Cross-Border Community College Students: A Headcount Estimate

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ABSTRACT

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Cross-Border Community College Students: A Headcount Estimate

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ABSTRACT

Cross-border students who live in Mexico and attend classes in the United States are an unexplored student population in community colleges. In fact, there is no reliable headcount for this group of students in the United States, making it difficult to plan strategies and allocate resources to serve them. The reason for the lack of accurate records is that cross-border commuter students often provide a local address in their application rather than the address that matches where they live in Mexico. This study examined survey data to estimate cross-border student headcount in one community college district located in the United States near the border with Mexico. Findings show that cross-border students accounted for 4.2% to 6% of students enrolled in the Spring of 2022. This finding informs policy and institutional planning. Colleges located near the border can conduct similar research to estimate the number of cross-border students they serve.

INTRODUCTION

Community colleges in the United States tend to be highly diverse in terms of their student population. Students attend these higher education institutions with different purposes (e.g. to complete general education requirements and transfer to a 4-year institution, or earn a degree or certificate). This prompts faculty, counselors, and other staff members to find ways to serve the different needs of all students (Murillo, 2024). It also leads policymakers to propose legislation to improve on selected outcomes for students. The student populations served include racial minorities (e.g. Native American and Hispanic), English learners, individuals with disabilities, and first-generation college students, to name a few examples. These are students who historically face unfavorable economic, learning, or social circumstances (Rassen et al., 2010).

There are 116 community colleges in California serving about 2 million students. It is the explicit goal of California's community colleges to support minoritized students (Sanchez et al., 2021). Therefore, student data (e.g. headcount, completions, and course success rates) are often used for strategic planning purposes. These data are usually disaggregated by student characteristics like race/ethnicity, age group, and gender. The data also tend to be disaggregated by student population like first generation, students with disabilities, non-English speakers, or financially disadvantaged individuals.

This research focuses on one relatively unexplored student population: cross-border students. Researchers and educators often use the term *transfronterizo*, which is Spanish for cross-border, to refer to students who live in Mexico and attend classes in the United States. It is assumed that cross-border students face unique challenges and barriers to succeed in college. Therefore, it is important for community colleges to learn as much as possible about their experiences. This includes calculating an approximate headcount of students served.

In their research, Cooper and Rosales (2021) described transfronterizos as students who obtained United States-Mexico citizenship (dual citizenship), have access to educational and work opportunities in the United States while living in Mexico, and often must overcome long commute times to and from school, language barriers, and even discrimination on both sides of the border. They tend to deal with these issues themselves without asking for help because they prefer not to reveal their residence status (Castañeda-Pérez & Félix, 2020).

This study used the term cross-border to describe students who attend classes in the United States, live in Mexico, and commute to college one or more times per week. It should be noted, however, that there are cross-border students who live in the United States and commute to Mexico to attend classes (Solis, 2023). However, the focus of this study was on cross-border community college students who live in Mexico and attend classes in the United States.

The Problem and Study Purpose

Faculty and staff find it challenging to serve cross-border students because they are not differentiated in institutional data and very little is known about them. Castañeda-Pérez and Félix (2020) argued that cross-border students often try to go unnoticed for fear of penalties that apply

for non-residents (e.g. non-resident registration fees are higher). This means that they might not reach out to counselors or instructors when they need support. The purpose of this research is to provide an estimate of the number of cross-border students enrolled in California's Southwestern Community College District (SWCCD) to help faculty and staff gain a better understanding of the experiences of cross-border students as they pursue their educational goals.

The general question guiding this study was: What was the range of values representing the proportion and headcount of cross-border students enrolled at SWCCD during Spring 2022? Addressing this question is in line with Rendón's (1994) validation theory, which is based on the idea that student populations not previously expected to enroll in higher education in the United States are now a large part of the student body. Given this diversity, faculty and staff need additional support to understand and validate their students to increase their chances of success. Having a headcount and proportion of students in the group is an important step in the validation process.

This study is novel because the result will inform faculty and staff at the SWCCD about the size of the cross-border student population that they serve. For faculty, having a better understanding of the number of cross-border students enrolled might help them improve the curriculum by integrating discussions about the border region, including some of its main challenges, opportunities, and history. For staff, this information can lead to differentiated counseling services, placement and assessment support, and recruitment strategies. Combined, these efforts should enhance students' sense of belonging.

Overall, this information might help the SWCCD to better plan its equity and inclusion efforts. The impact of the study could go beyond the SWCCD because other community colleges located in border cities can follow a similar process to conduct their own headcount estimates for this relatively unexplored student population, which could initiate a region-wide effort to support cross-border students. This could lead to reinforced commitment from policy makers towards community colleges serving diverse groups of students.

Literature Review

Researchers have argued that the increased diversity in colleges and universities in the United States requires faculty and staff to support

student groups that historically were not expected to enroll in higher education (Leal-Carrillo et al., 2023; Rendón, 1994; Rendón, & Muñoz, 2011). These groups include students of color, first generation, low income, and immigrants who often lack the support system needed to pursue a degree. According to Rendón (1994), it is imperative for educators to actively learn about the different needs of these students and aim to find new ways to address them.

For example, Rassen et al. (2010) documented the research conducted with California community colleges' staff to better understand the challenges associated with helping former foster youth achieve their educational goals. The findings suggested that staff need additional support and resources to properly serve foster youth. This included training and tracking progress with timely and accurate data. The dissemination of this result placed the issue on the agenda for the community colleges, making it more likely that decision-makers at these institutions will respond accordingly. Thankfully, there was a methodology in place to identify and track foster youth enrolled at community colleges, but this is not the case for all student groups. When information is not available, it is harder to propose and justify recommendations for improvement.

Community colleges tend to be at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding the needs of a specific student population (Leal-Carrillo et al., 2023). International students, for example, are easily tracked at 4-year institutions, but community colleges have experienced challenges serving this student type. One study that took place in a community college in Texas found that international students received support from counselors tasked with helping them integrate into their new learning environment; however, it was clear that students had to figure out several processes for themselves because counselors had not been adequately trained to address the needs of this student population (Zhang, 2016). This finding supports the claim that community colleges often lack the knowledge and resources to adequately serve all students.

Like international students, cross-border students often have needs that go unaddressed due to insufficient support from their educational institutions. While international students are known to faculty and staff through their enrollment process, cross-border students often go unnoticed, making it even more challenging to support them (Castañeda-Pérez & Félix, 2020). This is partly because they tend to avoid

out-of-state tuition fees by enrolling as residents but continue to live within driving distance just a few miles south in Mexico (Orraca-Romano et al., 2017). Because of this, faculty and staff do not have an official record that could help them identify this student population, which means that they do not know how many cross-border students attend classes.

Researchers have noted that it is important to tell the stories of cross-border students to lessen the occurrence and impact of prejudice against them in education. Castañeda-Pérez and Félix (2020) as well as Cooper and Rosales (2021) argued that faculty do not always understand the challenges faced by cross-border students. These challenges include long commute times, answering intimidating questions from Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers, and misrepresentations in the media. According to these authors, faculty can easily interpret cross-border student underperformance as a sign of disregard towards the class or the learning material when in fact the students are tired from waking up at 3:00 a.m. to stand in line for 4 hours at the port of entry or are overwhelmed by harassment from CBP officers.

The effects of long commute times, intimidation while crossing the border, and other challenges faced by cross-border students have not been documented within educational institutions because of the lack of accurate records regarding this student population. Typical community college metrics that are disaggregated by student population like courses success rates, graduation, and transfer rates are not examined for cross-border students. Although it can logically be assumed that cross-border students are more likely to underperform in college due to the unique challenges they face, this has not been documented.

Despite the gap in the literature noted here, several sources support the claim that there are many cross-border students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States (Castañeda-Pérez & Félix, 2020; Eaton, 2021; West, 2019). However, there is very little research that provides a specific estimate. Toward this end, Rocha-Romero and Orraca-Romano (2018) used data provided by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI—the organization responsible for the collection and publication of official statistical data in Mexico) to estimate the number of students who live in Mexico while attending school in the United States. The data used in their analysis was collected in 2015 and focuses on border states like Texas and California.

The findings published by Rocha-Romero and Orraca-Romano (2018) showed that there were an estimated 39,599 students across all levels of education who live in the northern border cities in Mexico while attending classes in the United States. At the undergraduate level, specifically, their data suggests that that there were 5,259 cross-border students (1,614 resided in Tijuana, Mexico, a sister city to Chula Vista, CA, where the SWCCD main campus is located). This is likely an underestimate of this student population but showed how self-reported data collected via survey could be used to create an estimate of cross-border students in the absence of formal enrollment records with accurate student addresses. The main shortcoming, however, is that it does not provide a district-level headcount, which is what faculty and staff need to plan their efforts to serve this student population. This gap in the literature is what the present study attempted to address.

Despite having limited information available on cross-border students, the importance of this group is clear. There is an emerging line of inquiry that examines the dynamics of cross-border education (Carrillo & Mathiesen, 2006; Cooper & Rosales, 2021; Díaz, 2020; Fránquiz & Ortiz, 2017; King-Ramírez et al., 2024; O'Connor, 2019; Orraca-Romano et al., 2017; Rocha-Romero & Orraca-Romano, 2018). Through these works, it is easy to understand that there is a *cross-border identity* that influences student behavior across the region.

This line of inquiry is related to other research that focuses on cross-border workers and the importance of the border economy (Orraca-Romano, 2015; Vargas-Valle, 2012). These studies converge on the fact that the border region is an essential economic engine for both countries involved that rests in people's capacity and willingness for cross-border understanding and cooperation (Cooper & Rosales, 2021; Santos & Wilson, 2021). Differences exist across the United States-Mexico border (e.g., California tends to be friendlier on issues of migration than Texas), but the hard truth is that the economies of cities on both sides of the border are interdependent.

Policymakers understand the value of a diverse, regional workforce. They also know that cross-border students may not afford community college tuition if they are obligated to pay out-of-state fees (Castañeda-Pérez & Félix, 2020; Sosa, 2023). Assembly Bill 91 (AB 91), passed in California in 2023, exempts Mexican residents who live within 45 miles of the border with California from paying nonresident registration fees at select

community colleges in the San Diego-Imperial Counties (Sosa, 2023). The passing of AB 91 sends a clear message of support for cross-border students, and it highlights their importance for community colleges.

Each community college, however, will be limited to admitting up to 150 full-time or equivalent students (FTES). This will be a pilot program, based on this legislation, that will last until 2029 (Sosa, 2023). Clearly, students in this cohort will require additional services, starting with an appropriate registration process that considers their status as nonresidents under the new law. While new students who register for classes under AB 91 will be identified through the registration process and then reported to faculty and staff by the office of institutional research, cross-border students registered as California residents will continue to go unnoticed. However, AB 91 represents a clear intention of support that might go a long way in inspiring an increased sense of belonging among all cross-border students.

Recent political shifts in the United States are expected to create more barriers for cross-border students. If these students are dissuaded from continuing their education in the country, the labor market might miss out on a growing pool of trained professionals with a binational background especially prepared to meet the unique conditions of the region. The labor market in the United States-Mexico border requires that colleges and universities train workers who can operate seamlessly across the region to help continue to make progress on the economy (Díaz, 2020).

By way of a summary, the literature on cross-border students suggests that community colleges located in border cities struggle to serve them properly because of insufficient information. In response, researchers have started to address the issue and have so far noted some of the challenges faced by cross-border students (e.g., long commute times), and are making efforts to quantify them. Policymakers passed legislation to help the community colleges, but with limited reach. Hopefully, this study and others will help stakeholders better understand the size and importance of cross-border students.

Conceptual Framework

Validation theory implies that faculty and staff know their students and have some level of understanding of their circumstances. Rendón and Muñoz (2011) stated that “validation refers to the intentional, proactive

affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents…. [I]n a way that gives them agency, affirmation, self-worth, and liberation from past invalidation" (pp. 12-16). Rendón (1994) argued that it is important to identify the underserved group and its proportion within the overall population of students. This is consistent with the *Vision for Success* adopted by California Community Colleges (Leal-Carrillo et al., 2023).

The emergence of cross-border students is part of a larger shift in college student demographics. Rendón (1994) recognized that the college student population in the United States changed over time to be more representative of nontraditional students. She wrote about the need to serve college students who identify as immigrants, persons with disabilities, first-generation, and members of ethnic, racial, or gender minorities. The main assumption supporting validation theory is that student learning is influenced by academic (e.g., support with course assignments) and interpersonal (e.g., support with adjusting to the environment) experiences that take place both inside and outside the classroom (Saggio & Rendón, 2004).

It is not enough for institutions of higher education to offer services like tutoring or extra-curricular activities to students (Rendón, 1994). Making this type of service available is necessary, but it is important to go beyond passively waiting for students to take advantage of these opportunities. Rendón (1994) provided specific action items aligned with validation theory that can be undertaken by colleges and universities: create student profiles, teach faculty and staff about nontraditional student needs, help faculty members become mentors, assure students that they belong in college, help them complete their assignments without lowering standards, and incorporate life experiences into the curriculum.

These actions to validate minoritized college students require timely and accurate data for their appropriate design and deployment. Faculty and staff need this information to properly create budgets, allocate adequate time, adjust schedules, draft their communication/outreach strategies, and evaluate their effectiveness. This need for information is underscored when it comes to cross-border students because there is currently very limited information available about this student population.

With the information provided in this study and others to follow, faculty and staff can plan for specific academic and interpersonal validation

interventions for cross-border students. Academic interventions might include assignments scheduled in advance, flexibility when dealing with tardiness due to long border wait times and making slight adjustments to the curriculum to make the subject matter more representative of the border region. Interpersonal interventions might include creating cross-border student groups to collaborate and help one another through carpool arrangements, study groups on either side of the border, and enhancing an overall sense of belonging.

METHODS

Study Participants

In the absence of institutional data about cross-border students, this research was designed in part on the work published by Rocha-Romero and Orraca-Romano (2018). Their model was built using the survey results of the 2015 intercensal survey conducted by INEGI. The authors used the responses to identify the proportions of residents of Mexico who reported that they commute across the border into the United States to attend classes. The data were extrapolated and disaggregated by several characteristics that included city of residence and education level.

The current study also used survey data, specifically from the SWCCD Student Feedback Survey 2021-2022 (SWCCD, 2022). This survey is conducted by the Office of Institutional Research and Planning every 2 years. The results from the survey provide the sample proportion of participants who self-identified as cross-border students. Based on the proportion of participants, the sample size and total documented student headcount of the SWCCD, it is possible to run statistics to produce a reliable estimate of the size of this population. Once the estimate of cross-border students has been established and disseminated, faculty and staff will have a better understanding of the size of the student group in question and work to address their needs in a manner consistent with validation theory.

The setting for this study was the SWCCD, an Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) with its main campus located in the city of Chula Vista, California, just a few miles from the border with the city of Tijuana in the state of Baja California, Mexico. About 89% of students identify as non-White, 56% identify as female, and 63% are 19-24 years old. The SWCCD currently offers its courses across different modalities including face-to-

face, online, and hybrid. In addition to its main campus in Chula Vista, the SWCCD offers classes and services in its Higher Education Centers located in the nearby cities of National City, Coronado, Otay Mesa, and San Ysidro.

The data used in this study came from the published report of the 2021-2022 Student Feedback Survey (SWCCD, 2022). By accessing the data from the published report and not the raw data from the survey, it was ensured that conducting the present study did not invite the possibility of a data breach. In Spring 2022, the district collected 2,762 responses after sending an email invitation to the 16,590 students enrolled within the district. The response rate was about 16.6%. Once the report was created, it was published on the institutional website of the SWCCD, making it available to the public. The report included tabulations showing frequencies of responses for each question. The multiple-choice question from the Student Feedback Survey selected to address the research question presented in this study reads as follows: *If you were to travel from home to campus today, where would you be traveling from?*

The response summary is listed in Table 1. Seven out of the 9 answer options are service area cities (Bonita, Chula Vista, Coronado, Imperial Beach, Mexico; cross-border (any location, National City, Otay Mesa, San Ysidro, Other) within the district. Students who selected Mexico; cross-border (any location) as a response are assumed to be cross-border students. The response count and proportion reported by the SWCCD provided the necessary information to run confidence intervals and answer the research question.

Table 1 Answer options, frequencies, and proportions to Q106: "If you were to travel from home to campus today, where would you be traveling from?"

Answer options	**Count**	**Proportion**
Bonita	90	0.039
Chula Vista	1,067	0.457
Coronado	22	0.009
Imperial Beach	119	0.051

Note: 426 participants skipped this question. Source: Adapted from SWCCD (2022, p. XXXIV).

Table 1 Answer options, frequencies, and proportions to Q106: "If you were to travel from home to campus today, where would you be traveling from?"		
Answer options	**Count**	**Proportion**
Mexico; cross-border (any location)	119	0.051
National City	235	0.101
Otay Mesa	75	0.032
San Ysidro	191	0.082
Other	418	0.179
Total	2,336	1.000
Note: 426 participants skipped this question. Source: Adapted from SWCCD (2022, p. XXXIV).		

The data analysis consisted in running confidence intervals for the sample proportion (see equation 1 below). Confidence intervals are used when trying to find a range of values that contains the population proportion (Jaeger, 1983). The sample proportion was 0.051 and the sample size was 2,336 (Table 1). The critical z value selected was 1.96, which corresponds to a value equal to 0.97500. For a 2-tailed test, this amounts to an alpha level equal to 0.05. After running the formula, the results produced lower and upper limits indicating the range of values that likely contain the true headcount of cross-border students enrolled in courses at SWCCD in the Spring of 2022.

$$\text{Confidence Interval} = p \pm z^*\left(\sqrt{p(1-p)/n}\right)$$

Where: p = sample proportion, z = to the critical value based on the confidence level, n = sample size.

RESULTS

Plugging the data from Table 1 into the confidence interval formula below, the lower and upper limits suggest that the proportion of cross-border students is between 4.2% and 6%.

$$\text{Confidence Interval} = 0.051 \pm 1.96^*\left(\sqrt{0.051(1-0.051)/2336}\right)$$

Lower limit = 0.042

Upper limit = 0.060

There were 16,590 students enrolled at the time the survey took place. Therefore, it is now possible to address the stated research question in this study. With a 95% confidence level, the true count of cross-border students enrolled at the SWCCD during Spring 2022 can be found between 697 and 994, compared to the 119 who self-identified on the student survey.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research helps narrow the knowledge gap regarding cross-border student headcount by addressing the matter within the SWCCD. The results suggest that the estimated number of cross-border students enrolled is relatively large. In fact, it is larger than the English learners, veteran, and foster youth student populations, individually. Based on validation theory (Rendón, 1994), the district might plan and implement action and communication strategies to ensure cross-border students that they belong and encourage them to reach out to their counselors and faculty to talk about ways they can improve their educational experiences. This is consistent with past research conducted to address matters related to underserved student populations in community colleges (Murillo, 2024; Rassen et al., 2010; Zhang, 2016).

Several limitations in this research need to be considered. First, the analysis relies on self-reported information collected through an institutional survey. Given that cross-border students might not want their residential circumstance discussed (Castañeda-Pérez & Félix, 2020), it is possible that what was reported in the survey was an underrepresentation. Second, non-response bias is often a factor with student surveys. Although the sample size is considered quite large, this could still affect the interpretation of the results. Third, the confidence level selected for the analysis (95% confidence level) means that there is still a rather small probability that the true value is found outside of the lower and upper limits presented in the results. Finally, this research went as far as providing a count of cross-border students. However, it is not known whether these students overlap with another student population (e.g., English learners).

Importantly, when students start approaching faculty and staff for support and guidance, they should be met by trained individuals who have the necessary resources to follow through and take steps to avoid misconceptions about the possible reasons why a cross-border student might underperform. Of course, faculty and staff are not expected to

know who the cross-border students are just by the results presented here. But by knowing that between 4.2% and 6% of their students might be commuting from Mexico, they can justify creating contingency plans to address challenges that might emerge for these students.

For policymakers, this new information from the SWCCD suggests that the size of the cross-border student population exceeds the 150 FTES allowed under AB 91. Perhaps this research and others can help persuade policymakers and educational leaders (e.g., the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office) to allocate resources and develop policies to address the needs of cross-border students and take steps to enhance AB 91. Along with this, steps should be taken to track enrollment and outcome trends for students who register under AB 91.

The result from this study suggests that the planning of efforts to understand cross-border student enrollment at community colleges is justified. Future research might examine the impact of AB 91 on enrollment, cross-border students and demand for English as a second language courses, faculty and staff practices to promote academic and interpersonal outcomes consistent with validation theory, and the experiences of cross-border students who live in the United States and attend classes in Mexico.

Perhaps the biggest opportunity for future research is having other community colleges located close to the border with Mexico conduct their own estimates and present a regional count. This could be accompanied by an analysis of cross-border student sense of belonging in the community across community colleges in the region. This research will be especially important given the results of the most recent election and expected changes on United States policy on migration.

The result identified in this study applies to the SWCCD only. Therefore, the recommendations for practice will be specific to this institution and framed within validation theory. However, the process used to estimate the number of cross-border students can be transferred to other colleges in the region and in other border states. Publishing region-wide estimates would increase the likelihood of influencing policy and securing resources to serve cross-border students in border cities. The implications for practice are as follows:

1. Continue to collect and examine cross-border student data using anonymized surveys. This will create the possibility of conducting

trend analyses and crosstabulations to better understand enrollment patterns for this student population. If appropriate, conduct focus groups or extended interviews to gain insights and document stories from willing participants.

2. Develop and implement a communication plan aimed at cross-border students to help them understand that efforts are underway to improve their educational experience without compromising their identities. The goal will be to increase their sense of belonging and help them feel more comfortable sharing their story and asking for support from faculty and staff.
3. Include knowledge gained from the analysis of the cross-border student population to inform class discussions/assignments, education planning/advising, engagement and inclusion programs, and training for faculty and staff.
4. Openly recruit cross-border students and track differences over time. This has the dual benefit of increasing enrollment and making the overall student population more representative of the diverse and interdependent border region.
5. Create information packages for media outlets that inform about the overall diversity and inclusion goals of the district, and how these align with the cross-border student population. This will make public the commitment of the institution to this student population.
6. Reach out to other community colleges to share insights about cross-border student research, services, and outcomes. This can lead to meaningful collaboration and greater influence over policy.

In conclusion, this research aimed to address the need for information about the cross-border/transfronterizo students. This is likely one of the least understood student populations served by colleges in border cities in the United States. Based on the data examined in the present study, the SWCCD served between 697 and 994 cross-border students during the Spring of 2022. This makes it a relatively large student population that merits additional analysis and the deployment of services to match their needs. This information should be useful for faculty members, counselors, institutional researchers, executive leadership teams, and board members, who could consider framing future initiatives in a manner consistent with validation theory. Initiatives under validation theory might be academic in nature, like making small changes in the curriculum to include the history and characteristics of the border region across academic programs or revising attendance policy/practice to accommodate students who face significant challenges during their

commute to campus. The initiatives could also be interpersonal in nature, like an institution-wide effort to consolidate its commitment to cross-border students and facilitate the development of relationships to enhance cross-border student recruitment, enrollment, and outcomes.

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