

# THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

## The Promise and Pitfalls of Eliminating Remedial Courses in Community Colleges

There is an equity crisis in the United States. First-generation college students, low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities earn fewer bachelor's degrees than their counterparts. White students attain four-year degrees at a rate 12 to 22 percentage points higher than Latinx and Black students, respectively. Students from affluent backgrounds and whose parents are more educated earn their bachelor's degrees at a rate 2.5 times higher than students who are both low-income and first-generation college students. Like many states, California has enacted a law, AB705, to redress this inequity at the community college level. AB705 mandated that by fall 2019, all California Community Colleges (CCCs) maximize the likelihood that students complete transfer-level coursework in English and math within one year of entering college. In effect, like many community colleges in the United States, CCCs are no longer placing students into remedial classes based on placement tests. Instead, multiple-measure assessments guide incoming students directly into transfer-level English and math courses—possibly with co-requisite courses or other concurrent supports. This is a huge policy shift, as nationwide the vast majority of incoming community college students enroll in remedial classes, where they frequently remain for years. Accelerating developmental or remedial education is a trend sweeping across the country because underrepresented students are overrepresented in developmental education courses.

Studies comparing students who scored immediately above and below the placement test cutoffs found that placing students into remedial classes predicted lower degree completion rates compared to placing them directly into transfer-level courses. CCCs that were early-implementers of AB705 conducted quasi-experimental studies indicating that as many as five times more students complete their transfer-level requirements in one year when students are placed directly into transfer-level courses. These promising statistics indicate that state laws like AB705 can work. Still, quasi-experimental studies have limitations. These studies cannot claim causality nor identify other factors that may contribute to the improved completion rates. While shortening the

pathway is a plausible explanation for improved student completion rates, it is likely that instructor practices and beliefs also play a role, as research shows that both have a large impact in redressing the achievement gap.

In these early-implementing CCCs, it is likely that strategies in the transfer-level courses are more powerful than strategies historically used in the remedial courses. After all, it is common practice throughout the United States to assign new or less-qualified instructors to teach remedial courses. Perhaps the transfer-level course instructors use more high-impact strategies such as delivering inquiry-based instruction in groups, fostering growth mindset classrooms, layering in college and career skills, and connecting students to campus resources. These strategies commonly improve outcomes for underrepresented students.

While instructional practices may be partially responsible for the improved student completion rates at these early-implementing CCCs, instructor beliefs may also have an impact. Instructors from these early-implementing colleges likely possess stronger beliefs that underrepresented students can succeed in transfer-level classes. After all, they are the pioneers and leaders of the AB705 movement. Many studies indicate that underrepresented students perform better when their instructors believe they can do so.

State laws like AB705 emerged in response to an equity crisis in college systems throughout the country. Entrenched socio-political and economic systems exist that erect structural barriers for students of color, students from low-income households, and other students. These students navigate a world that is not fair. Laws like AB705 hold community college instructors accountable for disrupting these larger systems of inequity at the classroom level. However, one potential pitfall of such laws is that colleges may overestimate the effect of eliminating remedial classes, and in the process, underestimate the impact of instructor beliefs and practices. In order to maximize the potential of the law to support underrepresented students, instructors of transfer-level courses will need to shift beliefs away from blaming students for low completion and transfer rates toward thinking about how to transform their classroom strategies to bolster the success of all incoming students. How will instructors tailor instruction to address the wide variety of gaps in student content knowledge and college skills while simultaneously holding all students

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to high academic standards? How will instructors create inclusive classrooms where the diverse perspectives and approaches of all students—especially those from backgrounds different than their own—are illuminated and valued? For laws like AB705 to work, instructors must believe that all students can succeed and refine their instructional practices to reach and teach all incoming students.

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Don't miss Dr. Darling's upcoming three-part online workshop, "Teachin' It! Tips to Facilitate Inclusive, Inquiry-Based Learning Online in Community Colleges," October 2, 9, and 16, 2020. Save \$100 if you register for the complete workshop on or before September 11!