

California Community College Catalogs: Student Guide or Student Jungle?



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All community colleges have a catalog, from their first proud copy heralding the institution's launch to annual editions calibrated with the academic calendar. Most open with a welcome message like these extolling the value of the catalog:

The Course Catalog is your guide to understanding all that we offer. . .

The information in this catalog is designed to help you refine your educational goals. . .

The college catalog is a vital resource for you as a [XXX] College student.

Unfortunately, our recent review of catalogs from California community colleges suggests these documents may not live up to their aspirations as vital guides for students' educational journeys. Using the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education listing of California public two-year colleges as 52 % large (FTE enrollment 5,000 or greater), 38% medium (2,000-4,999 FTE), and 10% small (1,999 or fewer FTE), we generated a random, stratified sample of 10 colleges and examined their most recent catalogs. The following findings will not make those who create community college catalogs happy.

What's Inside

In general, we found the catalogs to be crammed with information for a variety of purposes and largely undecipherable unless you know in advance what you are seeking. They offer a hodgepodge of basic and exotic information to ensure nothing is left out. They do not seem written for the benefit of students. In fact, catalogs seem to confuse more than enlighten even college staff, who report making their own versions of catalog sections to better guide students. We find three key barriers to overcome if catalogs are to meet their stated purpose of serving as student guides: excess scope, unbounded choice, and ambiguity of purpose.

Excess Scope

The 10 catalogs we reviewed averaged 308 pages in length, ranging from 165 to 576 pages. The average page length of catalogs from large college was 402 and from medium-sized colleges was 227. The small college catalog in our sample had 165 pages. These data alone suggest they were not designed as *easy guides*. All included standard information: application and admission procedures, academic program listings, degree and course descriptions, graduation requirements, student support services, and academic rules and regulations. All offered academic calendars, costs, departmental contact information, and students' rights and responsibilities, along with extensive student codes of conduct and ominous details of the variety and stages of disciplinary action facing violators.

Unfortunately, the nuts and bolts of how to go to college was largely cloaked in legalistic language or buried under mountains of details about the college and its history, governance, and philosophy, plus stacks of policies and procedures. All were peppered with educational jargon that few new students could be expected to decipher. Approximately 40% of California community college students are first-generation, who likely find terms such as articulation, assessment, accreditation, academic freedom, academic load, credit hour, lower division, prerequisites, corequisites, and registrar, as initially confounding. To be fair, the welcome messages in two catalogs explicitly urged students up front to meet with an academic counselor to help with their plans. Successful students learn to navigate college nomenclature and norms. Yet, why make translating a technical manual the gateway to entry? How many students will plow through 300-plus pages to figure out "*the steps you need to take to move through your studies efficiently and reach your academic and career goals*"?

Unbounded Choice

One problem for students is the unbridled abundance of certificate and degree options and variant descriptors for these options across institutions. These seasoned researchers struggled to make fair comparisons among the catalog offerings. Pity students striving to make informed choices with only a catalog as their handbook. Colleges offer multiform programs, majors, degrees, and certificates, most with multiple choices in the same area of study. One catalog featured 5 full-page charts listing 160 degrees and certificates, including 8 choices just in Early Childhood Education. Overall, the offerings increased with institutional size.

The General Education (GE) Jungle. Students able to zero in on a preferred program of study confront another convoluted decision: selecting a handful of GE courses from a stunning array of course offerings. Among the large colleges, the average number of required GE courses was 8 to be selected from an average of 365 eligible GE course offerings. On average, the medium colleges required 7 GE courses, yet offered 212 from which students could choose.

To make educated choices among the GE assortment, students must read through course descriptions and draw conclusions about which will best prepare them to “participate in a diverse and complex society,” as one college framed it. Students following this roadmap may also be flummoxed to figure which among all the courses listed are available in any given term. That ciphering requires cross-referencing with another guidebook altogether—the course schedule.

The Challenge of Choice. No one advocates for limits on choosing one’s destination or destiny. Thinking of choice as a bad thing is deeply counterintuitive. Don’t we all prefer 31 flavors of ice cream over three? But, if you are anything like the authors, you typically order the same favorite scoops each time you visit the ice cream parlor, despite the options. We are creatures of habit after all. Choice seems premier when it comes to big decisions like what to study in college, but research in behavioral economics and psychology has taught us that too much freedom of choice can lead to *choice paralysis* and unhappiness. According to *Paradox of Choice* author Barry Schwartz, having to choose among many good options activates our powerful drive of *loss aversion* and anxiety about making the wrong choice. Confronting students with dozens of desirable programs and courses may trigger fear of loss rather than the thrill of opportunity.

Ambiguity of Purpose

What is the true aim of a college catalog? Is it a pathway to student success or a compliance manual or an institutional repository? The catalogs we examined served many masters and purposes. One noted its multipronged function as “the general guidance of students, faculty, staff members, prospective students and other educational institutions.” Having an accessible compendium of up-to-date college processes, procedures, people, and programs is handy. Counselors, advisors, outreach, marketing, and public relations staff use them.



Catalogs help institutions keep up with employee lists and college milestones. Regional accreditors require colleges to publicize their purpose, processes, and outcomes; and catalogs served this function long before websites were universal. Accreditors, lawyers, auditors, compliance officers, and college employees all benefit from the smorgasbord of information crammed into catalogs. But one audience appears to have been omitted from catalog design plans: *students*. To be fair, with enough time and coffee (and perhaps a Rosetta Stone), one can winnow wheat from chaff, decipher GE and graduation requirements, and flesh out a degree plan. For community college students slogging through the catalog quagmire, lack of coffee is not their problem.

Digital Progress

All 10 California community colleges we examined offered some form of online catalog. Several provided only downloadable Portable Document Format (PDF) versions of standard print catalogs. Sadly, even those offering web-based versions replicated the shortcomings of their printed precursors. Several added links to fuller information on their website, one arranged catalog information with student-friendly headers such as, “How do I become a student? How do I enroll in courses?” But most were verbatim digital reproductions of their print catalogs. Even more troubling, the catalog information was neither the same nor as student centered as that in other parts of the college website. Financial aid was the best example. The catalogs gave dry, technical descriptions of the complex array of financial aid programs available, plus warnings and rules for repaying funds

if students drop out. College financial aid web pages were abuzz with vibrant photos, how to apply videos, pop-up chatbots in multiple languages, and encouraging “You can afford college!” messages. The contrast was stark.

The current trend to digitize is a no-brainer, and quite frankly, too many community colleges came late to this party. A couple of online catalogs we examined were more student-centric, web-based designs that were searchable and linked to the rich content available throughout the college website. For most, there remains great opportunity to both simplify and focus their content to provide an easy-to-follow roadmap for students or to stop pretending that is its purpose.

Our conclusion is that traditional community college catalogs—intended to convey helpful information to assist students and staff in navigating a complex set of rules, regulations, programs, services—have become overgrown jungles that students, advisors, and faculty have to hack their way through to find the treasure. Across the nation, community colleges are deeply engaged in student-centered reforms buttressed by significant research and resources. Yet, the college catalog has been



Note: This article is adapted from the author's report of a national study of community college catalogs to be published in Inside Higher Ed. The article is being published simultaneously in ASCCC's Rostrum to encourage a statewide conversation on this issue. The views of the authors do not necessarily represent those of the Community College League of California.