

Opinion: Don't eliminate remedial education in community colleges

Closure of critical program for students would result in an abdication of a California higher education mission



Courtesy Foothill-De Anza Community College District

Students have a right to access remedial education through the community college system, including Foothill College, shown above..

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I tell my students that I didn't start college until I was 31, but that's only half true. In fact, I started when I was 17, dropped out before completing a semester, restarted at 20 and dropped out again. Facing economic and mental health challenges, I was not ready for college until I was 31, when I enrolled at Cabrillo College in Aptos.

While my economic and mental health problems had settled down, I was not confident in my abilities. I attended a high school with a very good reputation, but I struggled, and with so many years out of the education system I needed to learn some basic skills. Remedial English and math classes, taught by some of the best community college instructors, is the first reason I eventually earned a Ph.D. and am now a community college instructor. Without remedial education, I probably would have been left behind, my confidence more shaken, and I would not be in a position to teach at a community college today. Now, remedial education is being threatened, and we must save it for our most vulnerable students.

Assemblywoman Jacqui Irwin's AB 1705 would effectively eliminate remedial education in community colleges. The grandchild of AB 705 by the same author, this bill would place all students in transfer-level English and math classes, regardless of their educational goals, requirements or preparedness, and whether or not they are needed for the program they are enrolled in.

Since the implementation of AB 705, student success rates in math and English have declined. According to the state chancellor's "Transfer Level Gateway Completion Dashboard," success rates in transfer-level English from 2018-19 to 2019-20 fell from 75% to 70% in a one-year timeframe to completion, with a sharper decline for African American and Hispanic students. In math, over the same time period, success rates fell from 68% to 60%.

What happened? An increased enrollment in these classes of students because of AB 705. Many students who would have benefitted from remedial English and math were placed in these transfer-level courses before they were ready. Instead of addressing the flaws in AB 705, the author is doubling down by further limiting access to remedial classes. For the students who struggle at college level math and English, what are they supposed to do? Admittedly, the placement of students in remedial math and English has not always been perfect, but what helped me in my English placement at Cabrillo was that I was able to place myself. If a student comes to a community college looking for remedial English, will they be able to find a class offered?

I argue that students have a right to access remedial education through the community college system.

According to California Education Code Section 66010.4, "In addition to the primary mission of academic and vocational instruction, the community colleges shall offer instruction and courses ... of remedial instruction for those in need of it." A further reduction of remedial education would be an abdication of the California Community College mission. It is a mission that I have benefitted from, that I believe in, and that I want to support in my teaching.

There are many students who, once they learned some basic skills, went on to attain associate's, bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees, and they want to give back. The elimination of remedial education in the form of AB 1705 would be an elimination of opportunities for many students whom we have traditionally served. We should oppose AB 1705 and call upon our representatives to do so.

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