



# Students Speak:

A survey by and for students  
to understand equitable placement  
and completion in California.



### **Assembly Bill 705:**

**Signed into law in 2017, this historic policy required that a community college maximize the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and math within a one-year timeframe. It eliminated the use of inaccurate and inequitable placement tests and required colleges to use high school coursework, high school grades, and/or high school grade point average instead.**



### **Assembly Bill 1705:**

**Students and advocates realized clarifying legislation was needed to strengthen implementation of equitable placement and completion. In 2022, this policy was adopted to provide greater protections for students and ensure students have the supports to be successful in transfer-level courses.**

## Introduction

In the Spring of 2023, Students Making A Change (SMAC) fellows set out to learn from their peers. They had two goals in mind, to better understand other students' experiences in college, especially related to equitable placement and completion; and to provide students directly with money for contributing their firsthand experiences. After designing the survey, the SMAC fellows distributed the survey and launched an outreach campaign that included posting flyers around campus and direct outreach with students. In just three months, the SMAC fellows gathered over 900 responses from students across the state.

## Equitable Placement and Completion

Access to transfer-level courses has long been a core issue for SMAC. SMAC was founded 12 years ago at City College of San Francisco by Black and Brown students who wanted to advocate for rights and resources to eliminate the barriers that were keeping them from completing college. They had identified access to transfer-level English and math courses as a significant barrier to completion and partnered with the Campaign for College Opportunity to advocate for system reforms. Two policies have since been passed in the state legislature, AB 705 (2017) and AB 1705 (2022) authored by Assemblymember Jacqui Irwin. Both improved access to transfer-level gateway courses (English and math) with supports at the community colleges, which is referred to as equitable placement and completion. Continuing to advocate for access and support for transfer-level courses has been critical as students are experiencing changes to equitable placement every day.



## Who Shared Their Experience?

Amongst the 900+ respondents, there were 854 valid responses by community college students from every major geographic area in California, with the greatest representation from the Bay Area. Students enrolled at City College of San Francisco, Skyline College, and College of San Mateo provided the majority of the total responses. To promote inclusion, students provided their own description of their self-identity related to race and ethnicity, gender, income, and experiences through open-ended questions.

### SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

Figure 1. Students' racial/ethnic identity

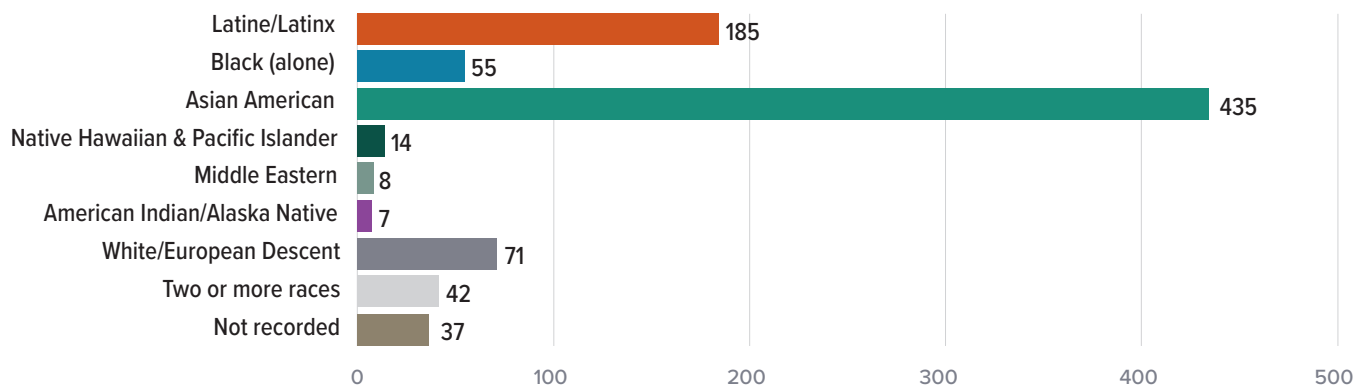
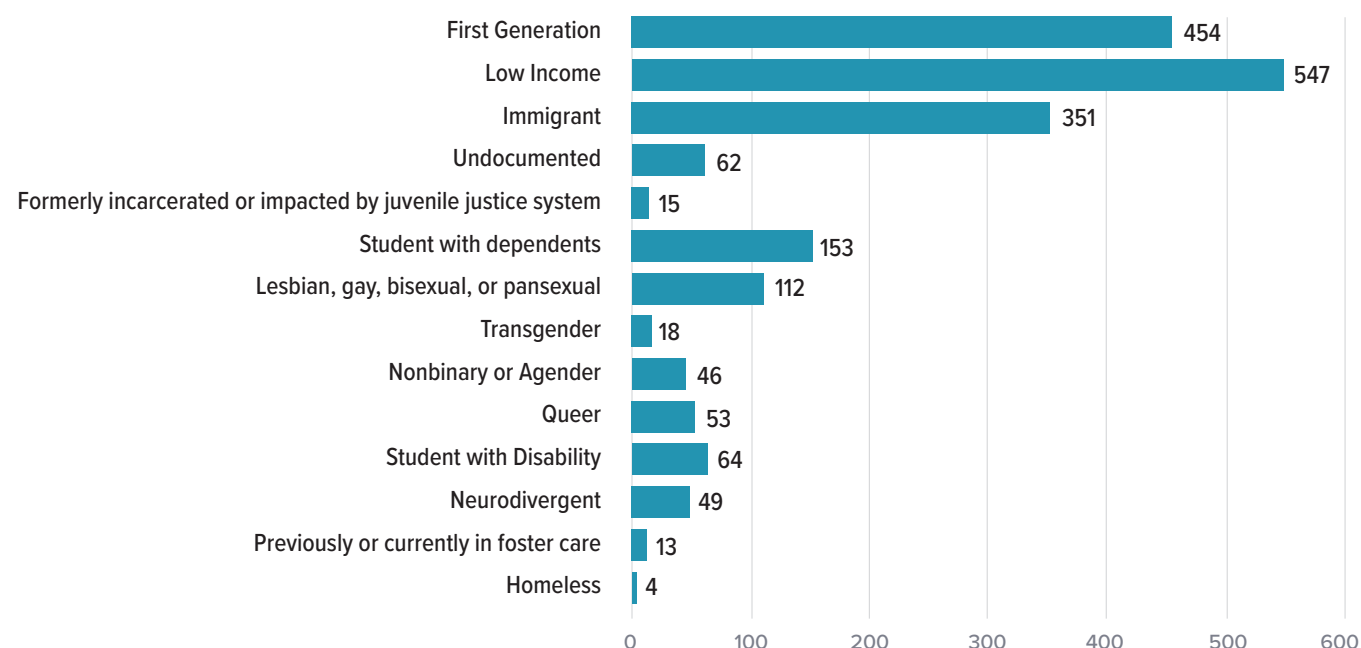


Figure 2. Student Group Identification



Just over 50% of respondents identified as Asian, 26% identified as Latine/Latinx, 8% identified as white, and 6% identified as Black. As for gender, the survey respondents identified as 32% men and 60% women. Over half identified as low-income and first-generation students. Of the respondents, 153 identified as a parenting student or student with caregiving responsibilities. There were 351 students who identified as immigrants and 62 identified as undocumented or as having AB 540 status (i.e. certain nonresident students exempt from paying nonresident supplemental tuition). Among the respondents, a smaller population identified as formerly incarcerated or impacted by the juvenile justice system, previously or currently in foster care, or homeless.

Student respondents varied in how long they had been enrolled in a community college: 19% spent more than three years, 12% enrolled for three years, 25% enrolled for two years, 22% enrolled for one year, and 22% for less than one year. Students were asked their reasons for attending. Over half indicated that their goals were to earn an associate degree and transfer to a four-year institution, with 456 combined responses.





## Student Reflections

### REMEDIAL COURSES:

Figure 3. Do students know what a remedial course is?

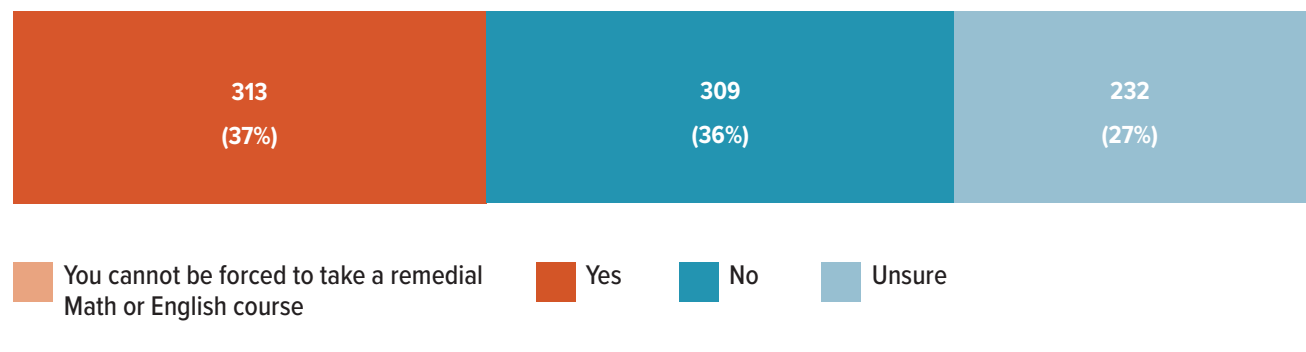


Most students who responded to the survey did not know what a remedial course was (63%). When disaggregated by how many years spent enrolled at a community college, those who responded they did know what a remedial course is were evenly divided across the categories.

Only 30% of students who identified as immigrants, including students who identified as undocumented, knew what remedial courses were. This is notable as English as a Second Language (ESL) courses had a delayed implementation timeline under AB 705, beginning in fall of 2021. While not all immigrants are English learners, within this survey, the ESL identifier is the most closely related to immigration status, providing a hopeful insight that colleges have largely transitioned away from remedial courses and only a small group of students are still introduced to these courses.

## RIGHT TO TRANSFER-LEVEL COURSES:

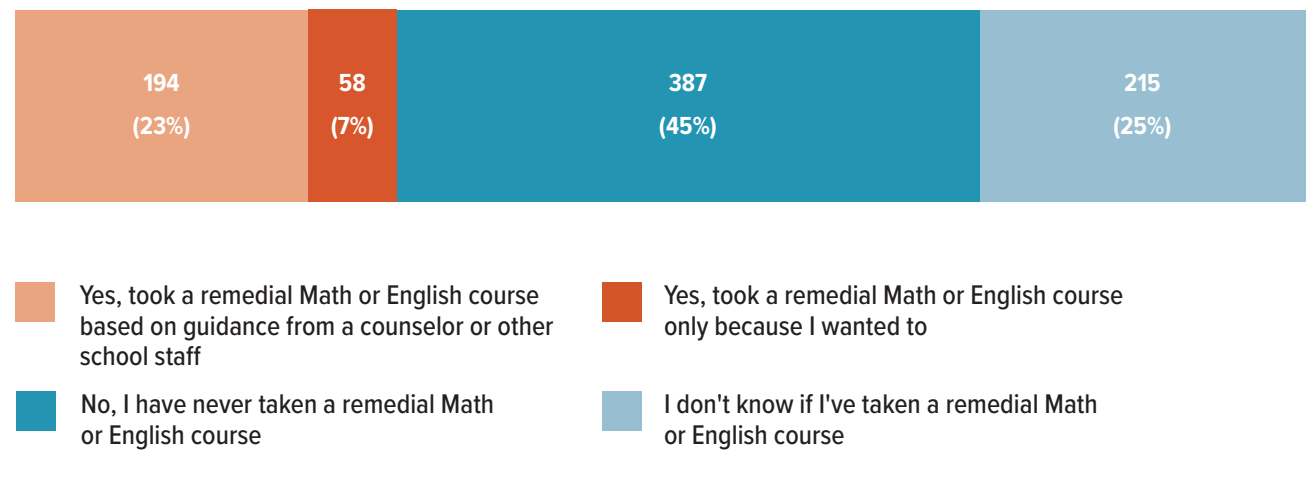
Figure 4. Are students aware of their right to enroll directly into transfer-level courses?



Consistent with those who knew what remedial courses were, almost an equal number of students knew they have the right to enroll directly into transfer-level English and math. When broken down by race, Black and Latine/Latinx students were the least likely to report knowing their right to enroll directly into transfer-level courses. Only 15% of Black students and 14% of Latine/Latinx students responded that they were aware of their right to enroll in transfer-level courses, compared to 27% of white students and 76% of Asian students who responded that they were aware. Newer students were more familiar, with 66% of students who had been enrolled in college for a year knowing of their right to enroll in transfer-level English and math.

## EXPERIENCE IN REMEDIAL COURSES:

Figure 5. Have you ever taken a remedial course?



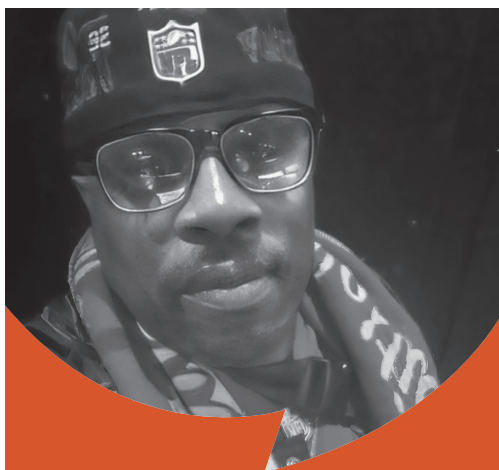
Most students indicated they had never taken a remedial English or math course or were unsure if they had. Responses from those who had taken a remedial course based on guidance from a counselor or staff when disaggregated by enrollment had a downward trend, which is consistent with what we would expect with implementation of equitable placement and completion. The disaggregated results are as follows: 38% of those enrolled in college for more than three years, 40% of those enrolled for three years, 26% of those enrolled for two years, 28% of those enrolled for one year, and 18% of those enrolled for less than a year. Just 6.8% of students took a remedial course only because they wanted to.



## Angel Briceno

City College of San Francisco  
Student

Angel began attending City College in 2019 as a part-time student because he had to work full-time to support himself. When he started, an advisor signed Angel up for general education courses so he could have more options for his future. His initial plan was to become a mechanic, but he quickly realized that was not the path for him. Since he had already completed many transfer-level general education courses, he was able to switch to the medical assistant program and is thinking about transferring after the summer. He highlighted access to transfer-level courses, corequisite support, the English Lab, City DREAM, and direct financial support as key supports for his success.



## Jaamar N.

City College of San Francisco  
Student

Jaamar is a newer student at City College of San Francisco. Previously, he attended San Francisco State University but did not complete then, and has returned to City College now to work towards a bachelor's degree. As a returning student and a Disability Services and Programs for Students (DSPS) student, he emphasized the need for accessible student supports. It has been challenging for him to navigate returning to college, but he has been determined to seek the supports he needs. He stays on campus and connects with his peers to locate supports. Jaamar has found that City DREAM, the Metro Transfer Program, and the tutoring within those programs have been the most helpful resources.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Students in this survey demonstrated that they have access to transfer-level courses in alignment with the goals of equitable placement and completion reform. **Overall, the students who shared their experience underscored what is critical to improving their completion in transfer-level courses - access to a variety of supports that meet their unique needs and make them feel welcome and included on campus.** As implementation continues, it is important to affirm students' unique needs and focus on improving their experience to and through the classroom.

At a time when students are questioning their place in college due to the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and a U.S. Supreme Court decision ending the use of race-conscious admissions practices; **colleges must focus on high-impact practices and co-requisite models that not only give students access to transfer-level courses, but affirm their place there.** Recent state funding available to colleges provides a tremendous opportunity to fully realize the vision of equitable placement and completion. Doing so will help all students be successful and expand their possibilities as they navigate college and beyond.



## BASED ON WHAT STUDENTS SHARED IN THIS SURVEY, WE RECOMMEND COMMUNITY COLLEGES TO:

- ✓ Guarantee that students receive accurate, consistent, and encouraging messages about their right to enroll and ability to successfully complete transfer-level courses.
- ✓ Provide data-backed and relevant student supports. This includes supports named by students interviewed for this brief, such as corequisite supports, tutoring, mentoring, and direct financial support.
- ✓ Ensure students are made aware of the resources available to them to support successful completion of transfer-level math and English. Meeting students where they are to communicate what is available to them is a critical part of supporting students to reach their goals.
- ✓ Establish a feedback loop with students and to share their experiences and use that feedback to inform campus-level policy change and practice. Administration must authentically engage students to understand what supports are most impactful for them. Students are the best resource for understanding how to relevantly support students on campus.



### **Melissa C.**

City College of San Francisco  
Student

Melissa has been a student at City College for the past five years. Melissa immigrated to the U.S. having completed higher education in Mexico, but when she came to City College those credits did not apply. She spent her first three years in a non-credit, below college-level ESL sequence, and was able to beat the odds and complete both the below and college-level ESL sequences. Melissa was able to find support at the City DREAM program. She has found motivation and passion through using her story to help other students. She shared that the Puente Program has been a critical program for students who have similar experiences.

## Methods

Data was collected through a survey containing 18 fields. Participants were permitted to provide responses in the language of their choice, with many responses in English, Spanish, and Mandarin. While the survey consisted of some closed-ended questions, including name, email address, racial, gender, and student group (e.g. first generation, parenting student, homeless, etc.) identities, and community college attendance, the majority were open-ended questions. Open-ended questions required respondents to formulate a response in their own words. All information used in the analysis was derived from survey data. Upon collection of the survey data, the data was cleaned to remove incomplete and duplicate responses and to ensure data quality. Upon completion of the data scrubbing, open-ended questions were reviewed and organized into the initial codes through thematic analysis which examines patterns of meaning with the data. Upon completion of initial codes, data was then organized a second time to further define and name themes. Additional student quotes for this brief were collected from 30-minute Zoom interviews. Students were asked six questions aligned with the survey. All students received \$50 gift cards for their participation in the survey and/or the interviews.

## Data Limitations

SMAC is based in the Bay Area, and many participants learned about the survey through local flyer advertisements and word of mouth. Thus, many of the responses are focused on students in the Bay Area region. Additionally, when it came to identity and open-ended questions, all the data was self-reported and defined by the responding students. This complicates the analysis of those areas, as the analyst's definitions may not be the same as the students'.



# Acknowledgments

Advocates through the Students Making a Change (SMAC) program developed and distributed the survey. Vitto Mendez from Coleman Advocates led the SMAC Fellows in the development and distribution of the survey. Lauren Harris was the lead data analyst for Coleman Advocates on this project. Alana Mendoza and Vitto Mendez of Coleman Advocates also contributed to this brief. Jewel Bourne from the Campaign for College Opportunity provided additional analysis of the survey results. Interviews for this brief were conducted by Marisa Johnson from the Campaign for College Opportunity. The Campaign for College Opportunity staff contributing to the brief were Marisa Johnson, Jewel Bourne, Sara Arce, and Jessie Ryan. A special thank you to our funder, Ascendium, that made this unique publication possible.



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