

Why Reform Developmental Education in the CSU?

California State University Chancellor Timothy P. White has declared that “CSU students’ chances of graduating should not be determined by their family income or their ethnicity, but by their willingness to work hard and our determination to help them achieve their goals.”

To that end, in September 2016 the California State University (CSU) launched [Graduation Initiative 2025](#), a bold plan to strengthen student success and increase degree completion. The CSU Board of Trustees endorsed new systemwide student success goals that seek to double the CSU four-year graduation rate, increase six-year graduation rates for first-time students, and significantly improve outcomes for transfer students. In addition to improving completion rates, the CSU is also committed to the elimination of equity gaps and outcome gaps between low-income students and their counterparts and underrepresented students and their counterparts.

In pursuit of these goals, the CSU has established a set of [six priorities](#) that are critical to dramatically improving student success. Foremost is improving the prior academic preparation of incoming students and rethinking how the CSU serves eligible students who arrive in need of additional academic support.

In past years, more than 25,000 eligible first-year CSU students were informed that they were not ready for college-level mathematics and/or written communication courses, including nearly 60 percent of African American and half of Hispanic first-year students. These students were required to enroll in and successfully complete developmental, also known as “remedial education,” courses before enrolling in college-level mathematics or written communication courses. This approach to developmental education has not effectively supported students’ academic needs. Only 10 percent of students assigned to developmental education courses graduate in four years. Fewer than half will earn a degree after six years.

In mathematics, approximately one-third of student enrollments in developmental education courses earned a failing grade. Some students did not complete the remedial sequence and departed the CSU with units that do not apply toward a baccalaureate degree. Among those who did complete their remediation, many passed a GE mathematics course but were not prepared for subsequent gateway courses for their desired degree.

A growing inventory of [data](#) and related scholarship on developmental education clearly indicates that requiring students to take stand-alone developmental education courses decreases persistence, extends students’ time to degree, and adds to the cost of attending college. Several studies demonstrate that there are more effective ways to serve students in need of additional academic support during their first year of college in ways that promote persistence, improve degree completion and address persistent equity gaps. For example, a [randomized controlled trial](#) conducted at a different, large, multi-campus system demonstrated that assigning students to college-level rather than developmental education courses can increase student success without comprising academic rigor.

In August 2017, the CSU Office of the Chancellor enacted systemwide policy changes that:

1. Revise the assessment protocol used to determine college readiness and course placement in the first year;
2. Strengthen the Early Start Program to offer students learning support and the opportunity to earn college credit in the summer before their first term; and
3. Remove traditional stand-alone developmental education courses.

Additional information about the recent policy changes, relevant research and briefs, and implementation support can be found on CSU Graduation Initiative 2025 Resources [website](#).