SINCE 2010, ENROLLMENT AT OUR NATION’S community colleges has been on the decline, falling between 2.4 and more than 4 percent annually. Some community colleges have seen enrollments drop by more than 6 percent during the last year, so it appears this disturbing trend is continuing. The 2016 Inside Higher Ed Survey on college admissions confirms that community colleges are struggling with enrollment, with 88 percent of the admissions directors surveyed reporting that their college enrollments are down compared to two years ago.

Declining enrollment can have a damaging impact on community college budgets and the ability of some institutions to fund course offerings that students need for college completion. The potentially devastating impact of declining enrollments on student completion is particularly evident in California, where community colleges receive funding from the state based on enrollment levels. This is why community college trustees need to understand the importance of strategic enrollment management practices at the colleges they oversee.

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Know the Trends
What are the elements of an effective enrollment management program, and what is the role of the community college trustee? First, trustees need to understand the national trends that are impacting enrollment at community colleges and then be prepared to ask the right questions.

Trend #1: Increased Interest in Online/Distance Education
With so many of our students working one or more jobs and caring for family, course flexibility is a must. At the San Diego Community College District, our enrollment growth has been supported by increasing the number of online courses by more than 11 percent in 2015 to meet student demand.

Trend #2: Community College Bachelor’s Degrees
Nationally, more community colleges are beginning to offer bachelor’s degrees in workforce related areas. California has recently approved a small pilot for 15 colleges, including
San Diego’s Mesa College, to offer workforce-focused bachelor’s degrees. This trend has already attracted new students and as this movement continues to expand, it will help to grow community college enrollments and student retention.

Trend #3: Increased Partnerships with Four-Year Institutions
Community colleges can encourage student completion and maintain enrollment levels through partnerships with nearby four-year institutions. SDCCD has strengthened our enrollment and student retention through the development of strong partnerships with the four-year institutions in our region. By offering our students clearly defined pathways to transfer degrees, we can attract more interested high school graduates and retain those students by helping them easily transfer to four-year universities.

Trend #4: Greater Recruitment of Baby Boomers
Another national trend that can help support community college enrollments is the return of baby boomer students. Take advantage of this trend by planning classes that attract returning baby boomers and targeting your marketing messages at this age group.

Trend #5: Increased Enrollment with Special Populations
Trustees should be aware and connected to special populations that could be attracted to community colleges. Two key populations to consider are veterans and active military who need additional training to reenter the workforce. San Diego Community College District enrolls more than 10,000 active duty military and veterans, representing 4 percent of the total student population. Another population that can boost enrollment is high school students concurrently taking community college courses. At SDCCD, we have doubled our dual enrollment students since 2016 as a result of new agreements with local high schools.

Trend #6: Increased Partnerships with Business
Partnerships with business and industry that offer internships and other resources are critical to the success of our workforce preparation programs. Businesses can be a strong incentive to attract new students interested in gaining job skills that lead directly to employment opportunities.

Three Key Questions for Trustees for Enrollment Oversight
As stated earlier, increasing enrollment doesn’t just happen. It is the result of a sustained and focused enrollment management program at all levels of your district. Boards should understand the essential elements of an effective enrollment management program and ask for frequent briefings where these key questions can be asked of college leadership:

1. How is the college(s) optimizing class scheduling based on student demand and workforce needs?
   Decisions about class scheduling must be data driven and based on enrollment data. Trustees should be asking if their college has the right software and data management tools to easily access and track enrollment data and demographic trends. With careful data monitoring, classes can be scheduled to meet student demand, balanced between day vs. evening sections and on-campus vs. online. Trustees need to understand how student course-taking patterns and workforce trends are monitored.

2. What are the contingency plans for flexibility during registration periods?
   To successfully manage enrollments, community colleges need to be nimble and ready to adjust each semester to capture as many students as possible. Trustees should be aware of how their colleges build schedules so that all interested students can find seats in high-demand classes. At SDCCD, our colleges build a schedule of classes with 1 percent contingency (i.e., overschedule), along with a number of “shadow” sections (planned, but not activated for students) that can later be activated when published sections are filled, which ensures that students are not turned away from high-demand courses that may have closed.

3. What is the budget for marketing and outreach to promote enrollment?
   As we began to emerge from the recession in 2012, our board decided to increase our district marketing budget to support outreach and marketing. With this budget commitment from our trustees, the district’s communications department began with market research to determine the perceptions that potential students had about our colleges and what differentiates our colleges from our competitors. We also researched our current students to learn how they get information, who influences their decisions, what classes they want to take, and when they want to take them. Based on this deeper understanding of our students, the district launched a broad marketing program that included print and television advertising, social media ads, and media outreach, all focused on building awareness and a positive image for our colleges and programs. The district also used student input to design a new registration portal that enhances the first impression of new students and simplifies access to class selection and registration. Our ongoing marketing efforts also focused on current students, encouraging enrollment in more courses to accelerate completion.

Enrollment Matters — and So Does Trustee Oversight
The collaborative district-wide focus on enrollment management has had a positive impact at the San Diego Community College District. When community college boards understand and support enrollment management efforts through goal setting and budget decisions, more students will find seats in classrooms and colleges will have adequate budgets to support student success.

Bernie Rhinerson is a member of the San Diego Community College District board of trustees and the ACCT Board of Directors.