

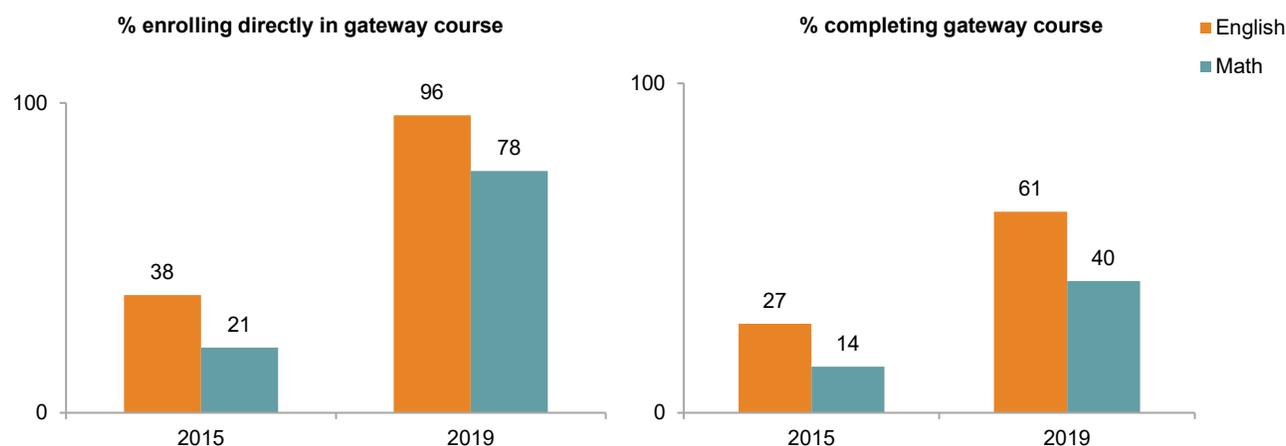
Until recently, the vast majority of California’s community college students—hundreds of thousands of students each year—started in remedial courses that slowed down or halted their academic progress. Attrition was high, particularly for Latino and African American students. Few students went on to complete the gateway English and math courses necessary to transfer to a four-year college (known as transfer-level courses).

After years of important but piecemeal reforms, in 2017 a landmark law (AB 705) completely reshaped placement and remediation at the state’s community colleges. Our work explores how AB 705 transformed student access, outcomes, and racial equity in fall 2019, the deadline for implementation. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic instability have upended students’ lives—and colleges will need to be more vigilant than ever in providing students the opportunities and support they need to succeed.

Key Findings

Broader access allows more students to complete gateway courses. Access to college composition is now nearly universal, and most students enroll in gateway math. This is a staggering change: compared to fall 2015, access rates have more than doubled in English and nearly quadrupled in math. Increased access has had a dramatic effect on success in gateway courses—a key educational milestone. About 57,000 more first-time English students passed college composition with a C or better in fall 2019 than in fall 2015, and roughly 31,000 more students completed gateway math. Altogether, 61 percent of first-time English students met this milestone in fall 2019, and 40 percent did so in math—more than double what we see in fall 2015. In math, higher enrollment in statistics—rather than algebra-based—courses contributed to overall gains.

AB 705 gives many more students the opportunity to complete gateway courses



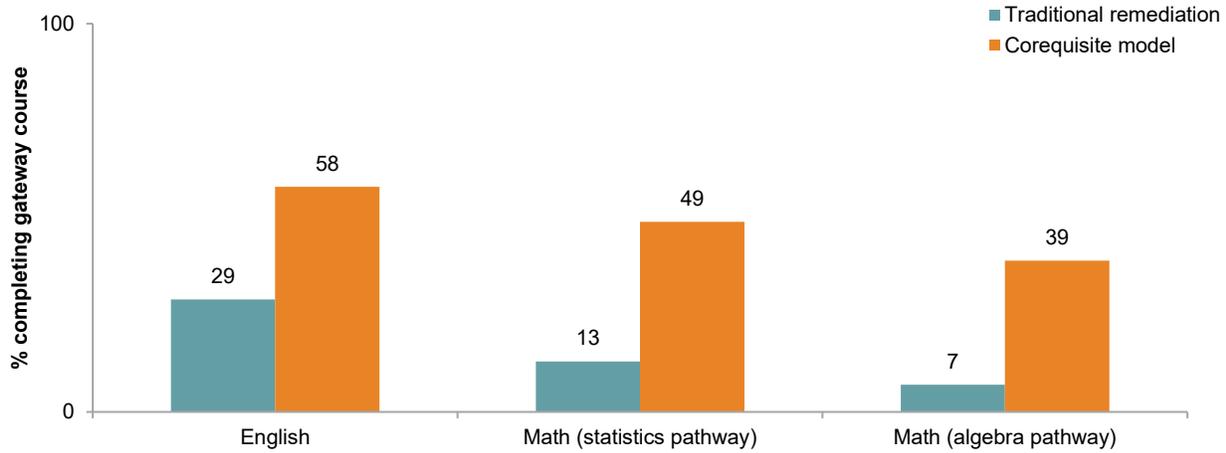
Source: Authors’ calculations using COMIS data.

Notes: Charts show the share of students who directly enrolled in a transfer-level course or successfully completed a transfer-level course in one term among all students who took any English or math course for the first time. Fall of each year.

Corequisite courses are more effective than traditional remediation. Providing concurrent remedial support is an important strategy to promote student success. Students in corequisite models are much more likely—by about 30 or more percentage points—to complete a gateway course in one term than students who start in traditional remediation are to complete the course in one year. However, it’s not clear that all students who could benefit from corequisite support are getting it: while most colleges offer corequisite courses, only about 20 percent of first-time students in English and 18 percent in math enrolled in these courses.



Students who take corequisites are much more likely to complete gateway courses

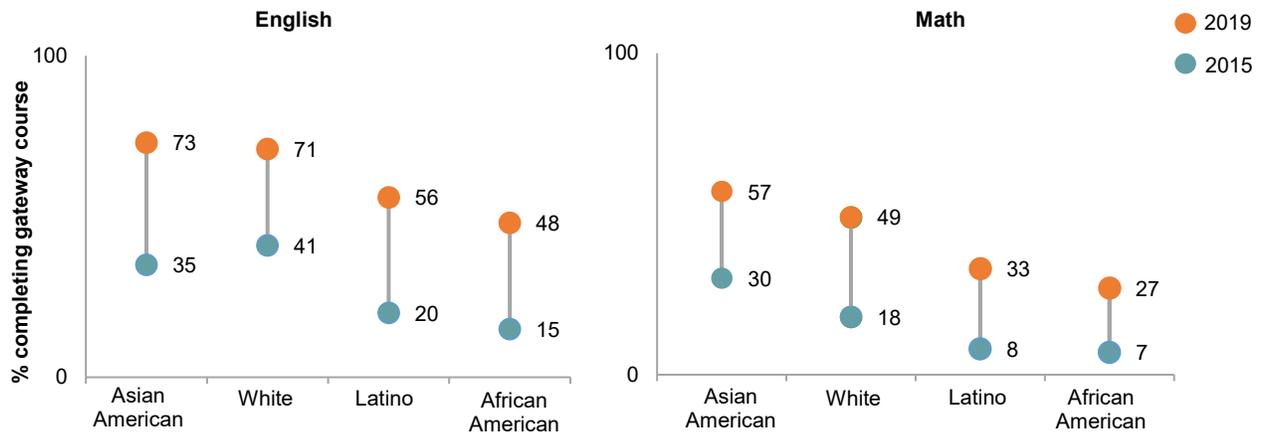


Source: Authors' calculations using COMIS data.
 Notes: For the corequisite model, chart shows the share of students who completed a transfer-level course in fall 2019 among first-time English or math students. For traditional remediation, chart shows the share of students who completed a transfer-level course in one year (English) or fall-to-fall (math) among students who started in a remedial English or math course in fall 2018.

Progress is across the board, with strong gains among Latinos and African Americans. Completion of gateway courses has risen by about 20 to 25 percentage points for all racial/ethnic groups. Gains have been particularly strong among Latino and African American students—not surprising since previous placement policies disproportionately placed these students in remediation.

Still, racial equity gaps persist and outcomes in math are poorer. Latino and African American students continue to see lower completion rates than their Asian American and white peers. At most colleges, Latinos are now more equitably represented among students completing transfer-level courses compared to four years ago, but African Americans remain substantially underrepresented, particularly in math.

All students saw remarkable gains in completion rates, but equity gaps remain



Source: Authors' calculations using COMIS data.
 Note: For each racial/ethnic group, chart shows the share of students who successfully completed a transfer-level course in fall 2015 and fall 2019 among students who took any English or math course for the first time.

When access is restricted, African American and Latino students are left out—especially in math. Continuing to offer a significant number of remedial courses and requiring enrollment in remediation are factors limiting access. Another is mandating multiple criteria for transfer-level placement (e.g., GPA and course grade

threshold) instead of using an “either/or” approach. Relying on reading and writing samples, math problems, and self-assessments may also hamper students’ chances of enrolling directly in gateway courses.

Recommendations

Our research shows that when given the opportunity, students can succeed in transfer-level courses. Community colleges have made tremendous progress, but the work is not over. Placement policies and student outcomes vary a great deal across campuses, and our research identifies areas of concern that may be limiting equitable access and completion rates. We offer these recommendations to help colleges as they refine their implementation of AB 705 to ensure all students have the opportunities and support they need to succeed.

Ensure placement methods broaden—rather than limit—access. Given the disparate outcomes between students who start in remedial versus transfer-level courses—and between students who take transfer-level coursework with or without corequisite support—placement is a high-stakes decision. Colleges must critically evaluate if current policies actually help students’ academic progress, and placement into traditional remediation should be monitored closely, especially in math where access is more restricted and racial/ethnic disparities are larger. Colleges should also encourage placement into corequisites—and offer more of these courses.

Refocus advising and counseling. Advisors and counselors play a critical role in supporting students and connecting them to available services, but relying on advisors and counselors to collect placement data may be contributing to higher remedial enrollments. Automating placements using students’ high school records, regardless of how long ago students attended high school, could improve access while allowing advisors and counselors to focus on helping students identify the supports—tutoring, financial aid, mental health services, food pantries, and others—that give them the best chance of success. Colleges should also ensure that academic advisors and counselors are well integrated into reform efforts.

Prioritize closing equity gaps. Achieving equitable outcomes for African American and Latino students will require a sustained, multi-pronged approach. This is all the more important as the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequities for students lacking access to technology, facing job loss, or struggling to meet their basic needs. Further evaluations of how remedial courses contribute to inequitable outcomes, particularly in math, are critical. In the classroom, revising pedagogical strategies and curricular materials will be important to ensure coursework is engaging and accessible to all students. Another priority is ongoing professional development to support faculty members, counselors, and advisors in adjusting to the widespread changes under AB 705.

Gain a better understanding of how to serve students of varying academic backgrounds. With more students enrolling directly in gateway courses, colleges may need to find new ways to support students with varying levels of academic preparation. Beyond corequisite courses, colleges should proactively evaluate the impact of other forms of support. With the pandemic illuminating the range of challenges students face inside and outside the classroom, assessing the effectiveness of academic and student services that address issues like college readiness, food insecurity, homelessness, and mental health will also be imperative.

Commit to evidence-based continuous improvement. The dramatic changes brought on by AB 705 give colleges an opportunity to reimagine placement, coursework, pedagogy, and student services. Are optional remedial courses contributing to inequities? Which features of corequisite courses are key to their success? What kind of support services have the biggest effect on student learning? Ongoing analysis of enrollment and outcomes data is vital to more fully understand the barriers to student success—and to develop better solutions.