

San Mateo County Community College District: Considerations of Class Size and Class Cancellation Faculty Response Paper

I. INTRODUCTION




The faculty from Cañada College, College of San Mateo, and Skyline College would like to thank the San Mateo County Community College District Board of Trustees for the opportunity to engage in the study and conversation around class size/class cancellations. We acknowledge that we have read the *SMCCD Considerations for Class Size and Class Cancellation* board report provided by the Vice Chancellor of Educational Services and Planning, Aaron McVean. As a faculty body, we would like to provide the following information to further the discussion and provide areas the District can further investigate before changing Board Policy 6.04.

As faculty we are approaching this document with a few baseline assumptions:

1. That everyone involved shares a goal to maintain a District that can be both student-centered and makes effective use of our resources as they are not mutually exclusive
2. That we all share a responsibility for the current level of efficiency as documented in the *SMCCD Considerations for Class Size and Class Cancellation* board report
3. That, as a community funded District, we all are accountable to taxpayers as fiscal stewards.

II. MISSION, VISION, AND VALUES

San Mateo County Community College District is comprised of three colleges that may seem similar in their efforts to provide quality education, but in reality have three very distinctive cultures. This can be seen in their mission, vision, and value statements.

College	Mission Statement	Vision Statement	Values Statement
<p>Cañada College</p> 	<p>Cañada College engages and empowers students in transforming their lives and communities through quality education.</p>	<p>Cañada College provides equitable education such that students from diverse backgrounds are able to achieve their educational goals and benefit the world.</p>	<p>Valuing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social Justice & Racial Equity ● Transforming Lives ● Community Partnerships ● Academic Excellence ● Sustainability ● Transparency & Authenticity ● Adaptability & Resilience ● Student-Centered ● Cultural Empathy
<p>College of San Mateo</p> 	<p>We are the community's college. College of San Mateo creates access and inclusion, fosters academic excellence, and ensures equitable outcomes so students can realize their full potential.</p>	<p>To deliver a liberatory education that inspires individual achievement and generational impacts.</p>	<p>Valuing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Accountability ● Authentic Care ● Celebration ● Critical Reflection ● Empowerment ● Excellence ● Growth (Personal & Professional) ● Inspiration & Innovation ● Integrity ● Solidarity
<p>Skyline College</p> 	<p>To empower and transform a global community of learners.</p>	<p>Skyline College inspires a global and diverse community of learners to achieve intellectual, cultural, social, economic and personal fulfillment.</p>	<p>Education is the foundation of our democratic society.</p> <p>Valuing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social Justice ● Campus Climate ● Open Access ● Student Success and Equity ● Academic Excellence ● Community Partnerships ● Partnership ● Participatory Governance ● Sustainability

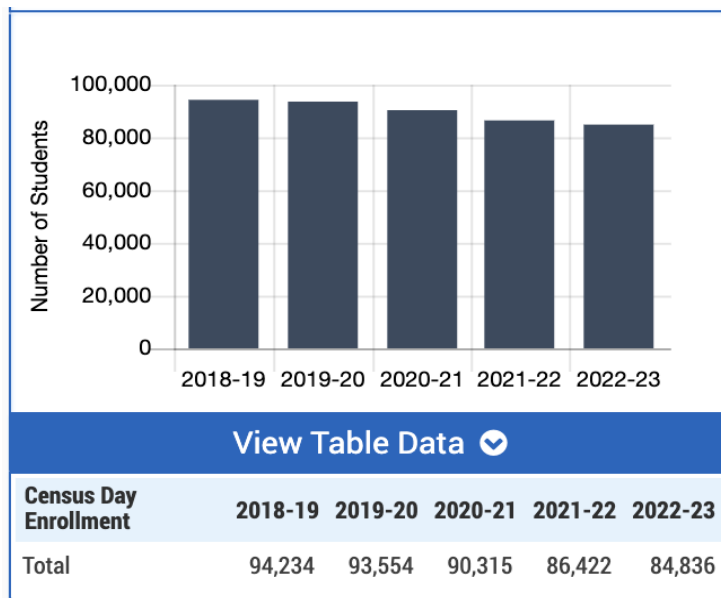
From this chart, it is evident that all three colleges are united in their goals of providing access to a transformational and liberatory education rooted in social justice and racial equity, and robust liberal arts education is a foundation for the achievement of these values. As faculty, we want to see a class cancellation/class size board policy that affirms this same commitment and doesn't simply focus on completion and dollar signs as a measure of efficiency.

III. THE CURRENT SITUATION

As stated in the *SMCCCD Considerations for Class Size and Class Cancellation* board report, “Over the past decade, the District has experienced a continuous enrollment decline. At the same time, the average class size and section fill rates have also continued to decline, despite reductions in section offerings.” (pg. 2). While we don't dispute smaller class sizes in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, we think it is important to also examine the demographics of San Mateo County. For example, when examining longitudinal enrollment trends for San Mateo County, we see a declining student population in Grades 1 - 12. According to Census Data Enrollment information retrieved from the [Ed Data website](#) on November 2, 2023, total student enrollments¹ in San Mateo County have declined 9,398 since the 2018-2019 academic year (Figure 1). This decline in enrollments will significantly impact SMCCCD enrollments as well. With fewer students coming through elementary and high schools (feeder schools), the pipeline of enrollments to SMCCCD becomes smaller (Figure 2). Faculty feel this also deserves consideration when determining a board policy on class cancellations/class minimums.

Figure 1

This graph displays the primary enrollment for San Mateo county. Census Day Enrollment is measured by counting the number of students enrolled in school on the first Wednesday in October. *Note: Prior to 2020-21, these counts did not include short-term enrollments.*



¹ * Includes Alternative, Charter, Community Day, Continuation, County Community, District Office, Elementary, High School, Juvenile Court, K-12, Middle, Nonpublic/Nonsectarian, and Special Education Schools

Figure 1 Source: Data collected by the California Department of Education (CDE) through the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). Aggregate data files are provided by the CDE – Data Reporting Office at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesenr.asp>. Counts of students in charter schools and traditional district schools were taken from the FRPM data file at <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/filessp.asp>.

Figure 2

This graph shows the count of K-12 public school students in San Mateo county by grade. Note: Prior to 2020-21, these counts did not include **short-term enrollments**.

View Table Data 					
Census Day Enrollment by Grade	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Grade 1	7,091	6,918	6,536	6,124	5,942
Grade 10	7,363	7,428	7,090	7,092	6,762
Grade 11	7,216	7,395	7,318	6,982	7,154
Grade 12	7,235	7,490	7,664	7,778	7,472
Grade 2	7,190	7,031	6,700	6,186	6,076
Grade 3	7,225	7,181	6,823	6,380	6,112
Grade 4	6,826	7,156	6,954	6,509	6,336
Grade 5	7,166	6,712	6,949	6,637	6,405
Grade 6	6,981	7,005	6,462	6,449	6,382
Grade 7	7,345	6,903	6,807	6,266	6,355
Grade 8	7,204	7,304	6,748	6,529	6,253
Grade 9	7,336	7,171	7,187	6,668	6,492
Kindergarten	8,056	7,860	7,077	6,822	7,095
Total	94,234	93,554	90,315	86,422	84,836

Figure 2 Source: Data collected by the California Department of Education (CDE) through the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). Aggregate data files are provided by the CDE – Data Reporting Office at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesenr.asp>.

Additionally, we agree that the COVID-19 global pandemic exacerbated this situation as the total population within San Mateo County declined (Figure 3). According to data retrieved from the [USA Facts website](#) on November 2, 2023, “The county’s largest decline was between 2020-2021 when the population dropped 3.2%.” This we believe coincides with the “*sharper declines in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 academic years*” reported on page 2 of the *SMCCD Considerations for Class Size and Class Cancellation* board report.

Figure 3

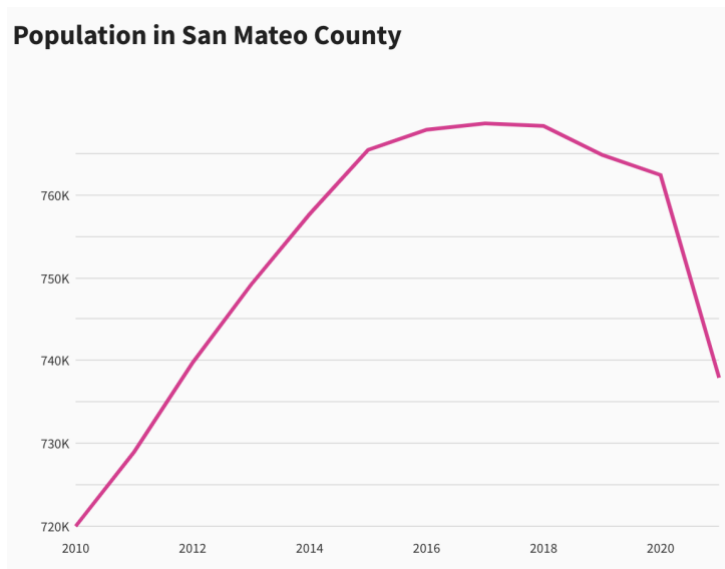
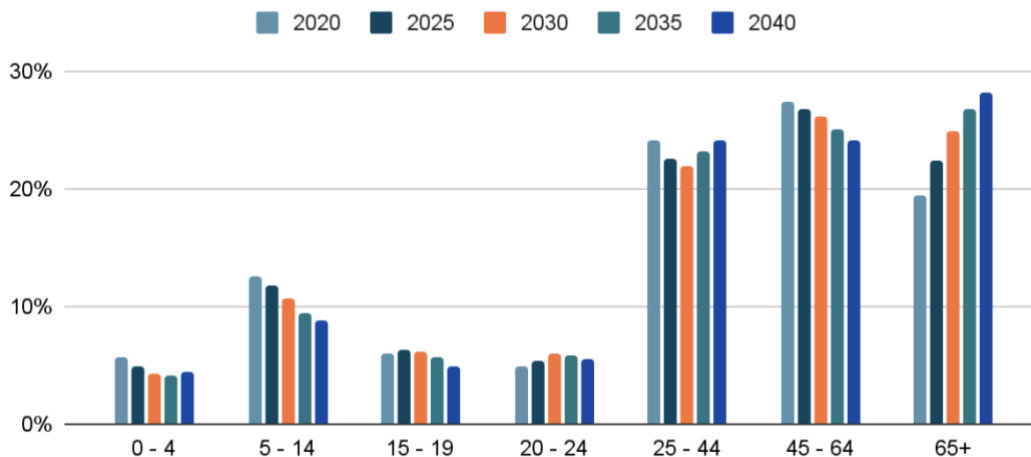


Figure 3 Source: US Census Bureau

While San Mateo County’s overall population has grown since 2010, it is not matching the growth of California or the United States. “San Mateo County’s population grew 2.5% from the 719,948 people who lived there in 2010. For comparison, the population in the US grew 7.3% and the population in California grew 5.1% during that period” (USA Facts). If this trend continues, San Mateo County could expect minimal growth over the next decades (Figure 4). Faculty will not begin to proffer the reasons for the population decline, but feel it is a reality that our District faces and needs to be taken into account when examining and discussing any board policies on class cancellations and class minimums.

Figure 4

San Mateo County Population Projections by Age Group, 2020 to 2040



Source: State of California, Department of Finance, P-2B State and County Population Projections 2010-2060, <http://>

Thus, the San Mateo Community College District should be planning for the future of our county, in which our population is projected to remain relatively stable but increase in age. It seems that trying to increase productivity through increased enrollments would only help the District budget minimally (through marginal increases in categorical funding) and could even increase costs to the District budget (if more students are making use of Tier 2 SB 893 costs). Instead, a policy that lowers class minimums will help navigate the general demographic changes and also allow us to explore new programs that meet our changing community needs.

IV. THE 525 PRODUCTIVITY (LOAD) MEASURE

Given the current educational landscape in 2023, faculty across the District feel that the 525 productivity (load) measure has become an unrealistic target to determine efficiency for any community college, whether community supported or state apportioned. As such, the following are instances in which the 525 productivity (load) measure is problematic and ultimately does not serve students.

First, as a District, it is important to acknowledge that we have been operating below the 525 productivity (load) measure since the 2012 - 2013 academic year. Per the chart on page 6 of the *SMCCD Considerations for Class Size and Class Cancellation* board report, in status quo, with Board Policy 6.04 currently requiring a minimum class size of 20, we would be operating at a 300 productivity (load). This further emphasizes that the 525 productivity (load) measure is out-of-step with transforming community colleges to serve all of our communities.

Second, our colleges offer many well-enrolled CTE and externally accredited programs of study to students (ie Anesthesia Technology, Automotive, Barbering, Cosmetology, Dental Assisting, Early Childhood Education, Esthetics, Interior Design, Medical Assisting, Paralegal, Radiologic Technology, Real Estate, Surgical Technology² etc.). The offering of these programs allows the District to be responsive to community and workforce needs, and enables students to transition into the workforce making livable wages in typically fewer semesters of study. Many times, our District does not get to set class enrollment numbers as they are established by the accrediting agencies/bodies. For example, the Surgical Technology program requires lab courses to have a 10:1 student to teacher ratio to maintain accreditation. This means that no matter what productivity (load) measure or minimum course number is chosen by the workgroup, these lab courses will always have to operate at a 150 productivity (load)/10 student course number unless the District is opting to no longer offer the programs to students. However, this would seem counterintuitive to the California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) Vision 2030³ goal of, "70% of working-aged Californians having a postsecondary degree or certificate by 2030." Faculty strongly believe that with this new goal that the CCCCCO is advocating for

² This is not an exhaustive list of all CTE or externally accredited programs within the San Mateo County Community College District, but meant to provide an example of some programs that would be impacted.

³ <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/docs/report/Vision-2030-A-Roadmap-for-California-Community-Colleges.pdf?la=en&hash=3B83F5221C4A7A8BEFA7E94D5BCBF540D2718013>

an increase in all degree/certificate completion, not just ones that can meet a 525 productivity (load) measure. As a result, faculty request, in the revisions to the class cancellation/class minimum policy, a commitment from the Board to continue to offer these programs and an allowance for them to run at lower numbers that are specifically tied to Career Technical Education and external accreditation requirements.

Third, our colleges, upholding our mission, vision, and values, offer students many opportunities to experience a liberal arts education through a variety of general education course and program offerings (Art, History, Languages, Literature, Math, Music, Philosophy, Science, and Sociology⁴). Faculty in these areas do not deny that many times these courses can be lower enrolled. The reasons why they do not fill as much or as fast as other disciplines is complex, but one consistent trend that higher education has seen over the years is that disciplines/courses that teach the histories and knowledge produced by marginalized groups do not fill as fast, because of their peripheral position within the institution and systemically racist ideals in higher education that hold them to the same enrollment/productivity (load) requirements as other disciplines. There are [additional studies](#) that suggest that focusing so tightly on class size misses needed attention on more nuanced details about student needs that are swept aside, particularly student equity needs. It takes time to build liberal arts programming and communities on campuses in a way that reflects *what we want to become*: antiracist and equity driven institutions. For example, we should not be the institution that cuts LGBTQ+ Literature before the start of the semester with ten students already enrolled (which happened at College of San Mateo in Fall 2019). Class cancellations such as these can send a message to students that they are not worthy of an enriching, liberatory, transformative, liberal arts education that explores the economic, racial, and social realities they experience. Furthermore, courses like Asian American literature, Black literature, and Queer literature are only offered every other year, because they are “competing” for students due to a higher class minimum that determines whether the course is canceled. When taking into account liberal arts disciplines, there is a positive pedagogical case to be made for smaller class sizes on its own terms: The [National Council of Teachers of English](#) (NCTE) recommends 15 as the upper limit for effective college writing instruction courses, and 13 for students who need extra support. Research in foreign language courses ([ACTFL](#)), English composition and literature courses ([ADE](#)) and other disciplines ([NEPC](#)) suggests that reducing class size has a strong correlation with increased student success metrics. This is an opportunity for San Mateo County Community College District to move past a 525 productivity (load) measure and intentionally support the innovative, single-section courses that may fill more slowly upholding our values of social justice, racial equity, and access. As a result, faculty request, in the revisions to the class cancellation/class minimum policy, a commitment from the Board to continue to offer a breadth of liberal arts and general education programs and an allowance for them to continue at lower numbers.

⁴ This is not an exhaustive list of all Liberal Arts or General Education disciplines within the San Mateo County Community College District, but meant to provide an example of some disciplines that would be impacted.

Fourth, programs like English, ESL, Languages, Math, and STEM fields⁵ require students to enroll in sequential courses. It is common for higher level courses in these programs to not benefit from “general education” student enrollment. This means that course enrollment is based on the number of students in that specific program of study, in a given year, that persist through the sequence. Faculty want to clarify that lower enrollments, in this instance, are not a result of ineffective pedagogy, modality, or scheduling issues, but simply that lower course numbers are based on major only students. Additionally, many CSU’s and UC’s, especially in STEM, have specific transfer course requirements. As not all students persisting will be transferring to that specific institution, it can also reduce the overall number of students enrolled in the courses. We acknowledge that Board Policy 6.04 states, *“Certain classes with enrollments of twenty (20) or fewer, for example required sequential courses, single sessions required for a major, and classes in facilities which will not accommodate twenty (20) students, will be carefully reviewed in consultation with discipline faculty and, if offered, will be balanced against large classes.”* While it seems to make an exception for sequential courses, a policy with room for interpretation by college administration leaves an opportunity for the policy to be implemented inconsistently. For example, the wording of this exception to cancellation leaves English as a Second Language (ESL/ESOL) courses in a precarious position. ESL as a discipline is not tied directly to a degree or certificate. The bulk of ESL courses are non-transferable and thus cannot be tied to certificate/degree pathways, which could lead to an interpretation that they are not “required.” However, they are sequential, and if a student’s ESL class is canceled, they have no way to complete the sequence. This is most significant when it is the lowest levels that are canceled. This issue was particularly apparent in Fall 2019 (pre-pandemic and pre-MOU) when 8 sections of ESL were canceled at College of San Mateo, including all classes in Level 2 (low-intermediate level). These cancellations wiped out an entire level of the program, and as ESL is sequential and Level 2 ESL is not offered at all of our campuses, students had nowhere to go in the District. We either lost those students forever, or they had to wait (which can sometimes be multiple semesters) until we could gather enough enrollment to offer the class again to help students move forward in their educational sequence. We provide this specific example, because these course cancellations were enacted after conversations with administration about faculty concerns for students and with a Board Policy that allows for this exception; further demonstrating the inconsistency in interpretation. More importantly, this is an adult, community population that we have committed to serving, so to send the message that their Community Colleges is not a place they can complete and find success is problematic. Lastly, when charting the Guided Pathway for any given major that requires sequential courses, there is practically zero room for contingencies like class cancellations and a “timely completion.” This is another area faculty feel the 525 productivity (load) measure is not responsive to student needs. As a result, faculty request, in the revisions to the class cancellation/class minimum policy, a commitment from the Board to continue to offer sequential courses and programs an allowance for running at lower numbers.

⁵ This is not an exhaustive list of all sequential programs within the San Mateo County Community College District, but meant to provide an example of some programs that would be impacted.

For these four reasons, faculty believe any discussion the District has pertaining to class cancellation/class size needs to move away from the unrealistic 525 productivity (load) as a measure of efficiency and seriously consider a lower class minimum number.

V. AREAS FOR FUTURE EXPLORATION

As we look to the future, faculty are eager to collaborate with other constituent groups to determine a way forward with class cancellations/class minimums. As such, we are committed to appointing faculty representatives from each college to participate in the Interim Chancellor's Workgroup, as we agree with the statement made in the *SMCCD Considerations for Class Size and Class Cancellation* board report that, "It is incumbent upon the District to consider alternate approaches and agree on a best practice that mitigates negative impacts of class cancellation on students, faculty, and fiscal sustainability" (pg. 11).

As this document is a joint effort of faculty across the District, the following are some of the areas/questions faculty would like the workgroup to consider in their studies and ultimate recommendations for further investigation:

1. The District adopting a productivity (load) measure that is more representative of the current educational landscape with which to discuss class cancellations, efficiency, and fiscal stability.
2. The District reconsidering the cancellation timeline as a "one timeline fits all programs" as the cost of CTE program and lab supplies, high textbook costs, and student populations can change when students choose to enroll for classes
3. A District procedure that *automatically* enrolls every student in a canceled class section into another section of the same course, on the same day/time and in the same modality. Without an automatic mechanism to re-enroll students, the onus is on students to find a place in another section of the course that may not have room or may not exist. Could there be a built-in consultation with a Counselor? Can we change the official guidance on WebSchedule for classes they might try and join after the start of the semester from "Contact instructor" to something more helpful. Without these measures we are making students, who may have especially high anxiety and low institutional confidence, cold email professors to see if they can add the class as a sort of "favor," which seems a completely inequitable dynamic.
4. After a section is canceled, building in more openings within the classes offered on the original schedule, so that students—who are not late, and have done nothing wrong—are not shut out of classes they need to complete their degrees.
5. The *SMCCD Considerations for Class Size and Class Cancellation* board report focuses on one piece of our current Board policy: "The District's Colleges will organize classes in as efficient a manner as possible." Can we also explore what, "consistent with good instructional practices and the needs of students" means to the District.
6. While Board Policy 6.04 states, "Classes with fewer than twenty (20) students will normally be canceled or merged with another section," how often are sections being "merged"?

7. Students with work and family obligations (that is to say, virtually all of them), it is essential to be able to plan their work shifts, commute plans, and childcare options around their class schedules, and vice versa, with as much lead time as possible. A class cancellation in this context is devastating. They cannot improvise new plans for their whole lives.
8. Will tying class minimums to class maximums create an incentive/pressure to argue for lower class maximums for non-pedagogical reasons?
9. Will using class maximums and an enrollment percentage for a class to “run” make it more difficult for students to know if a particular class is in danger of being canceled and lead to more implicit registration avoidance behavior?
10. Creating a class minimum policy that uses a low general number, as a single low number may be the simplest way to communicate the policy to students and employees.
 - a. Is presenting a single low number the simplest way to reduce the number of sections that are canceled each semester?
 - b. Would a single low number build and maintain the trust of our students when they register for classes?
 - c. Are small class sizes effective for marketing and enrollment?
11. Explore strategic scheduling collaboratively across the district
 - a. How often are class schedules rolled over from semester to semester with minimal changes?
 - b. How often are their duplicate courses offered at the same time, day of week and modality across all 3 colleges?
 - c. Is there a way to be creative with course scheduling that does not put institutions in competition with another?
12. Data collection and reporting
 - a. When students re-enroll in courses, what are their course success and retention rates?
 - b. What is the persistence and success rates of students who enroll in a late start course post class cancellations?
 - c. Can we disaggregate class cancellation impact using Student Educational Plans (SEPs), program maps, and completion goals?
 - d. How have past cancellations affected disproportionately impacted populations?
 - e. Would increasing productivity through a reduction in the number of class sections offered impact degree/certification completion for students?
 - f. Is the District relying too much on late-start classes to capture student enrollment for those caught up in class cancellations? Additionally, do late start courses further exacerbate already known equity gaps?

This list represents only a sampling of faculty questions and ideas for exploration. As stated above, we look forward to future district-wide dialogue and collaboration with the alternative approaches and examples from other Colleges and Districts presented in *The SMCCD Considerations for Class Size and Class Cancellation* board report.

VI. CONCLUSION

As we think back to the values of each institution presented in section II. of this document, the faculty believe these to not just be performative words on paper, but how we intrinsically frame and approach the work we do as educators as evidenced through each of our Educational Master Plans. These plans are directly tied to the District Strategic Initiatives, so we feel it reaffirms the commitments the faculty, District and Board of Trustees have made. By considering allowing certain programmatic, liberal arts, and sequential courses to run at lower enrollments the Board has the opportunity to ensure educational continuity, wrap-around services, and life stability taking a concrete step towards a kind of systemic equity that is enshrined in policy and process. In closing, we feel it is important for us all to take accountability for the current situation. We enter into this discussion and work in good faith that there is a collective commitment from the board and faculty to work towards increasing enrollment, while centering the well-being of students.

CONTACT

For questions related to this report, please contact Lindsey Ayotte, District Academic Senate President, ayottel@smccd.edu.