



SPECIAL REPORT: REMEDIAL ENROLLMENTS SURGED AT UCSD AMID SHIFTING PLACEMENT TESTING CONDITIONS

by Pamela Burdman | February 2026

IN NOVEMBER 2025, a University of California San Diego faculty report began generating national—and even international—headlines for finding that large numbers of incoming students at the highly selective campus were not ready for college-level math. In fact, over the past five years, a growing proportion of those students were deemed in need of middle school and even elementary mathematics, it said.

The news that up to 8 percent of incoming students at California’s third most selective public university were providing incorrect answers on elementary math questions had shock value of its own. Though it was an isolated picture of math preparation at a single campus, it garnered far more attention on opinion pages than recent reports showing that math performance had fallen across the country.

Indeed, declines in math preparation are a very real challenge for K-12 and higher education systems.

The decade-long trend has been fueled by various factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, rising absenteeism, and the prevalence of smart phones and social media.

By casting a spotlight on the significance of math preparation, UCSD’s report has the potential to help stimulate needed investment by states and education systems to reverse the trend. If it is used, however, to scapegoat the very underserved students who bore much of the brunt of the COVID-19 shutdowns, it could do more harm than good.

Numerous op-eds blamed the trend of declining math performance on the campus’ increased enrollment of underserved students. That conclusion was drawn from the report itself, which attributes the “excessive increase” in students needing precollege math courses to enrollments from schools serving students who are low-income, English learners, or foster youth. California allocates state funds for

schools to serve these students through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).

EXPLORING ENROLLMENTS OF UNDERSERVED STUDENTS

Examining this assertion using the report’s own data reveals a more complex picture. Indeed, enrollments of LCFF+ students nearly doubled between 2021 and 2022, which coincided with [legislative priorities](#). By 2022, UCSD had the highest proportion of LCFF+ students among UC’s nine undergraduate campuses. Over the same period, the number of students deemed underprepared in math also doubled.

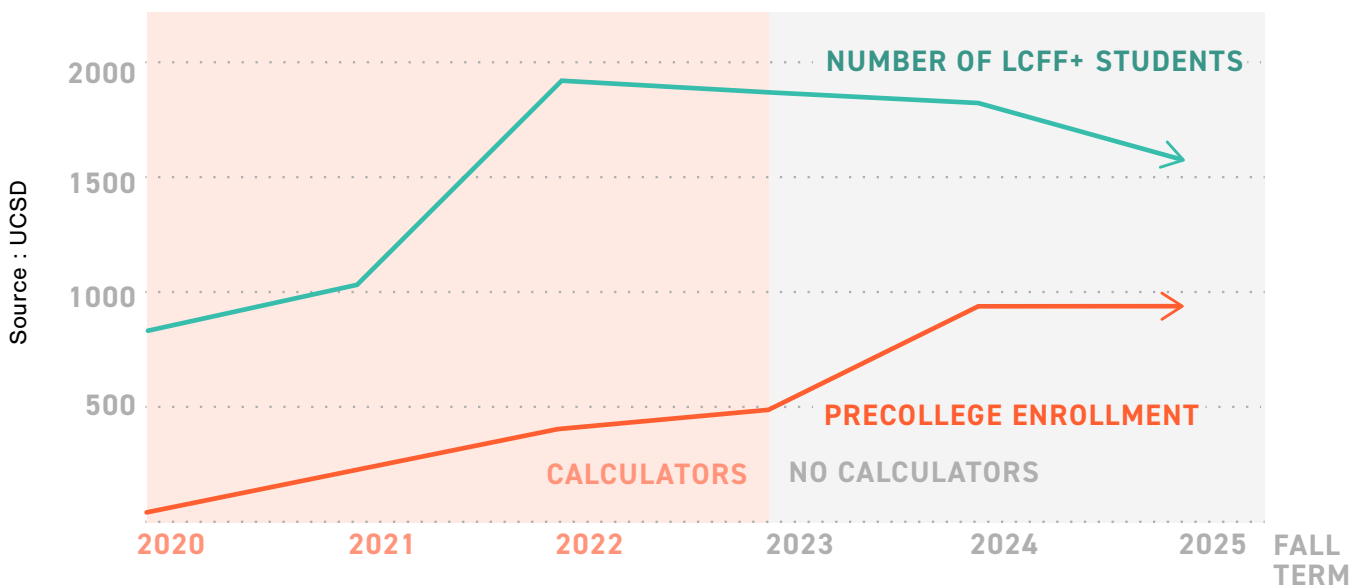
It makes sense that underserved students are more likely to need support when they get to college. Because UCSD opted to provide support in the form of precollege remedial courses, these students were disproportionately assigned to these precollege sequences. That same trend has been

seen in remedial enrollments in less selective institutions. It also tracks with [research showing](#) that COVID–19 learning loss affected schools serving lower-income students most profoundly.

However, after 2022, a curious pattern emerged at UCSD. It challenges the claim that the increases can be explained simply by students from LCFF+ schools: Even as the number of LCFF+ students was stagnant or declining, precollege math enrollments continued to rise. From 2022 to 2025, LCFF+ enrollments declined by 18 percent. But enrollments in precollege courses (Math 2 and Math 3B) increased dramatically—by 136 percent.

Therefore, enrollments of low-income students do not seem to account for the post–2022 increases. The report acknowledges this obliquely, by noting that LCFF+ students declined as a proportion of remedial assignments. But it doesn’t fully explore the pattern.

REMEDIAL MATH ROSE AS LCFF+ ENROLLMENTS STAGNATED



The question is, what else changed over the three years in question—particularly between fall 2023 and fall 2024, when the biggest jump in precollege enrollments occurred?

PLACEMENT TESTING AT UC SAN DIEGO

The faculty report says little about evolutions in math testing at UCSD, but a little sleuthing reveals at least one major shift that took place at that very point in time: After the fall 2023 class, students were no longer permitted to use calculators during the exam. Through 2023, the [Math Placement Exam website](#) (accessed via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine) said "Non-programmable calculators are allowed." But, by May 2024, in time for that fall's incoming class to take the test, there was a new [posted policy](#): "No Calculators are allowed on the MPE."

Evidently, UCSD's math faculty decided mid-stream that they wanted to ensure that students could answer math questions without a calculator. Calculator use on math exams is a [hotly debated topic](#), with some arguing that it's risky to allow students to use the device as a crutch, and others claiming that using calculators to perform rote tasks allows students to focus their learning on higher-order skills.

The reasons UCSD made this switch may be perfectly valid. But a decline in students' performance in the absence of calculators was entirely predictable, assuming that nothing else on the in-person, timed test had changed. That, however, doesn't explain why the shift was not acknowledged in the faculty report. In fact, it is unclear if the switch was known to the authors of the report—only one of whom was a member of the mathematics department. The report says little about the test protocols, which opens the door to further investigation. The same is true of the campus' prerequisite sequence which [differs markedly](#) from those of other UC campuses.

What seems clear is that, beginning in 2024, students were taking the test under starkly different conditions, that the change in conditions was not transparent in the campus' report, and that the 2024 and 2025 scores aren't directly comparable to the prior ones.

It appears possible that about 425 additional students who were assigned to precollege courses in fall 2024 and fall 2025—or 850 students total—could have taken precalculus or calculus had the test conditions not changed. If so, the number of students requiring remedial courses would have stayed below 500, as opposed to 900—some, as it was the prior two years. That's still a marked and concerning increase from 2020, one that requires a serious response. But perhaps not enough to yield the hysterical headlines and columns that have popped up in recent months.

While higher enrollments of low-income students appear correlated to the initial growth in the number of students not passing UCSD's placement test, there is no such correlation in the last three years. And the abandonment of calculators may have contributed to the excessive identification of underprepared students in the last two of those years.

Any response to UCSD's math preparation predicament requires accurate measures of students' readiness. It is essential that not just the UC system, but the entire state, heeds the right lessons from San Diego's experience. But doing so requires more transparent information about how the campus is measuring students' readiness.

