

Politics, Pendulums, and AB 1705

Opposing AB 1705 Does Not Mean Opposing Acceleration

By Troy Myers, Sacramento City College



AB
1705

Millions of Californians suffer from the generational effects of racism. These effects are widespread, including higher poverty rates in communities of color and lower academic outcomes. The California Legislature, informed by a group of self-designated “advocates,” presented a solution in the form of [AB 1705 \(Irwin 2022\)](#), a bill requiring almost all students be placed in transfer-level math or English.

So why do I, FACCC, and the Academic Senate, oppose AB 1705?

AB 1705 promises to level the playing field for students of color. But the bill’s sweeping, all-or-nothing, top-down approach will not serve our most vulnerable student populations. Ultimately, AB 1705 removes student choice: pre-transfer preparation in math and English, in whatever form, will no longer be an option in our open-access institution for almost all students, whether they would benefit from such assistance or not.

Supporting responsible acceleration does not mean supporting AB 1705’s reduction and elimination of critical pre-transfer math and English coursework. AB 1705 has been described as an AB 705 clean-up, but it is better explained as a clean-house bill that would impede the faculty’s ability to address the distinct needs of at-risk math and English learners.

In my experience as an accelerated English faculty member at Sacramento City College, I have seen at-risk students who would likely wash out in long developmental pathways, or achieve transfer-level outcomes in conventional writing courses. Acceleration, done well, does not entail shoving every student into transfer-level courses unless they are “highly likely to fail.”

The California State Legislature generally passes bills with the intention of benefiting students. However, in the case of AB 1705, lawmakers do not seem willing to rely on complete

data, accept guidance from the experts, or (as required by law) honor the recommendations of the Academic Senate. For this bill, the Legislature has chosen to listen exclusively to foundation-funded “reform” groups, almost none of which are led by working community college faculty.

I want to emphasize that the Faculty Association of California Community Colleges was told in March by Assemblymember Irwin’s office that our role in the discussion was over and, moving forward, only amendments from the “advocates” would be considered. Further, my colleagues at Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) tell me that their requested substantive amendments were not included in the bill that is sitting on the governor’s desk. The ASCCC also has been excluded from the conversation, in violation of the standing orders that dictate the collegial processes of the Board of Governors.

Unreflective of reality, AB 1705 takes a singular, neatly marketed interpretation of placement and acceleration, and etches them into statute. Many districts, under strong pressure from the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, are already operating at or close to the bill’s narrow prescriptions. So how are their students faring? Data from those colleges is available on the Chancellor’s Office website. If we look closely, in first-year outcomes we see some pockets of success, yes, but also sprawling swaths of catastrophe. Frankly, the statistics from early AB 1705 implementation demonstrate the havoc that this bill will wreak if signed.

AB 1705 and the Titanic

I take this section’s title from [a presentation by Daniel Judge](#), a professor of mathematics at East Los Angeles College. Judge made this relevant in April of this year, using success data from 2019–2020. That was the first year that Los Angeles Community College District implemented the sweeping changes the Chancellor’s Office was

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insisting upon after the passage of AB 705—changes that are enshrined in AB 1705. Judge looks at math acceleration in colleges throughout the LA District, the largest district in California and one with a high population of students of color. In every college he examined, the student success data is shocking. Not puzzling or question-begging, but shocking.

Judge noted that enrollment went up in transfer courses that year, especially in math, naturally leading to a greater number of students completing transfer math in their first year. This outcome, which was higher throughout, is perennially emphasized by those who support 1705. But what was the cost? Among Hispanic students at Los Angeles Mission College, 176 additional students attempted transfer-level math and only 11 students completed it. An *additional 165 Hispanic students did not succeed* in transfer-level math and were left with substandard grades on their permanent academic records.

Every student group had increased fail rates in transfer math at Los Angeles Mission College, and the success gaps between white students and students of color grew. At Los Angeles City College, during the same one-year period, the number of all students who attempted transfer math surged from 220 to 1,010, and the number of completers also rose, from 130

to 313. These are significant gains. But the number of students who failed at the transfer level exploded *from 98 to 697*. That's 697 people who were left with failing marks on their transcripts. Disaggregated data reveals that, among Hispanic and Black students, 587 students attempted the transfer course in Fall 2019 and, for both groups, only 106 successfully completed. A total of *481 students of color failed* transfer math. For African Americans, only one additional student completed transfer math after pre-transfer courses were eliminated, and *31 additional Black students failed*.

Judge looked at colleges across his district, and he noted that a student was more likely to survive the Titanic disaster than to pass transfer math the first year after the elimination of pre-transfer courses.

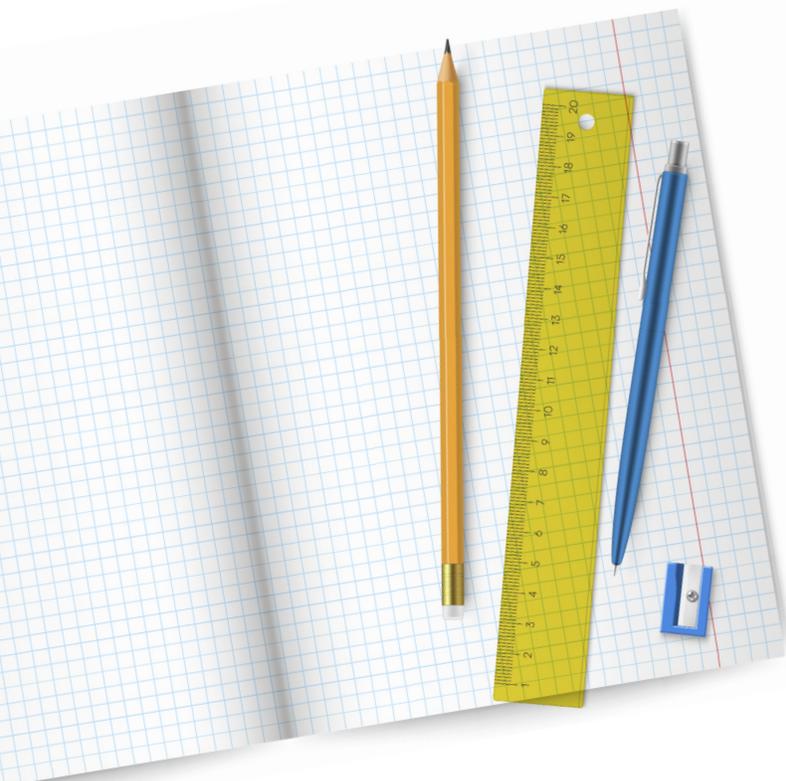
What went wrong? I have neither the discipline expertise nor the local reference to say, but what is apparent is that those colleges, those faculty, and those students were not ready for the sweeping and structural changes that AB 1705 is about to make law. And who pays the price? Thousands of community college students, many of them students of color.

Data like this should make any policymaker tap the brakes! Frankly, I am astonished that it has not.

Students Who Fail at Transfer Level

We cannot cheer as we point to the additional students who succeed in transfer-level courses and disregard the enormous amount of additional students who fail.

The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), which aims for non-partisan reporting, published [a generally positive report](#) on first-year AB 705 outcomes. They emphasized access and numbers while excluding other data and, notably, that their report was funded by some of the same foundations behind the crafting of AB 1705. However, the PPIC data also shows that we are losing students who do not successfully complete transfer-level courses, many of whom are not returning to community college. The PPIC observes that just 40% of the 56,600 students who were enrolled in but failed to complete college composition in Fall 2019 had re-enrolled as of Fall 2020. Further, “more



than half of the students who did not re-enroll did not return to the system at all...only 16% of initially unsuccessful students successfully completed college composition by Fall 2020.” One possible reason for this troubling outcome, the PPIC notes, is *inadequate co-requisite support*, which, as with any responsible acceleration program, requires resources, functional professional development and, critically, faculty buy-in, which in turn requires faculty to be treated like professionals. Without faculty enthusiasm and subsequent professional development opportunities, blanket acceleration will fail students and teachers alike.

Ironically, AB 1705 offers no ongoing resources for co-requisite courses or professional development. Programs that have shown success, as in my department, are expensive, but not every college will support the additional costs locally. Faculty cannot reinvent curricula to meet both the requirements of the bill and the needs of students overnight, and my friends most involved with acceleration are wondering why no funds are currently attached to the demands AB 1705 (and AB 705) require.

Part-Time Students

As an individual instructor, I supported the bulk of AB 705 in its final language because it allowed for local innovation until the Chancellor’s Office, in conjunction with the advocates, took control. However, one issue remains in any policy that rewards first-year completion of transfer English and math—the majority of our students, at last count about 65%, attend part-time, and both bills, along with the promised funds and the funding formula, push colleges to get students through in a single academic year. Better ideas were presented to Irwin’s office when she was working on AB 705, such as rewarding colleges that got students through in their *first 30 units*, or what a full-time student might accomplish in two semesters. These suggested changes would not have penalized students whose work or family responsibilities pressure them to go part-time.

These suggestions were ignored, and AB 1705 continues with this difficult-to-accept position. Even if half

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of our students could not attend full-time without a negative impact on the rest of their lives, or even a third of students, that would mean several hundred thousand students and their colleges would be harmed every year, as the new funding formula and this bill will do. The full-time metric might work well at a private, liberal arts college, but providing higher status to full-time students (who, as a class, tend to do better) is irresponsible in our system.

The Pendulum and Placement

It is ironic that the longstanding phrase used to describe effective student placement in Title 5, “multiple measures,” was, almost overnight, defined by the Chancellor’s Office as a single measure, high school GPA.

The elimination of commercial college placement tests, such as Compass, has not been questioned by English faculty in my experience, and it is reasonable to believe that high school grades predict college grades for many students. But in many cases, they are not an accurate predictor. My high school grades would not have qualified me to be a transfer level student; it was the placement essay I wrote that included a Keats poem I wrote from memory that got me into transfer writing.

Faculty who teach English know that accurate placement, even with the inclusion of a high school grade

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point average (GPA), remains difficult. The combination of high school GPA and a writing sample would be two assessments on the way to “multiple,” at least. A conversation with a faculty member or faculty counselor would be a third. The more I interact with accelerated English students, the more I see that third item to be a critical piece. Correct placement is critical for student success, and students’ lives and prior academic experiences are multi-variegated. I suppose it’s harder to sell the truth than a simple, one-size solution.

Some English departments used to place students, using a written sample before that assessment was stripped by the Chancellor’s Office after 705. Under AB 1705, any such assessment will not be allowed. Does research support such a change?

Fortunately, some research on the utility of a writing sample for placement is being done. In 2019, three faculty members from the University of California, Irvine—Jane S. Nazzal, Huy Q. Chun, and Carol Olson (who is the director of the University Writing Project at UCI)—conducted a study on placement accuracy

using a writing sample alongside high school GPA. They chose a large, urban district in California, one with more than 50,000 students, and they surveyed 13 sections of freshman composition over two semesters.

They came to the same conclusion my colleagues in English have: lengthy pre-transfer sequences have not shown a positive effect. However, their study and other research cited show the value of a *trained reader-scored* writing assessment in placement, especially for at-risk learners. They note that an academic writing sample is how the UC system places its students into their writing courses. They conclude by arguing that such written assessments are “effective in identifying groups of students with varying levels of writing proficiency”—which, I would think, seems obvious. Further, their study showed “no linear relationship” between high school GPA and writing competency as measured on the written assessment. They note that while high school GPA “is strongly associated with college GPAs and useful for predicting certain facets of students’ college performance ... it is very weakly associated with students’ level of writing proficiency.”

Perhaps most troubling, Olson and her colleagues note that while students place one or two levels below transfer using a written assessment rank closely in terms of skill set, the lowest-scoring students present a large gap between their writing fluency and those who placed higher. This means, of course, that if we are to remain open access, our least-prepared students may require some pre-transfer skill-building—something AB 1705 means to end with an almost evangelical vengeance.

Is the UCI study the final word? Its authors admit it is not. But how can the Legislature pass a bill that will codify such dramatic changes when recent research is inconclusive, if not contradictory? I offer one possibility: perhaps it is because the foundation-funded “advocates” are selling a product, and, to make the sale, they need to be the only salesperson at the door. Perhaps it is because the state Chancellor’s Office has partnered with their mission. And perhaps it is because the Legislature and its staff did not take the care to listen to the real experts.

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The Need for Complete Data

In defense of those at the Capitol, good data explained well is not always easy to find.

At first glance, the Chancellor's [Transfer Level Gateway Completion Dashboard](#) shows clear, even substantial gains in transfer English and math outcomes for all students in California since AB 705, including students of color.

We see upticks.

We see closed achievement gaps. This is true for the entire state, for regions, and for many individual colleges. However, if you click on the menu to the right to unselect "all students" and instead select students who "started at transfer level," the default placement AB 1705 has now made law, in most cases those gains disappear.

Instead, using the Chancellor's Office data, including spring semester 2020 when failing students received excused withdrawals because of the pandemic, we see that White and Asian students are faring reasonably well without transfer instruction, while other marginalized students are flailing. Sure, more students are completing transfer-level courses when everyone is tossed into the sink-or-swim pool, but the failure rates are higher and the achievement gaps are larger.

"It's the Law..."

How is the Legislature, Board of Governors, and the Chancellor's Office moving ahead on AB 1705 without support from the Academic Senate, FACCC, or unions? Surely, if those responsible for these bills want acceleration to work, they would've reached out to faculty as professional equals. Instead, some individuals have absorbed the anti-faculty rhetoric coming from the advocacy groups outside of the community college system.

Faculty who argue for local control of acceleration are being categorized as intransigent, racist, elitist, self-seeking, backward, and lazy. This unfair stereotype is consistent with the language used in a 2018 *Capitol Weekly* article written by a member of the Board of Governors who perpetuated anti-faculty



rhetoric by using the phrase "ivory tower."

In my experience, faculty care about students. All you have to do is look at the heroic efforts to serve students during the recent pandemic. That should be proof enough of the strength of our commitment and professionalism, as well as the adequacy of our experiences as evidence against AB 1705.

I present the following to illustrate the larger rhetoric. At a public meeting to explain AB 705 just after its passage, one of the leading faculty reformers, in response to questions, concerns, and pushback, went back on themselves with the stunning phrase, "It's the law, motherf***ers."

The belief that faculty must be forced into acceleration and agree that no course below transfer level can ever serve any student is the background noise between and behind every line of AB 1705.

Is the Post-Pandemic the Time?

In the years following AB 705's passage, we faced two years of pandemic and the subsequent influx of high school students who had completed their final months and years online, regardless of their instructors' levels of preparation for that modality.

For my accelerated students as a whole, the pandemic also meant working more hours under greater family demands; it meant health scares, emergencies, and hospitalizations of caregivers and wage-earners. At

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times, it meant death in my students' immediate families. And at this crucial juncture, we want to make informed decisions about changes for students who struggled academically and personally through an unprecedented global shutdown. The truth is that our students likely need consistency and extra support more than anything, and AB 1705 is a step away from this.

Too many unanswered questions remain. Enrollment is down across our system in the wake of COVID. We are trying to recruit students back into classrooms. How do enrollment and retention fare in math and English compared to the overall declines? What does the data from two years of the pandemic (data still not available on the Chancellor's Office website) look like?

In English, the transfer course outcome is an academic research paper. Does this mean that students who come to community college for vocational training need to write an academic research paper in MLA format to succeed? What will those students do now? Where will they go?

The Reality Our Students Know

The overt exclusion of faculty, the powerful lobbying efforts of the "advocates," incomplete acknowledgment of existing data, the distrust of faculty and faculty groups at the Chancellor's Office, and the willingness of the Legislature to dramatically alter the experience of our least-prepared students without engagement with the Academic Senate, is a perfect storm. With the passage of AB 1705, reform groups are cheering over their massive victory for "equity." Other states may follow their own laws, eliminating all pre-transfer level courses. Only time will reveal the human cost, wounds, avoidable mistakes, and foolish shortcuts of this unprecedented level of deceit and arrogance.

Faculty aren't arguing for a return to a lengthy pre-transfer sequence, but the solution AB 1705 promises is too simple for the complexities of the communities we serve.

Recently, I met with a dozen accelerated students individually and asked why they were in this class. Some had decent high school GPAs but chose the

support course because of pronounced writing anxiety, poor experiences, and low grades in high school writing courses. Two had definite mental illnesses and were striving to get sufficient care. One teenager moved from out of state a year ago, and was stuck with large medical bills, struggling to get retroactive Medi-Cal. Several of my students worked full time. Some were recovering from addictions. Many young students had young children of their own. At least one student told me outright that he had to work to help pay his family's rent.

If advocates for higher education want to make a genuine difference, we must see an explosive, energetic, and tireless drive to put free money and resources into the hands of community college students. The Cal Grant should be much larger, and federal financial aid must be increased. Universal access to high-quality medical and mental healthcare must be as accessible to students on our campuses as it is at UCs and CSUs. Students should have access to child care and public transportation. Money should never be the reason a student falls through the cracks.

And yet poverty is the insidious, ubiquitous cancer that drags our students down and back. When children are falling, it is our responsibility to build a system that will catch them. If the country wants to follow in California's footsteps, we must lead in these areas. Top-down, cookie-cutter solutions like AB 1705 are neither representative of the CCCs nor indicative of responsible government intervention. ■