

# School's In for Summer?

## The Effect of Encouraging Summer Community College Enrollment

Scott Carrell<sup>2</sup>, Michal Kurlaender<sup>1</sup>, Paco Martorell<sup>1</sup>, and Christina Sun<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of California, Davis, <sup>2</sup>University of Texas, Austin

January 5, 2026

*The research reported here was conducted under research partnership agreements between the University of California, Davis (Michal Kurlaender, PI) and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, the California Student Aid Commission, and the California Department of Education, respectively. The research funding was provided by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A180227 (Francisco Martorell, PI) to the Regents of the University of California. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute of Education Sciences, the U.S. Department of Education, or of the agencies providing data.*

**These results are preliminary – please do not tweet or cite without authors' permission**

# Motivation

- Community college is a key higher education sector
  - Almost half of undergraduate enrollment
  - CC's serve disproportionately low SES students
- Completion rates at community colleges low
  - 43% 6-yr completion rate (67% at public 4yr)
- Low community college completion rates are costly
  - Large returns to community college completion
  - Gaps in completion rates limit economic mobility

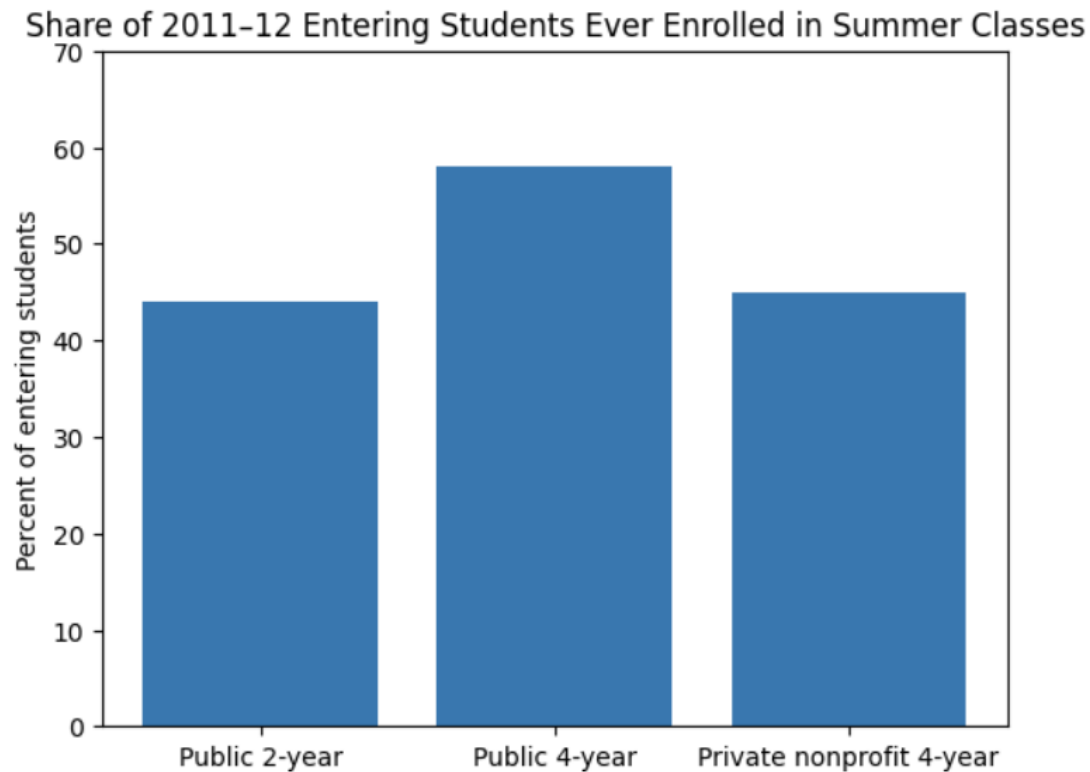
# Motivation

- Several interrelated challenges may play a role
  - Financial hardship
  - Part-time enrollment prevalent ( $\frac{2}{3}$  of CC students)
  - Summer melt
- Part-time enrollment
  - Increases time to degree
  - More time for “life shocks” that derail students
- “Full time” enrollment not enough to finish “on time”
  - “Full time” = 12 units/sem, need 15+ to finish on time
- Summer Melt
  - Students often disengage from college plans during the summer after HS
- One Potential Policy Lever: CC Summer School

# Summer College Enrollment Is Common — But Early Take-Up Is Low

- A substantial share of college students take summer courses, but participation is far from universal
  - ~30% of students at two-year colleges
  - ~21% at four-year colleges (Attewell & Jang, 2013)
- Nearly half of postsecondary entrants ever take at least one summer course (NCES BPS:12)
- Only about one-fifth enroll in summer courses near initial college entry (NCES BPS:12).

# National Prevalence of Summer College Enrollment



Source: Attewell & Jang (2013), NCES BPS

# California CC Summer Enrollment

- California is the largest community college system in the country
  - Roughly 1 in 5 CC students are in CA
- Summer enrollment at California Community Colleges averages 12% of total annual enrollment and reaches 20% in some districts (California Legislative Analyst's Office)

# Prior Research on College Summer Enrollment

- Academic momentum (Attewell & Jang, 2013)
  - Students who enroll in summer courses accumulate more credits and are more likely to persist and complete degrees
- Financial incentives (Brownback & Sadoff, 2024)
  - Randomized summer scholarships substantially increase summer enrollment and accelerate degree completion and transfer among CC students
- Summer Melt (Castleman & Page, 2014a; 2014b)
  - Targeted interventions during this period can meaningfully affect enrollment outcomes
- Early credit accumulation (Adelman, 2006)
  - Descriptive evidence shows that earning credits early in college—including during summer terms—is strongly associated with higher rates of degree completion

# Our Research Question

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- Can a low-cost informational nudge increase summer community college enrollment among college-bound high school seniors?

# Randomized Information Experiment

- Randomized field experiment embedded in a statewide FAFSA/CADAA senior survey in May 2023
  - 4% response rate
- 8,200 California high school seniors randomly assigned to treatment or control

# The Information Treatment

1. All students were asked if they intended to enroll in summer school
2. Half of students were then asked:

Did you know that taking college classes this summer could help you finish college faster and save money along the way?

At your local community college:

- There are many in-person and online options.
- Credits from most classes can be transferred to a UC/CSU.
- Many students qualify for free tuition.

# The Information Treatment

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3. After treatment, respondents were asked:

“After taking this information into account, how likely are you to take college classes this summer” with response options on a five point Likert scale (“Definitely not” ... “Definitely will”).

# Data

- Survey data on intentions merged with administrative records from CCC
- Outcomes:
  - immediate (change) in intention to enroll in summer courses
  - any summer enrollment
  - units attempted, units earned, GPA (conditional on enrollment)

# Results

- Intentions: Higher likelihood reporting intention to enroll in summer courses
  - Confirms salience of the information nudge
- Enrollment: Increased by 1.2 percentage points
  - 17% increase relative to control mean
  - ~50 additional students induced to enroll
- Credits Earned: Increased by 0.062 credits
  - 23% increase relative to control mean
  - Each additional student nudged to enroll, earned approximately 4 units

# Results

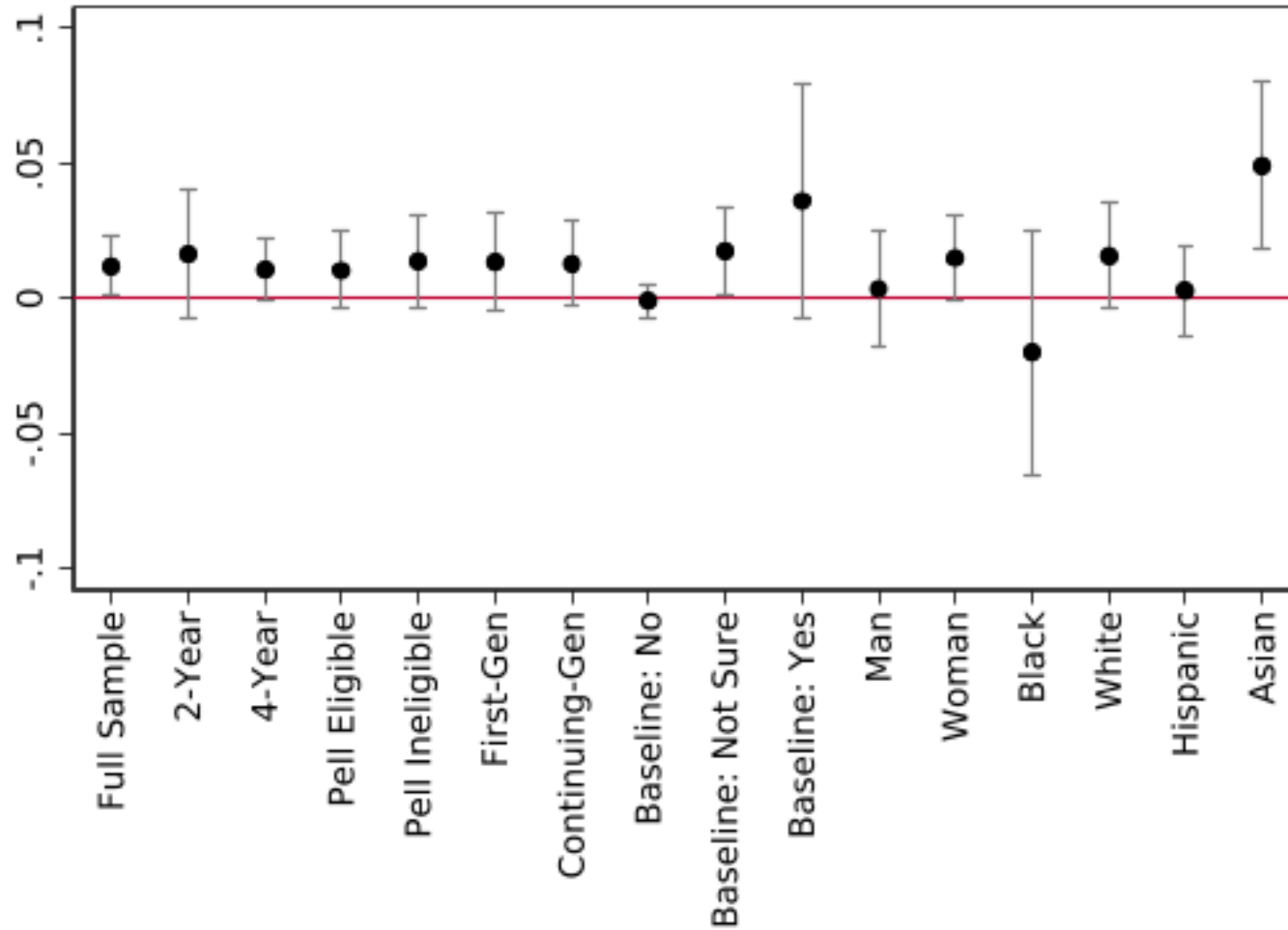
	(1) Enrolled in Community College Summer School	(2) Units Attempted	(3) Units Earned
Summer Nudge Treatment	0.012** (0.006)	0.055* (0.030)	0.062** (0.027)
Mean of Y	0.063	0.273	0.232
Individual Controls	No	No	No

# Who Responds Most?

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- Larger effects for women and students with higher baseline likelihood of summer enrollment
- Little difference by intended two-year versus four-year pathway

# Who Responds Most?



# Robustness: Results With and Without Controls

- Results are not sensitive to inclusion of demographics, GPA, or income measures
  - Summer enrollment effect remains  $\approx +1.2$  percentage points across specifications w/controls
  - Units attempted and units earned effects are similar with and without controls

# Policy Implications

- Low-cost, informational nudges can shift summer enrollment behavior
  - Information frictions appear to be a small, but potentially important barrier
- Easily scalable
  - CSAC and CCCs already communicate with students during FAFSA/CADAA filing

# Next Steps

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- Examine longer run outcomes
  - Persistence, credit accumulation, time-to-degree, and transfer
- Replicate findings (aspirational)
- Expand messaging through CSAC beyond graduating seniors (aspirational)