime between the 2012–13 and 2016–17 academic years. The share enrolled before and after college CalWORKs program is based on examining enrollment two years prior to entering the program and two years after exiting the program. Students also must have completed at least some units for credit during their enrollment history, so CalWORKs students who completed only noncredit courses and/or never earned any units are excluded.

Overall, CalWORKs students enrolled in more than six terms, on average, in the community college system and earned nearly 40 units total. Of course, this number masks substantial variation across students. About one in five CalWORKs students enrolled only in one or two terms, on average, and completed about eight units. But more than 60 percent enrolled in the community college system for at least five terms—with about a third enrolled in

<sup>6</sup> Includes all terms—both primary terms (fall/spring) and secondary terms (winter/summer), which may not be offered at all colleges.

<sup>7</sup> In the terms they are enrolled in college CalWORKs programs, we know that they must be aided adults in a CalWORKs assistance unit because that is a requirement for the program, and colleges must verify this with county welfare departments. In terms they are not enrolled in college CalWORKs programs, we do not know if they or their children may be receiving benefits through CalWORKs.

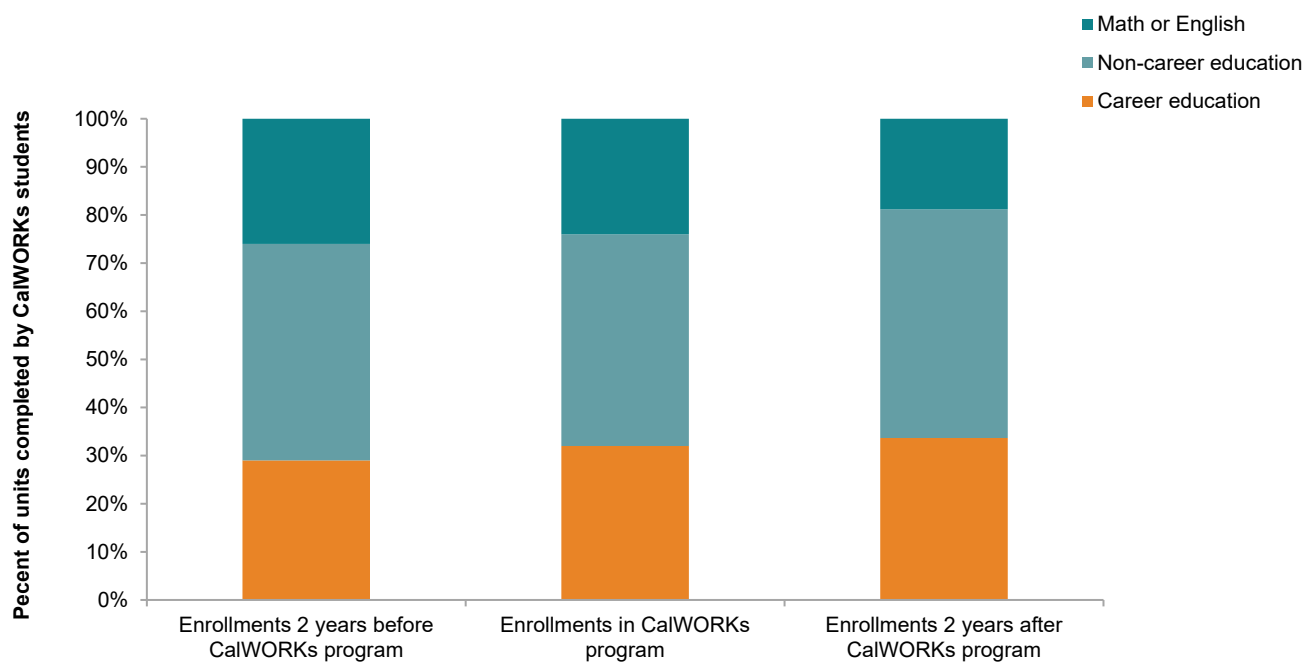
<sup>8</sup> The same CalWORKs students can be included in both the pre- and post-enrollment periods. A total of 68 percent of CalWORKs students are enrolled before or after their enrollment in college CalWORKs programs, rather than 77 percent if you simply added the before and after shares.

eight terms or more and earning upwards of 70 units on average. To improve outcomes for these students, it is important to understand how to maximize their progress.

When we drill down to look at the courses CalWORKs students complete, we find that students earn about one-third of units from career education programs, such as business and health, with slightly higher shares in the two years after they exit the college CalWORKs program (Figure 2). About 45 percent of completed credits are in non-career education fields, predominantly humanities and interdisciplinary studies. And another 20 to 25 percent are math and English courses—about half of which are remedial or developmental courses for which students do not receive college credit.

**FIGURE 2**

About one-third of units CalWORKs students complete are in career education fields



SOURCE: Authors' calculations from MIS data.

NOTE: Includes community college students who first enrolled in a college CalWORKs program sometime between the 2012–2013 and 2016–2017 academic years. A small number (about 6%) of CalWORKs students have multiple, nonconsecutive spells in a CalWORKs program, making it difficult to divide them into distinct periods before and after program participation and thus are excluded.

## Completion Rates and Career Pathways

For many students in community college, completing a credential takes a substantial amount of time (about three to four years on average), more time than CalWORKs students in our sample are typically enrolled in the program (The Campaign for College Opportunity 2014). Among the CalWORKs students in our sample, completion rates were low—27 percent completed a credential or transferred to a four-year college within three years of entering a college CalWORKs program (Figure 3).<sup>9</sup>

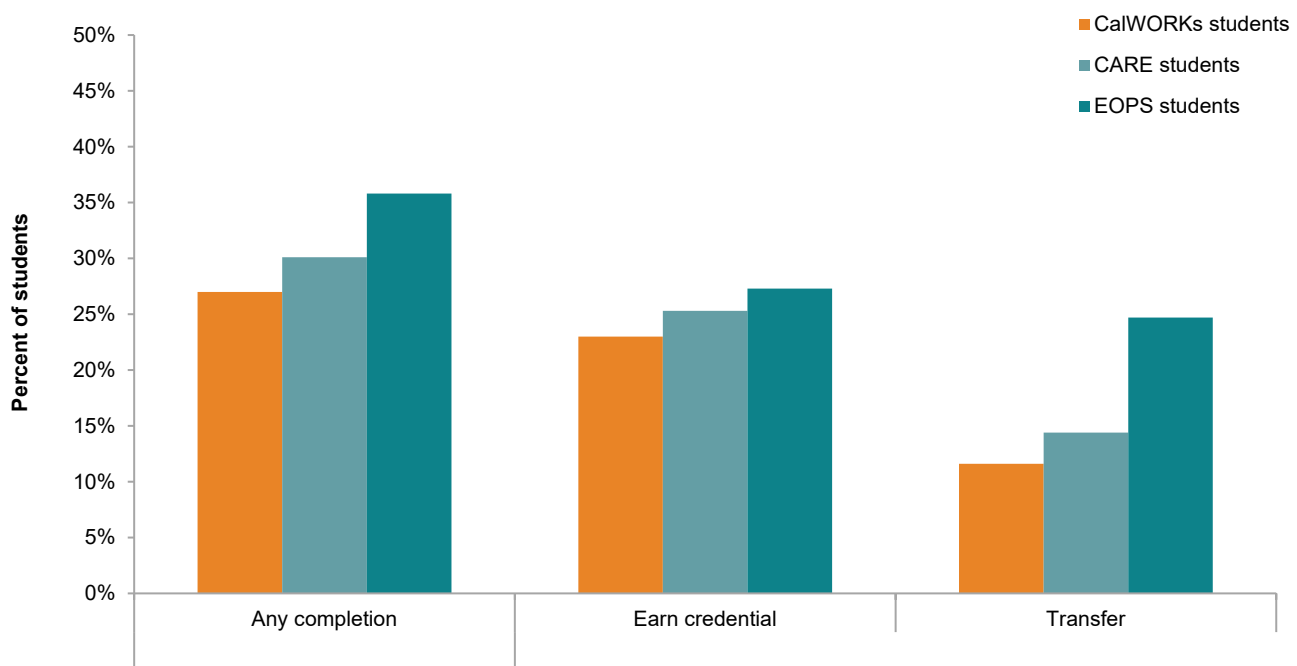
<sup>9</sup> While it is common to track these outcomes over a longer period, typically six years, we use a three-year window in order to focus on students with more recent experience in college CalWORKs and EOPS support programs to coincide more closely with the period in which we conducted our survey of program directors.



To put these completion rates in context, we compare them with students in Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) who also received targeted supports because they were identified as “disadvantaged by social, economic, educational, or linguistic barriers” by the community colleges.<sup>10</sup> While CalWORKs students do have lower completion rates at 27 percent versus EOPS students at 36 percent, the biggest difference is in the share that transfer to a four-year college. Twelve percent of CalWORKs students succeed in transferring compared to 25 percent of EOPS students. The difference between the shares of students in both groups who earn a credential within three years of entering a student support program, however are relatively small. Note that it is difficult to identify a good comparison group for CalWORKs students primarily because we do not have systematic information on other students’ income levels or whether they have children.

**FIGURE 3**

CalWORKs students have lower transfer rates compared to students enrolled in other support programs



SOURCE: Authors’ calculations from MIS data.

NOTES: Includes students first enrolled in a college student support programs between the 2012–13 and 2015–16 academic years. We follow students through the 2018–19 academic year to allow for a three-year window after their first program enrollment to observe if students completed a credential or transferred to a four-year college. The Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), of which CARE is a component, are community college programs that also offer additional supports to students identified as disadvantaged.

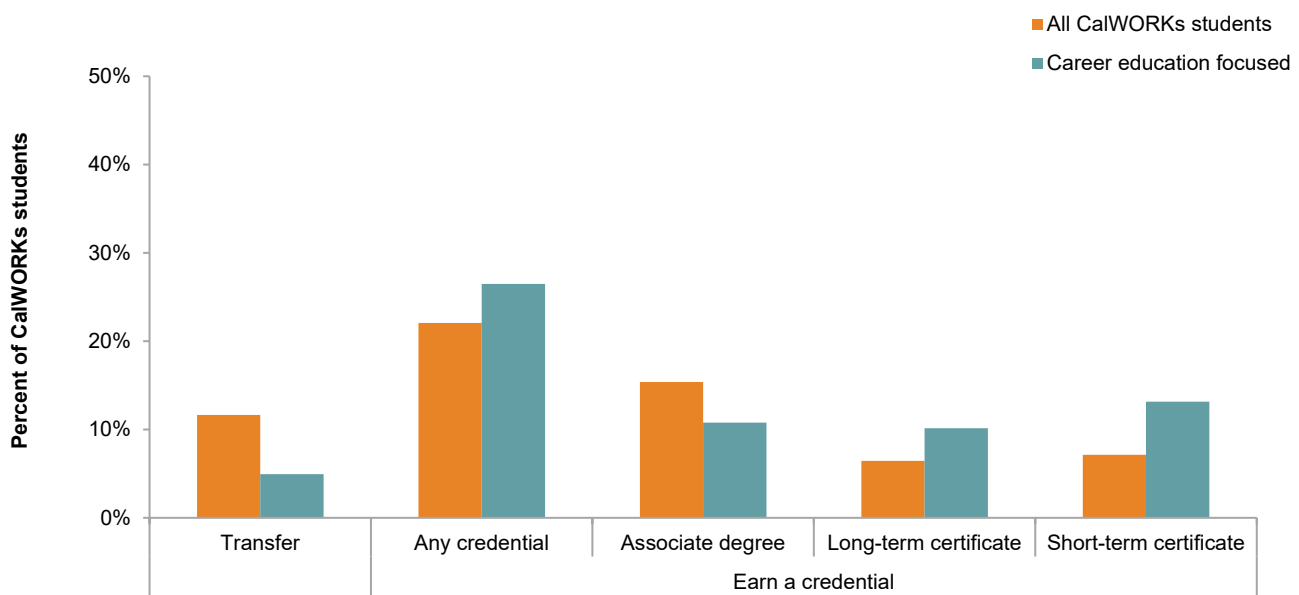
We are particularly interested in assessing the promise of career education pathways for CalWORKs students because (a) many credentials can be completed within the typical length of enrollment for CalWORKs students and (b) our prior work has shown that stacking certificates along an educational pathway may improve economic outcomes (Bohn, Jackson, and McConville 2019). Furthermore, CalWORKs adults are subject to time limits that

<sup>10</sup> The community colleges also offer a program to support a broader group of low-income, academically disadvantaged students to complete their educational goals. The Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) program offers educational support to address the specific needs of at-risk students (SB 164, Alquist, Chapter 1579, Statutes of 1969). EOPS students who are single parents that are also receiving CalWORKs assistance are also eligible for the Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) program, which provides “additional support services so students can transition from welfare dependency by securing the education, training, and marketable skills needed for self-sufficiency and upward social mobility.”

make achieving a credential within 24 months a high priority; after that time frame, adults must work at least 20 hours or more to continue receiving cash aid.<sup>11</sup>

Based on course completions, we identified CalWORKs students who showed particular interest in career education. Students who completed most of their coursework in career education programs were slightly more likely to finish a credential compared to other CalWORKs students (Figure 4). Twenty-six percent earned a community college credential within three years of when they first enrolled in a college CalWORKs program. They were more likely to complete a short-term or long-term certificate, in particular. About 13 percent earned a short-term certificate and 10 percent, a long-term certificate. A small share (5%) transferred to a four-year college.

**FIGURE 4**  
Completion and transfer rates are low among CalWORKs students



SOURCE: Authors' calculations from MIS data.

NOTES: Includes students first enrolled in a college CalWORKs program between the 2012–13 and 2015–16 academic years. We follow students through the 2018–19 academic year to allow for a three-year window after the first CalWORKs term to observe if students complete a credential or transfer. Students are designated as "career-education focused" if they completed the majority of their coursework in career education. Short-term certificates require between 6–29 units for completion and long-term certificates require 30–59 units. Note that students may achieve multiple credentials or may earn a credential and transfer, so these categories are not mutually exclusive, and the credential subtypes do not sum to the "any" category.

Among CalWORKs students focused on career education, the two leading fields of study were business and family and consumer science—which includes early childhood education (33% and 31% of students, respectively). Information technology, public and protective services, health, and engineering programs were much less common.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Some CalWORKs adults may have more time before they must meet work requirements, whether through exemptions or other circumstances that affect the length of time they are eligible for cash assistance.

<sup>12</sup> Among CalWORKs students identified as career-education focused in our sample, 33 percent completed at least one business course and 31 percent at least one family and consumer science course during their enrollment in a college's CalWORKs program. Fewer CalWORKs students completed at least one course in information technology (18%), health (15%), public and protective services (14%), and engineering (14%) fields.

Considering the value of credentials in today’s labor market, it is worth understanding how these completion rates might be improved. One policy advanced by the Chancellor’s Office to improve outcomes for CalWORKs students involves expanding financial aid resources to cover the total costs of college, which include living expenses like housing costs (CCCCO 2019). Another strategy advanced by the Guided Pathways framework—a structured approach being implemented across the community college system to improve student success—is to provide students early on with targeted guidance on how to achieve their career goals through educational pathways.

Later in this report, we look more closely at intermediate outcomes for CalWORKs students, including the markers of momentum like persistence and full-time enrollment. Given that CalWORKs students may face long-term challenges and barriers outside of school, we also examine their trajectories from term to term, isolating when they are receiving support from college CalWORKs programs. In the next section we describe those programs in greater detail.

## What Services Are Available to Support CalWORKs Student Success?

All CalWORKs students have access to supports through county social service agencies, including child care subsidies, transportation assistance, and job training. Families receiving CalWORKs benefits are also eligible to receive CalFresh (monthly assistance to purchase food) and Medi-Cal health coverage, which should provide access to needed medical and behavioral health services.

In addition, California community colleges receive dedicated funding—primarily from state Prop 98 funds and federal TANF funds—to run targeted programs for CalWORKs participants enrolled in community colleges.<sup>13</sup> Funds are allocated across a range of services: case management and coordination, work-study, child care, job development, and other direct student supports (CCCCO 2019). Community college CalWORKs programs are intended to work in partnership with county social service departments to help CalWORKs students achieve family self-sufficiency through education and job training. While some funding is directed to particular activities (i.e., child care or work study), and some services are provided through the county versus in community college CalWORKs programs, colleges do have some latitude and funding to provide other direct services to meet the needs of their students.

To understand what supports CalWORKs students may have access to, we surveyed CalWORKs program coordinators across all 114 community colleges over the last half of 2019.<sup>14</sup> We received responses from 52 colleges, which enrolled about half of all CalWORKs students across the system in the 2018–19 school year. Survey responses came from all regions of the state and colleges both large and small. Though not designed to be a representative sample, based on the similarity of characteristics for CalWORKs students in colleges who responded and those that did not, we feel comfortable drawing insights on CalWORKs programs across the California community college system. ([Technical Appendix E](#) provides more information on the sample of CalWORKs students enrolled at colleges responding to our survey.)

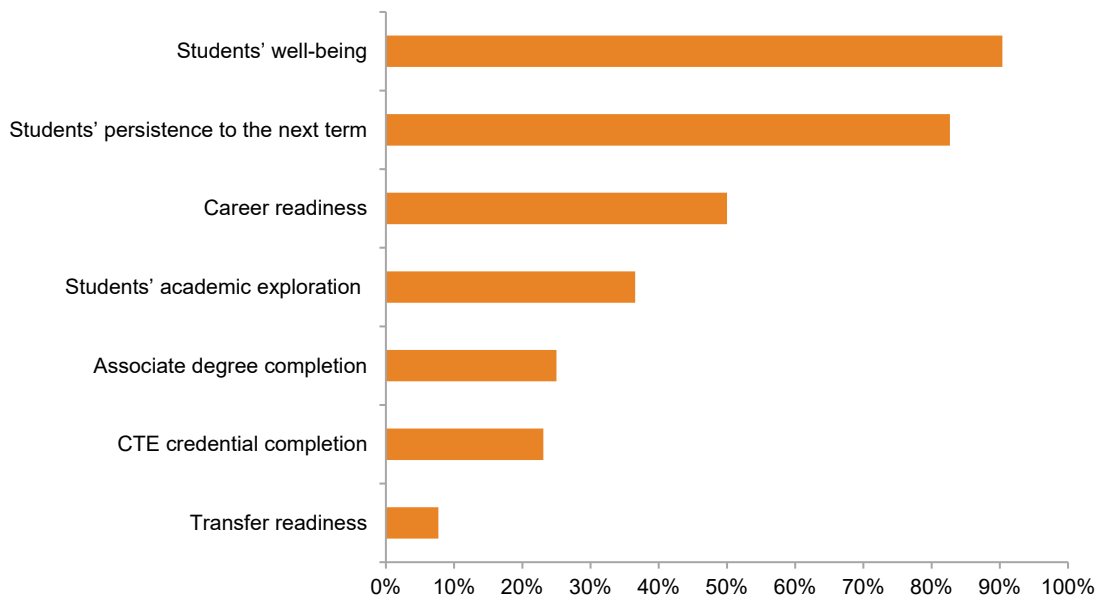
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<sup>13</sup> The bulk of funding for community college CalWORKs programs—about \$44 million in 2017–18—comes from state appropriations that support the K–14 public education system, which are determined by rules established by Proposition 98 that required specified funding levels for education. Community college CalWORKs programs also receive funding through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the federal block grant program that provides funding for states to operate their welfare-to-work programs. In the 2017–18 academic year, community college CalWORKs programs received about \$8 million in TANF funds, of which \$2 million was allocated to provide other direct student supports to CalWORKs students (CCCCO 2019).

<sup>14</sup> We also surveyed other community college support programs for students identified as disadvantaged, including EOPS, CARE, and NextUp (foster and former foster youth). See [Technical Appendices B, C, and D](#) for more information on our survey of program coordinators.

Program coordinators indicated what they saw as the most important goals for a college CalWORKs program. Supporting CalWORKs students' well-being was a top priority—about 90 percent of college program directors indicated that was one of the three most important goals of the program. The next goal was students' persisting to the next term—just over 80 percent of program directors rated persistence among the top three program goals.

**FIGURE 5**  
Community college CalWORKs programs serve a wide range of goals



SOURCE: PPIC CalWORKs Program Director Survey, 2019.

NOTE: Program directors were asked to rate the set of goals by order of importance (from 1 to 7). The percent shown indicates the share of program directors that ranked a particular goal in the top three most important for CalWORKs students.

About half of survey respondents indicated career readiness was among the top program goals. Completing credentials and transferring to a four-year college—oft-used measures of success—were not among the most important goals for most program directors; only 20–25 percent indicated credential completion among the top goals. This may be due to the relatively low completion rates for CalWORKs students and to program directors' ability to focus on and impact more proximate outcomes, like successfully completing courses or persisting to the next term. We look more closely at how college CalWORKs programs support these types of term-level outcomes in the next section of the report.

## Colleges Offer a Wide Range of Services for CalWORKs Students

To support these goals, community college CalWORKs programs can tailor services offered in their programs to student needs. Essentially all college CalWORKs programs offer a core set of supports that include academic counseling, case management, work-study opportunities, and referrals to community-based organizations (Table 1).

Beyond these core supports, CalWORKs programs offer a wide range of additional student supports. While we asked about more than 20 different types of services, we focus on nine informed by a review of the evidence on the

effectiveness of support services for low-income and/or TANF students. Rigorous evaluations have found that academic counseling, tutoring, and financial assistance can increase full-time enrollment and units earned, although the evidence on persistence and completion are more mixed (see Scrivener and Coghlan, 2011; and Hamilton and Scrivener, 2012 for reviews of the evidence). We also considered information from our survey, including the importance of the service as rated by program directors and the share of students with access to the service.

**TABLE 1**

CalWORKs students have access to different types of services depending on the college they attend.

Type of service	Service	% colleges offering service
Core supports	Academic counseling	100%
	Case management	98%
	Work study	98%
	Referrals to community-based organizations	96%
Financial assistance	Unmet needs grants	19%
	Laptop loan program	56%
Social supports	Nutrition assistance	77%
	Housing assistance	29%
	Transportation assistance	83%
Academic supports	College success courses	56%
	Tutoring	63%
Child care resources	Child care center	52%
	Child care subsidies	37%

SOURCE: PPIC CalWORKs Program Director Survey, 2019.

NOTE: College success courses are for-credit courses that teach first-time students how to be successful in college through building study skills, time management, and other strategies.

Few CalWORKs students attend colleges that provide emergency financial assistance such as unmet needs grants (17%), but more than half of the colleges provide laptop loan programs. Social supports including nutrition assistance (i.e., food pantry or meal tickets) and transportation assistance (i.e., bus passes or shuttle services) are widely offered across most programs (77% and 83%, respectively). Housing assistance is much less common, with only about 30 percent of college programs offering this service.

Most programs provide academic support services including tutoring (63%) and college success courses (56%). Just over half of community colleges have an onsite child care center available to CalWORKs students and 37 percent of colleges offer child care subsidies to students that can be used at off-campus care sites.

Again, we should note that social supports like food, housing and transportation assistance, along with child care services are also available to CalWORKs students through county social service agencies. The availability of these services through counties, along with student need, likely contributes to some of these observed differences across colleges. In addition, many of these services may be more broadly available to community college students who are not enrolled in the CalWORKs programs. Colleges operate other support programs including EOPS

(serves economically and academically disadvantaged students) and Next Up (serves foster youth and former foster youth) that may provide some of these same services.

## How Often Do CalWORKs Students Access these Supports?

Obviously, knowing what services are offered is key to a better understanding of CalWORKs programs, as is knowing how accessible or available these services are to CalWORKs students. While we do have information about some core supports, for most services we cannot directly link individual students to the services they receive.<sup>15</sup> Figure 6 provides a broad picture of how accessible these services may be to CalWORKs students based on directors' experience of how many students typically use the service.

As detailed in Table 1, colleges offer a variety of services.<sup>16</sup> Transportation assistance appears to be the most widely used service; more than 70 percent of CalWORKs students attended a college where most CalWORKs students used the service. This compares, for example, to housing assistance where 30 percent of students were enrolled at colleges that offer the service, but very few (3%) attended a college reporting high use. Likewise, on-campus child care centers were available to nearly 60 percent of CalWORKs students, but only 6 percent of programs report high use.

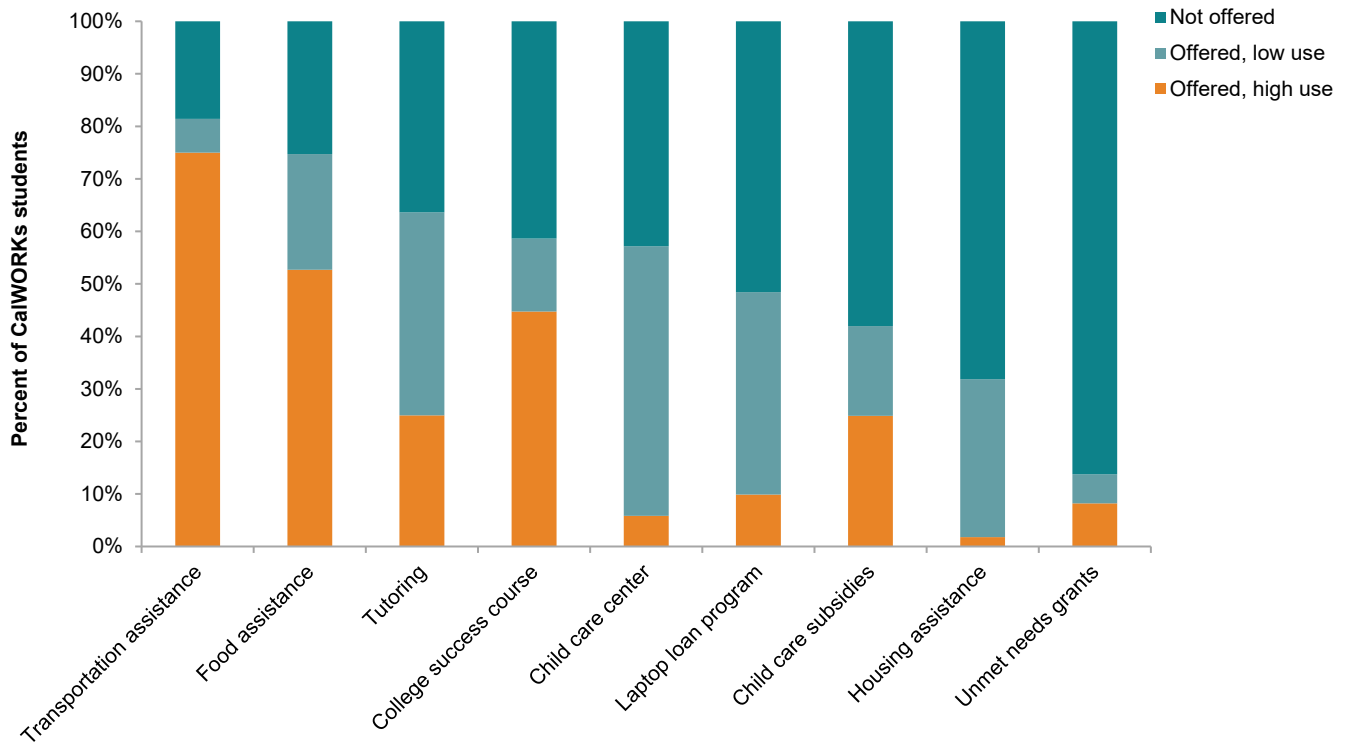
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<sup>15</sup> The student-level MIS data contains some information on counseling, referrals, and childcare services. We also do not observe or have any information on the services CalWORKs students may receive from the county, community-based organizations, or other support programs.

<sup>16</sup> Shares of students at colleges that do not offer certain services is very similar to shares of colleges reporting they do not offer a service, suggesting colleges with large numbers of CalWORKs students do not appear to be driving our results.

**FIGURE 6**

The type and scope of services accessible to CalWORKs students varies considerably



SOURCE: PPIC CalWORKs Program Director Survey; authors' calculations from MIS data.

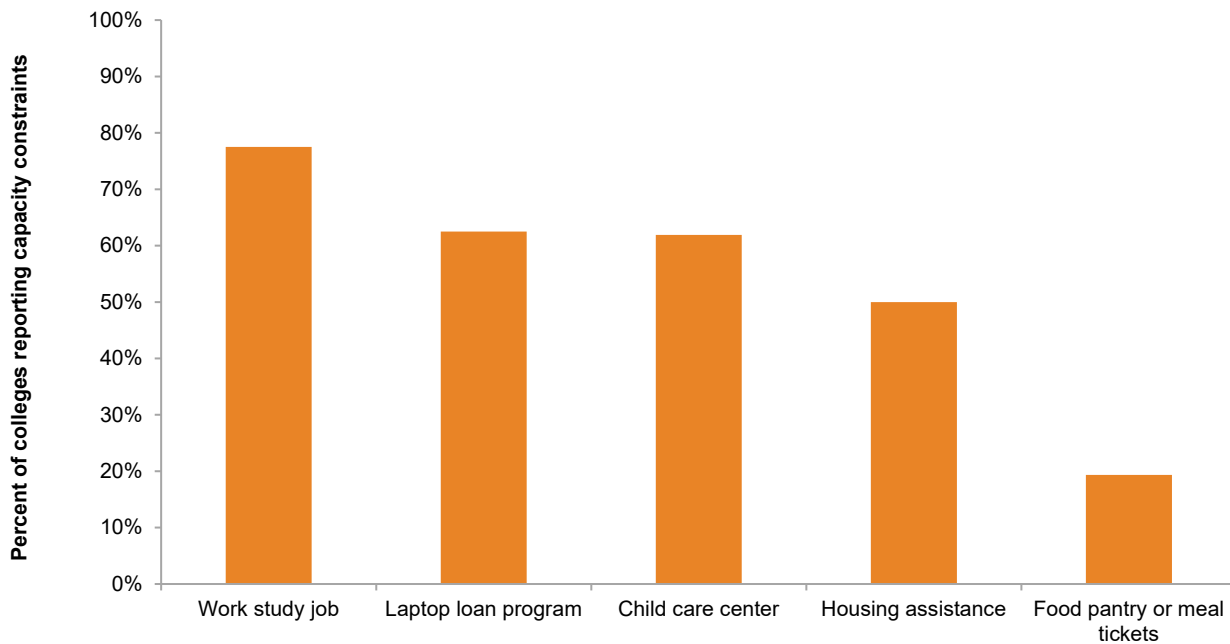
NOTE: High use refers to students enrolled at colleges where program directors indicated that either "All or almost all (80–100%)" or "A lot (60–80%)" of CalWORKs students used the service. The shares of CalWORKs students are calculated by matching survey responses at the college level to the sample of CalWORKs students described in the first section of the report. See [Technical Appendix B](#) for more information.

CalWORKs students may not need some of these services, or they may receive adequate support through other sources like the county. Although personal needs and other sources of support undoubtedly impact whether students use particular services, due to funding and program limitations, many CalWORKs programs face capacity constraints for certain services. That is, students can be denied certain services despite needing them because programs do not have enough available slots to serve them.

Few college programs reported widespread constraints that limited student access to needed services, with a few notable exceptions. Work-study jobs, which are a core support service offered by virtually all CalWORKs programs, were also the most often cited as facing constraints. More than three-quarters (78%) of program directors reported that CalWORKs students could be denied access to work study due to capacity and/or funding constraints (Figure 7).

**FIGURE 7**

Nearly 80 percent of CalWORKs programs report work study can be denied to students due to capacity constraints



SOURCE: PPIC CalWORKs Program Director Survey, 2019.

NOTE: Figure shows the top five services that can be denied to CalWORKs students due to capacity constraints. Percentage of colleges reflects the share of colleges among those that offer a particular service. Fewer CalWORKs programs offer laptop loan program (24 colleges), child care centers (21 colleges), and housing assistance (14 colleges) relative to work study programs, which are offered at 51 of the 52 colleges that completed our survey. For more details on survey results refer to [Technical Appendix D](#).

Other services, including laptop loan programs, on-campus child care centers, and housing assistance, were also flagged by more than half of program directors as services that could be denied to students due to capacity constraints. This is generally consistent with the patterns we see in Figure 6, where colleges report offering services like laptop loan programs, child care centers and housing assistance, but very few report that most CalWORKs students use these services. More work needs to be done to better understand why CalWORKs students use certain services more than others (i.e., lack of need or knowledge, other available resources) and what strategies could be considered to address program capacity constraints.

## Improving CalWORKs Student Success

How can colleges and policymakers improve CalWORKs student success? During the terms students are enrolled in college CalWORKs program, they have access to coordinated services and enhanced advising to support their success. On average, students are enrolled four terms in college CalWORKs programs; maximizing this time is crucial to improving outcomes.



## Strengthening Success during CalWORKs Program Enrollment

While the overarching goal may be for more CalWORKs students to earn a credential that improves their economic trajectory, many intermediate steps are necessary to support that objective. We examined term-level outcomes related to success—like persisting to the next term, enrolling full-time, and successfully completing coursework – to better understand how enrollment in college CalWORKs programs may relate to student outcomes.

Consistently, students do better on these metrics of success while enrolled in community college CalWORKs programs compared to the other terms they enroll in the college without the support of the program (Figure 8). When enrolled in college CalWORKs programs, we see more students successfully completing courses (13% increase), enrolling full-time (25% increase), and persisting to the next school term (11% increase). These results control for factors that may vary across students (like background or ability, as well as demographics like sex, race, and age) by comparing—for each individual student—their outcomes in terms when they are enrolled in college CalWORKs programs to terms when they are not.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, there is much we do not know about the students and their situations that could also impact outcomes, like changes in family or economic circumstances; so these results should not be interpreted as causal.<sup>18</sup>

Above and beyond participating in college CalWORKs programs, when students receive different types of financial aid we see relatively large improvements in the above outcomes. Pell grants—by far the largest source of financial aid for CalWORKs students—are associated with a 37 percent increase in persistence and nearly a 30 percent increase in the successful completion of coursework. Other sources of financial aid, like loans and supplemental grants, are also associated with improved term-level outcomes. These findings suggest that efforts to increase financial aid to more fully cover the costs of attending college could benefit CalWORKs students.

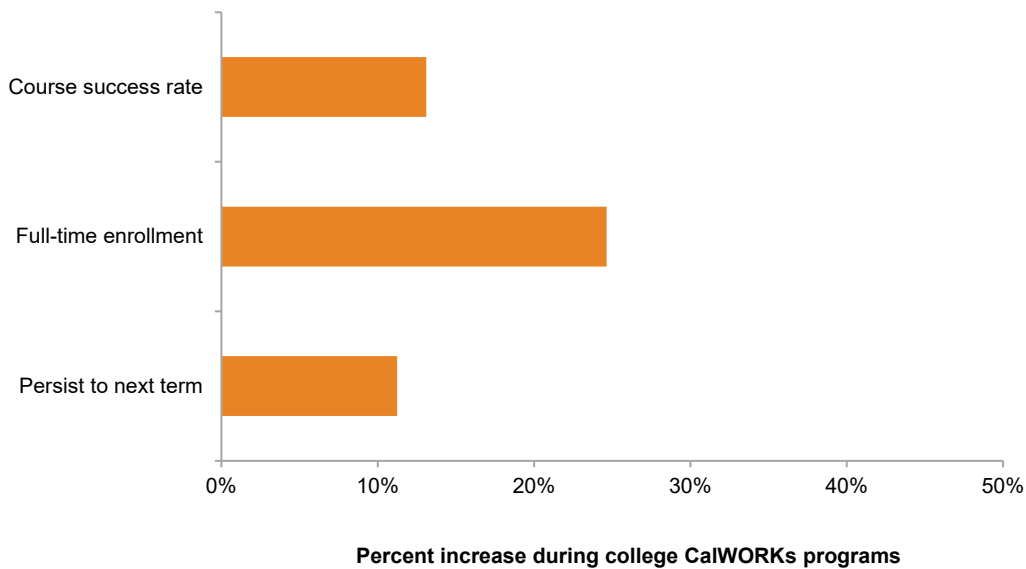
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<sup>17</sup> This analysis relies on the 70 percent of CalWORKs students who have enrollments within the two-year periods before and/or after their college CalWORKs program participation using student fixed-effects models. See [Technical Appendix E](#) for more details.

<sup>18</sup> For example, if entering a college CalWORKs program indicates a decline in family economic circumstances, we might expect worse outcomes during CalWORKs terms, not better. On the other hand, if enrolling in a CalWORKs program reflects a change in a student’s motivation to make progress on coursework, we might expect better outcomes in CalWORKs terms. One factor that makes it difficult to disentangle these effects is our inability to know whether students may be receiving CalWORKs assistance in terms that they are not enrolled in CalWORKs programs at community colleges. This could impact our results because these students may be exempt from work requirements that change the incentives they face to persist or enroll full-time because their continued receipt of CalWORKs cash benefits is not contingent on their school success.

**FIGURE 8**

Students have better outcomes in terms they are enrolled in the CalWORKs program



SOURCE: Authors' calculation from MIS data.

NOTE: Results are from student fixed-effects models including year dummies and financial aid receipt controls. Course success is a measure of the share of units attempted for which the student received credit. All estimates are statistically significant at the one-percent level. See [Technical Appendix E](#) for additional details.

Overall, when students participate in a CalWORKs program they achieve better intermediate educational outcomes, which indicates CalWORKs programs are generally achieving some of their most important goals, as specified by program coordinators. It is not clear, however, if certain types of supports are more effective than others.<sup>19</sup> College CalWORKs programs differ substantially across the state in terms of their non-core service offerings. Additional research to evaluate what services improve outcomes and for which students is needed to provide a better evidence base for programs and colleges to rely on.

We also examined how term-level outcomes change for CalWORKs students over time, to identify where program interventions are most impactful. In general, we find that students perform the best on these metrics in their first one or two terms enrolled in CalWORKs. While students do better on persistence in their CalWORKs terms, that result is driven by the decline in persistence *after* they exit the CalWORKs program.

The preceding analysis examines how an individual student performs while enrolled in a CalWORKs program compared to their outcomes in other terms. This is important for isolating the effect of the program. However, we also find systematic differences across demographic groups in these term-level outcomes. African American and Latino CalWORKs students have lower rates of full-time enrollment, persistence, and completion relative to white CalWORKs students; older students have slightly better outcomes on each of these measures.

## Expanding Career Pathways for CalWORKs Students

On average, CalWORKs students complete 27 units while they are enrolled in college CalWORKs programs, even though less than a quarter earn a credential within three years. About one-third of our sample of students

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<sup>19</sup> Survey data collected on supports offered in CalWORKs programs is at the college level: we can see which services a given college's CalWORKs program offers, but we learned from the survey that many services are not taken up by all students due to capacity constraints and/or preferences. For this reason, we cannot link college-level program services with student outcomes in a convincing manner.

pursued career education programs, based on the courses they completed—and while career education CalWORKs students have slightly higher rates of completing a credential, fewer than three in ten earned a credential. Connecting CalWORKs students with well-defined credential pathways could help more students to complete a credential. (Bohn and McConville 2018).

In past work, we detailed economic returns for students who followed various career education pathways—and found that students who completed even short-term credentials (those that require 6–29 units) saw higher earnings, on average, although there are large differences across programs (Bohn, Jackson, and McConville 2019). Health credentials conferred the most value by far in terms of raising future earnings, followed by credentials in public and protective services (includes firefighting and law enforcement) and engineering (includes automotive repair and construction trades) fields. Conversely, credentials in business and in family and consumer science fields offered far less value and economic mobility—and these are the most dominant fields CalWORKs students pursue.<sup>20</sup>

Students and program directors need access to this type of information when they explore education and career pathway options. Combined with informing students about local job openings, better connections with regional employers could help to direct CalWORKs students to better jobs and increased economic mobility. The Guided Pathways initiative, which is designed to connect community college students to clear pathways for attaining their career goals, should provide the tools and framework for enhanced advising and guidance.

## Revisiting Work Study Opportunities

Work study has been one of the core components of college CalWORKs programs since its inception. In addition, work study is a key strategy to help students who receive cash assistance complete post-secondary training while gaining relevant work experience (Administration of Children and Families 2016). Despite its promise, few CalWORKs students use work study. Funding constraints—driven at least in part by inequitable Federal Work Study (FWS) funding allocations that heavily favor four-year, private colleges and disadvantage two-year, public colleges—is undoubtedly a factor (Scott-Clayton and Zhou 2017). But there may be other reasons, such as difficulty colleges have with connecting to external employers to identify available job opportunities.

In recent years, only about 1 in 15 CalWORKs students were placed in work-study jobs—the vast majority of which were on-campus. Only about 16 percent of CalWORKs students participating in work-study programs had off-campus jobs (CCCCO 2019). About two-thirds of work-study funding for CalWORKs students comes from the FWS program, with the remaining one-third split evenly between the California state work-study program and other sources of funding (i.e., local matching funds).<sup>21</sup>

Expanding work-study opportunities will undoubtedly be challenging given the current state of the economy. In past recessions, budgets for community college CalWORKs programs declined sharply—including funds allocated to work-study programs. And FWS funding allocations have dropped by 25 percent in real dollars since 2000 (Scott-Clayton and Zhou 2017).

Despite the challenges, connecting CalWORKs students to relevant work experience—especially in industries that offer opportunities to move along a career pathway—will be a vital step to keep low-income parents from falling further behind amid the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing recession (Silva, Horton, and Pisano 2020). One way college CalWORKs programs could do this is by engaging with Strong Workforce regional collaboratives—

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<sup>20</sup> There may be many reasons why CalWORKs students do or do not pursue certain career pathways. For example, health courses may be harder to get into due to impacted programs or more difficult pre-requisites. And students may pursue early childhood education credentials because it allows them to take care of their young children while also working.

<sup>21</sup> Based on authors' analysis of MIS data on financial aid receipt for the CalWORKs student sample examined in this report.

created to expand and improve career education pathways in the community college system—to identify more career pathway opportunities for their students (CCCCO 2018b).

## Conclusion

Improving the educational outcomes and economic mobility of its students is a central goal of California’s community college system as outlined in their Vision of Success. As more California families face economic hardships resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding how best to support low-income student parents in acquiring education and training is crucial. Our analysis of CalWORKs student parents—arguably some of the most disadvantaged students—can provide insights to better advance low-income parents through the community college system, the CalWORKs program, or both.

Most colleges offer robust services and supports to CalWORKs students enrolled at their institutions. However, some of these services also face capacity constraints, particularly for things like child care centers and work study, and are unable to serve all students who have a need. Access to services also varies greatly across colleges as measured by how often students make use of these services according to CalWORKs program directors.

While outcomes improved for students in terms they are enrolled in CalWORKs compared to terms when they are not, it is difficult to ascertain which services may be contributing. Given the limitations of linking service use to individual students, our data does not paint a detailed picture of which supports connect to better outcomes. Nonetheless, students do better in terms they are enrolled in college CalWORKs programs, which suggests that the core set of services—coordination, academic and personal counseling, case management—likely helps students to meet term-level outcomes. More focused, well-designed evaluations of CalWORKs programs—evaluations that can connect individual students to particular services—would provide a stronger evidence base to guide CalWORKs program offerings and to target funding.

Finally, colleges may be able to strengthen career pathways for CalWORKs students and better connect them to employment opportunities. Colleges should consider how to leverage funding and collaborations under the Strong Workforce program to target career pathway programs for CalWORKs students. In addition, ongoing evaluations of career education pathway programs may provide more robust evidence of what works to improve outcomes for low-income students. One program, Year Up—which has sites at California community colleges and combines career education programs with six-month paid internships—may offer some early insights even though it targets young adults (Fein and Hamadyk 2019).

While difficult during state budget crises, leveraging existing funding, such as federal and state work study, or partnerships with other workforce training programs such as local workforce development boards, could benefit CalWORKs students and other low-income parents. These efforts may help disadvantaged students gain the necessary training and connections to seek out better jobs when the economy begins to turn around.

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