

Opinion: Research shows remedial courses hurt college students. A lot.

In both English and math, students do better when they begin in transferable, college-level courses



Professor Chris Gibson teaches an English 105 class at Skyline College in San Bruno. Local community colleges have revamped remedial education to get more students directly into credit-bearing courses. Now there's a bill to further expand such reforms statewide, which could ultimately raise the percentage of Californians with a degree. (Anda Chu/Bay Area News Group File Photo)

By [KATIE HERN](#) |

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As a community college English professor, I used to specialize in teaching remedial classes. I am deeply committed to the open-access mission of California community colleges, and I know that not everyone has the privilege of a strong high school education. A well-taught remedial class could make up for that, I thought, and prepare students to do well in college.

Teaching these classes, I'd often see students writing college-level papers, and I'd wonder why they weren't in college English. But it didn't worry me much. More practice couldn't hurt, right?

Then I saw the research. Turns out, taking a remedial course does hurt students. A lot.

In both English and math, students do better when they begin in transferable, college-level courses. In fall 2019, 60% of students who started in transfer-level math passed within a year. Among those who took a remedial course, just 14% went on to complete transfer-level math.

Every student group examined to date has higher completion of transfer-level courses when they start in these courses. This includes students often cited as “needing” remedial classes — students with low high school GPAs, students with disabilities, English language learners, low-income students, returning adults.

That’s why I support AB1705, which goes to the Assembly Higher Education committee next week. And it’s why I’m so disappointed that professors are opposing the bill, such as John Fox in an April 19 [Mercury News commentary](#). AB1705 is the follow-up to AB705, a 2017 law that was supposed to ensure that remedial courses didn’t keep derailing students’ college dreams. Before AB705, 80% of California community college students began in remedial classes. Their rates of transfer and degree completion were about half that of students who started in transfer-level courses.

When AB705 prohibited colleges from forcing students into remedial classes, one-year completion of transfer-level courses increased from 49% to 67% in English and from 26% to 50% in math statewide (fall 2015-fall 2019).

Yet implementation has been uneven. Some colleges followed the research and completely eliminated remedial courses, while others kept enrolling students in these classes, especially colleges with large Black and Hispanic populations. We need AB1705 to ensure that all students benefit from the law.

Opponents point out that success rates in transfer-level courses declined after AB 705, and this is true. There have been modest declines. But this data omits all of the students who took remedial courses. When you include all students, you see that tens of thousands of additional students completed key requirements for a college degree. In focusing on this single data point, my colleagues are either misinformed about the broader research or employing the kind of misdirection that magicians use to draw your attention from what’s really happening.

AB705 gave virtually all students access to transfer-level courses, and faculty will need time and support to learn how to teach a broader population of students, not the heavily screened students previously allowed to enroll. Colleges will need to expand tutoring, corequisite models of remediation and other supports. This is why advocates are pushing for AB1705 to be paired with a budget investment supporting implementation.

But the solution is not remedial classes. If colleges can’t identify students who benefit from taking these classes, they should not continue enrolling students there. That’s the standard of AB1705, and it’s reasonable.

Opponents claim to be protecting students' "choice" to take remedial classes, but students are not asking for choices that make them less likely to reach their goals. AB1705 is supported by the Student Senate for California Community Colleges, the UC Student Association, Students Making a Change and other student-led organizations. I urge policy makers to join them.

Katie Hern is a professor of English at Skyline College and cofounder of the California Acceleration Project, a faculty-led initiative founded in 2010 to help community colleges transform remediation.