

Equity Alert



Equity Alert: Time to Close the Loopholes in Remedial Education at Community Colleges

In 2017, California leaders set a bold vision to scale back remedial courses in California’s community colleges. Assembly Bill 705 (AB 705) addressed the long-standing equity issue of remediation, which keeps students – predominantly Black and Latinx students – in a cycle of spending tuition on remedial coursework (also known as below-transfer-level and pre-transfer-level courses), putting degrees and institutional transfer further out of reach.¹ The law requires colleges to implement evidence-based alternative practices for supporting students, including multiple measures for assessing and placing students in transfer-level courses. The bill maximizes students’ chances of completing transfer-level math and English courses in one year: completion of transfer-level courses increased for every student group after AB 705 was passed.² However, despite this progress, AB 705 contains critical loopholes, loopholes that continue to perpetuate the inequalities inherent to remedial courses.

California Community Colleges can rebuild pre-transfer-level coursework in ways that genuinely center students most disadvantaged by remediation and ensure their access to and enrollment in transfer-level courses. Further, implementing AB 705 must involve transforming long-standing systemic barriers in remedial courses that have historically harmed, and continue to harm, Black and Latinx students. As colleges work to mobilize recovery funds in ways that benefit those students most impacted by the pandemic, there’s even more of an imperative to uproot the harmful practices that uphold systemic racism. Our vision to re-imagine access to transfer-level courses in California Community Colleges requires California to strengthen AB 705 implementation by fully eliminating remedial English and math courses and replacing them with high-impact corequisites that support student success in transfer-level English and math courses.

This equity alert will address three of the most significant loopholes in AB 705 and emphasize why the state needs to close them. Further, The Education Trust–West recommends that state leaders:

- 1) Move toward eliminating remedial courses from community colleges;
- 2) Add capacity to the California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) to monitor the implementation of AB 705 and keep colleges accountable; and
- 3) Expand high-impact corequisite courses that support student success in transfer-level coursework.

WHAT ARE THE LOOPHOLES IN CA'S REMEDIAL EDUCATION LEGISLATION?

1 The Placement Loophole

While AB 705 encourages colleges to increase “placement” in transfer-level courses, it doesn’t explicitly direct community colleges to steer students towards enrollment in those courses. The statute expands the requirements for placement in transfer-level courses, including using indicators of success beyond placement tests, like high school grades and self-placement. The intent of this part of the statute is that in using a more balanced and accurate measure of a student’s potential success when evaluating correct course “placement,” students will be more likely to enroll in transfer-level courses. Yet, the statute fails to mandate that community colleges steer their students toward enrolling in transfer-level courses over remedial courses. Indeed, some California Community Colleges interpret placement as providing “access and options” to both transfer-level courses and remedial courses, treating the options as equivalent. This misinterpretation results in students who are capable of success in transfer-level courses, enrolling in remedial courses, despite the overwhelming evidence that remedial courses are detrimental to student success.³



"Research unequivocally shows that the only way to “maximize” student success in completing “transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics within a one-year timeframe” – as AB 705 requires – is to enroll students directly into transfer-level courses."

2 The Maximize Success Loophole

AB 705 calls for community colleges to “maximize” students’ chances of completing transfer-level math and English courses in a one-year timeframe without clearly defining what this entails. While the intent of this language is to ultimately eliminate remedial courses, the ambiguity leaves room for community colleges to continue with remedial courses while claiming they are better for student success than transfer-level courses.⁴ Yet, research unequivocally shows that the only way to “maximize” student success in completing “transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics within a one-year timeframe” – as AB 705 requires – is to enroll students directly into transfer-level courses. Further, local placement data finds that none of the 114 community colleges could show that remediation through student placement into remedial math classes was more effective in meeting the AB 705 “maximize” requirement than placement into transfer-level course enrollment.⁵



3 The Corequisites Loophole

AB 705 fails to provide or scale-up high-impact corequisites (like concurrent support courses, extended instructional time, intensive academic support services, and increased resources) for students in transfer-level courses who need extra support. Nor does it require colleges to collect data on transfer-level courses with corequisites. This failing is a significant oversight given that corequisites are one of the strongest evidence-based approaches to supporting students who need additional help in transfer-level courses.⁶ Alarming, California community colleges that serve a greater number of Black students (over 2,000 students enrolled) continue to offer more remedial sections than corequisite-supported transfer-level sections.⁷

WHY DOES CLOSING THESE LOOPHOLES MATTER?

All students should benefit from the transformative potential of AB 705. However, the loopholes discussed above continue to allow colleges to engage in harmful placement and assessment practices. These practices perpetuate equity gaps by holding Black and Latinx students back by enrolling them in remedial courses.⁸ In contrast, White and Asian students overwhelmingly benefit from direct enrollment into transfer-level courses.⁹ Through the implementation of AB 705 and subsequent policies and practices, the state must hold community colleges accountable to all students and initiate designing better systems that center the success of Black and Latinx students.

WHAT CAN THE STATE DO TO CLOSE THE LOOPHOLES?

State and campus leaders can, and must, remove the detrimental impact of remediation on Black and Latinx students in California community colleges. Ed Trust–West believes leaders should close the loopholes discussed above through the following fixes: eliminating remedial English and math courses, providing oversight to the implementation of AB 705 through increased staffing at the California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), and providing high-impact corequisites in English and math transfer-level courses in California community colleges.

- 1 Eliminate Remedial Courses.** The data and research has repeatedly shown that remedial courses are ineffective for students.¹⁰ In fact, students enrolled directly into a transfer-level math class were 6.7 times more likely to complete a gateway math class in their first year compared to those students who began in a remedial math course (Intermediate Algebra).¹¹ State leaders should work toward the eventual removal of all remedial courses from all colleges. To their credit, the California Community College Chancellor's Office has started requesting colleges that continue to place or enroll students in remedial courses provide evidence that it's better for students than direct enrollment in transfer-level courses. This data collection is commendable as a first step in the complete elimination of remedial coursework.



POSSIBLE SOLUTION: Ensure AB 705 Improvement Plan compliance.

The California Community College Chancellor's Office is already taking steps towards closing the first and second loopholes discussed above regarding "placement," "enrollment," and "maximizing," by asking colleges to develop and implement AB 705 Improvement Plans.¹² Ed Trust–West sees these improvement plans as critical towards closing loopholes and reaching full implementation of AB 705. The improvement plans call on community colleges to:

- Ensure all U.S. high school graduates are placed into and enrolled in coursework that maximizes the probability of completing transfer-level math and English within a year of taking their first class in that subject.
- End local remedial placement practices prohibited by legislation and regulation including, placing students below transfer-level courses (with limited exceptions).



Every community college is expected to submit an Equitable Placement and Completion Improvement Plan by March 11, 2022. Colleges that place every student in transfer-level courses will not be required to submit additional data. However, colleges that continued to enroll students in remedial courses, or multi-term transfer-level enrollments, as of fall 2021 will need to provide data that justify those enrollment practices. Specifically, they will need to provide evidence that they maximized completion, as required by AB 705, through continuing these enrollment practices. If the colleges are unable to provide evidence that they maximized completion through remedial classes, AB 705 regulates that they discontinue offering those remedial courses.¹³ Ed Trust–West applauds the CCCCO for asking all colleges to complete and execute AB 705 improvement plans with the intent of reaching full compliance of AB 705 by fall 2022. Further, Ed Trust–West recommends that CCCCO leverage the necessary resources and staffing to effectively implement the improvement plans and enforce the elimination of ineffective remedial courses.

POSSIBLE SOLUTION: AB 705 clean-up and expansion.

To close the first and second loopholes concerning "placement," "enrollment," and "maximizing," state policymakers need to pass a bill that clarifies the intent of AB 705: clearly outlining what they expect of colleges. For example, the law can explicitly stipulate that students must both have access to and be directly enrolled in, courses that maximize the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics within a one-year timeframe. Research studies confirm that transfer-level courses and corequisite supports maximize students' completion.¹⁴ Similarly, legislators should expand AB 705 to prevent colleges from offering any English and math remedial courses; instead, they should require colleges to enroll all students directly in transfer-level courses, with corequisites if needed, and provide holistic student support.



- 2 **Increase CCCCO staffing to hold institutions accountable and monitor equitable implementation of AB 705.** The California Community College system is the largest and most diverse public postsecondary segment in California and it's the largest higher education system in the world.¹⁵ Yet, the Chancellor's Office has the smallest professional staff of California's three public postsecondary systems.¹⁶

POSSIBLE SOLUTION:

Increase CCC Chancellor's Office staff capacity in the state budget to support colleges in AB 705 implementation.

If California is serious about monitoring and enforcing the implementation of AB 705, the state must invest in the capacity to do so. Ed Trust–West urges the Governor and Legislature to include funding in the budget for the CCCCO to hire additional, diverse personnel to monitor, manage, and oversee the transition from remedial courses to the transfer-level course and corequisites. Increased staffing will expedite the complete transition away from remedial courses across the system.

- 3 **Scaling High-Impact Corequisites in Transfer-level Courses.** Research has repeatedly shown that pairing transfer-level courses with corequisites is the strongest option for student success,¹⁷ especially for Black and Latinx students.¹⁸ Indeed, when students have access to corequisites alongside transfer-level courses, there is at least a 30 percent greater likelihood of them completing transfer-level coursework in a single term than those students who first take a remedial course.¹⁹ In order to incentivize the implementation of corequisites, the Governor and Legislature should make investments in scaling up high-impact corequisites across the CCC system.

POSSIBLE SOLUTION: AB 705 implementation budget package to expand high-impact corequisites.

Legislators and the Governor must invest in a block grant to scale proven high-impact corequisites in transfer-level courses. The budget package should include four key elements: equity, leadership, data, and specificity. These elements would be central to the requirements that colleges must meet in order to get funds from this proposed AB 705 implementation budget package.

- The grant should focus on **equity** by first distributing the funding to community colleges with a high enrollment of Black, Latinx, and low-income students enrolled in remedial courses.
- The college **leadership** must be willing to make the necessary changes to scale high-impact corequisite enrollment, transfer-level courses enrollment, and to move away from offering remedial courses.

"The California Community College system is the largest and most diverse public postsecondary segment in California and it's the largest higher education system in the world. Yet, the Chancellor's Office has the smallest professional staff of California's three public postsecondary systems."

- To qualify for the funds, colleges must collect and report data that tracks changes in course offerings, placement, enrollment, and longitudinal outcomes. Further, colleges should be required to report outcomes and progress that results from the block grant funding to make sure colleges spend the dollars equitably and effectively.
- The funding must include specificity on the types of corequisites that are most likely to support student success.²⁰ This could include corequisites that:

- Provide a culturally responsive instructional approach²¹
- Support students to gain confidence in the material²²
- Address math or English anxiety²³
- Develop time management and study skills²⁴
- Create a sense of belonging and community building²⁵

CONCLUSION

The research is clear: the loopholes in AB 705 enable the persistence of systemically racist barriers to transfer-level course enrollment for Black and Latinx students. AB 705 was a significant step in the right direction. Still, California must swiftly call out, act on, and change the remaining systemic remediation barriers and loopholes in our community colleges or the very intent of AB 705 itself is threatened. The Legislature, Governor, CCCCO, and campus leaders have the ability – and responsibility – to take actions that ensure California forever removes the unnecessary hurdle of remediation from students’ college experiences. Implementing the changes outlined in this equity alert will contribute to greater equity, increase degree completion in California, all while aligning with the workforce priorities of the Governor and the Legislature.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ AB-705 Seymour-Campbell Student Success Act of 2012. (2017). Retrieved from: https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=20170180AB705.
- ² Hern, K., Snell, M., and Henson, L. (2020). Still Getting There: How California’s AB 705 Is (and Is Not) Transforming Remediation and What Needs to Come Next. Sacramento, CA: Public Advocates.
- ³ Bailey, T., Jeong, D., & Cho, S. (2008). Referral, Enrollment, and Completion in Developmental Education Sequences in Community Colleges. CCRC Working Paper No. 15. Community College Research Center, Columbia University.
- ⁴ Hern, K., Snell, M., and Henson, L. (2020). Still Getting There: How California’s AB 705 Is (and Is Not) Transforming Remediation and What Needs to Come Next. Sacramento, CA: Public Advocates.
- ⁵ California Acceleration Project. (2021). Invalid Placement Practices Widespread in CA Community Colleges.
- ⁶ Complete College America. (2021). No Room For Doubt: Moving Corequisite Support from Idea to Imperative.
- ⁷ Hern, K., Snell, M., and Henson, L. (2020). Still Getting There: How California’s AB 705 Is (and Is Not) Transforming Remediation and What Needs to Come Next. Sacramento, CA: Public Advocates.
- ⁸ Mejia, M., Rodriguez, O., Johnson, H., & Perez, C. (2021). Community College Math in California’s New Era of Student Access. Public Policy Institute of California.
- ⁹ The RP Group. (2020). Retrieved from: https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/MultipleMeasures/AB705_Workshops/PowerPoint/UsingDataToIn-re-formEquitablePlacement_December2020.pdf?ver=2020-12-08-112303-500.
- ¹⁰ Transfer Level Gateway Completion Dashboard. California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. Retrieved from: <https://www.cccco.edu/About-Us/Chancellors-Office/Divisions/Educational-Services-and-Support/transfer-level-dashboard>.
- ¹¹ The RP Group. (2021). Maximizing Math Throughput of Students Who Did Not Complete Algebra 2 in High School.
- ¹² Equitable Placement and Completion: English and Math Validation of Practices and Improvement Plans. (2021). California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office.
- ¹³ AB 705 Regulations Approved at the Board of Governors Meeting. (2019). Retrieved from: <https://asccc.org/sites/default/files/AB-705-Regulations%20Approved%203.18.19.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ Mejia, M., Rodriguez, O., Johnson, H. (2020). A New Era of Student Access at California’s Community Colleges. Public Policy Institute of California.
- ¹⁵ California Community Colleges Facts and Figures. Foundation for California Community Colleges. Retrieved from: <https://foundationccc.org/About-Us/About-the-Colleges/Facts-and-Figures>.
- ¹⁶ California Community College Board of Governors Meeting. (2020). Retrieved from: <http://www.3cmediasolutions.org/node/21490?start=3805>
- ¹⁷ Logue, A. W., & Watanabe-Rose, M. Community College Students Assessed as Needing Mathematics Remediation: Seven-Year Impacts of Corequisite Remediation with Statistics1 Daniel Douglas Trinity College.
- ¹⁸ Corequisite Works: Student Success Models at the University System of Georgia. (2021). Complete College America.
- ¹⁹ Mejia, M., Rodriguez, O., Johnson, H., & Perez, C. (2021). Community College Math in California’s New Era of Student Access. Public Policy Institute of California.
- ²⁰ Additionally, the block grant should require that the corequisites are: low number of units, low number of hours, and same instructor. Retrieved from CCA Highlights Corequisite Support at the State Level - Complete College America.
- ²¹ Corequisite Works: Student Success Models at the University System of Georgia. (2021). Complete College America.
- ²² Corequisite Works: Student Success Models at the University System of Georgia. (2021). Complete College America.
- ²³ Purnell, R., & Burdman, P. (2021). Solving for Equity in Practice: New Insights on Advancing College Math Opportunity and Success. Just Equations.
- ²⁴ Purnell, R., & Burdman, P. (2021). Solving for Equity in Practice: New Insights on Advancing College Math Opportunity and Success. Just Equations.
- ²⁵ Mejia, M., Rodriguez, O., Johnson, H., & Perez, C. (2021). Community College Math in California’s New Era of Student Access. Public Policy Institute of California.