INTRODUCTION
This report analyzes the enrollment patterns of 115,892 CSM students over 10 academic years (20 consecutive semesters, excluding Summer Session), Fall 1993 – Spring 2003. The context of this report is CSM’s commitment to accommodating public demand for access to quality educational opportunities beyond high school. As is well known, the strength of the State and local economy is dependent upon the ability of its public two-year institutions to provide access and success for increasing numbers of students.

This report considers the following question: After enrolling for the first time at CSM, how many students re-enroll in subsequent semesters? The various methodological issues involved in tracking students over time, including those who temporarily “stop out” and return, are discussed in the conclusion.

Figure 1
CSM First-Time Students’ Persistence*
Fall 1993 - Spring 2003
(N=43,148)

FINDINGS
Figure 1 tracks the cumulative number of semesters enrolled of 43,148 first-time students—subsequent to their initial enrollment at CSM, Fall 1993 – Spring 2003. Student academic records were tracked for 20 consecutive Fall and Spring terms:

- 45.1% of students enroll in 1 semester only
- 19.9% return for a total of 2 semesters
- 9.2% return for a total of 3 semesters
- 8.4% return for a total of 4 semesters
- 4.6% return for a total of 5 semesters
- 4.8% return for a total of 6 semesters
- 4.1% return for a total of 7 – 20 semesters.

Figure 2 tracks the proportion of students enrolled in any given Fall term who re-enroll in the subsequent Spring term. A total of 115,892 student records were examined in order to consider subsequent Spring
enrollment, by a student’s enrollment status: (1) First-time student or first-time transfer student; (2) returning student or returning transfer student; (3) continuing student; (4) all students. These data indicate the following:

- Overall, 61.4% of all students enrolled in any given Fall term return for the subsequent Spring term
- 70.6% of continuing students enrolling in a Fall term return for the subsequent Spring term
- 55.1% of first-time students enrolling in a Fall term return for the subsequent Spring term
- 46.0% of returning students enrolling in a Fall term return for the subsequent Spring term

CONCLUSION

Overall, these data indicate that nearly one-half of new, first-time students come to CSM for one semester only. In addition, the majority of our Fall students enrolling for the first time (i.e., first-time students and first-time transfer students) or returning in the Fall after a break in continuous enrollment of more than 2 semesters (i.e., returning students and returning transfer students) do not return for the subsequent Spring term.

When considering these data it is important to keep in mind the following:

- Non-returning students may subsequently enroll at other colleges and universities, including those within the SMCCCD.
- Although students are tracked for a period of 20 semesters, students may eventually return to complete their educational objectives many years or decades later.
- Fall students not returning for a subsequent Spring term may skip immediate re-enrollment and return in a Summer term or the next Fall term.

- A student who does not return to CSM is not necessarily an educational failure. Many students who leave do so for a wide variety of reasons not within the control of the college, including coming to a reasoned decision that a college education is not in their best interest at this point in time.
- Comparable Statewide or national data are not available in order to make comparative observations regarding the enrollment patterns of CSM students. However, anecdotal information suggests that many California Community Colleges have comparable—or higher—rates of attrition. Notwithstanding the above considerations, the data clearly indicate that there is considerable “turnover” in our CSM student population. A considerable proportion of students who come to us—as their first attempt at education beyond high school—do not return for a second semester. These attrition rates reflect a growing national phenomenon of students who come to college academically under-prepared. In addition to the issue of academic under-preparation, many CSM students have ill-defined academic and career goals: nearly 40% lack goal clarity when they initially register.

Beyond this, the problem is more profound than ill-defined student goal declarations: nearly three-quarters (71%) of our enrolled student population do not have clearly defined educational objectives or do not enroll in the coursework necessary to meet an objective that they initially declared. That is to say, many students enter with a declared educational objective but do not take courses leading to that objective.

The problem of under-preparation and the need for remediation is reflected in an analysis of the outcomes of nearly 4,000 mathematics and English placement tests administered to first-time CSM students:

- Nearly three-quarters (74.9%) of placement test takers score at the pre-collegiate level in mathematics.
- Nearly two-thirds (64.6%) of placement test takers score at the pre-collegiate level in English and reading.

It is important to note that, at CSM, the term “pre-collegiate” mathematics or English placement means as many as five or six courses below college level work.

These data underscore one of the greatest challenges facing community college education: retaining the large number of first-time students requiring pre-collegiate or basic skills education. Most demographic and economic forecasts predict a dramatic shift in the balance between skilled and unskilled jobs—with most of the rapidly growing occupations requiring skilled workers with some postsecondary education. Accordingly, retaining and graduating this growing population of under-prepared students will assume ever greater significance if we are to prevent the “open door” of the community college from becoming a “revolving door.”