

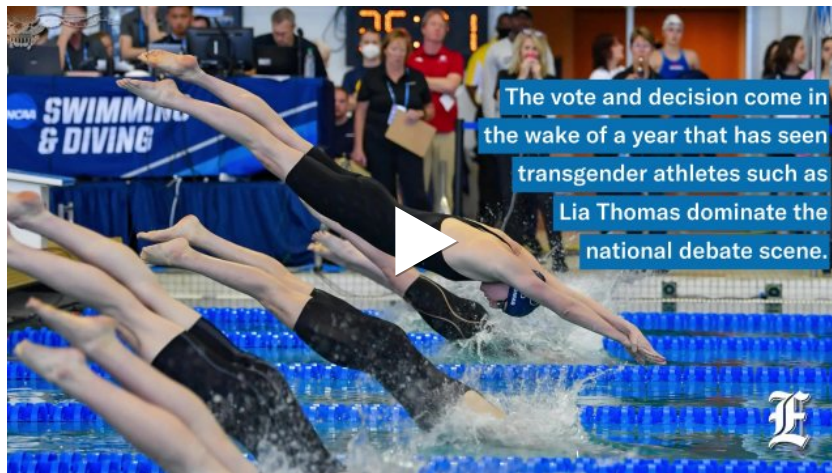


Bots and scammers enroll in California colleges to steal millions in student aid

by [Tori Richards, Investigative Reporter](#) |  | May 09, 2022 04:36 PM

[California](#) likely had 180,000 fake junior college students on its rolls last semester, with the potential of receiving more than \$325 million in stolen financial aid, a criminal justice professor told the *Washington Examiner*.

Enrollment fraud appears to have exploded since [California](#) schools received billions of dollars during the pandemic, but state officials and legislators don't appear to be in a hurry to fix anything, said Kim Rich, who teaches at the Los Angeles Community [College](#) District.



Neither education officials nor 20 legislators have responded to Rich's emails with fraud data she has mined over the past six months, and the problem persists, she said.

"They do not want to fix this because the amount of funding they are going to lose is astronomical," Rich said. "The lower their enrollment, the less they get funded by the state. If [school] districts are going to take out or prevent students from being enrolled, they are going to lose funding."

The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office said in a [2021 memo](#) that 20% of its enrollment and financial aid traffic is malicious. Rich estimates that half that amount, or 10% of the 1.8 million students, have succeeded in enrolling.

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More than 200 new students are enrolled every day in Rich's district alone. The average student gets [\\$5,000](#) in aid from the state's 116 community colleges.

A [Los Angeles Times](#) investigation showed that 65,000 phony students actually applied for aid last fall, but college officials refused to say if the funds were dispersed. If they all received funds, it would total \$325 million.

The amount is probably a lot higher, Rich said.

"It is clear that nationally, bad actors are attempting to take advantage of any vulnerability across different sectors," the memo said. "Additional methods of reducing fraud, while also prioritizing equity, continue to be actively researched by the Chancellor's Office and the TechCenter staff."

The California Student Aid Commission did not respond to requests for comment.

California Community Colleges said it's combating the fraud with several new security measures that should come online with the new fiscal budget. That includes enhanced spam filters and firewalls, said spokesman Paul Feist.

"Of course we are working to crack down on application and enrollment fraud and have made progress in hardening security of the application platform," he said.

The chancellor started requiring colleges in August 2021 to submit suspected and verified fraud. In addition, applicants are now required to have a verifiable email address or phone number.

But that hasn't stopped scammers, who find a wealth of information to help their endeavors online. In one [YouTube tutorial](#), a man nicknamed Targetter walked viewers through as he obtained a .edu email account from a Northern California community college.

"These .edu emails come with a load of benefits," he says. "The process is very simple. I hope you have your own .edu email and have all those benefits online with your .edu email."

The state shut down Targetter's method after [CalMatters](#) published the video last year in an investigation on admission fraud. However, the YouTuber issued a new video with another technique.

Rich checks enrollment records at least once a week and has found no downturn in the number of names that are clearly fictitious — Barack Obama, Donald Trump, surnames with numbers, and the same name sharing an identification number but with a small change to the spelling.

She said she would like to see the chancellor shut down the entire application portal until the loopholes allowing nefarious registrations are fixed.

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"It is corrupt beyond corruption. It is the reason why people are tired of lifelong politicians," Rich said of the data. "Why would you simply allow all of this money on a daily basis to be going to a crime? It's not going to students who need it. It's going to criminals, and they will never get this back."

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