

Tracking Progress in Community College Access and Success

For years, the vast majority of California’s community college students had to take remedial courses that slowed down or halted their academic progress. In 2019, Assembly Bill (AB) 705 removed many of these barriers, making it much easier for students to access and complete gateway transfer-level courses in English and math—a key early milestone for transferring to a four-year institution and earning a bachelor’s degree. We examine how student outcomes have changed in the years following this landmark legislation.

Expanded access has driven progress in course completion

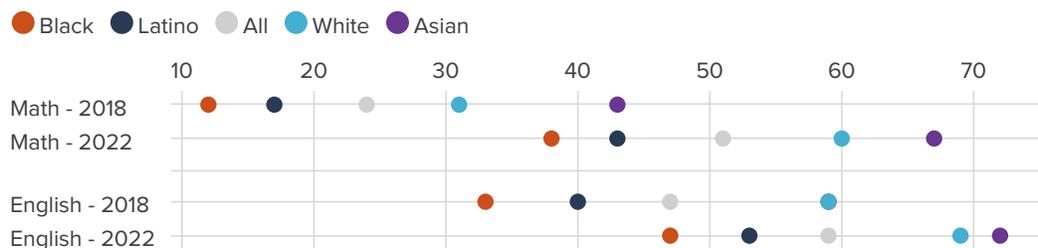
After AB 705, access to transfer-level English and math courses soared. From fall 2018 to fall 2022, the share of first-time English students starting directly in college composition increased from 68 percent to 99 percent, and direct access to transfer-level math rose from 40 percent to 96 percent.

Course completion rates have also improved dramatically. In fall 2022, 59 percent of first-time English students and 51 percent of first-time math students successfully completed the transfer-level course in one term (up from 47% and 24%, respectively, in fall 2018). Year-to-year gains in completion rates have largely followed expansions in access. Current near-universal levels of access to both college composition and transfer-level math suggest that progress in course completion may stall in the coming years without additional efforts—both inside and outside of the classroom—to advance student success.

Moreover, racial equity gaps remain as large as ever. In college composition, the one-term course completion rate for white students is 22 points higher than for Black students and 16 points higher than for Latino students. In transfer-level math, the white-Black gap is 22 points, and the white-Latino gap is 17 points.

Progress in completing gateway transfer-level courses has been dramatic, but racial disparities persist

One-term course completion (throughput) rate



Source: Authors’ calculations using MIS data.

Note: Figure compares fall 2018 to fall 2022.

For students who need additional academic support, some colleges offer corequisites, which enroll students directly in transfer-level courses with a concurrent support course. [Research evidence shows](#) that students perform better in corequisites than in prerequisite remedial courses. But overall completion rates in corequisites at California’s community colleges have been somewhat low. In fall 2022, 53 percent of corequisite students completed college composition in one term, and 46 percent did so for transfer-

level math. However, some colleges do show high performance in corequisites, especially among Black and Latino students, suggesting that these courses can be successful if implemented well.

Transfer rates held steady through the pandemic

Among first-time math students in fall 2019, who were the first cohort to be affected by AB 705, three-year outcomes, including transfer rates, degree attainment, and unit accumulation, are similar to those of earlier students. The three-year transfer rate for the fall 2019 cohort was 20.4 percent (vs. 18.7% for fall 2018 cohort), the degree attainment rate was 32.2 percent (vs. 34.8%), and unit accumulation was a median of 31 units (vs. 29 units).

Considering that the pandemic disrupted enrollment and persistence at the community colleges, minimal changes in these three-year outcomes are a positive sign, suggesting that AB 705 may have buffered the pandemic's impact on transfer. At the same time, these findings may also suggest that substantially broadening access to gateway math and English alone will not guarantee dramatic gains in longer-term academic success.

Recommendations

As California's community colleges approach universal access to transfer-level courses, using evidence-based strategies to improve completion rates and racial equity must be the next priority.

Increases in access have thus far been the main driver of progress in successful completion of transfer-level courses. To further advance student success, colleges will need to determine how to better address students' academic and non-academic needs. Following the legislature's recent approval of a one-time funding stream for corequisite models, professional development, and student services to support the comprehensive implementation of AB 705, the community college system should monitor how funding is allocated and the subsequent impact on student outcomes.

Successful college initiatives can help inform additional campus-level reform. In our interviews with colleges that have increased completion rates and reduced equity gaps, key elements of reform included a systemwide growth mindset, effective student supports and resources, and a commitment to data-driven decision-making. Many colleges also cited high-touch, holistic, student-centered programs that they believe have benefited students of color at their campus. Expanding communication and collaboration across programs and colleges to better understand how these programs are addressing the needs of specific groups of students may be necessary to eliminate statewide equity gaps in gateway course completion that have thus far limited the potential impact of AB 705.

More research is needed to understand the longer-term effects of AB 705 and identify further areas of reform for the transfer pathway. As pandemic disruptions recede and more years of data become available, we will be able to examine the outcomes of students for whom the pandemic had a lesser impact and the effects of AB 705 will become clearer. Moreover, once the state's cradle-to-career data system is up and running, information on community college students' high school records will allow us to investigate more thoroughly the effect of reforms on academic momentum, degree completion, and transfer.

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Adapted by Vicki Hsieh from *Tracking Progress in Community College Access and Success* by Marisol Cuellar Mejia, Cesar Alesi Perez, Sidronio Jacobo, Fernando Garcia, and Olga Rodriguez.