

theRPgroup

Research • Planning • Professional Development
for California Community Colleges SM

Considerations for Spring 2020 When Evaluating AB 705 – User Guide

August 2020

www.rpgroup.org

Purpose

This guide is intended to provide colleges with ideas for how to evaluate AB 705 implementation given the move to distance education starting in spring 2020 for semester schools and mid-winter term for quarter schools and may last beyond fall 2020. When analyzing throughput rates, and other outcomes, within the context of a fully-online distance education environment, it will be challenging for colleges to distinguish between the effects of AB 705 implementation and the change to a distance education environment. Further, the change to move all instruction to distance education due to the coronavirus pandemic will have an effect on the success and completion rates of spring classes, impacting throughput rates for the 2019-2020 academic year. Due to the changing landscape, we encourage institutional research, planning, and effectiveness professionals to explore four broad and overlapping areas of inquiry with an equity lens throughout to better understand the impacts of spring 2020 on their AB 705 implementation in order to tease out differences that resulted from the switch to distance education and those resulting from the implementation of AB 705. For example, if rates increase, decrease, or stay the same, there is evidence of the effect of the pandemic and the shift to a distance online learning environment on outcomes rather than mere speculation. The four areas of inquiry include: (1) comparison of course outcome rates; (2) comparison of instructional delivery methods; (3) throughput rates for English, math, and credit ESL; and (4) instructor effects.

Areas for disaggregation may include:

- Overall
- By course
- By course level (initial transfer-level, one level above initial transfer-level, etc.)
- By corequisite courses status
- By enrollment attempt (first course attempt in sequence vs. prior enrollment)
- By placement type (e.g. high school GPA, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), Guided or Self-Placement (GSP), College-Level Examination Program (CLEP), etc.)
- By student group (age, gender, ethnicity, first-time status, special student population status)
- Other areas as appropriate

Grading Anomalies: Important Context to Consider for Analyses

The distribution and long-term outcomes of students who took excused withdrawals (EW) in spring 2020 are of particular interest under the current circumstances. The EW grade is intended for students facing certain circumstances, such as a major illness, accident, or the current exceptional status due to the coronavirus (see https://bit.ly/EWRegs for more details and a complete list of excused circumstances). EW grades are unique in that they:

- Do not count towards the calculation of progress or academic probation;

- Do not affect financial aid eligibility;
- Can be requested retroactively, for example, colleges are permitted to allow students to request an EW after the student takes the final exam; and
- Do not count as an enrollment attempt or towards course repetition.

Due to these unique characteristics, an increase in EWs in spring 2020 may result in variations in success rates, as students who were already not doing well in a class may be more likely to take an EW than those who were doing well or may result in fewer Withdraw grades as they would be replaced by EW grades instead. It is also possible that a larger number of EW grades than usual in spring 2020 may depress one-year throughput calculations for cohorts of students who began their math and/or English pathway in fall 2019 as well as fall 2020. Given these considerations, success rates and throughput rates in spring 2020 may be considered atypical and at least footnoted as such in any reports or documentation (e.g., "Note: spring 2020 converted to fully-distance education instruction.").

Colleges need to explore the impact of leaving in or removing EW grades from success and throughput rates and if either allows for historical comparisons with applicable footnotes that can inform local understanding of the impact of spring 2020. However, the Chancellor's Office is advising that colleges include EW grades for throughput calculations so all students in the course are included in the cohort but students who received an EW grade would not be included in the calculation of those who successfully completed the gateway course in the term of interest. The inclusion of EW grades is not being used to penalize colleges, but to ensure the cohort includes all students who were enrolled at census in order to not artificially inflate throughput rates.

Further, caution should be used if assuming that EW grades could be acting as a proxy for what would have been unsuccessful grades in a normal, non-pandemic spring term, as we do not know how students were doing before the pandemic and how they were affected by it. Some colleges may have surveyed students around their needs during spring 2020 which may help inform local understanding of the impact of spring 2020 on student outcomes as well.

Other grading anomalies to consider resulting from the pandemic and the transition to distance education that may have an impact on throughput rates include the following:

- Withdrawal (W) rates might increase.
    - Colleges may want to know which students received a W grade in order to contact them and inform them of the availability of the EW grade.
- In Progress (IP) grades may increase when courses extend beyond the normal end of an academic term. IP grades are typically used when courses cross two consecutive terms and students' final grades will not be calculated until after the end of the first term. IP grades are also used if a course has been temporarily suspended but is expected to reconvene and complete instruction at a later date. Further, the replacement of IP grades with a grade could be delayed well into the future as colleges wait for in-person learning to resume.

- Incomplete (I) grades may increase as students are unable to complete a course in the normal term length.
    - When comparing (I) grades to historical terms, the comparison needs to be done at the same point in the term, as (I) grades largely get replaced with a letter grade at some point after the term has ended.

Comparison of Course Outcome Rates

An important element of understanding the impact of the spring 2020 shift to distance education is to look at grade distributions, retention rates, persistence rates, and success rates in prior terms. When analyzing outcomes within the context of spring 2020, it will be challenging for colleges to distinguish between the effects of AB 705 implementation and the change to a distance education environment. Understanding the impact of this shift will help colleges put students' spring 2020 throughput rates in context.

Here are some suggested lines of inquiry to better understand the effects of the pandemic and outcomes resulting from a shift to a distance education environment. All outcomes should be explored for disproportionate impacts to determine if results from any of the analyses below differ for particular student groups based on their educational goal, including race and ethnicity and high school GPA bands as required as part of title 5 compliance .

1. Compare **grade distributions** within similar groups and over time, such as **over the past five years** for math, English, and credit ESL and compare **historical spring** term letter and other grade distributions with the **spring 2020** (and additional fully-distance education instruction terms) distribution of grades.
    a. Are any letter grades given more or less frequently than in the past, with a particular focus on withdrawal (W), excused withdrawal (EW), in progress (IP), and incomplete (I) grades?
    b. Which students chose to take an EW in math, English, or credit ESL compared to the percentage of that student population taking courses in that subject area?
    c. Are there differences regarding which students did and did not take an EW in spring 2020 in relation to other letter grades by similar student groups?
2. Compare historical spring term **course outcome rates** in math, English, and credit ESL courses with the spring 2020 success rates.
3. Explore the impact of EW grades on success rates.
    a. What are the same course outcome rates with and without EW included in the denominator?
4. Explore the percentage of students who re-enroll in the same course in fall 2020.

a. What percentage of students re-enroll in the same course?

b. Which students re-enroll in the same course?

c. What is their success rate in the same course following an EW grade?

d. In comparison to students receiving other non-passing grades who repeated the course, do students who took an EW have a different success rate?

Comparison of Instructional Delivery Methods

A second line of inquiry when evaluating spring 2020 outcomes in a fully-distance education environment involves comparing distance instruction outcomes to those that might be expected for face-to-face, distance, and hybrid versions of classes in prior spring terms, for example spring 2020 compared to spring 2019. It is essential to understand the effects from everything shifting to a distance education environment with little preparation or planning. Each analysis below should explore disproportionate impacts to determine if results from the analyses differ for particular student groups, including race and ethnicity and high school GPA as required by title 5, but are not limited to only these variables.

Here are some suggested lines of inquiry for comparing instructional delivery methods:

1. Compare historical success rates, when comparisons are possible, of courses in math, English, and credit ESL that were taught in a face-to-face, distance, or hybrid format to the success rates of spring 2020 sections that were intentionally taught fully online or in a hybrid format; compare success rates as well to courses that were initially taught face-to-face and then shifted to a distance education format midway through the term.

2. Compare success rates and grade distributions, when comparisons are possible, of math, English, and credit ESL sections that were intentionally taught in a distance education format in spring 2020 or that were completed before the shift to distance education (e.g., eight-week classes) to success rates and grade distributions of full-term classes that shifted from a face-to-face to distance education environment during the spring 2020 term.

    a. Are spring 2020 success rates for courses that transitioned to distance education more similar to prior online success rates or more similar to prior face-to-face success rates?

    b. If a survey of faculty and instructional delivery methods was completed or course delivery method was included in the schedule of classes, colleges could explore whether there are differences in success rates of courses that were taught synchronously, asynchronously, or via a combination of the two methods.

3. Compare historical grade distributions and disaggregate by various student populations in spring 2020 in math, English, and credit ESL with grade distributions of spring 2020

courses taught fully online, in the case that any classes were offered in a hybrid format in spring 2020, a similar comparison could be made in the prior spring term.

a. Are any grades awarded more or less frequently in spring 2020 compared to spring 2019, including W, EW, I, and IP grades? What about when compared to fall 2019?

Distance Education: Important Context to Consider for Analyses

Success rates in online courses have historically been lower than success rates in face-to-face courses, though the gap between the two is lessening. However, students who choose to take online courses may be different from the general student population. Comparing the same student groups across a variety of outcomes will help to better understand differences between spring 20202 and prior spring terms, with a shift to distance education[1].

Important controls to explore include the following:

- High school transcript data
- Enrollment status (e.g., first-time in college students, returning students)
- First attempt of a credit course in math, English, or ESL
- Prior student experience with online coursework

Other controls to consider in consultation with faculty and academic senate include:

- Prior instructor experience with teaching online courses (in consultation with faculty
- Prior instructor training in online instruction

Throughput Rates for English, Math, and Credit ESL

Title 5 requires colleges to maximize students' throughput rates based on their education goal—the rate at which students complete a gateway course within one year. This section provides ideas on factors and variables to explore when calculating throughput rates with the inclusion of the spring 2020 term.

Important areas to explore include:

1. Compare throughput rates of cohorts pre- and post-fall 2019 for math, English, and credit ESL.

[1] The Online Education Initiative (OEI) California Virtual College (CVC) provides online course design standards to support title 5 requirements: https://cvc.edu/professional-development/online-course-design-standards/. In addition, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges has a guide for reviewing online content: https://www.asccc.org/content/title-5-and-distance-education-separate-course-review-enough.

2. Calculate throughput rates by initial course level, such as students based on their educational goal starting one level below transfer, two levels below transfer, and at transfer-level for comparison.

3. Are there differences in throughput rates by grade distributions or course modality (e.g., online, face to face, or hybrid)?

4. What are the course success rates and throughput rates when EWs are considered as non-successes (i.e., included in the denominator)? How do these success and throughput rates compare to:

    a. Spring 2020 rates excluding EWs from both numerator and denominator?

    b. Rates from previous terms?

5. In addition to calculating throughput rates within the math department, also calculate throughput rates for students who take math or quantitative reasoning classes outside the math department, such as business statistics, psychology statistics, or career technical education math.

    a. Do throughput rates increase or decrease when including these courses outside the math discipline in the analysis?

6. While not required by AB 705, it is important to explore how well students are doing in completing higher level math courses, colleges could explore if throughput rates differ for students who went on to complete a higher-level math class above statistics or precalculus?

    a. What are the declared majors of students in these courses, and does the major require a Statistics, Liberal Arts Math (SLAM) or B-STEM math course and are students starting on the appropriate track (which could impact the one-year timeframe under the law if students are not appropriately directed to the path aligned with their declared major)?

    b. For students enrolling in basic skills math or intermediate algebra, what are the one-year throughput rates?

7. Explore disproportionate impacts to determine if results from the analyses differ for particular student groups and consider focusing specifically on race and ethnicity as well as by default placement rule bands as required by title 5, though not limited to these variables.

When to Start the Clock: Important Context to Consider for Analyses

AB 705 does not explicitly define what constitutes “one year” in an academic setting. A rolling one-year window for calculation may be most beneficial. Under this definition, the throughput

rate includes a count of any gateway course completed within 365 days from the start of the first course in the sequence at the college.

For instance, students who took their first math course in the fall would have to successfully complete a transfer-level course by the summer of the next year to be counted as a success for throughput calculations. Similarly, students who start in the spring would have to successfully complete a relevant transfer-level class by the fall or winter term. The same logic applies to all other start terms, such as summer or winter[2].

One additional complication is determining when the clock starts. The clock starts with students' first attempt in a *particular* sequence (math, English, or credit ESL), instead of students' first attempt in *any* sequence. For example, calculation of the math throughput rate begins after a student's first attempt at a math class, while the first attempt in an English course starts the clock for the calculation of English throughput rates.

Instructor Effects

When analyzing success and throughput rates, additional considerations may be given to instructor effects in collaboration with faculty and/or the Academic Senate. The Research and Planning Group for California Community Colleges (RP Group) and the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) co-authored a guide that addresses the importance of exploring instructor effects when evaluating AB 705: *AB 705 Research and Analysis Ideas for Collaboration between Researchers and Faculty*.[3]

Important areas to explore in consultation with faculty and the academic senate to better understand instructor effects in light of spring 2020 include the following:

1. In consultation with faculty, examine success rate differences between spring 2020 (and future fully-distance education terms) courses whose instructors taught the class in a distance education format in prior terms and those courses whose instructors did not have previous distance education teaching experience.

    a. Did prior distance education experience better prepare instructors to help students adapt and succeed in a distance education format? For example, consider looking at the following variables: past experience teaching in a distance format, past experience teaching the same course in a distance format, and/or experience teaching the same course in a distance format in the same term type such as in the prior spring term.

---

2 https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a565796692ebefb3ec5526e/t/5b7f3afa1ae6cf162dc743c4/1535064826602/English705Guidance_CCCCO_03_22_18.pdf

3 https://rpgroup.org/Portals/0/Documents/Projects/MultipleMeasures/Publications/AB705_Faculty_IR_Collaboration_FINAL.pdf?ver=2020-01-16-073919-530

b. Did the faculty member participate in professional development in distance education or complete a distance teaching certification requirement?

c. Did the college increase technical support for faculty and/or increase the number of persons available to assist with technical issues?

d. Did the instructor use Canvas or other tools, such as Zoom, WebEx, to support learning?

2. In consultation with faculty, identify any variation in success rates for the instructor in the past, such as in-term variations. For example, if the same instructor taught two sections of the same course in the same term, what is the difference in the success rates between the two courses?

    a. In the term where instruction was delivered in a fully-distance education environment, is the difference similar, smaller or larger? This exploration can be used to determine if spring 2020 is an anomaly or outlier for the individual instructor or if it falls in line with historical patterns. However, outliers should still be studied.

Conclusion

When analyzing throughput rates that involve spring 2020 courses, it will be challenging for colleges to distinguish between the effects of AB 705 implementation and the change to a distance education environment. For example, if throughput rates are lower than expected, it could be due to choices related to AB 705 implementation (e.g., placement decisions or corequisite offerings) or it could be related to the unexpected shift to distance instruction, accompanied by disruptions to the lives of students and faculty as a result of shelter-in-place orders. A recent RP Group webinar featured a lively discussion among researchers on this topic, highlighting variables and questions to explore when evaluating and distinguishing between these different effects.

This guide can help institutional research, planning, and effectiveness offices work appropriately with faculty using the data available to derive insights that can inform discussions about student success and identify improvements moving forward. At the same time, this guide is only a starting point and is meant to provide examples and encourage inquiry and exploration to support colleges' evaluation of AB 705 and the possible impacts of a sudden and unexpected transition to distance education starting in March 2020.