Leading for Strong and Equitable Completion

How Community College Faculty and Administrative Leaders Are Transforming Remediation Under California’s AB 705
During summer and early fall of 2021, the California Acceleration Project wanted to better understand what was happening at colleges that achieved especially strong results in the first year of AB 705, landmark legislation that has transformed placement and remediation across the California community college system. While the law has produced large completion gains system-wide, results at individual colleges vary widely. We interviewed 63 faculty and administrators from 16 colleges, focusing especially on colleges with transfer-level completion rates that were both high overall and equitable for Black and/or Latinx students in at least one discipline.¹ For contrast, we also interviewed leaders from several colleges with low and inequitable completion.

¹ Using Fall 2019 data from the Public Policy Institute of California, we focused on colleges with completion rates in the top 25% of the state and proportionality indices of .85 or higher for Black and/or Latinx students, indicating that these groups' completion is proportional to their presence in math or English enrollment, or nearly so.
It was not surprising to learn that all of the high performer colleges we interviewed had eliminated or severely cut remedial classes and provided additional support in transfer-level classes. After all, extensive research has established that enrolling students directly in transferable, college-level English and math – with corequisite support for those who need it – produces far higher completion than traditional remedial courses, while eliminating the inequity of disproportionately placing students of color in remedial classes.²

Beyond these structural changes, our goal was to surface what else the colleges were doing. What concrete actions were faculty and administrative leaders taking to produce strong, equitable completion of transfer-level English and math post-AB 705?

This report describes four common themes that emerged in our interviews:

- Shared Clarity About the Need for Change
- Intentional Course Scheduling and Faculty Hiring
- Investments in Strong and Equitable Completion
- Cross-Campus Attention to Implementation Challenges

Each theme will be discussed in turn, with examples and quotes from across the system. Together, they provide an action framework that can help other faculty and administrative leaders improve completion on their own campuses.


**AB 705:** Passed unanimously by the CA legislature in 2017, this legislation requires community colleges to use high school grades as the primary basis for course placement in English and math, restricts colleges from requiring students to take remedial courses, and sets the standard that colleges must place students into courses that maximize their likelihood of completing a transferable, college-level course in one year (three years for students in credit ESL programs).

**Transfer-level math/English:** This term describes courses that earn transferable credit in English composition and quantitative reasoning at four-year universities (not “remedial”).

**Pre-transfer-level math/English:** Also called “remedial” or “developmental,” these courses do not earn transferable credit in English composition or quantitative reasoning.

**Corequisite models:** An alternative to traditional remedial courses, these models provide additional concurrent support as students take transfer-level courses. At some colleges, for example, students with a high school GPA below 2.6 take a 5-unit version of English composition instead of the standard 3-unit version.
At colleges with strong and equitable completion of transfer-level courses, there was often an ongoing, intentional effort to help people on campus understand the why behind AB 705 changes.

Administrative and faculty leaders shared data illustrating the low and inequitable completion rates for students taking remedial courses and the higher completion resulting from expanding access to transfer-level courses. Helping people understand the failure of the existing system laid the foundation for openness to new approaches.

“Black and Brown students were disproportionately placed into remedial courses, so eliminating those courses had a big impact on their success,” said a math faculty member at a college that completely eliminated below-transfer math courses. He noted that his college was concerned about students self-placing into remedial courses. “When we saw the data, there was no reason not to try. We said, ‘If remedial courses aren’t working, let’s get rid of them. Let’s go all in.’”

“One of the best things to come out of AB 705 was humility as instructors,” said an English instructor at a college that had stopped offering remedial English classes. “It allowed us to stare directly at the problem and admit that for a lot of years what we were doing wasn’t working, and so, let’s try some stuff that could.”

“This was work that really mattered for many, many students,” said a leader at a college where faculty had been working for years on accelerating their English and math sequences. “AB 705 was not problematic at our college because we had faculty and deans and a vice president of instruction that believed in what we were doing and supported it.”

“We always connected the changes to equity. It was never about the law,” said a faculty member at a college that had been an early leader in reforming remediation. “We clarified the why. Who are we serving? Why are they in our class? Why are they in college?”

A number of faculty and administrative leaders stressed that to reach shared clarity, their colleagues needed time and space to process. They also stressed that it was important to address people’s concerns, including fear that the changes would set students up for failure.

“We talked about changes we were planning,” said one math chair. “Then we talked about it again at the next meeting. Then again at the next. We let people come to terms with the changes slowly, patiently, with respect and compromise.”

Campus leaders noted that, as they moved forward with changes, shared clarity wasn’t necessarily unanimous. One administrator was pragmatic about navigating a divided math department. She described the department as split into three factions: those who support AB 705, those who oppose it, and those who are apathetic. At this point, she doesn’t think the hardline opponents can be convinced, so she’ll be happy to reach a critical mass of 60% supportive math faculty.

One faculty leader in English noted that their department included a number of people who “were deeply entrenched in the methodologies that had existed for some time, whose careers and their sense of their legacy were invested” in traditional approaches to remediation. In the years leading up to AB 705, she said change advocates were “like Sisyphus, you know, pushing a big boulder up a hill.” Ultimately, she noted, a few “serendipitous retirements” helped the department reach a critical mass of people who understood and supported AB 705 changes.
Ventura College

In fall 2019, Ventura College enrolled 90% of first-time math students in transferable, college-level courses and had the sixth-highest rate of transfer-level math completion in California, with 56% of students completing this milestone in one term. In English, 97% of first-time students started at transfer level, and 67% completed in one term, placing the college in the top 25% of colleges statewide. In both disciplines, the college’s large Latinx student population was equitably represented in completion.

This was a dramatic change from a few years before, when just 31% of first-time math students and 43% of first-time English students started in a transferable course, even fewer completed these courses within a semester (20% in math and 33% in English), and Latinx students were underrepresented in completion in both disciplines.

To achieve these results, the college made big structural changes. Both disciplines dramatically cut their pre-transfer offerings, and the math department ramped up corequisite support courses and offered more statistics and liberal arts math for students in non-STEM pathways.

But not everyone was on board at first.

“People thought pre-transfer-level courses were helping students succeed,” said English department chair Eric Martinsen. “They didn’t want to see us take that away.”

To help with the transition, the college created an AB705 workgroup that met at least every other week and included leaders from math, English, student support, and administration. They also held a series of events with stakeholders from the college, local high schools, and the broader community.

At one event, Martinsen said, attendees were given flashcards to represent students starting in pre-algebra, three remedial classes below transfer-level math. Everyone with a flashcard was initially told to stand. “If you had one kind of card it meant you didn’t pass the class, so you needed to sit down,” Martinsen explained. “Another card meant you passed but didn’t enroll in the next level so you also had to sit down, and so on until there was only one person still standing, to show the mere 6% who made it through transfer level.”

“You could see it click,” said Michelle Beard, chair of the math department. “One person who had previously resisted reducing remedial courses came up to me and said, ‘I’ve heard you talk about this many times, but this was the first time I really got it.’”

When working with critics, Beard said, “We needed to remember how long it took us to make the mental shift and to consider that people who resisted change were just earlier in the process.”

“Some of us were on fire and ready for dramatic change, but collectively, we weren’t ready,” said Martinsen. “So in English department meetings, we’d debate three things we could do -- a big change, a moderate change, or a minor change -- and usually, the department would pick the moderate change. I’d come back the next semester with visual representations of the data to show the impact, and we’d make another change. Every semester we’d tinker with it, always moving in the right direction.”

Martinsen said this approach has allowed Ventura to continue making progress while at other colleges, resistance has hardened.

“We’ve shown people that we’re opening up opportunity, not shutting it down,” said Beard.
At several colleges interviewed, college leaders discussed using key areas of their institutional authority in the service of strong AB 705 implementation, especially authority over faculty hiring and which classes are offered.

Several administrators used their authority over the course schedule to cut remedial classes, expand corequisite models, and increase the number of sections of statistics and liberal arts math to better meet student need. One department chair referred to herself as “guardian of the schedule,” drastically reducing the remedial sections offered.

“Faculty know that since I have right of assignment, that’s just the way it is,” said a math dean at a college that had dramatically cut its remedial classes. “Putting students in pre-transfer level is not the right thing, and faculty get that now.”

Several leaders also used faculty hiring to intentionally shift the balance in the English or math department toward change. When retirements made it possible to hire new full-timers, these leaders replaced faculty who had opposed AB 705 with faculty who had taught in corequisite models and championed reform on other campuses.

One department chair designed interview questions to surface faculty values and ensure that each new hire “brought a kind of growth mindset, was open to innovative strategies in the classroom, and was student centered.” For example, she would ask about what to do when a student missed class three times in six weeks. “You either recognize that that’s an equity issue, potentially, and you engage that student in that way, or you don’t and the interview question is now very revealing about who you are.”

At another college, an administrator informed the math department that there would be no new full-time faculty positions until the department made a plan for complying with the law. Change-resistant department chairs were also replaced with faculty who supported AB 705.

And at another, the math chair intervened with -- and ultimately removed -- a part-time instructor who was communicating to students that they didn’t belong in a transfer-level class.

Chaffey College

During her time as executive vice-chancellor in the state Chancellor’s Office, Laura Hope was clear: To maximize completion and meet AB 705 requirements, colleges should enroll students in transferable, college-level math and English courses.

“For the first time,” she said, “we’re actually committing to achieving equitable outcomes through AB 705, instead of just offering lip service.”

Yet when Hope left the Chancellor’s Office in 2019 and became Chaffey College’s chief instructional officer, the college was still offering five levels of pre-transfer-level math. Most introductory classes were geared toward B-STEM majors, neglecting the needs of students with other educational goals. And one in four first-time math students started in a pre-transfer class. Predictably, just 28% of Chaffey students completed a transferable, college-level course within one semester in fall 2019, an improvement over 9% completion in 2015 but still one of the lowest in the state.

After meeting with the math department to review the data and hear teachers’ concerns, Hope began removing pre-transfer-level math courses from the schedule and informed the department that they needed to develop a cohesive, AB-705-compliant approach to supporting students in math. When the department created a new pre-transfer-level course, she refused to schedule it.

“You can create all the courses you want, but I don’t have to offer them,” said Hope. “The faculty can plant a flag in the curriculum lane. The CIO can plant a very firm flag in the scheduling lane. That is my job.”

Since then, said Hope, Chaffey’s math department has developed non-credit support courses attached to transfer-level courses, all pre-transfer-level math has been removed from the schedule, and the college has joined a regional consortium to work on increasing equitable completion in math. The department is also developing contextualized transfer-level math courses that support each of the college’s six academic and career communities.

“These reforms came out of a situation where I forced the issue,” said Hope. “It just shows that administrators should lean into their roles. Putting a stop to the impulse to keep offering developmental courses can spark other conversations, and then the dominos start to fall.”

“I’m very proud of the math department and where it’s going,” she said. “The path they’re plotting now is one that the data supports and that will result in better achievement and more equitable outcomes for students. Ultimately, that’s what this is about.”
INVESTMENTS IN STRONG AND EQUITABLE COMPLETION

“My job as a dean was basically to ask, what do you need to make this happen?”

The faculty and administrators we interviewed gave multiple examples of college leaders dedicating resources toward strong and equitable completion of transfer-level classes.

**Expanded Tutoring**

Several colleges integrated tutoring in their AB 705 implementation efforts, such as placing embedded tutors in every transfer-level section with corequisite support, offering weekend tutoring, and strengthening tutor training.

**Reassigned Time for AB 705 Coordinators**

At several colleges, faculty were reassigned from at least one class so that they could coordinate AB 705 implementation, field questions and resistance, and stay on top of logistical details.

**Supportive Classroom Facilities**

Some college leaders invested in the physical learning environments on campus, such as ensuring that classrooms had computers and purchasing furniture that fostered collaboration.

**Responsive institutional research**

At many colleges with strong and equitable completion, research offices provided data spotlighting the poor outcomes of remedial prerequisite courses, as well as the completion gains from enrolling students directly in transfer-level courses.

“The research office was really good at coming up with ways to help us monitor progress,” said one college leader. “Whenever the departments would request data, they would drop what they were doing and provide some visuals so you could see a representation of the students you were impacting. Because of them, we never lost sight of the goal.”

Some research offices also enabled faculty to dig deeper into their outcomes, such as providing data on how success rates vary across sections of the same course and data from individual faculty’s classes, disaggregated by race/ethnicity.

**Professional development for faculty**

Professional development was the investment mentioned most frequently in our interviews. High performer colleges had typically invested in years of professional development about remediation redesign and equity-minded practice, building faculty champions who understood the why of AB 705 changes and who could effectively teach students arriving with a range of skill and experience in the subject. These colleges were often proactive about incentivizing attendance so that most faculty participated, both full-and part-time.

Some of the professional development was offered through external providers, such as the California Acceleration Project (CAP), USC’s Center for Urban Education, Zaretta Hammond, Luke Wood, the ALP corequisite program at the Community College of Baltimore County, and Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. Many colleges also developed local trainings and communities of practice for faculty.

One math faculty member mentioned the value of visiting a college that had already implemented corequisite remediation, as well as attending a three-day CAP conference. “All the conferences and every exposure I had made it a lot easier for that transition to happen.”

An English instructor at another college called it “indispensable” to have three or four workshops per term where faculty could “look honestly at what’s working and what’s not.” A dean at this college noted that the workshops helped faculty leave behind the view that students don’t belong in college English: “Every English faculty member has adopted the mindset that we have college-ready students who are in different places, and we’re meeting them where they are to get them where they need to be.”

At several colleges interviewed, racial equity was an explicit part of the professional development before and during the implementation of AB 705, including approaches for inclusive and culturally relevant teaching and faculty examining their own mindsets.

“We’ve really kind of had our eye on equity since the beginning in terms of not teaching from that deficit mindset, but really that growth mindset,” said one faculty leader.
Citrus College

“It’s very important to believe in the capacity of students to be successful,” said Michael Wangler, former math dean at Citrus College. “It’s also just as important to believe in the capacity of our faculty and our staff.”

This philosophy has helped Citrus College achieve one of the strongest rates of transfer-level math completion in the state, with 54% of first-time math students completing a transfer-level course in fall 2019 and equitable completion among Latinx and Black students.3

Years of planning and investment led up to the college’s implementation of AB 705. “My job as a dean was basically to ask, what do you need to make this happen?” Wangler said. Before offering corequisite support courses, math faculty attended California Acceleration Project events and traveled to Cuyamaca College, one of the first in the state to offer corequisite models in math.

“We grabbed one of the Citrus College vans and took about 10-12 people down,” said Wangler. “We actually got to go see what they had done within their classrooms, talk to their faculty, talk to the students and just kind of see the whole operation.”

Sheila White, who now teaches precalculus with support, said that because of these experiences, “I had a much better model before I actually had to try it out in the classroom. It gave me a lot more strength and confidence to be able to say: look, you’re a teacher, this is your profession, you can change at any time that you want, and you can just make it happen.”

The dean also secured funding to purchase new classroom furniture and install whiteboards all around math classrooms to foster student-centered, collaborative pedagogy. White said these boards allowed her to “spin around and in ten seconds see which groups needed help and which groups were done and could help other groups.”

“The students see everyone is getting up to the board and working together, asking questions to better understand the material,” said Sanaa Saykali, who teaches business calculus. “Three weeks into the semester they know what to do, and after that we don’t have any more shy students that hide away and don’t participate.”

The college also funds adjunct faculty to serve as embedded tutors in corequisite sections. While some might consider this too costly, Wangler said that the embedded tutor program is “one of the most cost-effective forms of professional development we offered.”

“Having an embedded tutor who was also a faculty member allowed me to try something and if it didn’t work, my tutor and I could think about how to fix it during the break for the class,” said Victoria Dominguez, former math faculty and current dean. “He would then try it in his class and bring what he learned back to me the next class. It was an improvement process that was just so critical.”

The college has also supported most math faculty – full and part-time – to participate in community of practice meetings where they share teaching strategies, learn new methods, and grapple with challenges together. In 2018, the research office found widely varying outcomes across sections of the same course, with success rates ranging from 30% to 80% across different faculty. The community of practice sprang into action, developing shared instructional materials and approaches for greater consistency.

As a result, said Wangler, “The lowest success rate went up from the 30 percent range to the 50 percent range, and the gap between the most and least successful sections went from 50 points to just 15 points. And for the first time, we started to close some equity gaps.”

3 Cuellar et al 2020.
Grossmont College

At Grossmont College, completion of transfer-level English has more than doubled, increasing from 27% in 2015 to 69% in 2019, with Black and Latinx students now equitably represented among completers.¹

English department co-chairs Tate Hurvitz and Cindi Harris noted that, beyond eliminating almost all remedial English classes and replacing them with corequisite support, the department’s success was supported by multi-year investments by the college.

One investment involved intentionally integrating tutors into their reform efforts. English faculty Michelle Crooks was reassigned from a portion of her teaching load to hire, schedule, train, and mentor the tutors, an ethnically diverse mix of Grossmont students and graduate students from neighboring universities. Tutors are paid to attend corequisite-supported English classes, meet with students, and convene monthly to reflect on their experience. Hurvitz said tutors often understand students’ needs “in ways that as instructors we just don’t get, because they’ve more recently been through the transfer-level courses themselves.”

The other key investment was professional development. For years before AB 705, said Harris, the college funded teams of English faculty to statewide California Acceleration Project events, with most full-time faculty participating.

To ensure that adjunct faculty received similar support, in 2017, Harris and a colleague created a local community of practice with four meetings modeled on CAP pedagogy. The college paid participants a $1,500 stipend and gave them priority to teach sections with corequisite support, incentivizing nearly all part-time instructors to participate.

In the first session teachers reflected on their triggers -- for example, students not printing their work -- and brainstormed how they might respond with a capacity mindset and radical empathy -- for example, realizing that printing costs money and designing class so students don’t need to print things. For the final session, instructors created and reflected on a piece of their own curriculum. Teachers were also asked to invite another instructor to visit their classroom and consider what this revealed to them about their own practice.

“Rather than just a bunch of one-shot workshops, we wanted to have a sequential experience over the course of a semester,” Harris said.

“Big picture,” said Hurvitz, “the work is about getting more and more people on the same page.”

¹ Cuellar et al 2020.
The enormity of AB 705 changes meant that many different parts of campus needed to participate in implementation. Several campuses created cross-functional groups with representatives from such areas as the disability resource center, counseling, research, IT, enrollment management, registration, and faculty leaders in English, math, and ESL.

The groups helped build shared clarity across campus about the why behind AB 705 and address people’s reservations about whether students were being set up for failure. Asked about the biggest barrier to implementation, one leader said, “I think just maybe wrapping our heads around the idea of getting rid of all of our below-transfer classes.” What helped, said a leader from another college, was when the data started rolling in showing how much better students were doing.

Cross-campus groups also helped to identify and respond to problems as they arose.

“The first time we rolled out the corequisite there were all kinds of issues with student registration,” said one dean. This was the most common implementation difficulty mentioned, as colleges battled systems that were hard wired with the presumption that remediation occurred as a prerequisite to transfer-level courses, rather than as corequisite support.

At one college, multiple meetings with the IT department were necessary to get past their initial conclusion that corequisite models “couldn’t be done.” At another, leaders secured resources for a programmer to create a seamless process for students to enroll in both a support course and its corresponding transfer-level section.

Another common problem was students mis-placing themselves in non-transferable intermediate algebra sections even if they had already taken it in high school and/or did not need it for their major. To address this, one college required students to meet with a counselor before registering for intermediate algebra. (Ultimately, they stopped offering the course.)

At a college where many math faculty opposed enrolling students in transfer-level courses, an administrator worked with the college marketing department to communicate directly with students about their rights under AB 705.

Finally, some leaders noted that they’d smoothed the implementation process by finding alternative roles for some people on campus, such as the coordinator of the testing center or reading faculty whose remedial classes were going away. As one English leader noted, their focus was to not simply abandon people “who might otherwise be vocal in their opposition” but to instead create “a constructive project to look forward to.”

Two years into implementation of the law, colleges have resolved some of their early implementation issues and are now using local data to both celebrate their gains and identify areas for further attention.

“Before, only 10% of students were placed into English 1A and essentially 0% of African-American students. Now it’s 100%,” said one dean. “Before, only 5% of African-American students completed English 1A. Now, it’s 55%. It’s still not good enough, but it’s a lot better.”

“We’ve made great gains,” her colleague agreed. “but we aren’t at 100% equity yet, so we’re motivated to keep working.”
Cuyamaca College

At Cuyamaca College, completion of transfer-level courses tripled between fall 2015 and fall 2019, increasing from 17% to 55% in math and from 24% to 72% in English, with equitable completion among Latinx and Black students.

It wasn’t easy. The college dramatically cut their remedial courses, enrolled the vast majority of students in transferable, college-level courses, and implemented corequisite support in both disciplines, including new math courses aligned with students’ majors.

“Making these changes was like peeling an onion” said Lauren Halsted, interim dean and former chair of the English department. “Things that we had no idea would be issues became issues, and we dealt with them as they came up.”

Initially, technological challenges almost derailed their ability to get students into the right math course. “We were told it would be impossible to include questions about students’ intended majors within the college’s enrollment system,” said math chair Tammi Marshall. “So we formed a small team to work with the college’s programmers, and we helped develop the computer logic they needed. After that, we were able to tell students which math class to take immediately upon applying for college.”

When enrollment data showed that all but five of the students who had signed up for the department’s pre-transfer-level intermediate algebra class were non-STEM majors and/or had completed the course in high school, Marshall said, “We canceled the section and worked to get each student into the right class. Moving forward, we will no longer offer intermediate algebra, especially now that new data show that even students who haven’t taken Algebra II in high school do better when starting at transfer level.”

In the classroom, said English department chair Tania Jabour, “The corequisite course dramatically changed the demographic of transfer-level courses and presented challenges to faculty who had been teaching the same way for years.”

“When we saw that some faculty were rejecting papers for having a staple in the wrong place or having three comma splices,” she said, “we knew we had to do something to better support faculty to help students learn the most important skills.”

They brought in outside experts on equity and inclusion and asked teachers to pick something new and try it. “This helped build a shared understanding of what equity-minded teaching involves, and faculty started changing their practices,” Jabour said.

Likewise, said Marshall, she and her dean discovered that one math faculty member had given students in an entry-level class an “algebra readiness” exam on the first day. “A one-time test doesn’t tell us a student’s capacity, so we focused on providing professional development that emphasized that the biggest predictor of a student’s success in a class is the instructor and their mindset.”

Despite their successes, faculty leaders said there is an ongoing need to monitor and resolve implementation challenges, and both disciplines are revamping their courses within equity and anti-racist frameworks and targeting professional development toward remaining inequities in outcomes.

“This work is never done,” Marshall said.
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The California Acceleration Project
Founded in 2010 by two faculty members, the California Acceleration Project supports the state’s 116 community colleges to transform remediation to increase student completion and equity.