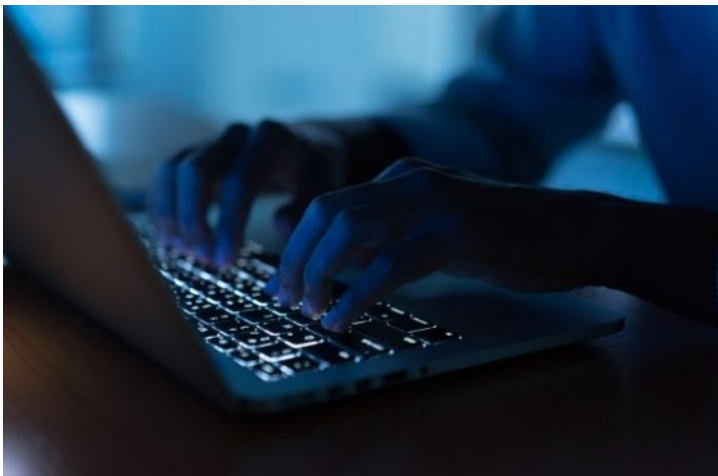**HIGHER ED BUBBLE**   **LEGAL**

Thousands of 'fake students' enrolled in California community colleges seeking financial aid

KATELYNN RICHARDSON - UNLV
NOVEMBER 26, 2021

Public colleges disperse hundreds of thousands of dollars in financial aid to scammers; professor says it's abuse of taxpayer dollars and real students can't enroll in needed courses

The California Community Colleges system is being overwhelmed by thousands of fake students, or "bots," applying and enrolling in classes to scam money from financial aid.

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during the summer semester in June 2021, when she discovered multiple "students" in her online class exhibiting suspicious behavior: submitting work done by someone outside the class, registering for the same courses, and using profile photos pulled from the internet.

Since then, Rich says she has experienced "roadblock after roadblock" in bringing the issue to the administration's attention. The district seems not to care, even though, as she previously **told** *The Epoch Times,* Rich believes between one-third to one-half of enrolled students could be fake.

She came to these numbers by surveying hundreds of class rosters, both from her own college and other schools in the system.

"In some classes, 95 percent of the students I believed were fake. In other classes, it might have only been 5 percent," Rich said in an interview with *The College Fix.* "The point of it was there are a lot of them there. It's a huge hit, enrollment-wise, if you were to remove those students."

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Colleges Chancellor's Office, which determined that approximately 20 percent of the traffic for the systemwide student application system, CCCApply, is "malicious and bot-related."

On August 30, the Chancellor's Office **issued an update** requiring colleges within the CCC system to report monthly metrics on registration and financial fraud starting September. Public Information Officer Rafael Chávez told *The College Fix* that the Chancellor's Office can not yet publicly comment on the investigation.

"At this juncture the CO and the Tech Center do not have a comprehensive picture of what may be occurring, as not all colleges have reported information at this point," Chávez said.

While Rich said she suspects the issue started in the spring, Joe Moreau, vice chancellor of technology for the Foothill-DeAnza Community College District, said he believes it began as early as Fall of 2020.

"Our district has been tracking potential fraud for quite a long time, almost a year now," he told *The College Fix* in a

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really began to hone in on it starting in about January."

Since then, his team has been working on a fraud detection model he said has become the "gold standard" throughout the California Community Colleges system. To date, the district has discovered 207 fraudulent admission applications and 336 financial aid applications but has been able to avoid financial loss.

"Some of the losses [in other districts] have been significant, but our district, I think, has developed a model for fraud detection and prevention that is really quite excellent," Moreau said.

Districts and colleges systemwide are struggling with fraud, costing some hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The College Fix reached out to **all 24 district offices** in the system. The majority did not respond or declined to comment. Of those that did respond, multiple confirmed having issues with fraud.

Since the start of the 2021-22 school year, the Costa Contra Community College

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reported them to the Chancellor's Office, district spokesman Timothy Leong said via email.

Palomar Community College District communications director Julie Bandy told *The Fix* that the district has experienced suspected fraud but has "been able to avoid financial implications in each case."

William Boyer, Los Angeles Community College District communications director, said that the district is "fully aware" of the situation and that it is a "statewide issue."

"The issue is under active review by the District and there is no other information we can currently share," Boyer told *The Fix*.

Outcomes vary widely between the systems' 116 colleges and 24 district offices. While some, like the Foothill-DeAnza District, have developed tools and avoided any disbursement of funds, others have not been so successful.

On November 5, EdSource **reported** that the breaches "could represent a loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars."

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delivered to fake students, given that the system's 115 traditional colleges, enrolling about 1.8 million students, are in the midst of distributing more than $1.6 billion in federal COVID relief aid," EdSource wrote.

EdSource also reached out to various districts, finding that there have been 1,508 cases of suspected fraud in the Los Rios Community College District; 63 fake students given around $200,000 at Mt. San Antonio College; $179,000 in financial aid disbursed to fake students in the Peralta Community College District; and unspecified amounts disbursed to scammers at San Joaquin Delta College and Merced College.

The fraud has already made it difficult for real students trying to register for classes, which is one reason Rich has been speaking up about it.

"[This issue] is not mine to fight, but I'm fighting it because real students who need to take our classes cannot get in because they are full of fake students," Rich said. "On top of that, every taxpayer out there is funding this. We're funding fraud."

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Some blame the influx of fraud on the CCC system's weak application portal, which reportedly allows students to decline to provide a social security number and home address and to register using only an email, according to one student **quoted** by EdSource.

But to move beyond the enrollment application and apply for financial aid still requires identity verification.

"Colleges collect personally identifiable information to confirm a student's identity whether in person or over the phone before sharing any financial aid information," Leong told *The Fix*. "This would include first/last name, student ID or government issued ID."

Moreau said the easiest way to steal money from a financial aid office is with a stolen identity.

"It's pretty hard to get past the FAFSA application without a verifiable social security number," he said. "Whether they are using their own or a stolen one, that's probably the most common mechanism they're using to circumvent other kinds of fraud prevention systems."

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students are getting in. What she does know, and has documented, shows another troubling kind of identity fraud.

To appear legitimate, many fake students changed their profile pictures within the school's online learning platform, Canvas, to images of actual people — stolen from the internet.

The Epoch Times reported cases of "fake students" stealing images from LinkedIn, Twitter and other websites for use on student profiles, including one student who used the name and image of a professor from the University of Minnesota.

"[This] shouldn't have even gotten to us in the first place," Rich said. "Faculty should not have to worry about this. It's the college that has the responsibility to ensure their technology addresses cyber security concerns."

Steps have been taken, but the problem has not been resolved

Chávez said the Chancellor's Office is on top of the issue.

"The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (Chancellor's Office)

reducing fraud in admission and financial aid applications," he said. "Any financial aid fraud is unacceptable and diverts resources away from deserving students who are seeking to improve their lives through a college education."

Of the bot traffic that has been caught during the fall, 15 percent was found because of a new software. Multiple districts also shared new measures they have put in place with *The Fix.*

"The [Palomar Community College] District has initiated a verification identity process via zoom for students," Bandy said.

The State Center District, which told *The Fix* it does not have any issues with financial aid fraud, has the Admissions & Records department hand-check applications.

The model developed in the Foothill-DeAnza district remains the most successful. Moreau explained that it tracks a number of factors, such as location, inconsistencies in the data, and suspicious behavior.

Before the model was completed around

process has been automated.

"All those hours we were spending preventing crime were hours we could not give to students," he said. "The impact of the time and effort has gone way, way, way down."

According to Moreau, a number of districts are now using Foothill-DeAnza's model. The state has even negotiated contracts with other systems to make it available to all colleges throughout California, he said.

"We're all taxpayer funded," he said. "Whatever we do should be shared more broadly with the other public institutions."

But Rich, who teaches in Los Angeles Community College District, says the issue still has not been resolved and that she has been "basically ignored" about what is occurring.

"My issue is that it appears, based on the lack of interest I've gotten from administration and the fact that there are still hundreds of fake students enrolled in classes, that not a lot is being done about it," Rich said.

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class that I identified as fake students…using other people's identities and images, and they are still currently enrolled in fall classes."

Rich notes that the CCC system could lose funding if fake students are removed from the rosters.

"The school receives funding from the federal government in order for students to participate in classes and get an education," she said. "Let's just say the class count is 40, and you lose 10 students. Well, you've just cut a quarter of your funding."

She suspects this may be behind the apparent slowness and is concerned more isn't being done.

"I cannot see any other reason, in my opinion, that a college would not be honest about what was found, the extent of what was found, and what they were doing to remove these students that were not real students," she said.

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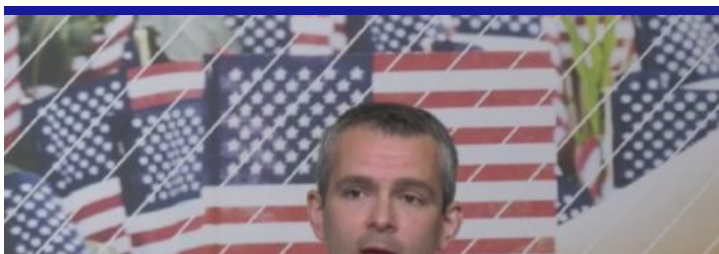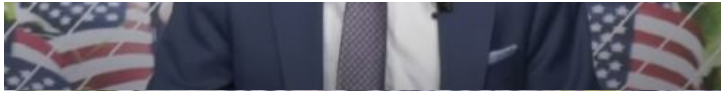IMAGE: Chainarong / Shutterstock

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