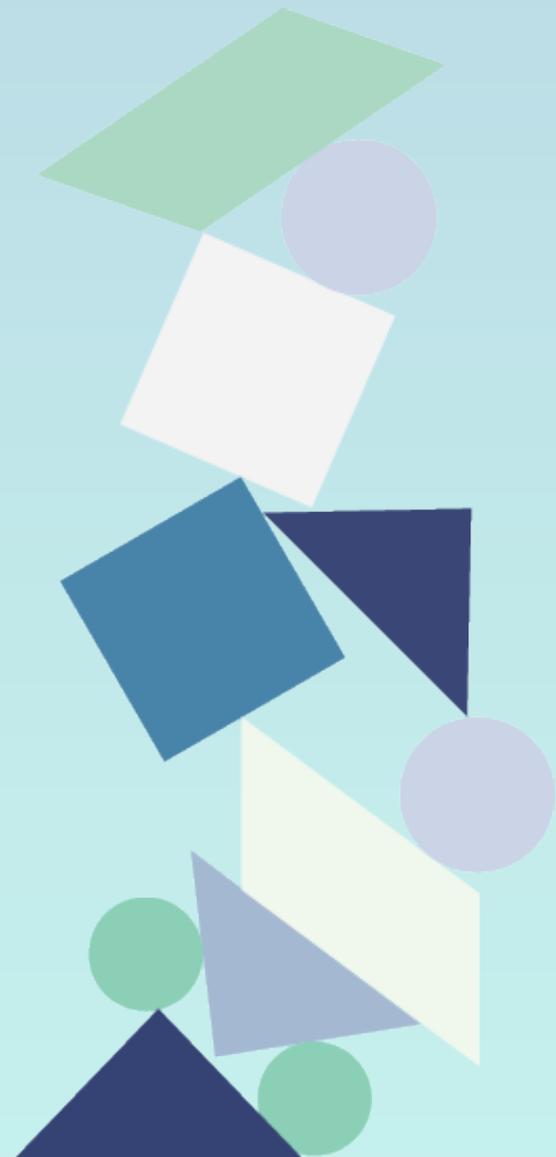


# The Detrimental Costs of Remedial Education for California Community College Students

## SUMMARY

Remedial education has long been tied to lower completion rates for California Community College students-few students who begin in remedial education successfully transfer or complete an associates' degree. Less is known about the negative effect of remedial education on those students who do complete their educational goals. This brief examines the impacts of remedial coursework on students who ultimately transferred or completed an associate degree. The brief uncovers ways in which remedial education negatively affects those students who beat the odds and ultimately complete their educational goals. These students experience excessive unit accumulation, longer times to completion, increased cost of attendance, and higher levels of student debt. The findings in this brief reinforce the need for the Legislature to ensure colleges are in compliance with the full intent of recent reforms to remedial education.



## BACKGROUND

In 2017, the California Legislature unanimously approved Assembly Bill 705 (AB 705) to fundamentally transform California community colleges' use of below-transfer level (remedial) education in English and mathematics. This landmark legislation responded to a growing body of research showing that remedial education often does more harm than good: standard assessment tests are a poor predictor of students' ability to succeed in college-level courses,<sup>1</sup> and students are less likely to complete their program when they start their postsecondary education in traditional remedial courses. Importantly, prior to AB 705, remedial coursework was ubiquitous, and its negative effects weighed disproportionately on Latinx and Black students.<sup>2</sup>

Among other provisions, AB 705 requires that colleges maximize the probability that students enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics within a one-year timeframe and, in most cases, use high school performance to determine student preparedness for transfer-level work. Colleges are further prohibited from placing students in stand-alone remedial courses unless specified conditions are met. All colleges were required to be in full compliance with AB 705 by fall 2019.

Robust research clearly demonstrates the cost of traditional remedial coursework on students' academic trajectories and odds of completing, including its role in perpetuating differences in completion rates by race. However, little attention has been paid to the added financial costs students may incur as a result of taking remedial courses. To shed light on the costs and financial aid implications of remedial education, TICAS collected data from five community colleges in California. Our colleges are located across the state, serve a range of student demographics, and reflect varying stages of alignment with strategies allowed under AB 705.

Our data capture students' estimated costs associated with units accumulated in years prior to and just after AB 705's implementation. While not representative of all students' experiences, these findings provide examples of the real costs of traditional remedial education practices and reinforce the need to further strengthen policies governing these practices in the California Community Colleges.

Practices that colleges adopted following AB 705 have resulted in significant boosts in transfer-level course completions, however, our findings underscore pre-existing research that makes clear additional work remains to ensure students in California are not enrolling in courses that delay or deter their success.<sup>3</sup>

## WE FIND THAT:

- When examining unit accumulation among students who completed or transferred prior to AB 705 implementation, students with any remedial coursework history accumulated significant excess units beyond the number of units required for their program, and accumulated many more excess units than those students who began in transfer-level classes.
- **Remedial coursework was associated with additional enrollment fees ranging from \$410 to \$1,390 per student, on average.**
- In some cases, additional accumulated units amounted to an extra year or more of college. When including all costs associated with college, including food and housing, **students with any remedial coursework history can face more than \$20,000 in additional college costs.**
- Remedial coursework made up just a small share of the total additional units accumulated by many of the students who completed or transferred with a remedial coursework history.
- In 2019-20, after the AB 705 compliance deadline, students receiving financial aid continued to enroll in remedial courses, thereby increasing their cost of education and extending their time to degree.

The added financial costs of excess unit accumulation add to the imperative that state and colleges do more to ensure no student faces unreasonable barriers and unnecessary expenses while pursuing their postsecondary goals. Full compliance with AB 705, and ensuring students are not enrolling in unnecessary remedial courses, is critical to improving outcomes for students. In 2022, the Legislature will also consider a proposal (Assembly Bill 1705, Irwin) to build on AB 705 by creating more stringent guidelines to limit community colleges' use of remedial education.<sup>4</sup> Given both the completion and financial costs of remedial coursework, such efforts will be critical to ensuring California's community college students have reliable and equitable pathways to postsecondary success, and to paving the way for California to meet the Governor's ambitious new statewide educational attainment goal.

## **EXCESS UNIT ACCUMULATION CAN LEAD TO SUBSTANTIAL ADDITIONAL FINANCIAL COSTS FOR STUDENTS WITH A HISTORY OF REMEDIAL COURSEWORK**

To shed light on differences in total unit accumulation between students who did and did not begin in remedial courses, we looked at a cohort of students who first enrolled in 2015-16 or 2016-17, and completed an associate's degree (AA, AS, or ADT) and/or transferred by Spring 2021.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, these students entered college prior to AB 705's passage, at a time when few colleges had implemented reforms to traditional remedial structures.

The vast majority of students taking remedial coursework do not complete their degree or transfer; however, looking at graduates and transfers allows us to more fairly examine the cumulative number of units taken and costs incurred at a college across students who did and did not begin in remedial coursework. While widely variable across our colleges, a substantial share of completers and transferring students at the five colleges in our analysis completed remedial units (19% to 52% of students).

Students who completed or transferred with a remedial coursework history typically accumulate many more units (between 9.0 and 30.3) than those who began in transfer-level courses (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup> Remedial units make up some, but not all, of those additional units. For example, at College A, students who took remedial coursework ended up completing, on average, 25.0 more total units than students who did not take any remedial units. At the same time, remedial units made up, on average, only 5.2 – one-fifth – of those total additional accumulated units. It is worth further exploring why students taking remedial coursework can end up taking substantially more nonremedial units before completing or transferring than those who never took remedial coursework.

As a result of accumulating more total units, students taking remedial coursework incur higher enrollment fees than students who graduate or transfer without taking remedial coursework. At the five colleges in our analysis, additional enrollment fees range from \$410 to \$1,390 per student.

Critically, \$46/unit enrollment fees are a tiny share of total costs for community college students in California. In addition to enrollment fees, students have to cover housing, food, books, supplies, and other expenses related to attending college. At two of the five colleges included in this analysis, additional units incurred by students with any remedial coursework history added up to an extra year or more of college,<sup>7</sup> the total costs of which amounted to \$20,842 for California community college students in 2018-19.<sup>8</sup>

## TABLE

### ADDITIONAL UNITS AND COSTS ACCUMULATED BY STUDENTS WHO TOOK REMEDIAL COURSEWORK BEFORE COMPLETING OR TRANSFERRING, PRIOR TO AB 705 IMPLEMENTATION

	College A	College B	College C	College D	College E <sup>9</sup>
<b>Region</b>	<b>Inland Empire/ Desert</b>	<b>Los Angeles</b>	<b>Central Valley</b>	<b>Bay Area</b>	<b>Bay Area</b>
Enrollment (number of students) <sup>10</sup>	29,000	35,000	30,000	34,000	14,000
Percent of undergraduates receiving federal Pell Grants <sup>11</sup>	29%	34%	34%	17%	16%
Percent of undergraduates who are Latinx <sup>12</sup>	66%	60%	69%	36%	45%
Percent of undergraduates who are Black <sup>13</sup>	8%	11%	4%	2%	6%
Remedial units completed (average per student among those with any remedial coursework)	5.2	5.4	10.7	5.6	8.1
Total additional units completed by students who took remedial coursework, compared to those who did not (average per student)	25.0	17.2	30.3	23.3	9.0
Estimated additional enrollment fees for students who took remedial coursework	\$1,150	\$790	\$1,390	\$1,070	\$410

Limited data also suggest that students taking remedial coursework before completing or transferring are more likely to graduate or transfer with student debt, and to have borrowed more, on average, than their peers who did not take remedial coursework.

## **EXCESS UNITS AND ASSOCIATED COSTS FALL DISPROPORTIONATELY ON LOW-INCOME STUDENTS, BLACK AND LATINX STUDENTS AND ENGLISH LEARNERS**

**More research is needed into the potential costs ESL students incur, and the implementation of the ESL-specific provisions of AB 705.**

At all five colleges, low-income students made up a larger share of students taking remedial coursework than those who did not take remedial coursework. For example, at College E, 80% of students taking remedial coursework before completing had received Pell Grants, Cal Grants, and/or California College Promise Grants, compared to 54% of their peers who did not take remedial coursework. Even when taking financial aid into account, the lowest-income students in California often cannot afford the full cost of college attendance; when these students take unnecessary coursework it expends their already limited financial aid and increases their likelihood of reliance on loans or other means to cover college costs.

Earlier research in this field identified Latinx and Black students as overrepresented in remedial course enrollments and highlighted that few students who begin in remedial education ultimately complete their educational goal.<sup>14</sup> Even among those who do complete, at all five colleges in our analysis, Latinx students were overrepresented in the group of students with a remedial coursework history, and white students underrepresented.

Degree-seeking students who begin in ESL sequences are also unlikely to complete transfer-level English, and for those that do, the time to and cost of completion is significantly increased.<sup>15</sup> Under AB 705, colleges are required to maximize the probability that a student enrolled in credit ESL instruction will enter and complete transfer-level English within three years. Data we received that aimed to shed light on the impact of credit ESL coursework among students impacted by ESL were limited. Prior research has found that few students who begin in ESL sequences ultimately complete their educational goals. Given the high stakes for student outcomes, more work must be undertaken to understand and assess the data and tools colleges have to identify course taking patterns and outcomes for students impacted by AB 705's ESL-specific provisions.

## **EVEN AFTER LEGISLATIVE CHANGES, MANY STUDENTS CONTINUE TO ENROLL IN REMEDIAL COURSEWORK, USING FINANCIAL AID TO COVER THE COSTS**

As these data show, for students with remedial coursework history who beat the odds prior to AB 705's full implementation, additional coursework can significantly extend their time to completion and increase the costs associated with their education. Financial aid plays a key role in helping students cover costs associated with attending and completing college. Moreover, lifetime eligibility limits (limits on the number of years and/or units that can be covered by financial aid programs) for some forms of financial aid can risk an additional cost of remedial coursework, making it less likely that a student will be able to cover costs through to completion. In the 2019-20 academic year, after implementing AB 705's required changes, remedial courses comprised 11 to 37 percent of the total units attempted by financial aid recipients<sup>16</sup> who were still enrolling in remedial coursework at the five colleges we looked at.

## **RECENT FINANCIAL AID EXPANSIONS REINFORCE THE IMPORTANCE OF REMOVING TRADITIONAL REMEDIAL SEQUENCES AND STREAMLINING STUDENT PATHWAYS TO COMPLETION**

More recent research on college's placement practices following AB 705 show that while course placement practices at many colleges have dramatically improved student outcomes, students at far too many colleges continue to enroll in courses that reduce their odds of completing transfer-level courses. Even when colleges do not require students to enroll in remedial courses, continuing to offer those courses is linked to increased numbers of students taking unnecessary remedial education. Moreover, inconsistent implementation of AB 705 disproportionately harms Black and Latinx students.<sup>17</sup> The recently introduced AB 1705 (Irwin) offers the Legislature the opportunity to create additional directives for colleges that are needed to meet the full intent of equitable placement and completion reform. In addition, emerging guidance and reporting requirements from the state Chancellor's Office encourages colleges to limit offerings of remedial coursework<sup>18</sup>; this will reduce the number of students self-selecting into unnecessary remedial courses. Finally, the state has the opportunity to consider how financial incentives could be shifted to support the transition away from remedial courses—one such approach (Assembly Bill 1187, Irwin) would fund colleges to provide tutoring for students enrolled in transfer-level coursework.<sup>19</sup>

Other reforms aimed at supporting California community college students further underscore the importance of ensuring colleges consistently set up students for success through coursework pathways that maximize their ability to complete. In the 2020-21 state budget, the California Legislature appropriated more than \$150 million to provide access to Cal Grant entitlement awards for all eligible community college students.<sup>20</sup> Under this expansion, students can receive awards for up to four years, allowing them to use their award after they transfer to a California State University or University of California. However, if, as our data highlight, low-income students at community colleges continue to take significant excess remedial and other units that extend their time to completion, many students will not have sufficient grant aid left to support them through baccalaureate degree attainment. It is imperative that colleges implement reforms holistically, to increase college completion rates, decrease time to completion, and ensure California's robust financial aid system adequately covers the full cost of college completion.

## ENDNOTES

1. Johnson, Hans, Marisol C. Mejia, and Olga Rodriguez. Public Policy Institute of California. 2016. "Determining College Readiness in California's Community Colleges: A Survey of Assessment and Placement Policies." <https://www.ppic.org/publication/determining-college-readiness-in-californias-community-colleges-a-survey-of-assessment-and-placement-policies/>.
2. Johnson, Hans, Marisol C. Mejia, and Olga Rodriguez. Public Policy Institute of California. 2016. "Preparing Students for Success in California's Community Colleges." <https://www.ppic.org/publication/preparing-students-for-success-in-californias-community-colleges/>.
3. Mejia, Marisol, Olga Rodriguez, Hans Johnson, Cesar A. Perez. Public Policy Institute of California. 2021. "Community College Math in California's New Era of Student Access" <https://www.ppic.org/publication/community-college-math-in-californias-new-era-of-student-access/>
4. Assembly Bill 1705, Assemblymember Jacqui Irwin, California Legislature 2021-22 Regular Session. [https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=202120220AB1705](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1705).
5. Note that some students in this group transferred before completing an associate degree and/or before reaching sophomore status.
6. Note that these analyses only include units taken for credit.
7. Students are considered full-time if they take 12 or more units.
8. TICAS, College Insight, <http://www.college-insight.org>. This figure represents the total cost of attendance in 2018-19 for students attending public 2-year colleges in California and living off-campus.
9. Note that College E was only able to include associate degree completers and could not include transfers, due to data limitations.
10. Enrollment figures include all non-special-admit students enrolled at each college during the 2019-20 year. Figures are rounded to the nearest 1,000 students. California Community Colleges, Student Success Metrics (SSM 122), <https://www.calpassplus.org/LaunchBoard/Student-Success-Metrics.aspx>.
11. TICAS, College Insight, <http://www.college-insight.org>. These figures represent the share of undergraduates receiving federal Pell Grants during the 2017-18 year.
12. TICAS, College Insight, <http://www.college-insight.org>. These figures represent the share of undergraduates enrolled for credit during the fall term who were Hispanic or Latinx, during the 2018-19 year.
13. TICAS, College Insight, <http://www.college-insight.org>. These figures represent the share of undergraduates enrolled for credit during the fall term who were Hispanic or Latinx, during the 2018-19 year.
14. Johnson, Hans, Marisol C. Mejia, and Olga Rodriguez. Public Policy Institute of California. 2016. "Preparing Students for Success in California's Community Colleges." <https://www.ppic.org/publication/preparing-students-for-success-in-californias-community-colleges/>.
15. Rodriguez, Olga, Sarah Bohn, Laura Hill, Bonnie Brooks. Public Policy Institute of California. 2019. "English as a Second Language in California's Community Colleges". <https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/english-as-a-second-language-in-californias-community-colleges.pdf>
16. These students received Pell Grants, Cal Grants, and/or California College Promise Grants.
17. California Acceleration Project. 2021. "Invalid Placement Practices Widespread in CA Community Colleges" <https://accelerationproject.org/Portals/0/Documents/CAPValidationReportAnalysisOct2021.pdf>
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19. Assembly Bill 1187. Jacqui Irwin. California Legislature 2021-22 Regular Session. [https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=202120220AB1187](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1187)
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