

Reforming Placement & Support in CA Community Colleges (AB 705, 2017) Frequently Asking Questions

What was the motivation for AB 705?

AB 705 addressed the pervasive use of inaccurate and inequitable standardized placement testing in California community colleges. Based on these tests, colleges enrolled over 75% of students into remedial math and English courses, with disproportionate impact on Black and Latinx students. Remedial courses cost students time and money while cutting nearly in half their likelihood of completing degree and transfer requirements. AB705 ensures that students have the greatest opportunity to make progress on their goals.

What does the law require of community colleges?

Colleges can no longer rely on placement testing and must recognize high school work. The law also restricts colleges from placing students into remedial courses. Specifically, colleges must demonstrate that students are highly unlikely to succeed in a transferable, college-level course (called “transfer-level courses”) and that taking a remedial course will improve their likelihood of completing transfer-level requirements within a year.

Did the law make access to transferable, college-level courses more equitable?

The percentage of students starting in transfer-level courses increased from 38% to 96% in English and 21% to 78% in math. Equity gaps have closed in English, but in math colleges still disproportionately enroll Black and Latinx students in remedial courses.

Did the law improve student outcomes?

- Statewide completion of transferable, college-level math and English more than doubled in one term. Every college saw unprecedented completion gains in both disciplines.
- Statewide, every demographic group examined had higher completion in both math and English. This includes Black and Latinx students, students with weak high school GPAs, low-income students, and students in programs for the disabled, veterans, and foster youth.
- For students with weaker academic backgrounds, starting in a transferable college course with concurrent support – an approach called corequisite remediation -- improved completion by at least thirty percentage points compared starting in a remedial course.

Did the law produce more equitable outcomes?

- All racial/ethnic groups have higher completion, and Black and Latinx students had the largest gains.
- Transfer-level completion has become more equitable for Latinx students at a growing number of colleges, but substantial inequities remain for Black students.
- When colleges replaced remediation with concurrent support, Black and Latinx students had equitable completion in English and in the most highly enrolled transferable math courses.

Has student failure increased under AB 705?

No. Far more students are successfully completing transferable English and math requirements than before AB 705. Every student group studied to date has seen their completion of transfer-level courses rise substantially. There is no evidence of harm for any group.

Claims of increased student failure are based on two factors: 1) Far more students are now ENROLLING in transfer-level courses, which means that there are more students in every outcome category – success, failure, withdrawal, and 2) These claims focus only on pass rates among students who actually enroll in a transfer-level class. This metric hides from view all the capable students never make it to transfer-level classes because they are mired in remedial classes. They don't *appear* to be failures because they aren't even being counted.

If students want remedial classes, why shouldn't we offer them?

If remedial courses are offered -- even if they're not mandatory -- many students will choose them out of fear. They trust that taking these courses will help them succeed. After all, why else would colleges offer them? But this trust is misguided, because students who take remedial classes are more likely to drop out of college without making progress. Further, multiple studies have established that when remedial courses are optional, colleges disproportionately enroll Black and Latinx students in them, exacerbating inequities in completion.

How has AB 705 impacted STEM pathways?

AB 705 expanded and diversified the STEM pipeline. Many more students are enrolling in and completing introductory transfer-level business and STEM math courses than ever before, with the greatest gains for Latinx and Black students.

How has AB 705 impacted ESL students?

Because implementation in ESL is on a later timeline, outcomes are not yet available. However, research from the Multiple Measures Assessment Project found that non-native English speakers who graduated from U.S. high schools are more likely to complete transfer-level English if they enroll directly in the course, rather than in stand-alone ESL courses below it.

Should colleges offer more remedial classes to make up for learning loss under COVID?

The poor outcomes of remedial courses make clear that this is not the solution for potential learning loss. Instead, colleges should expand their corequisite support offerings, which enable students to review foundational concepts and skills while taking transferable courses. Now more than ever, students cannot afford to waste time and money on courses that don't transfer.

Instead of forcing every college to do the same thing, shouldn't colleges have the local control to determine what is best for their own communities?

The staggering attrition in remedial courses -- and the dramatic gains in corequisite models -- hold true across every college in the California community college system. Claims of local control cannot be used to justify practices that harm students.