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Invalid Placement Practices Widespread in CA Community Colleges

Reports from 114 Community Colleges Show that Enrolling Students in Remedial Courses Does Not Meet the Standards of California's Remediation Reform Law AB 705

OVERVIEW

Signed into law in 2017, AB 705 requires California's community colleges to recognize high school coursework instead of relying on inaccurate and inequitable placement tests and restricts colleges from requiring remedial courses. The law also set a new standard for placement, requiring community colleges to “maximize the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics within a one-year timeframe.”

Prior to the implementation of AB 705, statewide research established that student completion was highest when students began in transfer-level English and math, and this was true whether students had strong or weak high school GPAs.¹ The state Chancellor's Office provided colleges a set of default placement rules, which stated that all English/math students should be placed into transfer-level courses, with additional concurrent support provided to students with lower high school GPAs.²

However, in order to determine whether these statewide findings applied to colleges' local populations, the Chancellor's Office gave colleges a two-year grace period to develop their own placement practices and study their local data. The validation reports were colleges' chance to evaluate their local practices and show that they could meet AB 705 standards while continuing to place students in remedial courses.

This report analyzes the 114 placement validation reports colleges submitted to the state Chancellor's Office, focusing on the following questions:

- Have colleges been able to identify a group of students for whom beginning in a remedial course meets the standards of AB 705?
- Are colleges' placement practices having a disproportionate impact on Black and Latinx students?

Key findings are outlined below.

¹ This finding is for students taking standard English and math courses, not classes for English language learners.

² Hope, L. and Stankas, J. (2018).

This report was prepared by California Acceleration Project Co-Founders Katie Hern and Myra Snell. Copies of college validation reports were obtained from the state Chancellor's Office through a public information request by the civil rights law firm Public Advocates. The analysis is limited to math because of the extent to which community colleges continue to enroll a large proportion of students in remedial math courses. We also focus primarily on transfer-intent and undecided students.

KEY FINDINGS



None of the state's 114 colleges could reliably justify placing students into remedial math.

AB 705 requires that to place students into a remedial course, colleges must demonstrate that this placement will make students more likely to complete a transfer-level course in a year than if they enroll directly in the transfer level.

The overwhelming majority of community colleges could not meet this standard:

- **93% of colleges did not meet the standard for statistics and liberal arts math courses (SLAM)**
- **92% of colleges did not meet the standard for courses in math-intensive business and STEM programs (B-STEM)**

At the remaining colleges, remedial enrollment *appeared* to meet the AB 705 standard in at least one math pathway and for at least one cohort of students. However, the cohorts were too small to draw reliable conclusions (most involved 10 or fewer students) or there were other problems with the data.

“Getting stuck in remedial classes predicts academic failure. Students must pay for the classes but don’t earn any credits towards a bachelor’s degree....starting in a remedial class makes them less likely to earn a degree.”

– *Andrew Nickens, Student Senate for CA Community Colleges*



At least half of colleges have placement practices that disproportionately harm Black and Latinx students.

Our prior research has revealed significant racial inequities in the implementation of AB 705. Black and Latinx students disproportionately attend colleges that have maintained large remedial math offerings, and colleges serving over 2,000 Black students are more than twice as likely to be weak implementers of AB 705 as other colleges.³

College validation reports confirm this pattern of racial inequities in AB 705 implementation:

- **58 colleges have placement practices that produce disproportionately lower completion of transfer-level math among Black students.**
- **64 colleges have placement practices that produce disproportionately lower completion of transfer-level math among Latinx students.**

When colleges disproportionately steer Black and Latinx students into remedial math, it places them at a structural disadvantage, starting college a semester or more behind their peers who begin directly in a transferable, college-level course.

“To be disproportionately funneled into remedial classes by college counselors serves to perpetuate pervasive racial stereotypes about Black and Brown people, and says to us as students, ‘you cannot succeed in a challenging class.’

- Trillia Hargrove, Student at City College of San Francisco

³ Hern, K., Snell, M. and Henson, L. (2020).



Colleges are ignoring high school grades and inappropriately using guided placement to steer students into remedial courses.

AB 705 requires colleges to use high school grades as the primary means of placement. If high school grades are “difficult to obtain, logistically problematic to use, or not available,” the law specifies that colleges can use “guided placement,” a process through which students select which course to take after receiving information about the different options.

College validation reports showed widespread violation of this element of the law:

- **48 community colleges disregarded available high school grades for transfer-directed and undecided students and used guided placement to enroll them in remedial math**
- **At 37 of these colleges, guided placement was used to enroll students in remedial math despite high and mid-range GPAs that should have excluded them from this placement**

When offering a choice between a transferable math course and a remedial one, colleges are asking students to make a high stakes decision that dramatically affects their progress in college, often without informing them about the consequences of enrolling in a remedial course. Further, some colleges are actively steering students to choose remedial courses through guided placement, counseling, math department websites, and other mechanisms that play on students’ fears about transfer-level courses.⁴ When remedial courses are optional, research in both California and Florida shows that students of color disproportionately end up in them, especially Black students.⁵

⁴ Hern, K. (2019); Mejia, M., Rodriguez, O. and Johnson, H. (2020); Burdman, P. and Purnell, R. (2020).

⁵ Mejia, M., Rodriguez, O. and Johnson, H. (2020); Hu, S., et. al. (2019).

CONCLUSION

In the first year of implementation, AB 705 produced unprecedented gains in student completion. Among students who began directly in a transferable, college-level math class, 60% successfully completed the course in a year, compared to just 14% of those who began in a remedial course. Completion within one year has increased for every student group examined to date, including every racial/ethnic group examined, low-income students, foster youth, veterans, students with disabilities, students with low high school GPAs, and STEM-bound students who had not completed Algebra 2 in high school.⁶

However, implementation of AB 705 is uneven across the community college system, particularly in math. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, “The campus a student attends continues to play a critical role in whether or not a student gets access to transfer-level math.”⁷ Some colleges have eliminated or drastically reduced remedial courses, while others continue to pack their schedules with remedial classes.⁸ At colleges where 90% or more of students begin in transfer-level math, 50% of students successfully complete the requirement in one term, and equity gaps are narrower for Black and Latinx students. At colleges where 65% or fewer of students begin in a transferable course, just 29% complete the requirement in one term, and equity gaps are larger for Black and Latinx students.⁹

It has been four years since AB 705 was signed, and two years since the fall 2019 deadline for full implementation. Between research from other states, California-wide studies, and now 114 separate validation studies from the state’s colleges, the empirical evidence is unequivocal:

- Enrolling students in remedial courses does not meet the standards of the law.
- Taking even one remedial course reduces students’ chance of making progress toward a degree.
- College placement practices are producing inequitable completion for Black and Latinx students.

Now that every California community college has had the opportunity to assess their local placement data, the next steps are clear: It is time to ensure that students begin in transfer-level English and math, where they have the greatest chance of making progress toward a degree.

⁶ RP Group. (2021). Hayward, C. (2021)

⁷ Mejia, M., Rodriguez, O. and Johnson, H. (2020), p. 46.

⁸ Hern, K., Snell, M., and Henson, L. (2020).

⁹ PPIC (2020), p. 53.