

Faculty throughout the state share their perspectives

AB 705 FACTS and Figures

by David Morse

No one that I know was enamored of our previous placement system or would have argued that it could not be improved. Experiments with more use of multiple measures, including greater use of high school transcripts, could have yielded promising results. However, the implementation of AB 705 has taken this reform too far and in directions that are harmful to many students, especially students of color.

My own experience in teaching a freshman composition course in the spring 2019 semester demonstrates some of the problems with the AB 705 implementation. The class started with 29 students enrolled. Of those 29, slightly more than half probably would have placed into freshman composition under the old placement system. Another six or seven would have placed below freshman composition previously but, with considerable effort, proved themselves capable of passing the class. The proponents of the new placement system will thus label it a success—these students who would previously have placed below freshman composition made it through and therefore saved a semester of coursework. The problem is that these numbers still leave six to eight more students who were simply unprepared for a college-level English class and who ultimately either dropped the class in frustration or failed. Those who claim the success of AB 705 and the new placement system seem willing to sacrifice these students in the name of improved efficiency. Those of us who teach the classes are not.

The other impact on transfer-level classes comes at the expense of those students who are prepared. When a third of the students are underprepared for the class, the instructor has to slow things down and spend time on topics that would previously have been covered in earlier courses. I have heard numerous English faculty state that they are no longer teaching

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AB 705 and Its Unintended Consequences

by Rosemarie Bezerra-Nader

The rapid and extreme pendulum swing from the Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) that began in 2006 and culminated with the full implementation of Assembly Bill 705 in the fall of 2019 swept away advantages for a vast number of students, even as it has helped others. The unintended negative consequences of AB 705 could have been eliminated by blending the best of AB 705 and BSI together with common sense.

BSI created foundational classes that prepared students for higher math or qualifying tests like the ASVAB military test or TEAS nursing test, as well as satisfying other goals such as self-improvement and job advancement. Yet AB 705 focuses almost exclusively on increasing the number of transfer students.

While equity is the goal of AB 705, the bill actually devalues diversity and the role community colleges have traditionally played for returning students. The expectation that all students want and are able to earn degrees within two years is unrealistic. The needs of students across California varies dramatically.

For instance, after failing a transfer class like algebra or statistics three times, is a returning student likely to continue, or become resigned to being “stuck” with a low-paying job? How equitable is it to expect single, working parents to complete transfer math and English classes within one year? How equitable is it to place a recently-released parolee in 15 units of classes including a transfer math or English class?

Is it equitable that underprepared students will be denied financial aid per AB 705 guidelines, while academically higher-performing students in transfer classes are not only eligible for financial aid, but also frequently have the advantage of higher-paying part-time jobs than their counterparts?

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The Great Debate: The Ups and Downs of AB 705

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in English and Math, I am speaking as an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor. For the first time in legislative language, ESL was recognized as “distinct from remediation in English” with a three year window, rather than one year as for other programs, to “maximize the probability that the student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics”. This distinction is important for preserving a language learning window for non-native English speakers in our college system. The recognition that ESL is distinct from remediation will have positive ramifications (recognizing their language development as one way to satisfy the foreign language requirement; putting pressure on the UC System to recognize our upper level composition courses as transferable).

Further, AB 705 has forced changes on a level that has simply not happened in years. At the Los Rios District we are having serious conversations about how our pedagogy curriculum is, or is not, relevant for the students we have in our classrooms. We are having serious conversations about how our different courses at the same level (reading/writing, grammar, and listening/speaking) can be more explicitly linked rather than siloed. We are talking about creating programs within our programs that expedite the learning process for students who are able to learn English at a faster pace than a more typical student. We do not agree on all these approaches, but we are having these discussions and our colleges are making significant changes to our programs. Professionally, these ideas are dynamic and these conversations are motivating. We will make mistakes as we move forward, but these changes, new ideas, and their revisions, will improve the educational product we offer the adults who enter our classrooms. AB 705 has stimulated these changes.

To FCC Staff,

I Michelle Lockett, am a former student of Mrs. Nader's math 250, 255 and STEM Math class. I returned to school in my mid-30s. I've been a licensed vocational nurse for 14 years. The reason I hadn't return to school earlier was because I couldn't score high enough on the placement test and I was afraid of being a failure and lose hope in becoming a registered nurse. A friend of mine informed me about a site called rate my professor. I viewed the site and found numerous instructors that sounded great, but when I read about Mrs. Nader, she sounded like a teacher, which is what I needed. Math 250 is where the light bulb come on in my head. I learned a math method called dimensional analysis, which I had no previous knowledge of. I knew then, that I could not only get into a RN program but be very successful in it. I even use the things I learned in math 250 in my everyday life. I can help my four children with their homework, I was able to help my husband when he was studying for an entrance exam for a job. After math 250 I took 255 then 103. Chemistry was the class I was dreading, and I passed the class the very first attempt and in the summer which is not an easy thing to do. I have two co-workers, both failed chemistry on their first try and one had to take it for a third time. I had recommended they take Mrs. Nader's math 250 class. The co-worker that passed the second time is the one who had taken my advice. After completing all the required courses, I started studying for the TEAS test. By that time, there was a new math class called STEM math. I took the class which is filled with lots of valuable information for students with all different types of educational goals. I took the TEAS test and scored well above the recommended score for the nursing program. I work with four other licensed vocational nurses who all received scores below the 62% required. One of those nurses even failed on her second attempt. I applied to two RN programs and was excepted into both on my very first attempt. I was told by other students of my program, that I was the person to see if anyone was struggling with math. I found out that the assistant director of the program had giving the them that information. I recommend the Stem math class for all nurses. I had even recommended to my nursing peers that they take this math class before taking the NCLEX. This math class requires you to think. It is a critical thinking class. Nursing is a critical thinking job. The public, our patients, trust and expect us to be competent and practice safely when caring for them and their loved ones. This math class is very valuable. I never received an A grade in neither of Mrs. Nader's classes, but I learned how to think and apply information to different situations. I can without a doubt calculate a patient's medication and not question as to whether I made a mistake. At the end of the day, I know I safely served the public.


Thank You
Michelle Lockett

AB 705 is not without its drawbacks, to be sure. Viewing a college system with little to no remedial education is a cultural shift that is not easy to implement, yet implementation is required without much, if any, guidance for re-training programs, departments, and instructors on how to adjust. In particular, it remains hardest for part-time faculty to be made aware of these changes and to access what trainings, conferences, and workshops. Part-time faculty represent a larger percentage of community college faculty than full-time faculty and are not paid equally.

AB 705 is a change focused on improving the possibility that more of the adults in our classrooms will succeed, more of the adults who take time away from their jobs, friends, and family to come to our classrooms with the belief that our college system and their effort will provide them the opportunity of a better future. AB 705 creates an institutional, legislative backdrop that simply believes more strongly in the learning ability of community college adults and that is a step in the right direction.

Math 312 -- Hello from Mrs. Nader

Hi Mrs. Nader, I'm doing great and thanks for asking. I just finished 3rd semester of nursing and your class was very helpful and I always recommend to other people who are struggling with math. I use the math skills I learned from you all the time with medication administration, I use dimensional analysis to calculate dosages based on weight or sometimes surface area, and to convert pounds to kilograms and ounces to liters. In my personal life I tutored my 11 year old nephew how to do fractions your way and he is really good now, his math teacher was very impressed when I spoke to him at a meeting a couple months ago. I can't remember but my TEAS score was 90% and my math test score was 96% or 98% I think. I don't know what else could make your class even better, I really enjoyed it and you covered essential topics you encounter in my field such as conversions, decimals, percentages and fractions. Recently I was elected Vice-President of the Students Nursing Association (SNA) for next semester and I plan to tell students who are struggling in math to consider signing up for your class. Next semester is my last and I would like to work as an ER or ICU nurse when I graduate and of course when I pass the NCLEX to become a registered nurse, I plan then to go back to school to earn a bachelor's degree and then hopefully work towards becoming a nurse practitioner. I need to send you math practice problems that we do so you can get an idea or incorporate them in your lessons. Ill try to send them to you next week in an email, I just need to look for them and scan them. This week I'm busy but I should be more free after June 5th. sorry for the late reply but I just noticed this email, for some reason it didn't show up in my notifications so I apologize. If you have more questions let me know and have a wonderful summer too.

 Omar De la Rosa

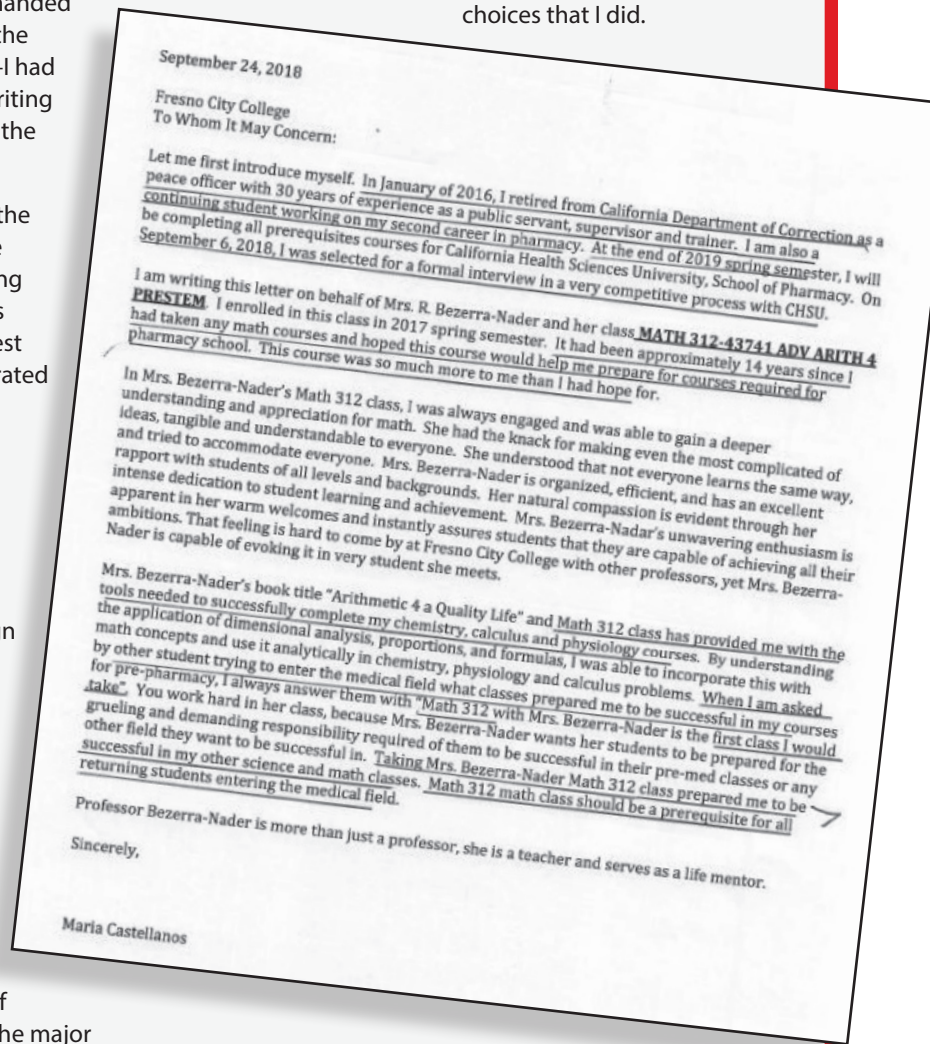
studies at the University of Oregon. I spent six years in Eugene, teaching, training new teachers and assisting with the administration of the Oregon composition program. A year after earning a doctorate, we moved to Wisconsin, where I spent three more years teaching in that state's university system.

I count the return to northern California to teach at College of the Redwoods as probably the best career decision I've made. Even so, I was never convinced that the slowed-down approach to developmental writing really worked. I knew almost immediately I wouldn't be able to teach the classes as many of my colleagues still did or as I had 10 years before. My research, my practice, and my experience all told me that I'd have to push my students harder, get them to read more complicated texts, and wean them off the five-paragraph-theme model so prominent in many of the developmental textbooks. By then I was way past the idea that rote sentence practice and simplified fill-in-the-blanks essay models guided by topic sentences, body paragraphs and tripartite thesis structures worked to teach critical thinking. For me, students needed to be invited into inquiry from day one. They needed to find their own reasons to write rather than being handed models to copy. That's why, when I first heard about the California Acceleration Project (CAP), I was relieved—I had already been accelerating my own developmental writing courses for more than a decade when I first joined in the Community of Practice sessions for CAP.

A few of my English department colleagues resisted the idea of acceleration, but the data didn't lie—we were definitely not serving our students well and something needed to change. We started making those changes almost immediately in 2012-13. Combining the earliest and the final developmental courses into one accelerated developmental course began to move the needle on success, persistence, and retention, and we followed that change up with new parameters for placement that allowed many more students to enter the final developmental class rather than being placed in the earliest one. As we started to phase those courses out altogether and began to do the kind of back formation that accelerated composition course design requires—thinking of the outcomes we wanted at the end of freshmen comp and building them into accelerated courses at the start—more and more of our English faculty went through the CAP communities of practice so that, by now, almost every member of our English faculty, full-time and part-time, have participated in CAP training.

The most important thing that I think people should bear in mind is that the implementation of AB 705 represents a shift in thinking about rhetoric and composition that has been at the core of disciplinary arguments going back decades. One of the major

fronts in the English theory wars of the 1980s and 90s was just this sort of question about how to treat the students we deem as not yet ready for college level work. The answer that a lot of my colleagues and the developmental textbooks adopted—take them by the hand and slowly walk them through sentence formation and drills on grammar and the like—never worked for me. This is what I believe many faculty have been missing in their anger and resentment about AB 705. Over the last year or so, at conferences and during panel presentations, I've heard people claim that I have somehow “drunk the Kool-Aid,” an especially offensive taunt if you're at all familiar with The People's Temple and Jim Jones. Such a claim represents a sort of motivism that I don't think even those who make it realize, as though I couldn't possibly have come to the conclusion that it's good to accelerate students without being bullied or threatened into it by the state. But my own decisions to accelerate English coursework have come from years of practice, experience, careful thought and argument. And while, in the long run, I understand some of my colleagues' opinions regarding the problem of legislators mandating curricular changes, I also need to be honest to myself and admit that the legislators made the same choices that I did.



the same class, that they can no longer cover the things they used to, both due to a lack of time because of the need to deal with issues for the less prepared students and due to the students' inability to handle the material. We have, consciously or not, lowered standards in our transfer courses, and the consequences are likely to be felt by students after transfer and in their careers.

In many cases, the real problems exist not with AB 705 itself but with the implementation led by the Chancellor's Office. For example, the bill stated that colleges "shall maximize the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics within a one-year time frame"; it did not state that students must be placed directly into transfer level. A one-year time frame, or two semesters, would allow for a semester of remediation when appropriate. Nevertheless, the implementation memo issued jointly by the Chancellor's Office and the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges on July 10, 2018 states that "the Chancellor's Office recommends that students who have graduated from high school within the past 10 years and have a goal of transfer or degree attainment should be recommended to enroll directly into transfer-level courses in English, statistics/liberal arts mathematics, and BSTEM-based mathematics." The use of that extra semester to prepare for transfer level, which would be allowed under AB 705, is clearly discouraged, thus forcing students who are underprepared to essentially dive in and sink or swim.

Likewise, while the bill mandates the use of high school performance data as an aspect of student placement, it does not disallow the use of assessment instruments and states that "multiple measures shall apply in the placement of all students." However, the Chancellor's Office guidelines focus exclusively on high school grade point average for placement, leaving all other measures aside. Whereas AB 705 allowed for thoughtful placement systems using a variety of measures—including the possibility of a placement test if appropriate—the guidance from the Chancellor's Office set aside any other considerations in favor of high school performance. In this sense, one can question whether the guidance follows the bill's mandate at all, since high school performance alone should not qualify as multiple measures for placement. Indeed, if, as the guidelines urge, all students are placed into transfer-level courses and high school GPA is only used to determine the level of additional support students need, one could question whether even high school performance is truly being used for placement at all.

Further, AB 705 stated that colleges cannot place students into remedial English or mathematics coursework unless "those students are highly unlikely to succeed in transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics." However, the bill language did not define "highly unlikely to succeed." Clearly, the Chancellor's Office guidelines set a very high bar for this term: the July 2018 implementation memo states that students with

a high school GPA below 1.9 have only a 42.6 percent success rate at transfer level in English and only 28-29 percent in math, yet the memo nonetheless urges that these students, whose likelihood of success is clearly limited, be placed into transfer level. These predicted success rates, based on information published by the Chancellor's Office, could easily be seen as indicating that the students are "highly unlikely to succeed," and thus the unclear definition of this term adds an additional problematic aspect to the bill's implementation.

However, the problems with defining success go even deeper. Students are generally seen as successful if they pass a course, yet research shows that students who pass with a C are considerably less likely to pass a course at the next level. Thus, even if the new placement system under AB 705 leads to more students passing transfer level courses with a C, the success of those students who truly needed remediation may be short-term only, and we may be setting them up for long-term failure as they attempt to continue their education.

Perhaps the old placement system did indeed place too many students into remediation. However, the new system goes to the other extreme, recommending the placement of all students into transfer level. Some students truly do need and benefit from remediation. In early spring 2019, I was contacted by a former student from several years ago who took a class three levels below freshman composition that I taught. She wrote to let me know that she is now an adjunct faculty member at a CSU campus and that she would be finishing her doctoral degree, and she wanted to thank me for helping to get her academic career started. She is just one of countless success stories from our remedial classes, one of many students who needed those classes to develop both the skills and the confidence to succeed. One can never know where that student might have ended up if she had been pushed into a freshman composition course immediately upon entering college, but, like many students, she clearly benefited from the remedial coursework.

Reconsidering our placement system was a valid and potentially valuable idea, but we could have done better. We could have worked together to reform the system in ways that would have made sense if the legislature and Chancellor's Office had relied on the expertise of the faculty who teach the classes. Instead, we now have a system that lowers standards, frustrates faculty, and, worst of all, harms the students that it purports to be serving.

Yuba College instructor John Almay, author of “The Fast Lane to Nowhere”, admired the dedicated instructors of the acceleration movement and their goals, but also stated, “You do not accelerate people who do not know the basics.”

AB 705 rewards colleges for increasing the number of students who complete transfer English and Math classes within one year. In Almay’s words, will this contribute to the “bogus sea of diplomas and degrees we already have?” Instructors may succumb to subtle or direct pressure to increase passing rates in response to job-security concerns by diluting content, leading to another unintended consequence of AB 705: the eventual decline of many colleges’ reputations.

Many claims are made and will continue to be made about the effectiveness of AB 705. With the current emphasis on teaching statistics, it would be hypocritical to blindly accept claims and conclusions. In colleges where BSI classes are no longer offered, there will be no appropriate control against which to compare new classes and procedures resulting from AB 705. The funding guidelines in AB 705 encourage administrators to eliminate nontransferable classes. These basic classes do not affect GPA, encouraging students to justify not attending as the semester ends. This leads to failing grades that quickly reduce the numerical success rate and distort the real value of the class in the minds of administrators.

Many innovative BSI classes have not yet reached their full potential. A relatively new BSI pre-STEM arithmetic class was taking root at one school and was supported by testimonials by former students as well as hundreds of other students who signed a petition of interest to take the class. Like all the arithmetic and pre-algebra classes this class was not scheduled. Worse, these classes were deleted from the catalog preventing students from even considering whether or not they needed these classes.

As the pendulum of change swings and proposals are made to promote and accelerate learning, modification, not elimination, would be the most efficient path to take. Equitable learning would be better accomplished by respecting the diverse educational needs and goals of the unique communities in which students live. It is especially important to remain acutely aware of the broad diversity within California, realizing the state is often recognized as the most diverse state in the nation.

To Whom it may concern

I wanted to take a few minutes to give a student’s perspective look at Math 312 Class I took the spring semester in 2017. What first comes to mind is “Where has this teacher and this class been at my entire college career.” I could have used the knowledge and the techniques that I learned in this one class over many classes that I have taken at Fresno city college.

Math has never come easy to me. Several semesters before this, I took intermediate algebra I went to class every day and did every homework assignment and still only passed that class with a “C”. I also took Chemistry 3 A the semester before taking Math 312, and struggled the entire time on the math that was in chemistry. I was convinced that I had missed something in math and could not understand anything about dimensional analysis. I spent that entire semester in the tutoring center. The frustrating part was not because I didn’t understand chemistry but because I could figure out that methods of the math and how to set it up. While there is one chapter in our chemistry mood that does go over some of the math. It is not nearly enough nor is it the teacher’s responsibility to teach us math that we should already have been shown. One fateful day, after a chemistry test, Mrs. Rosemarie Bezerra- Nader showed up into my life.

Math 312 isn’t just learning one way to do a problem, it brings math into your real world. It helps those of us who may not be strong in Math to have the confidence to knowing the basics as well as the more difficult problems. I had several moments in my Math 312 semester where Mrs. Bezerra-Nader would be explaining a problem, one of which that was very close to what I didn’t know in chemistry, and it was like she was now speaking a math language that I finally understood. It was all because Ms. Bezerra-Nader went back to basics in math, she made sure that we really understand the fundamentals of Math before moving on to harder more difficult equations, making things like dimensional analysis come a little easier. Not only did Mrs. Bezerra-Nader take the time to explain problems in an easier way but she didn’t just explain the one way. She explained them in several different ways that you might see not only in the profession you choose but also just in your life. I think this was very important because most people don’t think they need to use fraction or dimensional analysis in everyday life, but I still use the techniques taught to me in this class every day.

I wish Math 312 would have been a requirement for Chemistry 3A and not only just the pre-requisites for the health field but for any student who has had to take time away from school and has come back later in life to continue their education. The headache that was chemistry for myself and many fellow students doesn’t have to happen if this class is offered and advertised widely across Fresno city college. The techniques and lessons that I learned in Math 312 will undoubtedly help me in day to day life as well as when I pursue a career in the medical field. I have and will continue to voice the need for this class to fellow students and instructors because I believe that Math 312 and Mrs. Bezerra-Nader have benefited my life and career more in one semester than any other class has in my college experience.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Welsh

The letters in the margins of this article came from Rosemarie Bezerra-Nader’s students. The underlines were made by Rosemarie Bezerra-Nader and are not reflective of FACCC’s position on the issues discussed herein.

*Rosemarie Bezerra-Nader, a developmental math instructor at Fresno City College for 28 years, also taught math, English, and critical thinking in Grades 7 - 9 as well as professional development classes for teachers at Fresno State University. She discovered the lack of advanced arithmetic concepts was the source of her own difficulty in chemistry years ago, and it still is for many students today. This discovery fueled her 17-year passion to network with STEM colleagues and tirelessly develop contextualized math curriculum with the goal of increasing student interest and success in STEM. Rosemarie’s contextualized math curriculum evolved into a book entitled *Arithmetic 4 Success* (Kendall Hunt Publishing).*