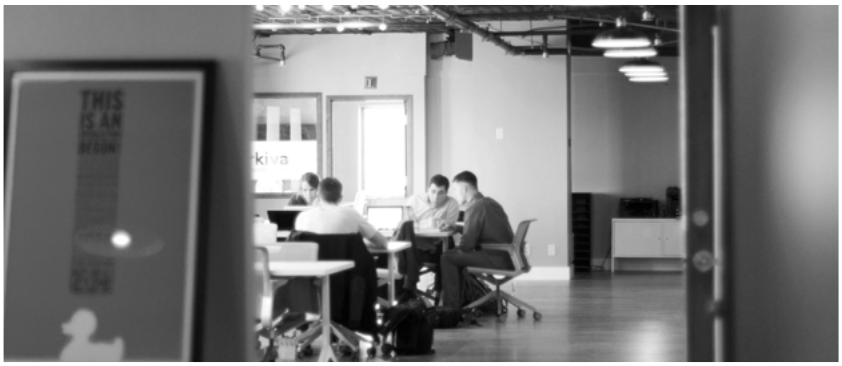
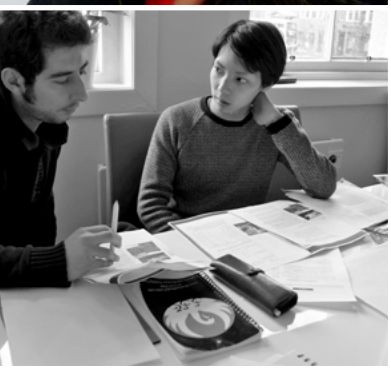
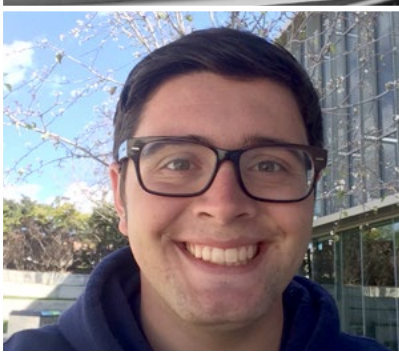
Up to the Challenge

Community Colleges Expand Access to College-Level Courses







The student stories in *Up to the Challenge* were written by Leslie Henson, English instructor, Butte College.

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Preface

The problem of the "underprepared" community college student is well publicized. Across California's 113 community colleges, just 20 percent of students are permitted to start in college-level courses in English and math. The rest are required to enroll in remedial English, math, or English as a Second Language courses, with low chances of completing college.[i] These statistics are often seen as evidence that high schools are not preparing students for college, but a growing body of research suggests that many students are more prepared than colleges have previously recognized.

Up to the Challenge: Community Colleges Expand Access to College-Level Courses features the stories of community college students who, like many of their classmates, have proved they are up to the challenge of college-level work, despite having been classified as "basic skills students" by a standardized placement test. Fortunately, these students enrolled in one of a handful of colleges that have transformed their policies and curricula so that most incoming students can enroll directly in college-level English and math.[1] Some of the students in this publication benefited from policies that allowed them to enroll in a standard college-level course based on their grades in high school – their overall GPA, or grades in English and math – while others enrolled in sections of the same college-level course that included additional time with and support from their instructor.

While these approaches are new to California, they are well-established elsewhere. In 2015, a national coalition of higher education organizations recommended that college-level courses be "the default placement for the vast majority of students." The group's recommendations have been endorsed by more than 30 states and organizations, including the American Association of Community Colleges, the Education Commission of the States, and the National Association of Developmental Education.[ii]

Colleges' dependence on placement testing is the heart of the problem. Several large-scale studies have shown that standardized placement tests are weak predictors of students' performance in college, and that capable students are being inappropriately placed into remediation.[iii] Research also makes clear that students are more likely to complete college English and math when they can bypass stand-alone remediation and enroll directly in college-level classes with extra concurrent support, an approach known nationally as co-requisite remediation.[iv] When Tennessee replaced traditional remediation with co-requisite models at all its public colleges and universities, students' completion of college English doubled, and completion of college math quadrupled statewide.[v]

Early results in California are just as promising. Community colleges working with CAP and the Multiple Measures Assessment Project are dramatically increasing students' access to college English and math while maintaining the same course expectations, and students are proving they can handle meaningful college-level work.

But these colleges are the exception in California. Despite long-standing regulations that students cannot be blocked from courses unless they are "highly unlikely" to succeed,[vi] capable students are being routinely excluded from college English and math. This exclusion substantially reduces their chances of completing college and is a primary driver of racial achievement gaps.[vii] With the growing body of evidence that students are more college-ready than previously recognized, one nagging question remains: Are California community colleges up to the challenge of transforming remediation?

With hope for the future,

Katie Hern and Myra Snell
Co-Founders, California Acceleration Project

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1. In this publication, we use the term "college-level" to refer to courses that are transferable to four-year universities. We do not use the term to include intermediate algebra, which counts toward the associate degree in California but is not transferable.

Before enrolling at Cuyamaca College in Rancho San Diego, Karly Franz studied fashion design and worked as a historical costumer. But a desire to teach high school biology sent her back to college. A major in biology requires calculus, a daunting thought for someone who hadn't taken math for five years.

Karly's test score placed her into intermediate algebra, but Cuyamaca's recognition of high school grades in placement allowed her to bypass algebra remediation and take pre-calculus with two units of required concurrent support.

> "I'm actually looking forward to Calculus now. It's kind of weird."

Karly was nervous about taking so much math at once, but the intensive eight-unit package gave her the opportunity to practice math four days a week in two-hour blocks of time. She benefited from the timely review of material she had forgotten, and she says she liked the intensity of the class because of "constantly having time to think about the problems." Even though she faced multiple challenges that semester, including her grandmother's death and her apartment being burglarized, Karly persisted and ended up with an 89 percent average in the class.

"When I reviewed for the final, it blew my mind how much I had learned," she says. The final was cumulative and covered 40 sections from the textbook, but she says reviewing for it "wasn't intimidating." She remembered much of the material from earlier sections because she'd been applying it all along. "You start with graphing a circle, then by the end of the class you're graphing hyperbolas," she explains. "You end up using all of that information you learned at the beginning of the semester to do something more complicated at the end."

The format worked so well for Karly that she says she wishes other classes would incorporate concurrent support for challenging material, "not just in math, but also for science."

Although he liked math and did well in Algebra I in high school, Carlos Hernandez[1] decided not to take Algebra II. He had been brought to the United States without documents when he was a child, so he didn't think he'd be attending college after graduating in 2010. Business math seemed like the more practical choice for an additional high school math class.

But in 2012, the California state legislature passed new guidelines making it possible for undocumented students to go to college, and in spring 2014, Carlos started at a San Diego community college. Unfortunately, he tested into the basic mathematics and pre-algebra course, which was three courses away from a transferable math class. Later, as he neared graduation and started getting email from Harvard and Columbia universities asking him to apply, Carlos would wonder why elite schools believed in his academic capacity while his community college considered him a year and a half away from being college-ready.

Carlos enrolled in the basic mathematics and pre-algebra class, but wound up dropping the course. He wanted to move forward, and the class felt like a long detour in the wrong direction. Instead, he focused on coursework for his major – sociology, with an emphasis in law and society. He made the president's list and the dean's list and was making progress toward his goal of becoming an immigration lawyer.

Luckily, Carlos found out that a different San Diego college – Cuyamaca College – had a new program that allowed students like him to enroll in a college statistics class that was paired with two units of concurrent support. College statistics was the last class he needed to transfer to UC Davis, so it seemed like a godsend.

> "If I hadn't been given the chance to take college statistics with support, I might not have made it to UC Davis."

The class emphasized critical thinking about real-life issues, and Carlos learned the importance of understanding how people gather and represent data. He passed the class, was accepted to UC Davis, and still uses what he learned on a daily basis. "Whenever I'm listening to the news," he says, "I always go back to what I learned in statistics."

1. Because of his undocumented status, a pseudonym has been used for this student.

Cuyamaca College
Math Transformation

Strategies

Five distinct math pathways tailored to students' program of study: general education, business, STEM, technical, and education

Pathways approach to placement: Different criteria for placement into different college-level math courses

"Best of" use of multiple measures: Course placement determined by test score OR high school measures, whichever is higher

Transcript verification not required. Students self-report their high school grades during the assessment process.

Co-requisite remediation: Students who don't meet placement criteria for standard college-level courses can enroll in sections with additional concurrent support

Students' lowest possible placement is intermediate algebra with concurrent support. The college no longer offers arithmetic, pre-algebra, or elementary algebra.

Results

Before: 24 percent of students eligible for college-level math

After: 84 percent eligible for college-level statistics (regular or with concurrent support), 59 percent eligible for business/STEM college-level math (regular or with concurrent support)

Gaps in access to college-level math were reduced or eliminated across all racial/ethnic groups. African American students' access increased eightfold, and Hispanic students' access increased fourfold.

Course success rates held steady. For first-time students enrolled in college-level math plus concurrent support (n=263), 67 percent succeeded (54 percent of those who attempted a business/STEM math course and 74 percent of those who attempted college statistics).

This rate of completion of college-level math was almost seven times higher than the rate for students who started below college-level math one year earlier (67 percent in one semester versus 10 percent in one year)[viii]

Santa Clarita native Andrés Salazar has been playing piano since he was five. After finishing his lower division coursework at College of the Canyons in Valencia, he plans to transfer to Chapman University, in Orange, to major in conducting. But music isn't Andrés' only passion. He's also academically driven. Andrés has earned an A in every course he's ever taken – including Algebra II in high school and college-level statistics at College of the Canyons.

"The College of the Canyons' placement process used to be really hard. Even the smartest people placed into remedial courses."

But if the college hadn't changed its placement policies and restructured its curriculum, the 4.0 GPA student would have had to take basic arithmetic in college, with up to two years of remediation ahead of him before he could take college statistics. At College of the Canyons, just 4 percent of students from this starting placement went on to complete a transferable college math course within two years.[x]

Andrés had been taking classes at the college since his junior year, but after graduating high school in May 2016, he went through the placement process again and got the benefit of the college's new system. He was given two options. If his major required college-level algebra or calculus, he could start in elementary algebra and complete two algebra courses before beginning college algebra. However, if his major required a college-level course in statistics, he could start there.

Like the vast majority of students at the college, Andrés fits into the latter category. He doesn't think of himself as someone who is naturally good at math, so he was nervous about taking a college-level course. But he discovered that statistics, unlike algebra, made sense to him. "I always got good grades in math from working hard," he says, "but I never really understood why we had to learn what we were learning."

He says percentages and probability, in particular, were "useful tools for the future," along with the ability to critically evaluate published findings and to gather his own data for future research papers. One of his favorite assignments was designing and conducting a survey to see if men and women had different views on a recent California ballot proposition. From this experience, he learned how easily survey response rates can be skewed by participants with strong opinions. As a result, he says he is now "more cautious" about statistics he finds on the Internet.

College of the Canyons
Math Transformation

Strategies

Pathways approach to placement: Different criteria for placement into different college-level math courses

"Best of" use of multiple measures: Course placement determined by test score OR high school measures, whichever is higher

Placement "floors": Students can't be placed lower than the last math course passed with a C- or better

Transcript verification not required. Students self-report their high school grades during the assessment process.

Results

Before: 15 percent of students eligible for college-level math

After: 71 percent of students eligible for college-level statistics, 30 percent eligible for other transferable math courses

Racial/ethnic gaps in access to college-level statistics have almost disappeared

Course success rates held steady. For students who started in college-level math but would have been placed below college level previously (n=408), 63 percent succeeded in their first attempt (57 percent of those attempting a STEM math course and 66 percent of those attempting college statistics).

This rate of completion of college-level math was five times higher than the rate for students who started below college-level math one year earlier (63 percent in one semester versus 13 percent in one year)[ix]

Joey Jerome, a full-time student at Las Positas College in Livermore and a 2016 high school graduate, aims to get a B or higher in all of his courses. "If I get below a B, I count that as a failure," says the fire science major.

Before Fall 2016, Joey's placement test score would have been too low for him to start in college English. However, the English department had reviewed research showing that students' grades in high school courses are stronger predictors of their performance in college than standardized placement tests. Starting in Fall 2016, the department allowed students to enroll directly in college English if they reported having a high school GPA of 2.5 or above.

> "It was kind of a push of encouragement to get to start in a college English class. It made me think, 'Oh yeah, I can do it.'"

As Joey had expected, the college-level course had its challenges, including paraphrasing what Joey says were "intellectual" readings with "large and sophisticated words," writing papers that were a minimum of 1,200 words, and reading two full-length books. But Joey found that once he practiced the skills, the tasks weren't as difficult as he had anticipated. "It was pretty much the same thing as high school, only faster paced," he says.

Joey hadn't expected this degree of continuity between his high school and college experiences. In high school, he had been in English courses for students with diagnosed learning differences. Joey says he now realizes that those courses prepared him for college English by teaching him about topic sentences, reading comprehension, and essay writing – knowledge he was able to apply in college English. For the required research paper, Joey read journal articles by professors, doctors, and teachers, and he wrote about teaching methods that work best for students with learning disabilities.

At the end of his first semester of college, Joey earned a "B" in all of his courses, including college English, a course he would have been excluded from had Las Positas relied on the placement test to measure his capacity.

Las Positas College
English Transformation

Strategies

"Best of" use of multiple measures: Course placement determined by test score OR a 2.5 minimum high school GPA, whichever is higher

Transcript verification not required. Students self-report their high school grades during the assessment process

Results

Before: 35 percent eligible for college English

After: 78 percent eligible for college English

Racial/ethnic gaps in access to college English have been reduced

Course success rates held steady. Of students who enrolled in college English despite test scores that would have placed them into English remediation previously (n=348), 58 percent earned an A or a B, and 77 percent earned a passing grade.

This rate of completion of college English was 1.75 times higher than the rate for students who started in English remediation one year earlier (77 percent in one semester versus 44 percent in one year)[xi]

> "Once the directions are clear, most students will rise to the level of challenge for the course."
>
> Karin Spirn
> Las Positas College English instructor

Full-time Skyline College student Laarni Medios came to the United States from the Philippines when she was in fifth grade. English is her third language, after Tagalog and Ilokano. When she's done at Skyline, in San Bruno, Laarni plans to transfer to San Francisco State University, and become a pediatric nurse.

In high school, Laarni earned a 3.4 overall GPA, and her good academic habits have continued into college. She spends time every day on homework and even studies during her breaks at her part-time job as a sales associate. Her first-year grades earned her an invitation to join Skyline's chapter of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society.

> "I took it because it was an opportunity, and I'm not going to turn that down."

However, when Laarni started at Skyline in Fall 2015, her placement test score determined she had to take a year of remedial courses in English. Among students starting at this level, just 18 percent complete college English in two years.[xiii]

In that first remedial course, Laarni's professor saw her motivation and ability and told her about Skyline's new accelerated course – a five-unit version of college English that provides additional time and support for students who don't qualify for the standard three-unit course. Had the course not been available, Laarni would have been required to spend an extra semester in remedial English.

The workload of the college-level course was challenging – three four-to-six-page essays, plus a seven-to-10-page research paper using at least six outside sources. But Laarni earned a B, alongside As in her science courses.

When asked why she works so hard to succeed, the first-generation college student says, "I want to do it for myself, and for my family."

Skyline College
English Transformation

Strategies

"Best of" use of multiple measures: Course placement determined by test score OR high school measures, whichever is higher (students eligible for five-unit college English with high school GPA of at least a 2.0 OR at least a C in 11th grade English)

Transcript verification not required. Students self-report their high school grades during the assessment process.

Placement testing not required (testing available as an advisory, if needed)

Guided self-placement survey gives highly motivated students another way to qualify for college English with concurrent support

Co-requisite remediation: Students who don't meet placement criteria for standard, three-unit college English can enroll in a five-unit version of the course

Results

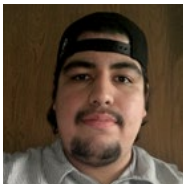
Before: 42 percent eligible for college-level English

After: 68 percent eligible for college-level English

Racial/ethnic gaps in access to college English have been reduced

Course success rates held steady. Of students enrolled in co-requisite sections of college English (n=437), 72 percent succeeded in college English.

This rate of completion of college English was more than three times the rate for students who started in English remediation previously (72 percent in one semester versus 23 percent in one year)[xii]



Alex Arguello was a C and D student at his Vacaville high school, but not for lack of ability. Alex says he felt like his life "was spiraling out of control," and he fell into a pattern of avoiding school at least two days a week. But when he realized he might not finish 12th grade on time, he buckled down. After five months of Saturday school, Alex graduated with his class in 2015. He enrolled at Solano College in Fairfield the following fall, determined to get to work on his dream: earning a degree in fire technology.

> "It was the best news I've gotten. When I told my family, they were so proud of me for being able to enroll in college English."

Alex's score on the assessment test placed him into the college's lowest English course, but he found the class too easy. His final essay exam for the class impressed his teacher so much that Alex was cleared to skip the rest of the college's remedial English courses and to enroll in college English with an attached support course. Alex was excited about the news, but anxious about moving on to a college-level course.

The co-requisite model proved to be what he needed. Students were held to the same grading standards and completed the same assignments as students in other sections of college English, but Alex and his classmates had three hours of lab time for their teacher and an instructional assistant to help them practice and to fill any gaps in their knowledge.

The first assignment was a 1,000-word essay on how students' cultural identities are affected by requirements to speak and write in standardized English. Alex's class worked on the basics – clear and organized sentences, coherent paragraphs, strong essay structure – in the context of relevant, real-world topics. His teachers motivated and pushed Alex to meet their high expectations, and he passed college English with a B.

The next semester, Alex took another English course – Critical Thinking and Composition – to meet general education requirements. It was challenging, and he found himself wishing for the built-in support of the co-requisite lab in his prior English class. However, he worked hard and sought help when he needed it, and at the end of the semester, Alex surprised himself. The former C and D student who had been placed into the lowest level of remedial English had earned an A.

Solano College
English Transformation

Strategies

"Best of" use of multiple criteria: Course placement determined by test score OR high school measures, whichever is higher

Transcript verification not required. Students self-report their high school grades during the assessment process.

Lowered test scores required for placement into college English

Co-requisite remediation: Students who don't meet placement criteria for standard college-level courses can enroll in sections with additional concurrent support

Results

Before: 18 percent placed into college English

After: Over 70 percent placed into college English (regular, or with concurrent support)

Racial/ethnic gaps in access to college English have been reduced

Course success rates held steady. Of students enrolled in college English plus co-requisite support (n=205), 65 percent succeeded in college English.

This rate of completion of college English was two times higher than the rate for students who started in English remediation one year earlier (65 percent in one semester versus 31 percent in one year)[xiv]

Sacramento-born LaMont Guidry works as a security guard from 12 midnight to 8 a.m., four nights a week. Twice a week, the 21-year-old goes straight from his shift to Sacramento City College.

As a child, LaMont didn't begin attending classes regularly until middle school, due to his mother's struggles with addiction. LaMont says that classmates repeatedly told him, "Black people can't read." "I'd get a bad grade," he adds, "and my friends would say, 'You ain't going nowhere.'" LaMont stopped reading and pretended not to care about English, but eventually got on track for college. In spring of 2015, LaMont became the first person in his family to graduate from high school. That fall, he enrolled at Sacramento City College with the goal of becoming a nurse.

"Most of the minority students are placing into the lower classes. It's sad to see that."

LaMont's test score placed him below college level in English. African American students' chances of completing college-level courses are particularly devastated by placement into remediation. Of African American students who start out in Sacramento City College's upper level of remedial English, just 18 percent complete college English within a year. Of African American students who start in the college's lower level of remedial English, just 8 percent complete college English in two years.[xvi]

But Sacramento City College had just begun offering a co-requisite model of college English as part of its Umoja learning community, which focuses on African American history and culture. Students who hadn't met college-readiness criteria could enroll in college English if they also took a separate support course taught by the same instructor. Instead of being told he wasn't college ready – echoing the experiences that discouraged him previously – LaMont was told he would be supported to meet the rigorous expectations of college composition.

In the support course, a teacher or tutor sat down with the students and gave them feedback on how to improve their rough drafts of the essays for the college-level course. The process made LaMont realize he could write successfully for college if he put in the work. He earned an A in college English and credits the co-requisite model with helping him become a better writer and a better student.

Succeeding in college English helped LaMont decide to stay enrolled part-time at the college, and he hopes to be done soon. "I'm not trying to be in school that long," he says. "I just want to be able to help support my family."

Sacramento City College
English Transformation

Strategies

Co-requisite remediation: Students who don't meet placement criteria for standard college-level courses can enroll in sections with additional concurrent support

Co-requisite model piloted within an Umoja learning community focused on African American history and culture

Results

Of students who started in the co-requisite pilot (n=27), 85 percent succeed in college English

This rate of completion of college English was five times the rate for students who started in English remediation one year earlier (85 percent in one semester versus 17 percent in one year)[xv]

"Students succeed when somebody believes in them and holds them to a high level."

Carrie Marks
Sacramento City College English instructor

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The California Acceleration Project

In California, approximately 80 percent of community college students are classified as "unprepared" for college and required to take remedial courses in English and/or math. Though remediation is intended to help students be more successful, research over the last 10 years has made clear that the more remedial courses students are required to take, the less likely they are to ever reach their college goals.[xvii]

Being placed into remediation cuts nearly in half a student's chances of transferring or earning a degree or certificate. Statewide, just 40 percent of community college students classified as "unprepared" complete these goals in six years, compared to 70 percent of students classified as "prepared."[xviii]

The unintended consequences of remediation hit students of color especially hard, because African American and Hispanic students are much more likely than white students to be required to take multiple remedial courses.[xix] One recent study estimated that 50-60 percent of the racial disparities in long-term college completion are driven by students' initial course placement in English and math. [xx]

The California Acceleration Project (CAP) was founded in 2010 by two community college faculty members who wanted to do something about the poor outcomes of students placed into remediation. CAP is a faculty-led professional development network that supports the state's 113 community colleges to transform remediation to increase student completion and equity. Between 2010 and 2016, all of the California community colleges participated in CAP outreach workshops, and more than 80 colleges began implementing accelerated approaches to placement and remediation with CAP's professional development programs.

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