One Size Fails All: Unmasking AB 1705

by Anna Mathews, FACCC Government Relations Director

AB 1705 (Irwin) effectively removed stand alone remedial courses from community college course catalogs across the state, with supporters positing that the policy would close equity gaps for marginalized students.

As colleges were diligently implementing AB 705 to simplify the remedial education process, various stakeholders in higher education—including legislators, advocates, administrators, some faculty, and even students—embraced an appealing narrative that would eventually become AB 1705. What they thought was a solution for inequity would prove to significantly disrupt higher education as we know it. Collectively buying into this illusion of grandeur has had devastating consequences on community college students across California. AB 1705 represents a troubling trend in educational reform driven by corporate-backed interests and unsubstantiated metrics of success—a pattern that we must wholeheartedly reject. In his well-renowned military treatise The Art of War, Sun Tzu states "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle." In order for us to effectively combat the reform movement that spearheaded AB 1705, we must know who was behind it, why they succeeded, find the weaknesses in their arguments, and take action.

The History: AB 705

AB 705 (Irwin) redesigned pre-transfer education to "maximize the probability" that students would pass transfer-level math or English in their first year at community college. The bill addressed pre-transfer pathways that were unnecessarily long for students without creating a mandate. FACCC was neutral on the bill, but acknowledged the benefits that this redesign would bring to our system.

After AB 705 was signed, Title 5 § 55522 language was drafted regarding the implementation of the bill within the California Community College system. The regulations' overly prescriptive language was both stronger and narrower than what was written in the bill itself. It exhorted colleges to decrease or remove offerings of pre-transfer stand alone courses, reducing the availability of classes in lower levels of math and English as a means of expediting students' passage of transfer-level courses. Even though most colleges complied with the regulations, special interest groups brought the issue back to the Legislature, requesting a bill that would effectively ax stand alone remedial courses at the California Community Colleges. The result was AB 1705.

Educational Philanthrocapitalism and the Push For Completion

One might wonder where the push for students to complete transfer-level courses as fast as possible came from. It originates from a neoliberal movement to apply corporate principles of efficiency to education, as opposed to perceiving education as a public good that is critical to both self-actualization and the development of our societies. From their inception in the early 1900s, the primary goal of community colleges has been to increase educational access for the wellbeing of democracy, and build a more educated citizenry. In recent years, the inherent goodness of education in any form has been reduced to measurable outcomes and oddly specific metrics of "student success." The effectiveness of education is (rightly) too abstract to quantify, so this movement has described two priorities that are easily measurable, and exalted them above all else that community colleges have to offer: (1) transfer as the only metric of student success, and (2) two-year completion at community colleges to maximize time and financial efficiency.

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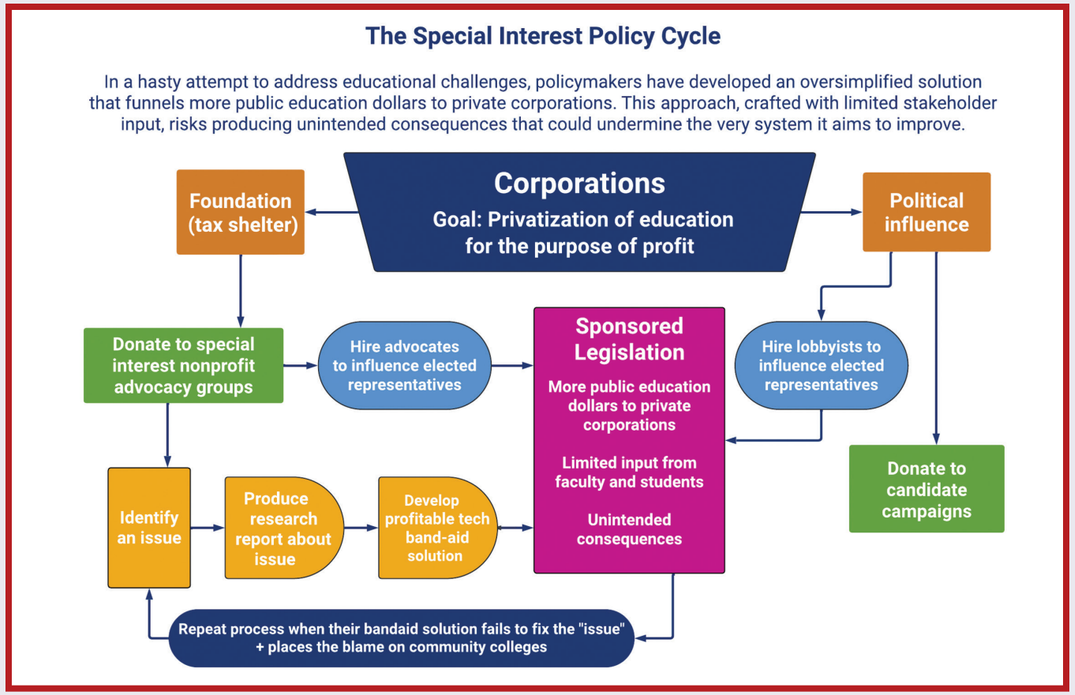

A diagram of the way in which corporate-backed special interest groups have taken over higher education policy.

Many pieces of research have been published that disparage the community colleges, asserting that they are doing a poor job at educating students because they fail to meet arbitrary metrics of "success." They frame enrollment drops in community colleges and less-than-attractive transfer and completion rates as the fault of educators instead of the result of policies, which have been largely pushed by nonprofit special interest groups (which I will refer to as "educational philanthrocapitalists). In fact, the same philanthrocapitalists produce the "research" that disparages community colleges, setting the stage for them to utilize corporate-funded lobbyists to push policies suggested by their very own research. This is a part of the neoliberal playbook which has pervaded the community college sphere. As articulated by Robin Isserles in her book The Cost Of Completion:

"Another important aspect of the neoliberal ideology is when philanthropic generosity is encouraged to fix what is assumed the state cannot. In fact, those who have prospered in the marketplace use their philanthropy to justify and reproduce an economic system that is deeply unequal. These philanthropists use their privileges to maintain their wealth and give what they want, on their own terms, which benefits a small fraction of what more systemic changes in our tax and income policies could."

But things have gone further than philanthropic generosity: a whole system has been created in which private entities, funded by corporate dollars under the guise of philanthropy, shape educational policy by controlling every part of the process. As Isserles states, these entities are contributing far more than just donations: "there is a whole set of edu-philanthropists who are funding the research, the implementation, and even the evaluation of completion-driven initiatives in community colleges throughout the country." There are many such groups engaging in these practices, so the public perception is that they are not related, but the reality is that they are a well-oiled machine that has effectively monopolized the narrative in the higher education sphere. And because they constitute nonprofits, people believe that all the work they engage in is for the betterment of the most marginalized students, particularly since they claim that equity is the foundation of their work.

How AB 1705 Was Rationalized

When these same nonprofit special interest groups pushed AB 1705 in 2021, they received immense support for their excessively restrictive policy. One might wonder how they accomplished it: they rationalized a ridiculous ban of foundational basic skills classes by wrapping their message in a bow of equity. Their line of reasoning? Students of color (particularly Black and Latinx students) are disproportionately placed in pre-transfer classes, and students who take pre-transfer classes are less likely to graduate college with a degree, therefore, students of color are less likely to graduate college with a degree.

It's a logic argument called a hypothetical syllogism:

If A, then B.

If B, then C.

Therefore, if A, then C.

If students are people of color, then they are more likely to be placed in pre-transfer classes.

If students are more likely to be placed in pre-transfer classes, they are less likely to graduate with a degree.

Therefore, if students are people of color, they are less likely to graduate with a degree.

The culprit? Pre-transfer classes. As articulated by the Campaign for College Opportunity, "Black and Latinx students were overrepresented in remedial courses, meaning that many Black and Latinx students were derailed from their goals of fulfilling transfer requirements and completing a degree." However, hypothetical syllogisms fail to consider factors outside their premises. This logic is an example of defeasible reasoning, or reasoning that is rationally reasonable but not deductively valid because it fails to account for other circumstances or possibilities. In other words, the argument's conclusion (that students of color are less likely to graduate with degrees as a result of remedial classes) has profound equity implications that stretch far beyond the initial premise of the conditions. The reasoning is non-demonstrative, and confuses correlation with causation—placing the blame for education inequity on pre-transfer classes instead of considering why students of color were being placed in these classes in the first place.

The Campaign for College Opportunity boasts of "unapologetically advancing college access and success for all students". But this advancement comes at a cost. Yes, AB 1705 increased student access to transfer-level math and English classes, but it decreased access to classes that meet students where they are at. By significantly reducing student access to stand alone pre-transfer classes, the most marginalized students who lack a strong educational foundation are stripped from accessing classes at their skill levels. While pre-transfer courses can technically be offered to students deemed 'highly likely to fail' transfer-level courses, this provision is essentially pointless: too few students qualify for this exception, making it impractical for campuses to actually offer these classes. Corequisite classes, which combine basic skills instruction with transfer-level content, have been suggested to address the void left by the lack of pre-transfer courses. However, this solution has proven inadequate. Corequisite classes often contain an overwhelming amount of material, making it challenging for both professors to teach and students to comprehend. The corequisite model demands a significant investment of time and energy—a luxury that many students simply cannot afford, and fails to meet the unique needs of community college students in a way comparable to pre-transfer classes.

Moreover, many students who require additional academic support have competing priorities—one of the reasons they were often placed in pre-transfer courses prior to AB 1705. Lots of community college students juggle multiple responsibilities, including caregiving for family members and working several jobs, which can put their education on the back burner. Many students' socioeconomic challenges make completing their studies within the arbitrary two-year timeframe—a core "metric for success"—nearly impossible. Instead of labeling these students as failures for not meeting unrealistic expectations, we need to shape our educational system to accommodate their complex lives and diverse needs. We should be tailoring education to students' realities rather than expecting them to conform to an inaccessible and narrow model.

In order to address this issue, the California Community Colleges must stop perceiving basic skills courses as superfluous or of a lower caliber than transfer-level courses. A champion of AB 1705 recently likened taking

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AB 1705 and the slew of corporate-backed special interest groups do not recognize that giving everyone the same treatment regardless of their circumstances does not lead to equal outcomes.

remedial classes to eating unhealthy food simply because it's available, stating, "we are all inclined to make choices that aren't good for us when given the option." This appalling rhetoric, which unfairly assumes that students taking pre-transfer classes lack motivation or discipline, was a driving force behind AB 1705. Such statements demonstrate the disconnect between policymakers and the realities faced by students they're meant to serve. Our system needs to celebrate the true diversity of community college students instead of forcing them into an ill-fitting, one-size-fits-all model. Until this happens, corporate-funded critics will continue to use narrow, out-of-touch metrics to unfairly label faculty as failing our students. It's time for us to stop listening to them instead of focusing on meeting our students' needs.

Equity in the AB 1705 Conversation

The California Community Colleges often tout their diverse student population, and have branded themselves as an open access institution that accepts the top 100% of students. But if they accept all students, they should have the means to meet the unique educational needs of all students. AB 1705 has prevented community colleges from meeting students where they are at; the branding of this policy as acceptance of students under the guise of diversity and inclusion is performative. Students without an adequate background in math or English should not be forced to struggle through remediation at the same time as trying to master transfer-level coursework that they are unprepared for, take a hit to their GPA, or drop out of these classes. Professors shouldn't have to choose between teaching with integrity and watching their students fail—especially when those students were placed in a class they weren't prepared for through no fault of their own.

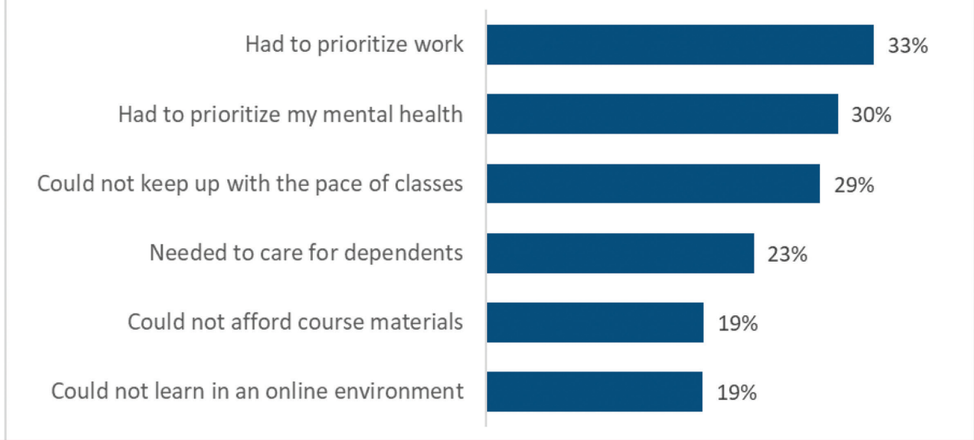
AB 1705 proponents constantly throw the word equity around, speaking about how the policy closes equity gaps, provides equitable access, and more. They fail to note the difference between equality and equity. Equality means giving everyone access to the same resources or opportunities, but equity means providing different resources to people with different needs. AB 1705 and the slew of corporate-backed special interest groups do not recognize that giving everyone the same treatment regardless of their circumstances does not lead to equal outcomes.

The Data: An Incomplete Picture

AB 1705 proponents use a flawed metric called throughput to justify AB 1705. Throughput is measured by looking at the pass rates of two groups of students: students who went directly into transfer-level math or English, and students who started in foundational math and English before moving into transfer-level. Unsurprisingly, the percentage of students who started in transfer level math or English had higher pass rates—likely because they felt prepared enough to go straight into that level without additional support, unlike the foundational math students, who probably felt that they weren't at the skill level necessary to succeed immediately in transfer-level math or English. It seems like a poor research method to compare the percentage pass rates of two groups of students who were at different places in their math and English skills—the better question to ask is if more of the students who took a foundational level class would have failed the transfer-level class without it. In such a study, the variable would remain the same, but there would be less factors differentiating the two groups of students and skewing the results.

Evidently, throughput is an insufficient measure to determine if something as important as basic skills classes should be removed. It is critical to note that no data statewide has been collected regarding the amount of students who have dropped out of transfer-level classes because they did not have a strong enough foundation to succeed—this is an important piece of the puzzle. Additionally, the impacts of this policy have not been studied in disciplines outside of math and English, many of which rely on strong backgrounds in these subjects to be successful. Now that we have removed algebra from community college, how has this impacted student performance in chemistry? If a student barely passes English 1A, how will they fare in their sociology class? Drop data and interdisciplinary ramifications would certainly paint a clearer picture of the academic landscape since AB 1705's implementation. However, the throughput data is almost guaranteed to reflect the conclusion that AB 1705 is working.

***Figure 6*. Top Reasons Previously Enrolled Students Dropped Class(es)**



Charting a Difference Course

The implementation of AB 1705 reveals a troubling pattern in educational policy-making that has gone on for far too long. The California Community Colleges have fallen victim to a deceptive narrative that promises much but delivers little, committing to close equity gaps yet failing to deliver meaningful improvements and exacerbating existing inequalities.

There are numerous discrepancies in the rationale behind AB 1705:

1. Success metrics that lack comprehensive data support
2. The monopolization of policy development, advocacy, and evaluation by corporate-backed interest groups
3. A flawed argument for eliminating remedial classes that confuses correlation with causation
4. A misrepresentation of equity and equality in educational access and outcomes
5. Significant gaps in data collection, particularly regarding dropout rates and interdisciplinary impacts

The erosion of educational access, exemplified by AB 1705, makes our educational system more susceptible to such misguided policies—and places already vulnerable students into precarious positions. By limiting options for students who need additional support, we are excluding those who could benefit most from a community college education. To truly serve our diverse student population, we must resist oversimplified solutions and demand policies based on comprehensive data and a nuanced understanding of student needs. Only by addressing these discrepancies and broadening our perspective can we create an educational system that genuinely supports all students in their pursuit of knowledge and personal growth.

As we move forward, it is imperative that we approach educational policy with a more critical eye, questioning the motives behind proposed changes and insisting on a fuller picture of their potential impacts. FACCC has held the line against the special interest group agenda, and is ready to continue this fight to protect the community colleges we know and love, but we need the help of our FACCCtivists: faculty must provoke a statewide conversation with the Legislature about the consequences of this policy and push for change. Our community colleges must remain true to their founding mission of increasing educational access and fostering a more educated citizenry—goals that require flexibility, diversity in course offerings, and a commitment to meeting students where they are. Their ability to continue doing so depends on us. ■