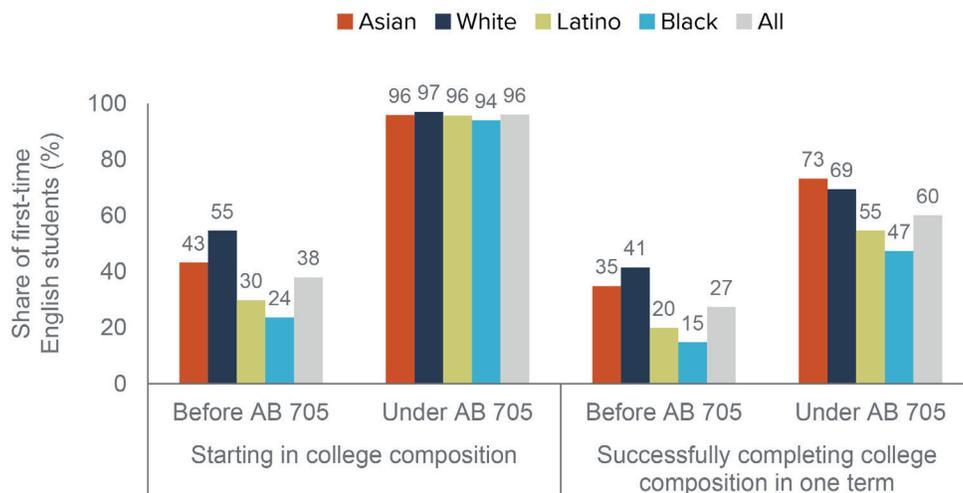


# Community College English in California's New Era of Access

California community colleges began implementing a landmark law (AB 705) in 2019, making major assessment and placement reforms that have virtually eliminated remedial prerequisites for both English [and math](#). Now that most students are enrolling directly in courses they need to obtain degrees or transfer to four-year schools, their chances of completing college composition—the “gateway” transfer-level English course—have improved dramatically.

- ▶ **Access to college composition is nearly universal.** After AB 705 implementation, 96 percent of students who took an English course for the first time enrolled in college composition. This is a dramatic change from fall 2015, when only 38 percent of first-time English students enrolled in college composition.
- ▶ **Racial/ethnic gaps in access to college composition have mostly disappeared.** Under AB 705, Black and Latino students are about as likely to start out in college composition as their white and Asian peers.
- ▶ **Expanded access has increased the number of students completing college composition by tens of thousands.** In 2019 and 2020, 60 percent of first-time English students successfully completed college composition in one term, compared to only 27 percent of first-time English takers in 2015.
- ▶ **Racial/ethnic gaps persist in successful completion.** While completion has improved significantly across all racial/ethnic groups, there continues to be a 22 percentage point gap between Black students and white students, and a 14 percentage point gap between Latino students and white students.

The implementation of AB 705 dramatically improved outcomes for first-time English students



Sources: Authors' calculations using MIS data.

Notes: “Before AB 705” = 2015. We use 2015 as a baseline year because early implementation of changes aimed at broadening access to transfer-level courses started in 2016. “Under AB 705” = the weighted average of outcomes for the fall 2019 and fall 2020 cohorts combined.

## Progress continued in the first year of COVID-19—but more work is needed

Despite a 14 percent decline in first-time English enrollment in fall 2020, access to gateway transfer-level English remained high, continuing the progress made in the previous fall. In fact, the share of first-time

English students enrolling directly in college composition actually increased slightly (from 95% to 97%), and the share completing these courses only declined slightly (from 61% to 59%).

The evidence is clear that students who begin in college composition, with or without corequisite support, have much higher rates of successful completion, on average, than those who begin in remediation. However, corequisites —key to maximizing the impact of AB 705—remain a work in progress. When implemented effectively, corequisites provide concurrent support to students enrolled in transfer-level courses through personalized instruction and just-in-time remediation. But it's not clear that all students who could benefit from corequisite support have been getting it. Some colleges found the shift from face-to-face to online support challenging—indeed, a handful stopped offering corequisites altogether.

More generally, a better understanding of the barriers and challenges facing students who are struggling under the new system can help educators identify effective interventions and support. The need is great: only 40 percent of the 56,600 students who enrolled directly in but did not successfully complete college composition in fall 2019 had re-enrolled as of fall 2020. More than half of the students who did not re-enroll did not return to the system at all. In all, only 16 percent of initially unsuccessful students successfully completed college composition by fall 2020.

## How can California promote equitable student success?

Three years into the AB 705 era, significant progress has been made. But persistent racial equity gaps in successful course completion and the challenges posed by the pandemic must be addressed. In addition, debates continue about what it means to comply with AB 705, whether corequisite courses are effective, and whether remedial courses should remain an option. To inform efforts to improve student success and promote equitable outcomes, we offer several recommendations.

**Identify high-impact curricular support to improve student outcomes and promote equity.** Curricular student supports should include well-designed, equity-minded corequisite or enhanced courses and embedded tutors or supplemental instruction. It is equally important to provide—and pay faculty for—ongoing equity-centered professional development to help ensure that curricular supports are implemented effectively.

**Enhance support for students who are not successful under the new system.** We find that students who struggle in college composition tend to be struggling in college more broadly. Given the complexity of students' lives and the fact that many are first-time and first-generation college students, embedded institutional supports, college knowledge skills, library skills, and counseling are key.

**Continue to monitor racial equity implications of offering remedial courses.** While only a small share of first-time English students enroll in remediation systemwide, we find that Black students are more likely to enroll in remedial courses—which are highly correlated with lower levels of success in completing college composition. Enrollment in these courses should be monitored to promote equitable student outcomes.

**Expand and adapt effective strategies adopted during the pandemic for a face-to-face environment.** Online office hours, tutoring, writing centers, and counseling that can be accessed outside traditional business hours have been especially helpful to students with family or work responsibilities. Flexible grading and assessment practices adopted during the pandemic have also helped support student success. Finally, the expansion of food pantries and mental health services has underscored the link between academic success and overall wellbeing.

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Adapted by Mary Severance from [Community College English in California's New Era of Access](#), by Marisol Cuellar Mejia, Olga Rodriguez, Hans Johnson, and Cesar Alesi Perez. Supported with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, William T. Grant Foundation, and the Sutton Family Fund.