



Fast, Flexible Paths for Students

Evaluating Shortened Courses at Community Colleges in Three States

Robert Linden

CALIFORNIA, TENNESSEE, AND VIRGINIA community colleges have expanded shortened-course offerings in recent years, though prevalence varies substantially across colleges within each state. These courses deliver a full semester's worth of material in fewer than the traditional 16 weeks through an accelerated instructional pace. Colleges frequently schedule two 8-week shortened terms that run alongside the full semester, although implementation varies across institutions. Shortened courses give students additional enrollment entry points and the flexibility to build course schedules that meet their learning needs while balancing other responsibilities.

This brief presents new evidence from three large-scale, quasi-experimental studies of shortened courses—Kurlaender, Linden, and Carrell (2026), Li and Xu (2025), and Matheny et al. (2025)—which are the first to evaluate the effectiveness of shortened courses in California, Virginia, and Tennessee community colleges.¹ It also describes implementation of shortened courses across these state contexts, including the policy conditions that drove the expansion of flexible course formats and the institutions, courses, and student groups for which shortened courses are most prevalent. The brief outlines the data and research designs used in each study and compares the estimated effects of shortened courses on student success across states, highlighting differences in outcomes by course modality, course subject, and student group.

Results consistently show that student performance is higher in shortened courses, particularly when they are delivered in person. By contrast, shortened courses delivered online are associated with null-to-negative effects. Impacts on future outcomes are less clear, with some studies finding positive effects and others finding null-to-negative effects. Shortened courses appear to be an effective strategy for bolstering students' college success in the short term, without clear adverse effects on their downstream outcomes.

TOPLINES

- > California, Tennessee, and Virginia community colleges have expanded shortened-course offerings in recent years, though prevalence varies substantially across colleges within each state.
- > Controlling for other factors, researchers find that student course performance is higher in shortened formats than in full-semester formats, on average.
- > Comparing online formats, the California and Virginia studies find that average course performance is lower in shortened formats than full-semester formats.
- > Shortened courses appear to be most beneficial for students of color, low-income students, and students enrolled in STEM courses.



Background

Community colleges are the primary point of entry into higher education for millions of Americans. Despite this critical access function, persistence and completion rates remain low—fewer than half of students who enroll with the intention of earning a credential or transferring do so within six years.² Because community college students frequently stop out at some point on the path to completing a degree or certificate, often due to financial or other personal challenges, shortened courses can reduce delays in academic progress by creating opportunities to enroll throughout the semester. Because many community college students balance working and family responsibilities with coursework, shortened courses may be less disruptive to their schedules than full-semester courses since they require fewer on-campus meetings. For example, students may spend less time commuting to campus over the term and need to adjust other responsibilities for a shorter duration.³

Flexible enrollment calendars can also strengthen college operations by enabling institutions to manage enrollment levels more strategically throughout the semester. As open-enrollment institutions that are funded largely based on enrollment, community colleges are particularly vulnerable to revenue declines when enrollment falls. By creating additional entry points for students who might otherwise not enroll at the start of a traditional term, colleges can stabilize or increase enrollment levels, enabling them to scale programs and services more effectively.

To date, there is limited rigorous evidence on student learning outcomes under accelerated instruction. On the one hand, shortened courses enable students to accumulate units, credentials, and degrees more quickly than in full-semester formats. The accelerated structure may also increase student and instructor engagement by concentrating their focus on fewer courses at a time. On the other hand, some students may struggle with a faster instructional pace, which could result in lower performance in current and subsequent courses. These concerns are particularly salient in community colleges, where students enter with varying levels of academic experience and preparation, including gaps in enrollment. Shortened courses may also reduce students' margin for error since missing even a single class session can leave them substantially behind in course content.⁴

Policy Context

The California, Tennessee, and Virginia community college systems have expanded shortened course offerings in recent years. Many of these changes unfolded in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a significant impact on both students and institutions. Students faced heightened barriers to enrollment, including health concerns, caregiving responsibilities, and financial strain, while community colleges experienced sharp enrollment declines.⁵ Enrollment shares of shortened courses increased from 9% to 18% in California between the 2019–20 and 2024–25 academic years, from 4% to 13% in Tennessee between 2020–21 and 2022–23, and from 23% to 32% in Virginia between 2019–20 and 2024–25.

College leaders and policymakers across California, Tennessee, and Virginia emphasize the importance of expanding flexible enrollment options for community college students, particularly those who are balancing work and caregiving responsibilities.⁶ Because shortened courses are typically scheduled to start at multiple points throughout the semester, students who register late or who cannot attend class at the beginning of the term still have opportunities to enroll and maintain academic progress. Leaders also view these courses as

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an effective tool for managing enrollment levels, a strategy that was important to stem pandemic-related enrollment declines.⁷ They further highlight the potential for shortened courses to improve student success, positing that enrolling in fewer courses at a time may enhance learning and engagement while reducing the risk of burnout.⁸ Additionally, maintaining academic momentum across shorter terms may enable students to complete credentials more quickly.

Implementation of flexible course offerings has varied across states. In California and Tennessee, colleges have led these initiatives, with approaches and uptake differing substantially across colleges. In Virginia, the state has taken a more direct role by requiring all colleges to incorporate shortened sessions into the general studies curriculum—one of several strategies outlined in the Virginia Community College system’s Accelerate Opportunity plan for 2024–30.⁹ While all colleges are creating shortened academic sessions for a set of general education courses, some colleges are also focusing on expanding these sessions in courses outside of general education.¹⁰

Shortened Courses Prevalence by Institution, Subject/Program, and Modality

In each state, colleges exhibit wide variability in the share of course enrollments in shortened formats, ranging from 3% to 97% in California, from 1% to 70% in Tennessee, and from 22% to 78% in Virginia.¹¹

The college systems employ distinct strategies in scheduling shortened sections across subjects and programs. In California colleges, shortened sections are most prevalent in the social sciences, business and management, health, and engineering (21%–37%) and are least prevalent in the physical sciences, mathematics, arts, and humanities (6%–14%). Shortened formats are also more prevalent in career and technical education (CTE) courses (28%) than in non-CTE courses (13%). In Tennessee colleges, shortened sections are most prevalent in business (29%) and are least prevalent in biology, nursing, accounting, and art (7%–8%). In Virginia colleges, shortened sections are most prevalent in social science and applied subjects (roughly 38%) and are least prevalent in the humanities and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses (roughly 26%).

Across the college systems, shortened sections are more likely to be offered in online or hybrid formats than in-person formats.¹² In California colleges, 35% of online sections are shortened, compared to 9% of in-person sections. In Tennessee colleges, 7% of online sections are shortened, compared to 19% of hybrid courses and 3% of in-person courses. In Virginia, 20% of in-person sections are shortened, compared to 52% of online sections and 41% of hybrid sections.¹³

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES ESTIMATING THE EFFECTS OF SHORTENED COURSES

Estimating the impact of shortened courses on student outcomes is complicated by the absence of random assignment of students, courses, and instructors to course formats. Student characteristics may systematically vary across course formats because enrollment in shortened courses reflects a series of student choices. For example, if students with more parenting and working responsibilities have a stronger preference for shortened courses, observed differences in performance across formats may reflect underlying differences in student characteristics rather than the effect of the course format itself. Sorting may also occur within students. For example, a student may enroll in a shortened format when they anticipate that the course content will be less challenging and enroll in the full-semester format when they anticipate greater difficulty.

Course characteristics may also differ by format, reflecting strategic decisions by college leaders about which courses to offer in shortened format. For example, colleges may offer a greater share of shortened sections in online rather than in-person formats because accelerated instruction is more feasible without in-person meetings.

Finally, instructor characteristics may vary across formats due to teaching preferences. For example, tenured faculty often receive priority in course assignments and may prefer to teach the full-semester format with which they are more familiar.

Because observed differences in student outcomes across course formats may partly reflect sorting on student, course, or instructor characteristics, identifying the causal effect of course format on student success requires a rigorous research design that accounts for these potential sources of bias.

Leadership Perspective

How a California College Scaled Shortened Academic Terms to Meet Student Needs

Barstow Community College is a rural-serving institution located in the Mojave Desert region of San Bernadino County that enrolls roughly 5,000 students annually. The college was an early adopter of shortened courses in the California Community College system and now delivers roughly four in five course sections in shortened format.

Barstow Superintendent-President Eva Bagg and staff responded to the author's questions about the institutional context and strategy behind their approach to scaling shortened academic terms.¹⁴

Q: How does your college structure its academic calendar?

A: Barstow structures each primary term around two consecutive 9-week sessions within an 18-week semester, with a spring break and a fall break midway through. Students may enroll in one session, the other, or both, giving them the equivalent of a full semester while preserving the flexibility to engage in a schedule that fits their lives. There are also a small number of full-term traditional sections they can enroll in.

Q: How long has your college used this calendar, and what was the rationale?

A: The college began expanding its 9-week model in the early 2000s, and it has been the dominant scheduling structure for well over a decade. The shift was initially driven by online sections and student feedback. Originally, online courses followed the traditional 18-week semester, but many students reported withdrawing because the courses felt too long. In response, the college piloted shorter course lengths, which received strong positive feedback from students. As a result, the number of shortened courses expanded, two 9-week sessions were added to the academic calendar to split the semester in half, and additional instructional modalities, including traditional face-to-face and hybrid courses, were transitioned into the shortened format.

Q: What benefits and drawbacks do shortened courses present?

A: For students, shorter sessions accelerate progress, reduce the window in which life disruptions can derail enrollment, and allow for quicker course correction between terms. For the institution, the multisession calendar supports more consistent enrollment across each term. By creating multiple enrollment entry points within each term, the college can reach students who might otherwise miss a traditional semester start date while also building stronger academic momentum through shorter, more focused course commitments. The primary drawback is pace; shortened courses demand more from students week to week.

Q: Why are shortened courses suited to Barstow's students and community?

A: Barstow serves a geographically isolated high desert community with a significant military-connected population: active duty personnel, family members, and veterans whose schedules are shaped by deployment cycles, relocations, and caregiving responsibilities that rarely align with an 18-week commitment. The 9-week model allows these students, along with the college's broader working adult population and residents across the vast service area, to make real academic progress within the windows their lives actually allow.



Comparison of Data, Student Outcomes, and Research Methods Across Studies

Each study uses statewide administrative data from the respective state community college system. These datasets include student-by-course enrollment records, along with corresponding grades, section characteristics (e.g., course length and modality), student characteristics (e.g., demographics and Pell Grant receipt), and instructor characteristics (e.g., demographics and employee classification). Differences in shortened course definitions, samples, and student outcomes used across studies are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Key Features of the Studies

	 California	 Tennessee	 Virginia
Sampled terms	Fall and spring semesters in 2018–19 through 2023–24, excluding 2020–21	Fall and spring semesters in 2015–16 through 2021–22	Fall, winter, spring, and summer terms in 2010–11 through 2014–15
Sampled student course enrollments	First-term enrollments for each outcome	Enrollments across all sampled terms for current outcomes; first-term enrollments for future outcomes	First-term enrollments for each outcome
Sample size ¹⁵	2.7 million course enrollments; 1.2 million unique students	3.1 million course enrollments; 338,000 unique students	448,000 course enrollments; 179,000 unique students
Shortened course definition	< 9 weeks	6–8 weeks	< 11 weeks

The studies use different observational periods: The California study samples the most recent student cohorts (2018–19 through 2023–24), followed by Tennessee (2015–16 through 2021–22) and then Virginia (2010–11 through 2014–15). The California and Virginia studies sample course observations in a student’s first term for all outcomes; the Tennessee study uses this restriction for future student outcomes but not current student outcomes.¹⁶ Because there is no widely accepted definition of a shortened course, each study adopts a somewhat different definition based on common course-scheduling practices in its respective state.

Each study uses rigorous statistical modeling to isolate the impact of shortened courses from potentially confounding factors related to students, colleges, courses, sections, and instructors.¹⁷ Section-level controls account for differences in outcomes across course modalities, which is important to the research design because colleges tend to offer a greater share of shortened sections online than in person, and prior research has often found lower student learning outcomes in online courses.¹⁸

Which Student Groups Prefer Shortened Courses?

Each study estimates the likelihood of enrolling in shortened courses across key student subgroups, controlling for factors related to colleges, courses, and terms. These controls isolate differences in student demand for shortened courses from differences in supply (e.g., higher shares of shortened courses in certain colleges or subjects).

Across states, students aged 25 and older are more likely by 2.6–3.5 percentage points to enroll in shortened courses than students age 24 or younger. Part-time students are more likely than full-time students to enroll in shortened courses by 2.5–4.0 percentage points.¹⁹ Differences by race, gender, and Pell Grant receipt are smaller in magnitude and vary in directions across studies.

Estimated Shortened Course Impacts on Student Success

Table 2 shows estimates for key current course outcomes across studies.²⁰ Each study estimates a positive, statistically significant association between enrollment in a shortened course and course passing, but effects vary substantially by modality. The California and Virginia studies find that shortened in-person courses increase the likelihood of passing by 2.2–2.8 percentage points relative to full-semester in-person courses, on average. However, the studies also find that shortened online courses decrease the likelihood of passing by 1.7–1.9 percentage points relative to full-semester courses, on average.²¹ The Tennessee study, which does not disaggregate results by course modality, finds the largest estimated effects of shortened course enrollment on passing outcomes at 5.0 percentage points.

Table 2. Estimated Shortened Course Impacts on Current Course Outcomes Across Studies

Outcome	Estimated Change
California Study	
Pass In-Person Course	2.2pp*
Earn B or Higher in In-Person Course	4.4pp*
Pass Online Course	-1.7pp*
Earn B or Higher in Online Course	-0.01pp
Tennessee Study	
Pass Course (Any Modality)	5.0pp*
Course Withdrawal (Any Modality)	-3.2pp*
Grade Points in Course (Any Modality)	0.2 points*
Virginia Study	
Pass In-Person Course	2.8pp*
Earn C or Higher in In-Person Course	3.6pp*
Pass Online Course	-1.9pp
Earn C or Higher in Online Course	-0.05pp

Notes: “pp” denotes an effect that is measured in percentage points. Asterisk denotes estimate that is statistically significant at the 5% level. Each study compares student outcomes across course sections taught in the same modality. However, the California and Virginia studies estimate effects disaggregated by modality, whereas Tennessee estimates effects aggregated across modalities. Magnitudes and statistical significant are not directly comparable across studies due to differences in outcomes and samples.

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Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the estimated mean course passing rates across shortened and full-semester formats in each college system.²² Across all course formats, estimated passing rates are higher in Tennessee (77%–82%) than in California (63%–71%) and Virginia (60%–78%).

Figure 1. Estimated Mean Course Passing Rates in California Community Colleges

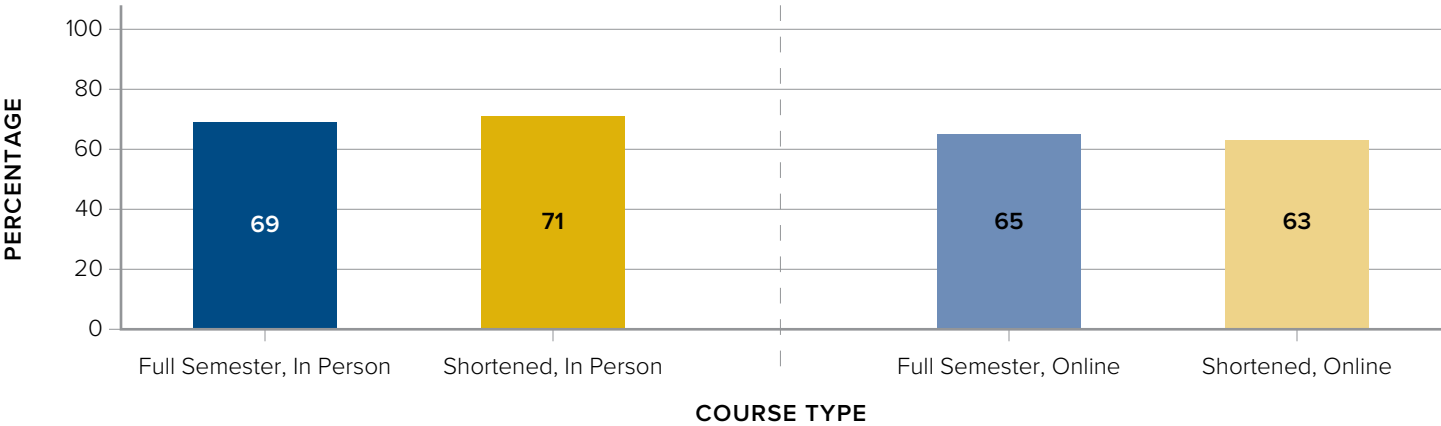


Figure 2. Estimated Mean Course Passing Rates in Tennessee Community Colleges

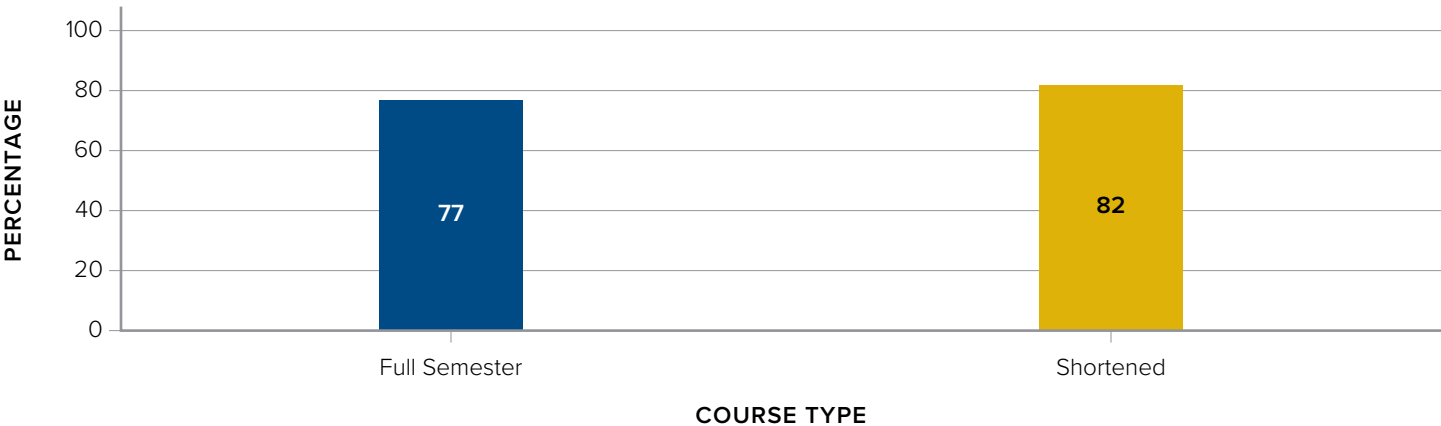
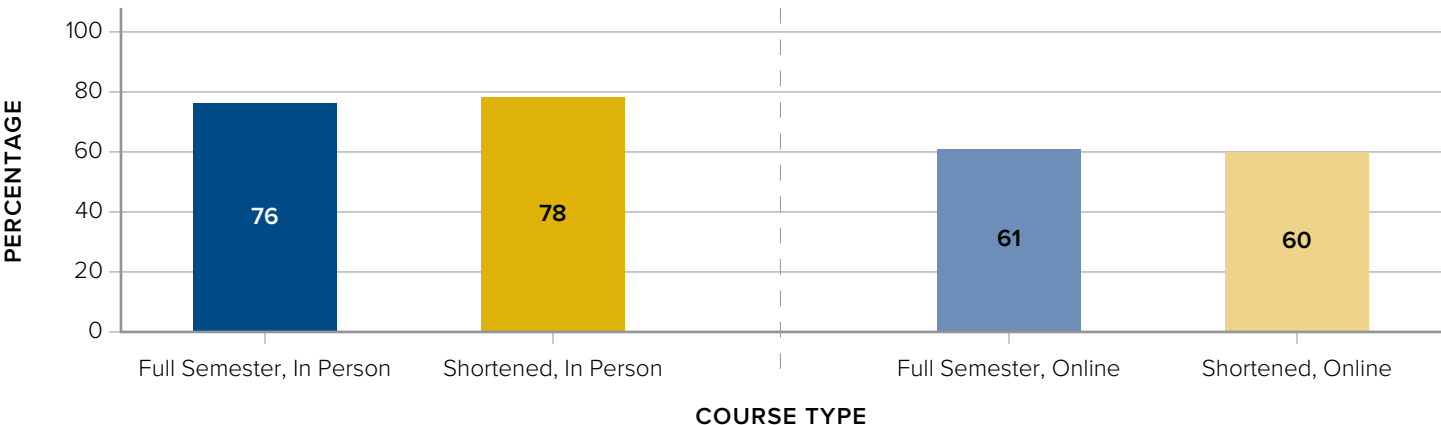


Figure 3. Estimated Mean Course Passing Rates in Virginia Community Colleges



Note. Figures 1–3 show the estimated conditional mean passing rates for shortened and full-semester student enrollments from the California, Tennessee, and Virginia studies, respectively. The California and Virginia studies disaggregate impacts by course modality while the Tennessee study does not.

Impacts of shortened courses on current course performance tend to be stronger for outcomes measured above a minimum grade threshold.²³ The California study finds that shortened in-person courses increase the likelihood that a student earns a B or higher by 4.4 percentage points relative to full-semester in-person courses but that shortened online courses decrease this likelihood by 1.7 percentage points relative to full-semester online courses, on average. Similarly, the Virginia study finds that shortened in-person courses increase the likelihood of earning a C or higher by 3.6 percentage points relative to full-semester in-person courses but that shortened online courses decrease this likelihood by 0.5 percentage points relative to full-semester online courses, on average.²⁴

Despite the substantial positive impacts of shortened formats on current course performance, concerns may remain about longer-term impacts. For example, although students pass shortened courses at higher rates than full-semester courses, they may retain less course material, which could negatively affect reenrollment and performance in subsequent courses. The studies therefore examine a range of downstream outcomes to assess impacts of shortened course enrollment that extend beyond the initial course.

The California study finds that taking an in-person shortened course during a student's first term is associated with an average decrease of 1.5 and 2.1 percentage points in the likelihood of reenrolling 1 and 2 years later, respectively.²⁵ However, there is no statistically significant change in cumulative units earned after 1 or 2 years.²⁶ Among online courses, effects are null for each future success outcome. Taken together, these results do not provide clear evidence of downstream learning losses associated with shortened course enrollment.

The Tennessee study finds that, compared to students who did not take any shortened courses during their first term, students who enrolled in at least one shortened course had a 0.07-point higher first-year cumulative GPA but were less likely by 1.7 percentage points to persist or graduate in their second year, on average. Effects are stronger for students who took two or more shortened courses during their first semester. Those students earned a 0.12-point higher first-year cumulative GPA and were 3.7 percentage points more likely to persist or graduate in their second year, on average.

The Virginia study finds that taking a shortened in-person course during a student's first term is associated with an increase by 3.6 percentage points in the likelihood of taking and passing a subsequent course in the same field.²⁷ By contrast, taking a shortened online course is associated with a decrease by 1.6 percentage points in that likelihood, on average.

Overall, the studies find mixed effects on downstream outcomes, with more support for positive than negative effects. There is not clear evidence that students retain less course material in shortened formats.

Differences by Student Subgroups and Course Subjects

The California study finds that the largest gains in course passing from enrolling in a shortened in-person course, relative to a full-semester in-person course, are observed among Black students (4.2 percentage points), Pell Grant recipients (3.9 percentage points), Hispanic students (3.7 percentage points), part-time enrollees (3.0 percentage points), students aged 24 or younger (2.9 percentage points), and male students (2.7 percentage points). With the exception of Pell Grant recipients and students aged 24 or younger, these student groups have below-average course-passing rates, suggesting that shortened courses may particularly benefit students who face stronger barriers to college success. Estimated effects for shortened online courses are null to negative across all student subgroups.

In preliminary work, the Tennessee study finds that gains from course passing associated with enrolling in a shortened course, compared to a full-semester course, are higher among Hispanic students than non-Hispanic students (5.8 percentage points versus 4.9 percentage points), Pell Grant recipients than non-Pell Grant recipients (5.2 percentage points versus 4.6 percentage points), and students aged 24 or younger compared to students aged 25 or older (5.2 percentage points versus 4.5 percentage points), on average.

The Virginia study finds that course-passing gains associated with enrolling in a shortened course compared to a full-semester course are higher among underrepresented minority (URM) students than non-URM students (3.8 percentage points versus 2.7 percentage points) and students aged 24 or younger compared to students aged 25 or older (3.3 percentage points versus 1.7 percentage points).²⁸

Across state community college systems, nearly all student groups benefit from shortened course enrollment through higher course performance. A similar set of student subgroups appear to benefit somewhat more from shortened courses: students of color, younger students, and Pell Grant recipients.

The California study further disaggregates results by course subject. The largest gains in course passing associated with shortened in-person courses, relative to full-semester in-person courses, are observed in the biological sciences (10.8 percentage points), mathematics (8.3 percentage points), engineering and industrial technologies (5.3 percentage points), and humanities (1.8 percentage points). Across online courses, effects are null to negative in all subject areas.

Key Takeaways for Research and Practice

1. Evidence strongly supports the efficacy of shortened courses.

All three studies find that, controlling for other factors, students tend to achieve higher course passing rates and grades in shortened courses than in full-semester courses. Although findings are less clear regarding impacts on downstream student outcomes such as re-enrollment and graduation, there is not clear evidence of future learning losses associated with shortened courses. Results suggest that colleges can use shortened courses as a strategy to increase student enrollment opportunities and promote student success.

2. Modality matters.

Results from California and Virginia show that shortened courses are associated with substantial improvements in students' performance in the current course under in-person instruction but with null-to-negative impacts under online instruction. This has direct implications for institutional decision-making and course design. Colleges adopting shortened course formats should prioritize implementation in disciplines that rely heavily on in-person instruction, such as CTE programs and lab-based STEM courses.

Uneven impacts by course modality can be interpreted in multiple ways. If shortened courses operate primarily by accelerating learning, their effects should be weaker in online settings, where asynchronous, self-paced instruction reduces the role of instructional pace. Alternatively, if the key mechanism is a reduced duration of required in-person attendance, effects should also be smaller in online courses, which do not require physical campus presence. This latter explanation may be especially relevant in community college contexts, where students frequently withdraw due to unforeseen personal, financial, or transportation disruptions

3. Shortened courses appear widely effective across student groups, with some notable differences.

Studies show that shortened courses have positive effects across most student groups, with the largest gains observed among students of color, younger students, and Pell Grant recipients. Although policymakers often frame shortened courses as enrollment opportunities for adult learners—particularly working parents—the results underscore the importance of offering broad access to shortened course formats across student populations.

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Endnotes

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- ¹¹ For each statistic reported in this section, the California and Virginia studies sample course enrollments in the 2023–24 academic year, and the Tennessee study samples course enrollments in spring 2023.
- ¹² The Tennessee and Virginia studies distinguish between online, in-person, and hybrid courses whereas the California study defines an online course as one that is fully taught online and an in-person course as one that is taught fully or partially in-person.
- ¹³ Because online courses are often associated with lower learning outcomes than in-person courses, it is important to take modality differences into account when estimating the impacts of shortened courses.
- ¹⁴ Bagg, E., (May 7, 2026). personal communication.
- ¹⁵ The Tennessee study samples course enrollments beyond a student's first term while the California and Virginia studies sample only first-term enrollments, resulting in more enrollments per student in the Tennessee sample.
- ¹⁶ Because first-time students often have less flexibility in scheduling courses (e.g., they are more likely to enroll in prerequisite courses than electives), this sample restriction should reduce selection into shortened versus full-semester offerings.
- ¹⁷ In the California study, researchers use a main model specification that includes college-by-course and term fixed effects and section, student, and instructor controls. In the Tennessee study, researchers use college, subject, term, modality, student, and instructor fixed effects and student controls. In the Virginia study, researchers use college-by-course, term, and student fixed effects and section and instructor controls. A fixed effects model compares outcomes within a given unit to control for all time-invariant differences. For example, a student fixed effects model compares outcomes within students, thereby controlling for all time-invariant differences across them.
- ¹⁸ Hart, C. M. D., et al. (2019). Online learning, offline outcomes: Online course taking and high school student performance. *AERA Open*, 5(1), 1–17. doi.org/10.1177/2332858419832
- ¹⁹ This may be explained by the fact that students tend to enroll on either a full-semester or a shortened schedule in a given semester, and full-time students are typically unable to fill a full course load with only shortened courses. Students may find enrolling concurrently in shortened and full-semester courses onerous because the course schedules do not align.
- ²⁰ Each study measures the likelihood of course passing, defined as completing a course with a D or higher. Other course outcomes vary across studies.
- ²¹ This effect is statistically significant in the California study but not in the Virginia study.
- ²² In each study, estimates are obtained by predicting the likelihood of course passing conditional on model controls in each course format and averaging the prediction across all sample observations. The estimated effect in Table 2 is the difference between mean predicted passing rates in shortened versus full-semester courses across modalities (Tennessee) or in a given modality (California and Virginia).
- ²³ The Tennessee study does not estimate effects on student grades above a minimum threshold but finds that enrollment in a shortened course is associated with a 0.3 increase in grade points in the current course, on average.
- ²⁴ The latter coefficient is not statistically significant.
- ²⁵ This result can be interpreted in multiple ways in the community college context given the diversity of students' academic goals. For example, lower reenrollment among transfer- or associate-intending students may indicate increased stop out whereas lower reenrollment among students with short-term vocational goals may reflect accelerated passing of a course or certificate.
- ²⁶ This may suggest that the students who did not reenroll following initial enrollment in shortened courses would have been expected to complete relatively few units had they reenrolled.
- ²⁷ In qualitative findings from the Tennessee community college system, some faculty reported that they graded shortened courses less rigorously than full-semester courses. Therefore, it is important to examine student performance in subsequent courses in the same field to evaluate whether increases in performance in the initial shortened course are driven by stronger learning outcomes or less rigorous grading policies. The Virginia study finding that effects of shortened courses on subsequent course performance are similar to those on initial course performance for both in-person and online courses suggests that the primary mechanism driving the increase in student performance in shortened courses is improved learning outcomes, not less rigorous grading practices. See Tennessee Board of Regents—The College System of Tennessee, 2024.
- ²⁸ Unlike the estimates from the Virginia study presented in the previous section, these estimates are aggregated across course modality.