

# Withstanding the Backlash: Conceptualizing and Preparing for Coercive Reactions to Placement Reform and Corequisite Support Models in California

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In the last few years, college and university systems nationwide have implemented sweeping reforms to placement and course sequences to rectify systemic inequities affecting incoming students. Many of these reforms acknowledge that standardized placement tests create false distinctions between “prepared” and “underprepared” students, and that most students deemed “underprepared” by placement tests are in fact successful in college-level courses. A growing and predictable backlash is arising as these reforms change the demographic makeup of college classrooms. Using local data to examine, characterize, and theorize the backlash against California’s recent legislative reform, AB 705, this article identifies corequisite support courses as a likely target for future backlash and offers suggestions for framing conversations around corequisite models and placement reform so as to generate meaningful, good-faith discussion while minimizing reactionary attempts to return to inequitable placement and curricular practices.

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“The reason why I’m so strongly in favor of AB 705 [is] because it truly symbolizes and hallmarks not just equality but equity in higher education.”

—Alexander Walker-Griffin, former student representative on the California Board of Governors

Over the last several years, higher education institutions nationwide have engaged in campaigns to reform remedial education. In most cases, such efforts center on reworking placement and implementing corequisite support. These reforms are driven by an ever-expanding body of research demonstrating that corequisite remediation benefits completion in both math and English for students of color by several fold, greatly helping to reduce the equity gaps we know exist in traditional, multiple-course remedial sequences (Public Policy Institute of California). Alexander Walker-Griffin and other young students of color like him stand to benefit the most from reforms legislated by California Assembly Bill 705 (AB 705), and student advocacy organizations like Students Making a Change have embraced AB

705 as a transformative opportunity for Black and Brown students (Students Making a Change). However, this growing body of evidence has not stopped reform critics from decrying institutional and curricular change. Rather, the tectonic pressure of legislative changes like AB 705 has increased the shrill of those critics.

Signed into law in October of 2017, AB 705 legislated changes to English, mathematics, and ESL placement and course sequences for California's community colleges. The reforms included the required use of multiple measures (high school GPA, high school coursework, etc.) in placement, the elimination of standardized skills tests as assessment mechanisms, the prohibition of placing students in remedial coursework without clear evidence that such coursework would increase success, and the more limited time frames to complete transfer-level courses—one year for English and mathematics and three years for ESL (California State). These changes were later narrowed in guidance from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) to primarily rely upon high school GPA and to prioritize access to transfer-level coursework (Hope and Stankas).

These recent legislative efforts in California mirror changes happening nationwide. Tennessee, for example, piloted corequisite remediation in the 2014-2015 academic year, and the pilot results were so compelling that they instituted full implementation the following year (Tennessee Board of Regents 1). Specifically, Tennessee demonstrated a 31% increase in writing completion with the corequisite model versus their old prerequisite model, and they closed their achievement gap (Tennessee Board of Regents 4). Tennessee's transformative results have been echoed by other states adopting similar reforms, like Georgia and Colorado. These states saw a 55% and 33% increase in completion, respectively, while also reducing the time frame from two years to one (Complete College America, "Bridge Builders").

Around the same time, Idaho was also making statewide change in their placement and course sequences, as chronicled in Heidi Estrem, Dawn Shepherd, and Lloyd Duman's "Relentless Engagement with State Educational Policy Reform: Collaborating to Change the Writing Placement Conversation." Detailing over 15 years of reform work, Estrem et al. acknowledge that placement is "an especially powerful act" (90). They demonstrate the importance of treating placement as a statewide and collaborative initiative and the potential for reform to have positive results. Putting writing faculty, administrators, student affairs representatives, registration staff, and the State Board of Education in the same conversation allowed Idaho to develop a more comprehensive placement framework than one relying only on standardized test scores. The new placement framework leveraged multiple measures to determine a more accurate placement for students across the Idaho system of higher education,

at both two- and four-year institutions (Estrem et al. 96-98). For example, the Boise State University pilot placed more students into the first semester freshman composition course, and students were more successful, earning an increased .23 grade points and completing at an increased 6.7% (84.6% to 91.3%) (Estrem et al. 101).

Despite the positive results achieved in each of these cases, whenever there is significant reform in education, there will be critics. To an extent, that is healthy; we should always maintain a critical eye toward change and toward the status quo. Unfortunately, when reforms pursue equity by making systemic changes that upend established power structures, the criticism—especially by those who have benefitted from the previous structures and those who feel unheard in reform efforts—can fester into a backlash that seeks to reinstall the former hierarchy. As educational institutions proceed down the road of educational reform, we educators need to be aware of this backlash and its tactics to impede change efforts if we are to effectively ensure our institutions and systems are equitable for all our students.

### **Characterizing “Backlash”**

In their essay “Toward a Theory of Backlash: Dynamic Resistance and the Central Role of Power,” Harvard political scientists Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames lay out a framework for identifying and understanding backlash. They define a backlash as “the resistance of those in power to attempts to change the status quo . . . a reaction by a group declining in a felt sense of power” (625). Within this general framework for understanding power lies a more specific subtype that plays an important role in backlash theory: the concept of “coercive power.” Mansbridge and Shames define coercive power as a particular type of social power identifiable when parties in a particular situation have competing interests, stating that it exists in two forms: “the threat of sanction and the use of force” (624). The authors take great pains to point out that “many, if not most, forms of force are not violent,” and include “social norms that work in the interests of some and the disadvantage of others” (625). Thus, as we consider the possibility of backlash in our current setting, it is critical that while coercive power can have a sinister look to it—Mansbridge and Shames point to “assassination, rape, beatings, lynchings, and other forms of violence”—it often takes more subtle, less obvious forms, including “ridicule, condemnation, ostracism, censure” etc. (626). Any time a powerful actor or group feels their own capacity to exert power diminish and responds with either threat or force in an attempt to regain that power, this can be understood as a backlash.

Mansbridge and Shames point out that a strong backlash seems to occur most often when opponents of change see reformers as moving too quickly,

going further than appropriate, or lacking interest in their concerns (628). They also suggest that while backlashes are always ultimately about responding to a change that threatens power, the amount of power in question need not be particularly high (Mansbridge and Shames 630). Finally, Mansbridge and Shames suggest that backlash is often combined with a strong and sincere sense that the change is simply morally or ethically wrong, which presents additional challenges. They claim that “it is not easy in practice to distinguish between wanting to right a perceived wrong and wanting to return to a situation where one had greater capacity to turn one’s preferences or interests into outcomes” (Mansbridge and Shames 632). Ultimately, though, a backlash is present when coercive power is used to attempt to regain power lost through change.

Moreover, in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander argues that this resistant force—in our case those that support traditional remedial and placement structures—will work to find a way to reinstate its system of control, even if in a new and different way. She describes this effort as a pattern of backlash:

Following the collapse of each system of control, there has been a period of confusion—transition—in which those who are most committed to racial hierarchy search for new means to achieve their goals within the rules of the game as currently defined. It is during this period of uncertainty that the backlash intensifies and a new form of racialized social control begins to take hold. The adoption of the new system of control is never inevitable, but to date it has never been avoided. (Alexander 21-22)

While Alexander is referring to the ways in which society, culture, and the law have evolved to continue to segregate and subjugate people of color since slavery, the principle still applies here, for placement measures and assessments tests have been, in effect, a racial system of control used to segregate and subjugate students of color within the academy by deciding who gets access to what and when. We do not argue that instructors, counselors, administrators, and staff members have explicitly subscribed to “racialized social control” (Alexander 21-22); in fact, most would deny such claims, abhor such a system, and rightly point to their consistent efforts at teaching and supporting a diverse student body. Nevertheless, the system itself, as we argue below, needs only implicit support to continue to replicate inequity—and in fact, a vocal backlash from stakeholders at each of those levels is already attempting to do so.

In order to distinguish between legitimate, good-faith critique and attempts to wield coercive power to reassert the *status quo ante*, we will first

explore the history of reform in California before engaging with exemplars of each kind of backlash.

### **A Brief, Recent History of Reform in California**

AB 705 is not the first time that the California Community Colleges (CCC) have endeavored to reform writing placement and course sequences, particularly for students of color. In the late 1980s students at Fullerton College, supported by the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), claimed that placement tests were inequitable and prevented minoritized students from accessing a college education. In fact, David Reyes from the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1988 that “At issue is whether the college is using the exams to exclude students from college-level courses that are transferable to four-year institutions and restrict them instead to remedial classes, attorneys for the plaintiffs said. They added that they believe the policies under attack at the Fullerton campus also are in effect at other California community colleges, each of which does its own testing.” This lawsuit was settled out of court, and in 1991 CCC “agreed to halt over-reliance on assessment tests in placing students and pay more attention to interviews, high school transcripts and other achievement records” (“Latinos Settle Dispute”). The settlement yielded changes to Title 5 regulations regarding placement and prerequisites that were intended to ensure more equitable access for all students.

Unfortunately, the reforms of the last thirty years did not produce the long-term change intended. In fact, over these intervening years placement policy regressed and remedial education remained a hurdle for students seeking higher education, at least in California community colleges. Ironically, the 1988 lawsuit summary could easily have been transplanted into a 2017 argument for AB 705. Despite lawsuits and regulatory changes, this regression is a testament to the enduring power of systems to reassert control and ideologies about students and their preparation, as Alexander noted.

This shift is evident in our local writing placement procedures at College of the Sequoias (COS). In February 1993—likely in response to updated Title 5 regulations that followed the 1991 settlement—placements were decided by multiple measures: reading test scores, grammar test scores, high school GPA, and the grade of the last English course taken. These four measures were compiled into a composite score that determined writing and reading placement (Keen 2-3). According to the document, this was supposed to be in effect until March 2006, but regression began earlier than that: effective March 2002, COS reverted to predominantly test-based scores, and in February 2003 raised the cut scores, limiting access even further for college-level course work

(Keen 3-4). A little more than 10 years after the MALDEF lawsuit, COS was back to the same problem: relying primarily on assessment tests.

While this is our own local data, we suspect this trend was echoed by other community colleges across the state. In fact, it is this regressive trend that ultimately led to the reforms legislated by AB 705 (though measured at the end via significantly lower throughput rates for students placed into remedial sequences, particularly students of color) (Hern and Snell; Henson and Hern).

AB 705 was the culmination of a thorough, exhaustive process examining the mechanisms by which community colleges in California placed students into transfer-level classes. A major conclusion of that process was that, in sum, “standardized assessment skills tests are not well-suited to accurately assess California’s community college students” (Oakley). Nevertheless, the majority of critiques of AB 705 from individual educators take as an irrefutable premise that placement tests accurately identify so-called “underprepared” students. Thus, before we engage with those individual critiques, we should examine the history and data that drove the CCCCO to firmly reject skills tests as a mechanism for student placement and what initial data show about the impact of those reforms.

In 2013, the Chancellor’s Office commissioned the Common Assessment Initiative (CAI). As outlined above, the Chancellor’s Office was well aware that existing placement mechanisms were both inequitable and unreliable. The CAI included two major efforts: CCCAssess, which attempted to develop a skills-based assessment test that would accurately, fairly, and equitably place students, and the Multiple Measures Assessment Project (MMAP), which sought to develop metrics for incorporating multiple measures into placement in conjunction with the CAI’s proposed test. By 2017, the Chancellor’s Office decided to terminate the CCCAssess project as an impossibility, noting (among other reasons) that the project had been unable to meet external validation requirements, and observing that standardized assessment skills tests tend to yield “inappropriately low placement recommendations” (Oakley). The MMAP, on the other hand, analyzed a population of 245,020 students across a thirteen-year period (1992–2015), covering the full breadth of the CCC system (Bahr et al. 187). The MMAP’s findings concluded that “cumulative high school GPA is the most consistently useful predictor of performance across levels of math and English coursework” (Bahr et al. 201), and outlined a set of placement guidelines which projected success rates above 75% for the top recommended GPA band in both Math and English (Hope and Stankas 6-7).

It is in the wake of these thirty years of reform that AB 705 was implemented. The clear implication of this history is that the idea that students are “underprepared” arises from an overreliance on standardized assessment tests that are unreliable, inaccurate, and predisposed to underplacing students. The

reality revealed by the MMAP data, however, is that the vast majority of incoming college students are already prepared to succeed in college-level courses. Nevertheless, the disproven belief that placement tests identify “underprepared” students remains a central premise of backlash efforts.

### **Backlash Against AB 705**

While the MMAP data was a projection, we already have initial data confirming these numbers (Public Policy Institute of California; Henson). As California community colleges conclude our first full year of AB 705 implementation, the impact of the changes in placement procedures—at COS, at least—are difficult to characterize as anything other than a complete success. In fact, since Fall 2015, we have seen an approximately 10% increase in success rates in college-level English (from 58% to 68%), and our first semester of post-AB 705 data sees those numbers holding steady at 67% for courses without corequisite support. Meanwhile, those changes have meant that nearly 800 more students were allowed to take, and pass, college-level English in Fall 2019 compared to Fall 2018 (College of the Sequoias). Moreover, these changes had a tremendous impact on equity. The overall direct placement rate into first-year composition effectively doubled (from 41% to 81%) after AB 705 implementation, but the equity gaps among student populations shrunk significantly. The gap between rates of placement into first year composition between white and Hispanic students decreased from 20% to 10% from Fall 2018 to Fall 2019, while the gap between white and African-American students closed from 21% to only 1% in the same period (“Placement”). The research is clear that standardized skills-based cognitive placement tests are inaccurate, invalid, and inequitable; that those students who have heretofore been deemed “underprepared” are in large majority ready to succeed in college-level classes; and that initial data show that such students granted access to college-level classes do succeed at approximately the same rate as under the old, more restrictive mechanisms of placement.

These facts are crucial background to examining the backlash to reform, and so they are worth re-emphasizing before we move forward. Even though reform was long in the making and has demonstrated powerful results, systems are reluctant to relinquish the power of placing students, particularly students of color, in remedial writing sequences. Thus, we have already begun to see backlash develop. This backlash adheres to the patterns Mansbridge and Shames observe in how agents of backlash employ coercive power. Backlash at the level of institutions has relied on rhetoric critiquing reformers for moving too quickly, while individual voices of backlash have attempted to take a stand of moral certainty, asserting that reforms deny essential realities—each form of criticism following its own formulaic logic.

### *Institutional Critiques of Hasty Action*

Once AB 705 became law, backlash very rapidly took root in the form of institutional critiques of hasty action by lawmakers and the CCCCCO. By the fall of 2018, the statewide academic senate had written and was circulating a motion titled “Improving Participatory Governance with the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges.” While the motion does not specifically mention AB 705, placement reform, or remediation as sites of conflict, it clearly describes the relationship between the statewide senate and the Chancellor as adversarial, unproductive, and dismissive of the role the Senate is meant to play in the development and implementation of policy changes (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges).

When this motion did not pass, a more aggressive and forceful version appeared for our local senate’s consideration. This version considerably amplified the claim that our chancellor had acted inappropriately and unilaterally, although the specifics of these accusations were again vague (Spencer). What is clear in both resolutions, and in conversations with our colleagues around campus, is that faculty felt that the changes were happening too fast, and that they were inadequately involved and represented in the process.

The entire purpose of these documents, it seems, was to express, publicly and loudly, some faculty’s displeasure—not with the reforms themselves, but with the Chancellor, the process, and the perceived reduction of faculty roles. In other words, these motions served as a mechanism by which a group—one that had previously held authority over placement, course sequences, and curriculum design—used their coercive power to censure the person and office they perceived as having led the charge on reform. Fortunately, these motions did not succeed, and ultimately, as preparations for the legally-mandated changes began to be made, they faded into the background.

### *Individual Critiques of Abdication*

While critiques of these reforms come from many voices, the core syllogism driving this resistance is based on three pillars of coercive power: first, the *status quo ante* assumption that students traditionally placed into remedial classes are “underprepared” for college-level work; second, that allowing such students access to college-level work will result in a catastrophic lowering of course-level success rates; and third, that any success among those ostensibly “underprepared” students constitutes a lowering of standards and an abdication of our duty toward academic integrity. While this syllogism can be found in many spaces, we will examine three articles employing it as a coercive mechanism to reassert the preexisting racist hegemony of placement tests and remedial classes.

This logic is most clearly laid out in Merced Community College philosophy professor Keith Law's February 2018 opinion piece for the *Merced Sun-Star*, "How California's Democratic Leaders are Destroying our Community Colleges." Law argues that rather than representing true and useful reform, the changes mandated by AB 705 would, unavoidably, result in there being "little difference between a community college degree and one from a for-profit diploma mill." In one paragraph, Law asserts the primacy and accuracy of standardized placement testing; from that premise, he augurs the potential consequences of allowing such "underprepared" students access to college-level work:

Now, students can bypass remedial courses based on high school transcripts. The problem is they didn't test well because they graduated from high school being nearly illiterate. They register for college courses though they can't read a textbook or write a proper paragraph. This means they either fail, or teachers will dumb down classes so they can pass. (Law, "How")

In sum: students who didn't do well on placement tests are "underprepared;" if those students are given access to college-level work, they will fail; if they do not fail, it is only because standards have been lowered.

In a December 2019 article for the California Part-Time Faculty Association, Law describes the elimination of placement tests as "one recent example of the lowering of expectations in higher education" (Law, "Soft Bigotry"). Here, Law demonstrates the first, essential premise of reform critics taking this tack: that students who would historically have been placed in remedial classes are, in their language, "underprepared" to succeed in college-level courses. As we have seen, substantial research disproves that assumption, but it is nevertheless core to the argument against reforms like AB 705.

Law is hardly the only voice arguing from this premise. In October 2017, Yuba Community College English professor John Almy penned an essay titled "The Fast Lane to Nowhere" for *Inside Higher Ed*. Almy characterizes reforms like AB 705 as the work of "federal and state policy makers, college and university administrators, and some well-intentioned instructors," all of whom are "ignoring low placement scores" in pursuit of their agenda (Almy). "The root of so many of our problems," Almy argues, is that "we have already promoted so many students at all levels who don't know the material that we are drowning in a sea of bogus diplomas and degrees." Almy goes on to cite as evidence for this problem low success rates on the National Association of Educational Progress's reading test, as well as "nationwide college entrance exams." Almy laments, "How do we justify passing such ill-prepared students?"

It is only through skills-based placement tests, Almy implies, that students may “demonstrate that they have attained a solid educational foundation.” In fact, at no point does he provide any metric for “underpreparedness” that does not rely on a standardized skills-based cognitive assessment.

Here, Almy models the “soft repression” of ridicule: he declares that the instructors working to further the reforms are “well-intentioned,” a back-handed compliment reserved for those passionate but misinformed people whose intention is coupled with failure (Feree, as cited in Mansfield and Shames 629). In so saying, Almy minimizes and ridicules those faculty who have worked towards change, even before those changes have really and truly taken hold. Moreover, the hegemonic intent of this rhetoric becomes clear in Almy’s subsequent characterization of “underprepared” students: “right now we are squandering hundreds of millions of taxpayers’ dollars on people who do not have the wherewithal to do the work.” He characterizes those students who were underplaced by tests—a group which, recall, included hugely disproportionate numbers of economically disadvantaged students and students of color—as “draining our valuable resources” when they should rather “leave and find something better suited for them” (Almy).

It is difficult to read the rhetoric of “underprepared” students as anything other than an attempt to reassert the preexisting social and racial hierarchy by glorifying the mechanism—standardized skills tests—which reinforced it. Knowing, as we do, that placement tests are terrible at predicting success in college coursework (Estrem et al. 111), but extremely efficient at dividing and privileging incoming students along racial lines (Complete College America, “Remedial Enrollment”), any adherence to the divisions created by those tests is, wittingly or otherwise, an act of white supremacy.

The second component of the anti-reform syllogism is that if these “underprepared” students are allowed access to college-level work, they will simply fail. Proceeding from the false premise that placement tests were accurately distinguishing between “prepared” and “underprepared” students, Law asserts that students will “fail in droves” if colleges do not “dumb classes down” (“Soft Bigotry”). These students, he claims, “can’t solve basic math problems, read a textbook, or write a proper paragraph,” because “they graduated from our high schools without having college entrance competency in math or English” (Law, “Soft Bigotry”). Thus, Law argues, the only way these students might succeed is by a widespread lowering of standards. This is the third component of the syllogism of reform critique.

Law concludes his op-ed for the *Sun-Star* by arguing that ultimately, terms like student success, equity, and access are buzzwords deployed by Democrats in order to dumb down and destroy the California community college system, and that if allowed to continue, these changes will render degrees from our

colleges useless and meaningless to transfer institutions and employers alike (Law, “How”). Here we see yet another component of backlash in action: the threat. While in this article Law upholds politicians as the responsible party for these changes, he claims that ultimately, it will be teachers who will have to make the choice between lowering their standards or failing “underprepared” students. If the double-speaking Democrats persist in their foolishness, he concludes, faculty will have no other options but to water down degrees or punish “underprepared” students (Law, “How”).

In contrast with Almy’s more explicitly hegemonic characterization of “underprepared” students, Law wields another form of academic backlash: co-opting positionality. Where censure, ridicule, and threat do not prevail, he seeks to persuade the unconvinced that resisting reforms is in the best interest of students. For Law, instead of reforms granting students access, they “rob” them of hard work. Instead of reforms having high expectations for students, they lower standards and expectations. Instead of reforms being liberating and equitable, they are the actual “bigotry” we should resist (Law, “Soft Bigotry”). Law suggests that his is the progressive, equity-minded position. Unlike Almy, Law acknowledges that “completion rates as measured by college transfers, diplomas, and certificates have been historically low for black and Latino students,” but argues that this is the result of a failure of the public education system, which has granted students diplomas based on lowered standards rather than holding them back—although he provides no evidence that this is true beyond his own classroom experience (Law, “Soft Bigotry”). Law connects this observation with a phrase coined in 1999 by George W. Bush: “the soft bigotry of low expectations” (qtd. in “Soft Bigotry”). Law claims that rather than turn the tide of inequity, placement and remediation reforms have already and will continue to make these issues worse, as “masses of relatively illiterate people . . . possess college diplomas that give a false impression”—not only denying our students’ ability to succeed in college, but also laying groundwork for white supremacists to reject the credentials of graduates of color (“Soft Bigotry”). Throughout this article, Law contrasts the reformers against the example of Jaime Escalante, the subject of 1988’s *Stand and Deliver*, who was able to help his Latinx students succeed in math simply through “hard work” (“Soft Bigotry”). This new system, he argues, “[makes] life easier for teachers and students alike,” but ultimately robs them of the opportunity to work hard and learn (“Soft Bigotry”).

Law alludes to *Stand and Deliver* as a paean to the hard-working educator who believes in his students’ capacity, and we certainly celebrate Escalante’s faith and diligence. In this context, though, *Stand and Deliver* showcases the danger of this rhetorical essentialism. We see it prominently in the film’s portrayal of the Educational Testing Service, which sees Escalante’s students’

success on the AP Calculus exam and responds predictably: if these students are succeeding, they must be cheating. This is precisely the rhetorical move employed by reform skeptics when they assert that increased success (particularly by students of color) can only mean failing standards. This lack of faith in the ability of students of color to succeed is portrayed as villainous in *Stand and Deliver*, but it is also the centerpiece of any declamation of lapsing standards in our current context.

Having examined the placement and completion data, however, we can see that these arguments do not engage in good faith with the evidence behind the reforms. In this way, they reveal themselves as an attempt at coercive persuasion, attacking those that seek reform and the reforms themselves as the real villain (Mansbridge and Shames 631). This tripartite syllogism is not new, by any means, but in our current context, it is likely to gain additional rhetorical force as a means of backlash specifically against corequisite support courses.

### *The Next Front: Corequisite Support*

Given the shape our remediation reforms in California have taken, we can predict the next site at which backlash will likely take root: the corequisite support model. Furthermore, our initial, preliminary data collection efforts at COS have already seen some conversations coalescing around what may be perceived as a “failure” in the corequisite model to support those students who would previously have been categorized as “underprepared.” We present our own data here not as representative or generalizable, but as an example of how backlash might take shape, and why it might focus on corequisite support.

The three coercive mechanisms we have already examined—our students are not ready, our course-level success rates will go down, and the only way they will go up is if we decrease standards—are already commonplaces of reform skeptics, but we suspect that these mechanisms will find unique purchase in the conversation around corequisite support models and will anchor the backlash in that debate.

First, critics will find it easy to categorize students in corequisite support courses as “underprepared.” As we have seen, the idea that test-reliant placement mechanisms accurately distinguish between “prepared” and “underprepared” students is deeply flawed, and more often than not, “underprepared” is used as a dogwhistle to essentialize the reasons that some groups of students—often and especially students of color—do not have the same levels of success as others, thus effectively importing the Southern Strategy into composition studies. While the perspective of those lamenting the loss of standards relies on the purity and perfection of testing as a means of divining “preparedness,” the fact that there are still placement mechanisms at play under AB 705 makes it easy for reactionaries to target students placed into corequisite support as

“underprepared.” The same rhetoric that once said “These students can’t even pass a basic placement test” will likely reframe itself to use the new metrics of AB 705: “These students couldn’t even pass high school algebra,” “These students barely had a C average in high school,” “I don’t even know if these students have ever taken an English class,” *ad nauseum et infinitum*. Insofar as there are different levels of placement, critics of reform might say that AB 705 works for “college ready” students, but that “underprepared” students are another thing entirely—never noticing or mentioning that, at least at COS, the number of “college ready” students increased by nearly a thousand students who would have been considered “underprepared” just a year before (College of the Sequoias).

Second, critics’ emphasis on course-level success rates will make it very easy to target corequisite support courses, which will almost certainly have lower success rates than courses without support. As mentioned above, our success rates for courses without support at COS remained very consistent, from 68% in Fall 2018 to 67% in Fall 2019. In conversation with colleagues, though, we have already heard some anxiety about the 46% course-level success rate for classes with corequisite support (College of the Sequoias). 46% feels, and is, very low. As a result, it is again relatively easy pickings for critics: “obviously, these students just aren’t ready.” Of course, use of course-level success as a metric here overlooks two issues fundamental to these systemic changes. For one, the tremendously broad and thorough MMAP studies that led to AB 705 predicted lower course-level success rates. In English, the two GPA ranges that might result in placement into corequisite support had projected success rates of 57.7% for students with high school GPAs between 2.0 and 2.59 and 42.6% for students with high school GPAs below 2.0 (Hope and Stankas 6). Our 46% success rate is in line with those projections. For another, and more crucially, comparing course-level success rates between courses with and without corequisite support is deeply misleading. At COS, 46% of the students who were given our lowest placement possibility completed college-level English within one semester (College of the Sequoias). By comparison, under the previous system, our course-level success rates for English 360, our lowest pre-transfer course, were on average only 55%—after which students would still need to complete another pre-transfer course, and then complete college-level English (“College of the Sequoias Program Review Dashboard: ENGL”). As a result, only about 28% of students who received our lowest possible placement completed college-level English within *six years* (“Sequoias ENGL 360 Fall 2012-Spring 2018 Cohort Data”). With that in view, a 46% single-term course-level success rate for college-level English with corequisite support is an undeniable success.

Third and finally, corequisite support courses will be a target of backlash because they can easily be manipulated into the rhetoric of “compassionate passes,” to borrow a term from Almy. Backlash rhetoric proceeds from the premise that increased success means lapsing standards, which means that corequisite support courses will likely become the site at which a certain tautological essentialism plays itself out. Because of the essentialist assumption that some students are not prepared to succeed at college-level work, any success in a class designated for “underprepared” students must be characterized as the result of lowered expectations. The alternative would be to accept, as the research suggests, that traditional models of preparedness are deeply flawed, based on false assumptions, and derived from invalid instruments, and that we should instead be looking at other metrics to predict success. And, more painfully, it would mean that reform critics face the demoralizing reality that these students were never “underprepared,” but that the systems we have constructed have held them back.

To say it more simply, corequisite support courses will be the site of the strongest backlash because the students in those classes can most easily be forced to conform to pre-existing models of “underpreparedness,” allowing reactionaries to celebrate those students’ failures as proof that the reforms are wrong, and to lament those students’ successes as evidence of dereliction in academic gatekeeping.

### **Toward a Counterreactionary Rhetoric of Success**

Thus, we should expect the backlash to attempt to centralize student “underpreparedness,” course-level success rates, and lapsing standards, especially in conversations surrounding corequisite support. We must resist the impulse to frame the debate in these terms, as these very frameworks established the systemic injustice that these reforms attempt to overturn. Talking about course-level success rates is a familiar crutch, but it allows us to overlook the long course sequences and terrible student outcomes that have kept so many students from success. As Tom Fox reminds us in *Defending Access*, “the academy is no island of tolerance; it shares our culture’s fear of change and difference. We need forceful, thoughtful, vigilant, and prepared responses to these challenges” (113). It is in the spirit of this challenge that we turn now from identifying and predicting backlash to responding to it.

To combat this reaction, we suggest the following:

1. In any conversation about success data and corequisite courses, we should insist on contextualizing the new data. It is counterintuitive, but nevertheless true, that a lower success rate in a college-level course with corequisite support is still likely better than higher

success rates across multiple courses in sequence. Ask colleagues to think about “success” in terms of throughput, and point to the number of students who were able to succeed in college-level English with support in one semester as compared to the number of students who were able to succeed in college-level English after spending a year (or more!) in remedial courses.

2. We should also welcome good-faith criticism and engagement where it exists. Although the data that drives the new placement and support models is thorough, robust, and supported by decades of scholarly work in the field of composition, it is likely that as implementation continues in California and elsewhere, we will continue to find more effective ways to teach our students. However, as we discuss new possibilities, we must resist the impulse to allow our colleagues’ anxiety to drag us back toward the systems we now know to have been inequitable and ineffective. We must ask of any good-faith criticism: is this likely to be an improvement on our current system, and how do we know? We must insist on evidence beyond “common sense” and “personal experience.” The recent data shows definitively that we have consistently overestimated our abilities to accurately assess student capacity and identify student needs, and in so doing, unwittingly upheld systems that oppressed students—particularly students of color. If we are going to address inequity in our systems, we are going to need more than gut feelings.
3. Whenever we engage in conversations about reading and writing, we should endeavor to do so with a solid foundation on what has been supported by academic research. In *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, editors Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle point out that there is a lot that literacy and composition studies have learned, but most of that information is not shared well throughout the field and across institutions (xii). Because of this lack of shared understanding, outdated and unfounded perceptions of reading and writing instruction prevail, including perceptions about student “preparedness” and their reading and writing capabilities. If we are to effectively maintain system-wide change, we should—wherever possible—work to inform our institutions and organizations about current and effective literacy practices, especially anti-racist pedagogies.
4. We should engage in consistent professional learning that helps us improve our teaching through race- and system-conscious approaches. These learning opportunities should take many forms to

allow diverse engagement from faculty, staff, and administration. Furthermore, these learning opportunities need to be explicitly cultivated and encouraged by our institutions, and all participants should be compensated for their additional commitment. If we are to develop and maintain equitable systems, our institutions need to be actively engaged in learning. Professional development is often called out in mission statements, policy documents, and categorical funding goals, but all too often the practices around professional learning are ad hoc, influenced by negative stereotypes about faculty or staff engagement, and vaguely seen as a poor investment. Instead, professional learning should be intentional, concrete, fully funded, and integrated into our institutional plans. It took a lot of professional learning and effort to effectively make the changes legislated by AB 705, and it will take more to maintain and improve these changes without succumbing to backlash.

5. Finally, we should be prepared to publicly combat backlash, especially the backlash we anticipate against corequisite support. We must “[b]e present. Relentlessly” (Estrem et al. 109). As narratives of success become available to us, and as new data shows increased access to the academic world beyond college-level English for populations long excluded by the status quo, we must tell those stories—not only to those colleagues in whom we already find support, but to those who resist, to those outside of our departments, and to the public more generally. It will be tempting, indeed, to ignore the backlash and get on with the work of teaching, but in so doing, we risk ceding important ground to a vocal minority clamoring to regain power.

As Michelle Alexander notes, it is not inevitable that another system of inequitable control will reassert itself. If we are mindful of reform backlash, particularly that which may arise around the corequisite model, we stand a strong chance of building on these reforms toward a more equitable future for our students—one that is resistant to regressive and racially unequal systems of power.

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