

Debunking Myths Around AB 705

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Assembly Bill 705 (Irwin, 2017), now written into Education Code §78213, was legislation regarding placement of students into transfer-level English, ESL, and mathematics courses and in some cases college-level mathematics courses. Colleges are allowed to place students in pre-transfer courses only if students are highly unlikely to pass the transfer-level course and if placement in the pre-transfer course would maximize the likelihood that a student would complete transfer-level English or mathematics within a one-year timeframe or for ESL within a three-year timeframe. In addition, colleges are required to use a student’s high school performance in their placement procedures when that data is reasonably available. The implementation of AB 705 mandates has led to many discussions and debates, and various aspects of the implementation continue to spark controversy.

For many years, community college faculty have been searching for ways to appropriately educate students and fill gaps, or perceived gaps, in student preparation for college coursework. The Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) that began in 2006 under the leadership of Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) had promise; however, support to bring more effective placement programs to scale needed improvement, and the responsibility for the BSI was transferred away from the ASCCC before such improvement could take place. Still, few would have denied that the placement systems used by community colleges needed improvement: data indicates that many students were under-placed by traditional placement models, while others were over-placed by those same placement processes. Incorrect placement could occur for numerous reasons, such as an extended time gap between students finishing their

K-12 education and taking an assessment test, students not understanding the significance or seriousness of the assessment test, and the assessment test simply not being accurate. As initial implementation of the Multiple Measures Assessment Project began to grow, colleges began to see improvement in their placement processes, but AB 705 was passed before many of the programs were brought to scale. Various possibilities for improved placement that were being explored throughout the state were thus collapsed into a more standardized model that offered less encouragement for local innovation.

With the passage of AB 705 came many interpretations and debates regarding the best ways in which to implement its requirements. In order to help colleges understand the expectations of the new mandates, the ASCCC and the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) created and disseminated

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guidelines for AB 705 implementation prior to the approval of new Title 5 Regulations. This early guidance was necessary due to timelines for compliance with the law and due to the amount of time required to write and approve new placement and support processes at the 114 community colleges. The first memo, authored by ASCCC President John Stanskas and CCCCO Executive Vice-Chancellor Laura Hope, was circulated to the system's colleges on July 10, 2018. An FAQ document with further clarification was disseminated in August of 2018, with additional FAQ documents distributed in December 2018 and February 2019.

Some of most pressing questions addressed in the guidance documents included the following:

- Can colleges legally place students below transfer level?
- Are colleges required to use the default placement rules published by the CCCCO?
- Are colleges required to remove basic skills or pre-transfer level prerequisites from the transfer-level English and mathematics courses or courses in other disciplines?
- How will students demonstrate that they have met mathematics competency?

AB 705 neither mandated nor encouraged the discontinuation of remedial coursework in the California Community Colleges. Education Code §66010.4 requires colleges to provide remedial instruction for those students that need it. The new mandate of §72813 states that colleges “shall not require students to enroll in remedial English or mathematics coursework that lengthens their time to complete a degree *unless placement research that includes consideration of high school grade point average and coursework shows that those students are highly unlikely to succeed in transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics*”. This requirement will necessitate new placement policies that will result in far fewer students being placed in pre-transfer or remedial coursework, but numerous students will still need or desire this preparation before they move forward with their transfer-level programs, and providing this preparation for students is in no way prohibited to colleges.

The default placement rules were established using predictive analytics on student course taking patterns from 2007 to 2014. These rules were not based on students that were placed using the rules. Essentially, these rules are not placement, but rather guidelines

on how colleges could use corequisites. Colleges have been encouraged to develop their own placement rules, evaluate those rules, and adjust them accordingly to maximize throughput and student success. In order for colleges to continue using their own multiple measures placement rules, they must show that throughput is at least as good as the throughput would be had they used the default placement rules established by the CCCCO. In other words, if colleges choose not to be innovative in their placement practices, they may simply use the default placement rules.

However, the default placement rules have been met with some criticism by faculty around the state, as they essentially recommend placing all students into transfer-level coursework. Under these rules, even students with a high school grade point average below 1.9 would be placed into a transfer-level English course, with concurrent academic support, even though the success rate for such students is predicted to be only 42.6%. The same recommendation is offered in mathematics for any liberal arts student with a GPA below 2.3 or any STEM student with a GPA below 2.6, even though the predicted success rates for these students fall below 30% with such placement. AB 705 allowed for placement of students into remedial coursework if they are “highly unlikely to succeed in transfer-level coursework,” but it did not mandate the placement of all students into transfer-level coursework, and certainly a failure rate of 60-70% could be interpreted as highly unlikely to succeed. Colleges may therefore wish to conduct their own research to justify placement rules that can more effectively serve all students in our communities.

Prerequisites serve many purposes: they are designed to provide students with the needed skills to be successful and to inform the instructor, the students, and other institutions regarding the level at which the course will be taught. In some cases, the prerequisite includes subject matter that will also be needed for coursework subsequent to the particular course to which it is a prerequisite. The language in Title 5 §55003 that allows for the establishment of prerequisites remains. While the language of AB 705 does appear to require a greater level of research or evidence to validate prerequisites, it does not prohibit the establishment or enforcement of prerequisites. Moreover, removing existing prerequisites could endanger articulation agreements with other colleges as well as C-ID approval for courses. For

these reasons, colleges have been advised to not remove the prerequisites that they have established for courses.

With many groups in the state of California interested in participating in the implementation of the AB 705 mandates, messages regarding what colleges may do versus what colleges must do often become mixed and unclear. For example, questions have been raised about what the California State University (CSU) system and the University of California (UC) can require of the California Community Colleges (CCC) in regard to course articulation. One statement that was brought to the IGETC Standards Subcommittee of the Intersegmental Committee of Academic Senates to qualify a question read as follows:

As you may know, CSU and UC are currently reviewing CCC courses submitted for IGETC. This includes the review of CCC courses that have been revised to align with AB 705, that mandated the elimination of prerequisites for transferable courses in English Composition, Mathematics, and Statistics.

The assumption in this statement is simply false. AB 705 does not mandate the elimination of prerequisites for transferable courses in English composition, mathematics, or statistics. Colleges have been explicitly advised to not remove their prerequisites. Removing prerequisites can impact articulation agreements as well as the trust that the CCCs have with transfer institutions. Moreover, historically, students that transfer to CSU and UC have performed as well as, if not better than, their counterparts that enrolled in CSU or UC as freshman. Community colleges must not lose the level of expected course quality and integrity as they move forward with AB 705 implementation. Not only should colleges want students to take transfer-level courses, but they should also want them to succeed in the course as well as beyond the course.

These concerns have been discussed at the California Community Colleges Curriculum Committee (5C), the recommending body to the chancellor on regulations under Title 5 Division 6 Chapter 6, "Curriculum and Instruction." The members of 5C agreed that language similar to the following could be used on Course Outlines of Record:

For courses that have no corequisite option

Prerequisite: COURSE 123 or equivalent or by assessment through the college's multiple measures placement processes.

For courses that have a corequisite option

Prerequisite: COURSE 123 or equivalent or by assessment through the college multiple measures placement processes. Some assessments may result in the student being required or recommended to take COURSE 234 as a corequisite course instead of taking a prerequisite course.

Colleges and especially faculty will need to be nimble in their responses to student educational needs as they move through iterations of AB 705 implementation. Already faculty around the state are seeing the effects of AB 705 in their classrooms and have expressed frustration with the difficulty of helping students to learn material for which they simply do not have sufficient preparation. The text of AB 705 correctly notes that improperly assigning a student to remediation can result in "discouraging some students from pursuing a postsecondary education," and thus colleges should without question undertake a full review of placement processes and, under the parameters set by the new mandates, work toward more accurate placement practices that would allow all students who are prepared for transfer-level work to begin at that level. At the same time, students can be equally discouraged and are equally likely to curtail their education if they are placed into coursework for which they are not prepared and in which they experience frustration and failure. Colleges and faculty must therefore work diligently to ensure that their placement processes are truly serving the interests of students and promoting student success.

While not all in the CCC system may agree on how to improve student success, all stakeholders do agree that improving student success is their ultimate goal. The ASCCC and the CCCC are working together, following well-established processes for drafting Title 5 Regulations and clarifying guidelines, while trusting the wisdom of the collective voice which is comprised of all stakeholders in the California Community College System. Further discussion will be needed, and revision of the published guidance and ultimately perhaps even of the new mandates may be necessary. In the end, faculty throughout the state remain committed to helping students succeed through processes that are both expeditious and effective in order to allow all students to reach their educational goals.