

PROGRESS AND POTENTIAL: CONSIDERING THE QUESTION OF RACIAL EQUITY IN CA AB705

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FOREWORD

California's movement toward ending remedial education in community colleges through Assembly Bill 705 employs the power of policy as a means for racial justice. It is amply documented that Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students have for many years been disproportionately placed in remedial English and Mathematics courses. For generations of racially minoritized students, remedial non-college credit courses have blocked their ability to earn college degrees that would have provided access to well-paying jobs. Just as red-lining policies prevented Blacks from accumulating wealth through home ownership, placement in remedial education denied thousands of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders and their descendants the economic, health, and social benefits derived from higher education degrees.

This brief is motivated by our optimism that AB 705 can repair the harms done by more than 50 years of consigning racially minoritized students to remedial education courses—non-credit courses that have contributed to the very high rates of withdrawal that have characterized enrollment patterns in community colleges for too long.

Our optimism is not without caution, however. Even with the promising signs that AB 705 is having positive impact on racially minoritized students, documented here and elsewhere, we are aware that the transformational potential of AB 705 can easily be undercut by race-neutral methods of implementation. The recent report from the California Acceleration Project (2021), *Invalid Placement Practices Widespread in CA Community Colleges*, documents that, "At least half of colleges have placement practices that disproportionately harm Black and Latinx students" (p. 3). The findings we report in *Delivering on the Promise of Progressive Policy: Strengthening the Academic Senate Professional Development in California's Community Colleges*, an analysis funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, highlight our fears that AB 705's potential to leverage racial equity is at risk of being derailed. These concerns are confirmed by the finding that racial equity was not even uttered once in a series of professional development sessions offered by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges that were of relevance to the Bill.

Nonetheless, we are heartened by the many community college faculty, leaders, staff, and students—along with advocacy organizations—all committed to protecting the promise of AB 705. With this report, we seek to add our voice of support to realizing the promise of AB 705.

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“AB 705 has to succeed. The real question is: How do we change? Do we blame secondary schools? There’s lots of room for improvement. But how do we prepare ourselves for our students? We need to address a thorny issue: The quality of teaching and support for students at the college level. Just because you have subject matter expertise doesn’t mean you have the pedagogical expertise to succeed. We need to change practices and change attitudes -- about students and about the work.”ⁱ

Pedro A. Noguera, Dean

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INTRODUCTION

This brief was inspired by a December 2020 convening of researchers and advocates, hosted by Bensimon & Associates, the USC Race and Equity Center, and the Pullias Center at the University of Southern California’s Rossier School of Education, to take stock of the implementation of Assembly Bill 705 (AB 705). Passed by the State Legislature and signed by then-Governor Jerry Brown in late 2017, AB 705 is an ambitious departure from past practice of funneling tens of thousands of California community college (CCC) students, overwhelmingly racially minoritized, into basic skills courses that became educational dead-ends for far too many. Though it is early -- just under four years since AB 705 became law -- recent evidence provides important insights about implementation progress and challenges, and highlights a number of important questions that need answers as the community colleges work to achieve the full potential of AB 705.

We begin by taking stock of what key recent studies tell us about AB 705: What appears to be working, and where is there room for improvement, particularly with regard to the policy’s promise as a tool to combat structural racism? We follow by detailing informed reflections and suggestions from researchers, advocates and policymakers who participated in the convening and have been watching AB 705 implementation closely. Drawing from their responses, we note outstanding research questions and highlight key considerations for players at all levels as they work to get developmental education reform right.

We present this brief in the spirit of improving an important and potentially emancipatory reform that has so much promise to support the evolution of equitable, anti-racist institutions that succeed in dismantling barriers to student success.

What is AB 705?

AB 705 is evidence-based legislation that took effect in January 2018. It requires all California community colleges to maximize the likelihood that students begin and complete college-level English and math within one year. It also requires colleges to use multiple measures (i.e., high school achievement) instead of assessment tests to place students **in college-level** courses. This reform was built upon a strong research base that demonstrated that many students were erroneously assigned to developmental education courses—often on the basis of one high stakes placement test and **even after passing rigorous college-preparatory coursework in high school**—when they would otherwise have been able to successfully pass college-level courses directly.

What does research tell us about AB 705?

Investigations of course taking patterns in recent years by the RP Group, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, the University of Southern California and the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), reveal that most colleges moved swiftly to implement AB 705. These findings are confirmed by surveys of community college officials.

In 2019, the majority of students who took English and math enrolled in transfer-level courses. In fact, 96% of first-time students who enrolled in English were enrolled in transfer-level college composition, up from 38% prior to the law's passage in 2015. Nearly 80% of first-time students who enrolled in math took a transfer-level course, up from 21% pre-AB 705 (Cuellar Mejia, Rodriguez & Johnson, PPIC, 2020). In the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD), California's and the nation's largest, rates of enrollment among first-time students in transfer-level English rose from 49% to 91%, and from 20% to 70% in transfer-level math between 2017 and 2019 (Melguizo, Ching, Ngo, & Harrington, 2021).

Enrollment patterns showed major reductions in basic skills course taking, and a substantial narrowing of equity gaps that predated the change in policy. In years just prior to AB 705, first-time Latina/o/x and Black students were significantly underrepresented in transfer-level English composition courses, relative to their share of first-time English students. In 2015, only 24% of African American and 30% of Latina/o/x students, respectively, had enrolled directly in college composition. By fall 2019, Black and Latino/a/x student were no longer underrepresented in college composition courses (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2020).

Although all students experienced higher enrollment in transfer-level courses, some disparities in access persist, and early evidence suggests that access to transfer level math, in particular, continues to be disproportionately restrictive for Latina/o/x and Black students (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2020), with substantial variation across community colleges (Rodriguez, Brooks & Hsieh, 2021). Black and Latina/o/x students disproportionately attend colleges that have maintained large remedial math offerings (Hern, Snell & Henson, 2020). New work by the California Acceleration Project analyzing CCC's internal validation of placement policies suggests that when colleges continued to make remedial placements, those placements did not meet state guidelines under AB 705 (Hern and Snell, 2021). These guidelines require that in order 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 course.

The early evidence on AB 705 and transfer-level course outcomes is somewhat more mixed than the evidence on access to transfer-level courses. Specifically, although rates for successful completion of transfer-level math and English courses are rising for all groups (by 20-25 percentage points since the passage of AB 705), Black and Latina/o/x students' completion rates are lower when compared to other groups (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2020). Yet, given that improvements in course enrollments overall were largest for Latina/o/x and Black students, the gaps in throughput ratesⁱⁱ narrowed overall. In LACCD, researchers found that post-AB705 course passage rates actually declined somewhat in both transfer-level math and English. Nevertheless, there, too, colleges experienced a net gain in throughput growth, since African American and Latina/o/x students had been disproportionately placed in basic skills classes relative to their White and Asian peers (Melguizo et al., 2021; Ngo et al., 2021; Cuellar Mejia et al., 2020; Hern et al., 2020; Kurlaender & Larsen, 2013).

To strengthen AB 705 implementation, the California Acceleration Project provides a useful checklist, highlighting key strategies to address transfer-level course completion, specifically the elimination of remedial course offerings, enhancement of corequisite course supports for students with weak high school preparation, adoption of more flexible math pathways, and support for faculty professional development.ⁱⁱⁱ Across the system, colleges are innovating in instructional approaches, for example through corequisite courses that offer academic support to students while they are enrolled in transfer-level courses. Corequisite developmental education models allow students to receive academic support; corequisites can be customized to provide the specific types of support so that students can successfully complete transfer-level courses without losing forward momentum toward transfer or degree. Evidence from Texas^{iv} and the City University of New York^v, as well as multiple other states (e.g., Georgia, Indiana, Tennessee, and West Virginia)^{vi} shows strong results in accelerating completion of transfer-level course completion through corequisite models. Beyond corequisite models, emerging research from some community colleges highlights strategies for supplemental instruction and academic supports, such as tutoring, are increasingly popular for supporting students in math, rather than requiring students to take corequisite courses (Swanson, Yucel, Morris & Melguizo, 2021).

AB705 WITHIN AN EQUITY FRAMEWORK

The December 2020 convening that inspired this brief was organized around the following questions:

1. In what ways are racially minoritized students benefiting from the implementation of AB 705?
2. What are the enablers and barriers to the implementation of AB 705 with a focus on racial equity?
3. In what ways can research be leveraged to strengthen the racial equity focus on AB 705?
4. What more do we need to know in order to ensure that AB 705 fulfills its potential as an anti-racist policy?

Lessons from other states suggest that AB 705 can be an important lever for racial equity. Evaluation of comprehensive developmental education reform in the state of Florida found that reforms contributed to many more students enrolling directly into college level English and math and successfully passing these courses in the first year of college (Park-Gaghan, Mokher, Hu, Spencer & Hu, 2020).^{vii} In addition, researchers reported that Black and Latina/o/x students experience even greater gains in passing rates than White students, effectively narrowing the racial/ethnic equity gaps.

Evidence on transfer-level course enrollments in recent years suggest that AB 705 may in fact be reducing inequality in access to the coursework necessary for degree completion and transfer. Yet, a critical policy analysis of AB 705 underscores that “policymaking is not a race-neutral practice,” (Felix & Trinidad, 2020) and that this reform is built around a recognition that racial inequalities have long existed in our education system, disproportionately burdening minoritized students (Bensimon, 2020). Felix and Trinidad (2020) posit that AB 705 effectively “recognizes racial inequity, but limits racial remedies.” As such, they argue,

implementation of AB 705 practices (e.g., placement, co-requisite models, student supports, faculty professional development) necessitate an explicit orientation toward racial equity that integrates reform practices with the equity goal of the legislation.

What would it mean for AB 705 to more explicitly address structural racism? Anti-racist policies must attend to the conditions and practices that contributed to the inequalities we see in developmental education placement and which, at least in part, led to the passage of AB 705. Although community colleges may have not contributed to all of the inequalities in college readiness students experience in K-12 prior to arriving in college, they nevertheless have great responsibility in not perpetuating those inequalities in the college classroom and in addressing systemic barriers to college success once students arrive. These include more explicit accountability to equity in placement practices, attention to equity gaps in course success and faculty practices (i.e., content and pedagogy), and ensuring an equity focus in broader student support services including counseling. In 2020, California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) issued a memorandum to colleges that required them to submit student placement data, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, through an "Equitable Placement Validation of Practices" template.^{viii} CCCCCO has also provided an Equitable Placement Toolkit.^{ix}

Implications for Policy and Practice

Following up on the December USC convening, we surveyed participants to gather suggestions for how to maximize the potential of AB 705. We asked: What additional measures or conditions need to be in place to ensure racial equity in student access to and success in transfer-level courses? Responses provide productive suggestions for next steps in implementation of developmental education and in broader efforts to support student success, particularly for racially minoritized populations.

To the question -- What needs to be done to maximize the potential of AB 705 as a lever for racial equity? -- respondents offered suggestions we have grouped in three buckets below:

- 1. Accelerate and enforce implementation.** Multiple respondents focused squarely on campus accountability for following the law. Several suggested that the state should more actively ensure that colleges eliminate any remaining course sections of basic skills that are no longer allowed under the requirements of AB 705. These accountability suggestions included the introduction of legislation "to close the loophole" that allows for remedial placements, with a more explicit focus on the disproportionate numbers of Black and Latinx students still placed in these courses; along with "potential funding penalties" for colleges exhibiting any equity gaps in placement.

Guided placement may still be a barrier to equitable implementation in some colleges. Several participants suggested that colleges that have been identified as weak implementers of AB 705 should be pushed harder to comply. As one respondent put it:

"We need to fully replace remedial courses with corequisite models in order to eliminate the remaining structural racism under which colleges continue to disproportionately enroll Black and Latinx students in stand-alone remedial courses post-AB 705."

2. Learn from campus innovation. As campuses implement a variety of approaches, we can learn from both their success as well as the efforts that may not have resulted in desired goals. What are students taking instead of basic skills and how can we ensure greater success and equity in transfer-level course completion (not just access)? We need to learn from the design, content, and instructional approaches of the corequisite models being introduced across the system. This also includes closer investigation of innovative efforts to bridge gateway math and English composition courses into discipline-specific courses, diverse transfer-level math pathways,^x efforts at changing the timing of required transfer-level math and English requirements (among other innovations). What lessons -- positive and negative -- can be drawn from instructional delivery adaptations in the distance learning context of the pandemic?

Any number of variables and interactions are at play in a campus shift in placement policy and in AB 705 implementation, including the role of administrators (i.e., embracing policy implementation, fostering innovation, and leading for equity -- or not); counselors (i.e., their mindsets and assumptions that contribute to student advising and sorting practices); faculty (more on this below); and students.^{xi} How do students interpret and navigate placement policies, and what types of supports do they find most effective? As one educational leader reflected:

“We need a concerted systemwide focus on supporting struggling colleges with professional development, especially in math pathways. Right now, the students benefiting from AB 705 are from those colleges who bought in early and have been doing the work for at least the last few years. Those left behind are those colleges that are more intractable due to leadership or not having participated in early PD efforts.”

3. Address faculty mindset and classroom experience. Several respondents urged more concerted efforts to shift faculty “mindsets”^{xii} and implicit bias. They also noted the need for broader culture change that would make institutions more accepting, and embracing, of the imperative to teach and be responsive to the students they serve, rather than to expect students to be prepared for the teaching that colleges provide. As one participant offered:

“Faculty beliefs need to change – particularly, their racialized understanding of developmental students. AB 705 is the structural change, but faculty need systemic cultural change in the way they see students and how they evaluate their policies and practices.”

Most respondents called for increased faculty development to support stronger equity orientations, and several specifically mentioned the importance of using the hiring process to both diversify faculty and address pervasive “deficit perspectives”¹ among some faculty, particularly in math.

4. Tend to external issues that, left unaddressed, may undermine the goals of AB 705. There was general recognition that AB 705 does not exist in a vacuum, and that other factors -- from funding, financial aid and advising to mental health and unmet basic needs -- are simultaneously impacting and even driving inequity. There is no question that the COVID-19 pandemic has only increased student needs. As two respondents noted:

¹ Oxford reference defines a deficit perspective as “a perspective which attributes failures such as lack of achievement, learning, or success in gaining employment to a personal lack of effort or deficiency in the individual, rather than to failures or limitations of the education and training system or to prevalent socio-economic trends.”

“Colleges have...not received specific and sustained funding for these changes, which require a big cultural shift. The fund they are being told they can support [professional development] through is the same fund that supports basic needs and other activities related to student equity and achievement.”

“I also think it’s critical to not just look at AB705 in isolation, but to understand the broader influences on students’ college outcomes-- for example, if we’re seeing persistent inequities in completion rates, how might that be related to issues of funding, housing insecurity, food insecurity, diversity among faculty, and so on? AB705 is one policy lever, but in order to maximize its ability to promote racial equity we have to understand how it relates to a broader web of systems and policies.”

There was broad agreement that institutions that have struggled with AB 705 implementation have a great deal to learn from those colleges that have made substantial progress. More specifically, the CCCCO or a designated entity could play a brokering role, identifying colleges serving similar populations but achieving disparate outcomes. Beyond pursuing compliance, colleges can learn about the multitude of academic supports and innovations currently in play across the system to support the successful completion of transfer-level math and English for all students.

Lastly, we asked participants to suggest additional measures or conditions that need to be in place to ensure equity in student access and success. This includes an acknowledgement that some students, through no fault of their own, may require additional support once in college, and that removing basic skills instruction was a necessary but insufficient condition to support more students to degree completion and transfer. This question elicited many calls for additional funding to support low-income and students of color more generally, and specifically the level of skilled professional development needed to support institutional evolution to equitable and anti-racist practices and culture.

CONCLUSION

The goals of AB 705 are necessary and audacious in equal measure. Necessary, because the unacceptable inequities of past developmental education practice had derailed countless college dreams. Audacious, because longtime educational practice is difficult to change, especially when so many practitioners may have built habits, territories or even identities around the status quo. Practice had to be dramatically disrupted in order to change.

While much work remains to be done, the progress on AB 705 implementation, as shown in the data and analyses enumerated here, is undeniable. Just three years in, thousands of students have seen their educational trajectories accelerated by a policy that was designed to do just that. System guidance and messaging from the CCCCO is increasingly explicit about the imperative for colleges to reckon with and address persistent inequities in placement.

Progress is highly variable across colleges, with some slower to develop or adopt successful models. Black and Latinx students are still more likely to be placed in remedial courses than their White and Asian peers, and are, perhaps relatedly, more likely to attend community colleges that have maintained large remedial course enrollments despite the requirements of the law.

The educational interruptions wrought by the pandemic may hinder student preparation for college. COVID-19 may necessitate deeper investments in and commitment to student support, particularly in bridging what may be unfinished learning in high school.

Big policy change is inherently messy and requires courage. There is work ahead to ensure that AB 705 achieves its promise of contributing to college pathways that are more racially just and effective for the students who depend on them. There are also resources available from policymakers who appear prepared to invest in supporting more efficient and equitable pathways to degree and transfer. Community college leaders, faculty, policymakers, researchers and advocates have the opportunity to maximize AB 705's full potential to support a better and more equitably educated California.

ⁱ Dean Noguera offered introductory remarks to the December 2020 convening that inspired this paper.

ⁱⁱ "Throughput" refers to the share of students completing transfer-level English and math courses in their first year of enrollment.

ⁱⁱⁱ See California Acceleration Project Checklist here: https://www.google.com/url?q=https://accelerationproject.org/Portals/o/Documents/PowerMoves_Checklist_Final.pdf&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1620072424415000&usg=AOvVawoGHGFQg1ZunWGZFsUajZYS

^{iv} See Daugherty, et al: www.rand.org/t/RR810-1

^v See: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/07/17/data-already-tell-us-how-effective-co-requisite-education-opinion>

^{vi} See Complete College America, Spanning the Divide": https://www.google.com/url?q=http://completecollege.org/spanningthedivide/%23the-bridge-builders&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1620072424414000&usg=AOvVaw3wwEld4bJnTqV4_hZ48qvA;

^{vii} Reforms consisted of making developmental education courses optional; reforms in instructional strategies in developmental education; and enhanced advising and student support services. See: Park-Gaghan, Mokher, Hu, Spencer & Hu (2020). See also: What Happened Following Comprehensive Developmental Education Reform in the Sunshine State? Educational Researcher, 49(9): 656-666.

^{viii} See the CCCCO memorandum: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a565796692ebefb3ec5526e/t/60a7e5f9499714081145426c/1621616125231/ESS_20_300_009__AB_705_Validation_of_Practices_acc.pdf

^{ix} See CCCCO's Equitable Placement Toolkit: <https://equitableplacementtoolkit.cccco.edu/>

^x Dadgar, M. Buck, D. & Burdman, P. (2021). Solving for Equity: Design and Implementation of New Postsecondary Math Pathways. Just Equations, Available at: <https://justequations.org/wp-content/uploads/Just-Equations-2021-Report-Solving-for-Equity-Digital.pdf>

^{xi} In Summer 2021, Bensimon & Associates in partnership with the USC Race and Equity Center organized a Racial Equity in Mathematics Institute. Supported by a Bill & Melinda Gates grant, over 100 math instructors learned the competencies of equity-minded practitioners.

^{xii} A learning "mindset" on the part of teaching and counseling faculty is the belief that student achievement and intelligence is not fixed or innate, and can be developed and nurtured in a supporting learning environment.

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