

A Tale of Two AB 705 Implementers: How Different College Interpretations Impact Student Success Statewide View



Assembly Bill 705 (Irwin, 2017) has dramatically improved student outcomes by requiring colleges to place students into courses that maximize their likelihood of completing transferable, college-level English and math. Extensive research shows that completion is maximized when students begin in transfer-level courses, instead of remedial ones. This is true for every student group examined, including marginalized racial groups, students with low high school GPAs, students with disabilities, STEM students with weaker math preparation, low-income students, foster youth, and veterans. Given this research, the state Chancellor's Office has guided colleges to place nearly all students into transfer-level courses in math and English.¹ **But across the system there is disagreement about how colleges must meet their obligations under AB 705, resulting in very different outcomes**

AB 705 Realized

Colleges give students access to transfer-level courses and ensure that they enroll there, with support if needed.

Typical Actions

- Replace traditional remedial courses with extra support in transfer-level courses
- Operate from a belief in student capacity, devote college resources to transfer-level classes & support
- Steer students *away from* remedial classes, if these are still offered (e.g., having to meet with a counselor and sign a waiver to enroll)
- Take institutional responsibility for the inequitable completion driven by disproportionate enrollment of Black & Latinx students in remedial courses

IMPACT ON OUTCOMES

At colleges where 90%+ of students begin in transfer-level math, 50% of students complete transfer-level math in one term, with narrower racial inequities for Black and Latinx students.

AB 705 Undermined

Colleges give students access to transfer-level courses but continue to enroll many students in remedial courses.

Typical Actions

- Continue offering large share of remedial courses
- Operate from a deficit view that students “aren’t ready” for transfer-level courses, use college resources to retain remedial classes as an “option” for students, despite overwhelming evidence these reduce student completion
- Steer students *into* remedial courses (e.g., providing placement guidance that triggers student fear and makes remedial classes seem like a good choice)
- Attribute racial inequities in completion to student under-preparedness, student life circumstances, or inadequate high school preparation

IMPACT ON OUTCOMES

At colleges where 65% or fewer of students begin in transfer-level math, only 29% of students complete transfer-level math in one term, with larger racial inequities for Black and Latinx students.¹

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Case Studies

COLLEGE A: AB 705 REALIZED

College A is a mid-sized college where approximately two-thirds of students are Latinx and about half are the first generation in their family to attend college. Prior to AB 705, the college used placement tests to bar most students from starting in transfer-level math. Post-AB 705 **the college not only gave all students access to transfer-level math, but also ensured that students enrolled in transfer-level classes.**

Approach to Implementation:

- **Align the class schedule and website with AB 705 placement:** College A removed almost all remedial math from the schedule, and math flowcharts on the website do not include remedial courses.
- **Re-envision support:** The college required students with weaker high school performance and preparation to enroll in low-unit concurrent support attached to their transfer-level course.
- **Integrate data into equity and improvement efforts:** The college provided data on student experiences, equity gaps, and variations in success rates across sections. In response, faculty worked collaboratively to integrate equity-minded practices, norm instructional strategies, and troubleshoot classroom issues.

THE RESULT

Five times as many students completed math requirements for transfer, with **equitable completion for Latinx students.** The college jumped to 5th in the state for completion of transfer-level math in one term.

“It’s very important to believe in the capacity of students to be successful,” said one administrator. “We just need to give them that opportunity and provide the support necessary.”

COLLEGE B: AB 705 UNDERMINED

College B is a large and diverse college where approximately 10% of students are Black, one-third are Latinx, and half are first-generation college students. After AB 705, College B gave almost all students access to transfer-level math, but instead of ensuring that students followed their transfer-level placement, **the college steered 35% of students into remedial math, substantially reducing their odds of completing math requirements.**

Approach to Implementation:

- **Knowingly offer options that harm students’ transfer chances:** The college’s own AB 705 placement validation report showed that enrolling in a remedial course produced lower completion of transfer-level math for every group examined, yet they continue to maintain large remedial course offerings.
- **Undermine students’ understanding and confidence about their transfer-level placement:** The large volume of remedial math in the schedule sends students a message about what to take. The website presents remedial courses as “preparation” for transfer-level courses, and features them as the first courses in math flowcharts, lending the impression they are recommended or even required.

THE RESULT

Expanding access produced large transfer-level math completion gains, but College B was in the **bottom quartile** of California community colleges for transfer-level math completion, with **inequitable completion for both Black and Latinx students.**

“We’re not going to get rid of our remedial courses anytime soon, without legislative action,” said one math instructor at the college.

ENDNOTES

¹ Limited exceptions granted for some English language learners and students seeking terminal associate’s degrees

² [PPIC](#), 2020, p. 53