

# Equitable Course Placement and Completion at California Community Colleges:

An overview of historic policy reforms to improve student success and close racial equity gaps in completion



Today's community college students enter college and are placed directly into a math or English course that counts toward their degree, credential or transfer goals. It wasn't always this way. Prior to critical reforms by lawmakers in 2017, the vast majority of incoming community college students were placed in a maze of remedial courses that had no transferable credits and cost students time and money, while cutting their likelihood of completing degree and transfer requirements nearly in half.<sup>1</sup> A series of data-driven efforts by the state policymakers over the last nine years have driven dramatic changes in how California Community Colleges (CCC) place students into initial English and math courses and positive impact for student success.

## CALIFORNIA'S PROMISE TO STUDENTS

Spurred by research that found **only one in five students placed in remedial education will ever complete a degree**<sup>2</sup>, in 2015 the legislature invested \$60 million in the Basic Skills and Student Outcomes Transformation (BSSOT) Program which provided one-time grants to colleges to adopt or scale a set of high-impact practices proven to substantially increase student completion of transfer-level courses in English and math, or an industry-recognized certificate or degree within two years. An additional \$30 million was invested in the program given the significant response in the field for these funds and demand exceeding initial investment. A total of \$90 million was invested in colleges to drive innovation and help set the stage for future policy reform. Many colleges have credited the BSSOT Program with helping them undertake the work to reform their assessment and placement practices.

Building on these earlier investments, the legislature unanimously passed AB 705 authored by Assemblymember Irwin in 2017. This landmark law required CCC to use students' high school grades as the primary means of placement instead of relying on inaccurate and inequitable placement tests; restricted colleges from denying students access to transferable, college-level courses; and gave students the right to begin in courses where they have the best chance of completing the English and math requirements for a bachelor's degree. The right to access transfer-level coursework included English as a Second Language (ESL) students who have a goal to earn a degree or transfer. AB 705 required that colleges could use placement tests to place students in credit bearing ESL courses that maximized the probability that ESL students are able to complete transfer-level English courses within three years or less.

### Early results of AB 705 implementation demonstrated the law working as intended:

- 95% of students enrolled directly in transfer-level English in fall 2019, and 79% enrolled directly in transfer-level math.
- Student completion of transfer-level courses increased from 49% to 67% in English and from 26% to 50% in math statewide (2015-2019)
- Every student group studied had seen their completion of transfer-level courses rise substantially, including students with low high school GPAs, students with disabilities, foster youth, veterans, students over the age of 35, and low-income students.

<sup>1</sup> UC Davis Wheelhouse (2023). "Working as Designed". [https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/file/file-attachments/wheelhouse\\_research\\_brief\\_vol\\_8\\_n\\_3\\_final.pdf](https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/file/file-attachments/wheelhouse_research_brief_vol_8_n_3_final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The Research & Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group). (2014). "Curricular Redesign and Gatekeeper Completion: A Multi-College Evaluation of the California Acceleration Project". [https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/California%20Acceleration%20Project%20%28CAP%29%20Evaluation/CAP\\_Report\\_Final\\_June2014v2%20%28002%29.pdf](https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/California%20Acceleration%20Project%20%28CAP%29%20Evaluation/CAP_Report_Final_June2014v2%20%28002%29.pdf)

Despite these historic gains, only a handful of colleges had achieved 100% implementation of the law by fall 2020 and Black and Latinx students were still disproportionately impacted by inequitable access to transfer-level courses. In 2022, policymakers renewed their commitment to equitable placement and completion through unanimous passage of AB 1705 (Irwin) paired with a \$64 million investment in the Equitable Placement and Completion Grant program. AB 1705 provides clarity and additional guidance to colleges to help ensure all CCC students benefit from the success of AB 705, including providing greater protections for students. The grant program supported this policy refinement by investing in professional development for faculty, expanding supports for students, and increasing evidence-based practices in the delivery of curricula.

## DATA PROVEN POLICY CHANGES WORKING FOR STUDENTS

This historic policy reform has been the subject of much national and state research, becoming an exemplar of the power of data-driven policymaking in support of improved student outcomes in higher education. Taken together, the policy reforms and investments in equitable placement and completion by the state have found:

- Racial equity gaps in transfer-level English and math throughput have gotten smaller. The racial equity gaps between Black and white students decreased by 4 percent and between Latinx and white students decreased by 3 percent.<sup>3</sup>
- The implementation of AB 705 lessened the negative impacts of the COVID pandemic, allowing for an increased share of transfer ready students through the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>
- For every \$1 invested in the community college system, California sees \$7 in return through increased earnings and tax revenue.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Students have saved up to \$20,000 by not having to spend additional time in remedial course sequences.<sup>6</sup>

## WHERE ARE WE & WHAT'S NEXT?

After six years of implementation, equitable placement is meeting the mark. Access to transfer level English and math courses is nearly universal across the system. However, **there is still much work to do to ensure equitable completion of transfer-level courses and that students have the supports needed to be successful there and to close racial equity gaps in completion.** To keep California's commitment to students, the state and colleges must continue to work together towards:

- Ensuring colleges have high-impact, accessible and data-backed student supports. This is critical to improving the completion of transfer-level English and math courses and closing the existing racial equity gaps in course completion.
- Improving math access, particularly for Business, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (BSTEM) courses. BSTEM math courses are the gateway to STEM careers, and racial and gender diversity in those career pathways start in BSTEM math courses.
- Completing the promise to ESL students. ESL students should be receiving the same efficacy of evidence-based practices that their colleagues receive to maximize their opportunity to complete a transfer-level English course in a timely pathway.

<sup>3</sup> Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). (2023). "Tracking Progress in Community College Access and Success". <https://www.ppic.org/publication/tracking-progress-in-community-college-access-and-success/>

<sup>4</sup> Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). (2022). "The Effects of COVID-19 on Transfer-Intending Students in California's Community Colleges". <https://www.ppic.org/publication/the-effects-of-covid-19-on-transfer-intending-students-in-californias-community-colleges/>

<sup>5</sup> California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), Emsi, and Burning Glass. (2022). "The Economic Value of the California Community College System" <https://assets.cccco.edu/share/51B197C8-519B-49FD-BCAEFF10781A2B0D/?mediaId=11A71E97-C56A-4E3D-8F62C88E51A719B9&viewType=grid>

<sup>6</sup> The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS). (2022). "The Detrimental Costs of Remedial Education for California Community College Students." <https://www.ticas.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Detrimental-Costs-of-Remedial-Education-for-California-Community-College-Students.pdf>