



## **Reclaiming the Community College Mission: Access and Preparedness**

Recent changes to how California's Community Colleges provide fundamental academic skills, primarily in math, English, and English as a Second Language (ESL) — skills without which a student cannot succeed in any college-level course — have resulted in large numbers of traditional community college students being abandoned. Over a million students have been lost from the system because of the relentless focus on high-flying degree and transfer-ready students.

The vision of taking all students on a higher education journey, regardless of their starting point, has evaporated. The elimination and effective ban on offering introductory math and English courses (as well as the regulatory changes that have forced the restructuring of ESL programs or shortening course sequences.) and the resulting loss of students has altered the mission of the California Community College system beyond recognition. The ban forces community colleges to turn away from their communities, but they must be allowed to turn back.<sup>1</sup>

The seeds of this betrayal of the community college mission go back to a five-year series of intense conversations held by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges in the early 2000s to determine California's expectations of an associate degree. At the time, the math and English requirements to earn an associate degree were below the entrance requirements for state universities and even below the level of high school graduation requirements. These conversations concluded with a change to associate degree pathways, requiring at least transfer-level English and an intermediate algebra course, only one level below transfer. What followed over the next decade has effectively dismantled the system's ability to give all but the most privileged students a chance at success.

The series of decisions and legislation that began with AB 705 has left a gaping hole in the community college's ability to prepare students for precisely what the system is intended for - transfer to and success in four-year universities and highly skilled career paths. While the earlier AB 705 legislation was designed to assure that only students who needed additional preparation in basic skills were placed into courses below

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<sup>1</sup> [FACCC Educational Philanthropists Webinar](#)

transfer level, the implementation of AB 1705 resulted in community colleges abandoning formal instruction for students who need algebra and possibly other pre-calculus content to enter various STEM fields. Pretending that there are sufficient resources to replace multiple levels of classroom instruction (arithmetic, beginning algebra, intermediate algebra, and beyond) with individual tutoring is budget lunacy. Instead, students who still struggle with basic arithmetic receive the message that they only belong in college if they can learn the missing material “just in time.”

The removal of introductory courses in math and English from the community college system has not increased student success. It has driven students away from the system and is driving students who remain in the system away from math-focused majors and STEM pathways. Courses in beginning and intermediate algebra and basic writing skills must be thoughtfully returned to the system, and students who need them and wish to take them should be welcomed into them.<sup>2</sup>

There is not necessarily a need to return to the complicated placement systems and long course sequences of the past that precipitated the AB 705 legislation. The need is to provide the students with courses that meet them where they are and give them a chance at success in transfer-level math and English courses for which they may not feel prepared. Colleges must be allowed to decide which courses to offer, given the needs of their unique communities. The students who live in those communities must be provided a chance at success in transfer-level courses, and for some, that means building basic skills beforehand. The local community college districts should have the autonomy to determine and meet the community’s educational needs by offering introductory courses in math and English and sufficient levels of ESL courses. Students need these courses to progress and fulfill their goals without interference from the legislature or the Chancellor’s office.

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<sup>2</sup> [FACCC Blog: AB 705 - Leaving Students Behind](#)