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Students placed directly into transfer-level math, on average, completed 7 to 14 more transferable STEM units compared to those placed into lower-level math courses.

Math is an integral subject in nearly all STEM disciplines and placing lower than expected into developmental math may sidetrack students who aspire to enter STEM fields.

TOPLINES

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> Math is an integral subject in nearly all STEM disciplines and placing lower than expected into developmental math may sidetrack students who aspire to enter STEM fields.
Studies estimated that as many as a quarter of math students were unnecessarily placed into lower-level courses and that misplacement hindered students’ academic success. As such, several states now mandate the use of multiple measures like high school records in determining students’ college placement.

In 2018, a change in California law (Assembly Bill 705 or AB 705) mandated that California community colleges use high school performance criteria instead of placement tests in making course placement decisions. It is important to note that the research reported here does not directly address the effects of AB 705 itself. Instead, it highlights the negative impacts of placing high-achieving students into math courses below transfer level that do not count toward degree. These results are particularly relevant as California community colleges adapt their practices to comply with AB 705.

Findings

Overall, more than half of the students experienced math misalignment in community college, whether or not they had expressed a desire to pursue STEM degrees. This misalignment had measurable consequences for student trajectories on their desired paths: STEM-aspiring students who experienced math misalignment completed fewer STEM units than STEM-aspiring students who were directly placed into transfer-level math.

Table 1 below shows the percentage of students placed into each level of community college math by the level of high school courses they completed. The first three rows show CCC math placement by high-school course-taking. The most common math placement among STEM-aspiring students who took algebra 2 in high school was pre-algebra in college (50%). But even among those students who took calculus in high school, just over half placed directly into transfer-level math. The fourth row shows that only 25% of students with a high school GPA greater than or equal to 3.0 were placed into transfer-level math. Finally, the fifth row shows math placement for students who met the multiple measure criteria most relevant to STEM-aspiring students according to AB 705—graduating from high school with at least a 3.4 HS GPA or having taken calculus. Only 40% of students who met these criteria placed directly in transfer-level math.

### Table 1. College Math Course Placement by HS Criteria among STEM-Aspiring Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIGH SCHOOL MATH EXPERIENCE</th>
<th>MATH PLACEMENT IN COLLEGE</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest HS Math = Algebra 2</td>
<td>Transfer-Level</td>
<td>Intermediate Algebra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest HS Math = Pre-Calculus</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest HS Math = Calculus</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS GPA&gt;=3.0</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS GPA&gt;=3.4 or HS GPA&gt;=2.6 + Calculus</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The shaded cells indicate the course placements that are misaligned based on students’ high school transcript.
Figure 1 shows math placement for STEM-aspiring students, focusing on the multiple measures criteria most relevant to these students outlined in AB 705 (high school GPA ≥3.4 or HS GPA ≥2.6 and took Calculus). Only 40% of STEM-aspiring students were placed into transfer-level math. An additional 32% of students were only placed into intermediate algebra (equivalent to algebra 2). Over a quarter of students who met these criterion placed into elementary algebra, pre-algebra, or arithmetic.

Only 40% of STEM-aspiring students were placed into transfer-level math.

Figure 2 shows that math misalignment had significant impacts on college performance and STEM transferable unit accumulation for students who had either earned a 3.4 high school GPA, or had earned a 2.6 high school GPA and took calculus.

Figure 1. College Math Placement Among STEM-aspiring Students Who Earned a 3.4 High School GPA or Earned a 2.6 GPA and Took Calculus in High School

NOTE: All courses in the figure above are credit-bearing; however only intermediate algebra and above are considered degree-applicable. Transfer-level math is considered both degree-applicable and transferrable to the UC/CSU.

KEY TERMS

AB 705
Legislation enacted in 2018 that requires all California community colleges to use, instead of placement tests, at least one of three criteria to determine course placement: high school course taking, course grades, and/or grade point average (GPA).

STEM-aspiring Students
Students who stated intent to major in a STEM field, (including life science or physical science and engineering), on their college application.10

Math Misalignment
Students placed in a lower level of math than their high school transcript would suggest they are prepared for.11

We examined three types of misalignment:

1. The mismatch between high school math course-taking (algebra 2, pre-calculus or calculus) and math placement in college.
2. The mismatch between overall high school GPA (greater or equal to 3.0) and math placement in college.
3. The mismatch between a combination of overall high school GPA and high school math grades and college math placement. This is for students who either earned at least a 3.4 high school GPA, or earned an overall high school GPA of 2.6 or higher and took calculus.

The second and third types of misalignment were derived from the rules developed for AB 705. According to AB 705, students who intend to major in STEM must either have at least a 3.4 HS GPA or at least a 2.6 HS GPA and have enrolled in calculus in order to be directly placed in transfer-level math without additional math support.
Students who were directly placed in transfer-level math completed seven more transferable STEM units (about two courses) compared to students who were placed into intermediate algebra, almost 12 units more than students in elementary algebra, and 13.6 more units than those placed into elementary algebra. Importantly, this relationship held after controlling for student background, academic achievement in high school (e.g., grades, standardized test scores), and feeder high school. That is, even among STEM-aspiring students with similar levels of high school achievement, the difference in placement had profound effects on overall STEM credit accumulation.

Even among STEM-aspiring students with similar levels of high school achievement, the difference in placement had profound effects on overall STEM credit accumulation.

Even among STEM-aspiring students who successfully completed calculus in high school, only about 50% were placed into transfer-level math in community college.

Why Does It Matter?
Inter-sector math misalignment is critical to understanding postsecondary STEM attainment among community college students. For one, math is integral to nearly all STEM disciplines. Secondly, students who placed lower than expected in community college math may lose important momentum and interest in STEM that they developed in high school. Before AB 705, the lack of a common definition of college readiness resulted in the placement of a large proportion of students in below-college-level math. Even among STEM-aspiring students who successfully completed calculus in high school, fewer than 50% were placed into transfer-level math in community college.

On average, students who experienced math misalignment completed 7 to 14 fewer transferable STEM units than those who did not. This has significant cost implications for...
both students and institutions as seemingly college-ready students have to repeat course material they have already mastered, as demonstrated by their grades, in high school.

Finally, these findings suggest that math misalignment hindered many of the very students with the greatest STEM interest. This imposes significant costs in terms of STEM momentum as students received a negative signal regarding their academic preparation that may not have been justified.

**What can colleges do?**

As community colleges revamp their assessment and placement policies to comply with AB 705, efforts like these could help reduce misalignment:

- Establish a systematic data sharing agreement between high schools and community colleges to illuminate issues of misalignment from both sides.
- Encourage community college math faculty to collaborate with local high school teachers to create courses, so that the rigor of those courses is valued and the knowledge and skills students bring from high school is trusted.
- Expand dual enrollment partnerships with high schools as a low-cost way of allowing students to understand college course expectations and complete college courses while still in high school.
- For students whose high school records are difficult to evaluate, such as international students or students with older high school records, develop consistent standards across colleges to ensure that fewer students experience math misalignment.
- Use high school records to identify STEM potential, talent and aspiration, and encourage these students to pursue STEM.

**Conclusion**

Students who experienced math misalignment likely received one message about their academic preparation in high school and a very different message in college. This misalignment penalty is akin to “starting off on the wrong foot”: STEM-aspiring students who experienced math misalignment face the burden of rectifying a bad start. Our results suggest that if math misalignment were reduced, STEM-aspiring students entering community colleges would likely complete more transferable STEM courses, and, potentially, increase their likelihood of STEM degree attainment and experience the labor market advantages such attainment provides.

These findings underscore the importance of aligning academic standards across high school and postsecondary institutions as a means of improving STEM participation and student success. The findings also suggest that the recent AB 705 policy emphasizing high school preparation in placement decisions may open more doors for underserved STEM-aspiring students in community colleges. But even with this directive, colleges vary significantly in their approaches to implementing the new policy.

The impact of this new state policy to address equity and historical opportunity gaps could be dampened absent strong collaboration between high school and college faculty, and strong college-level commitments to place the majority of STEM-aspiring students in college-level math with the supports necessary to help them achieve their career goals.
Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research was established in 2016 to support California community college leaders through annual professional learning institutes and independent, actionable research. Wheelhouse is supported by the University of California, Davis, the Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative (California Community College Chancellor’s Office), the James Irvine Foundation and the College Futures Foundation.

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