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Acceleration Across California: Shorter Pathways in Developmental English and Math

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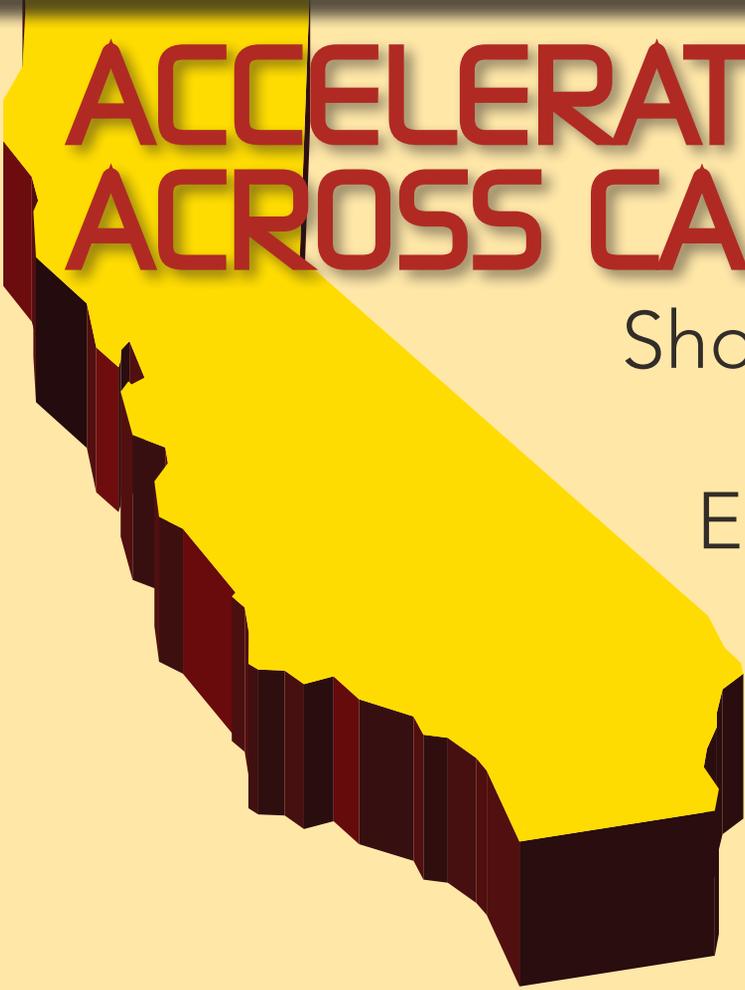
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ACCELERATION ACROSS CALIFORNIA:

Shorter Pathways in Developmental English and Math

By Katie Hern

Developmental courses in English, math, and reading have an important purpose in higher education, especially in the open-access world of community colleges. These classes—also referred to as “remedial”—are intended to give less-prepared students a chance to catch up and meet the challenges of college-level coursework.

And yet, despite these noble intentions, remedial course sequences have become the place where college dreams go to die.

Nationwide studies have shown that the more semesters of remediation a student is required to take, the less likely that student is to ever complete a college-level math or English course, never mind reach a longer-term goal such as earning a degree or transferring to a four-year college or university. In a multi-state study of 57 community colleges, the Community College Research Center found that among students who are placed three or more levels below college math, fewer than 10 percent ever go on to complete a college-level math course. Put differently, community colleges weed out more than 90 percent of these students before they get through the first gate.

This bleak reality has motivated a growing number of California community colleges to re-think their approach

to remediation. Joseph Gerda is now the vice-president of instruction at College of the Canyons, but in spring 2011 he was a mathematics instructor who was looking for a solution to what he calls the “tremendous blood loss” in remedial math. He and a group of colleagues attended a workshop organized by the California Community Colleges’ Success Network (3CSN), where they heard Myra Snell talk about a new developmental course she’d developed at Los Medanos College.

Instead of accepting the traditional curriculum as a given, Snell set out to design an alternative, accelerated pathway for students who would go on to take statistics as their college-level math requirement. The solution: Path2Stats, a

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one-semester developmental course leading to college statistics, with no pre-requisites or minimum placement score. Rather than enrolling in up to four semesters of remedial arithmetic and algebra review, Path2Stats students begin learning statistics on day one, with “just-in-time remediation” of relevant arithmetic or algebraic skills along the way (e.g. reviewing how to calculate percentages or convert ounces to grams when they need these skills to analyze data).

In developing Path2Stats, Snell wanted to address an issue math educators have quietly recognized for years: the disconnect between the traditional developmental sequence and college statistics. The vast majority of what elementary and intermediate algebra courses cover is geared toward calculus, the track students will pursue in science, technology, engineering, and math (the STEM fields) and a few other majors.

Most of the knowledge and skills picked up in these classes are never used in the study of statistics; they are not, in fact, “pre-requisite knowledge” for that course. Despite this, community college placement tests assess all students based on their recall of their previous knowledge of algebra and—regardless of the student’s intended major—force those determined to be “not college ready” into the algebra sequence.

Gerda says that seeing how Myra approached her class gave him “a sense of possibilities” he didn’t have before, and he began working with his College of the Canyons colleagues to develop their own version of the course. “This is a solution to the one of the biggest problems in the community college system. It felt like a wonderful gift.”

The College of the Canyons is one of 17 community colleges supported by the California Acceleration Project in offering over 100 sections of new accelerated math and English courses in 2011-12. The Project is an initiative of the state-funded California Community Colleges’ Success Network (3CSN), with additional private support from



the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, LearningWorks, and the Scaling Innovation project of the Community College Research Center.

In 2011–12, seven colleges offered accelerated pre-statistics courses and received coaching from Myra Snell, while I coached the ten that offered accelerated English courses. The Project will support a second round of colleges in offering accelerated pilots in 2012–13.

WHY ACCELERATION? THE BASIC MATH OF LONG SEQUENCES

The California Acceleration Project began in the summer of 2010, when Myra Snell and I published an article in *Perspectives*, the newsletter published of the California community college system’s Research and Planning Group. We argued that the high attrition rates in developmental sequences are attributable to the length of the sequences. “The problem,” we wrote, “is fundamentally structural. Attrition is high in developmental sequences, but more important, attrition is exponential. As students fall away at each level, the pool of continuing students gets smaller and smaller until only a fraction of the original group remains to complete the sequence.”

In that article—and in a series of 3CSN workshops offered throughout California in 2010-11—we demonstrated that low completion rates can be explained by the number of “exit points” in students’ path. Students starting two levels below college math or English face five exit points before completing the college-level course. They must 1) pass the first course, 2) choose to enroll in the next course, 3) pass the second course, 4) choose to enroll in the college-level course, and 5) pass that course. The specific reasons for student attrition vary, but community college students peel off at every exit point—and at higher rates when facing semester after semester of classes that earn no credit toward a longer-term goal.

Here’s a thought experiment to illustrate what is occurring: Imagine you have a cohort of students starting out two levels below college English/math. Now imagine that 80 percent of them pass each course in the sequence and that 80 percent of the successful students persist to each subsequent course (a fairly optimistic assumption for many col-

Most of the knowledge and skills picked up in [remedial] classes are never used in the study of statistics; they are not, in fact, ‘pre-requisite knowledge’ for that course.

leges). As your cohort makes its way through the exit points, the pool of continuing students shrinks: 80 percent of the original group pass the first course, and 80 percent of *those* students enroll in the second remedial course. Now you've got 80 percent *of the 80 percent*, or 64 percent of the original group. After you've made it through all five exit points, you end up with just 33 percent of the original group completing the college-level course. It's simple multiplication: .80 multiplied by itself five times = .33.

What this means, the article argues, is that to increase the number of developmental students who complete college-level gatekeeper courses in English and math, we must "step outside the prevailing assumption that multi-level sequences are the best way to support under-prepared students for the rigors of college. We will never increase completion rates for College English and Math—and therefore increase the numbers of students becoming eligible for transfer and degrees—unless we shrink the length of our sequences."

ALSO, IT WORKS

The laws of multiplication alone wouldn't be enough, though, to convince faculty to dramatically overhaul their curricula. For acceleration to spread across the state, faculty needed to believe that shorter, redesigned pathways could actually lead to student success.

On the reading and writing side, evidence from Chabot College has helped to make that case. Since the mid-1990s, Chabot has offered an accelerated, integrated reading and writing class one level below college English. Students who don't qualify for college English can choose this four-unit

course (English 102: Reading, Reasoning, and Writing – Accelerated), or a two-semester, eight-unit developmental sequence (English 101A and 101B: Reading, Reasoning, and Writing I and II). Both the accelerated course and the first non-accelerated course are open access, with no pre-requisite or minimum placement score.

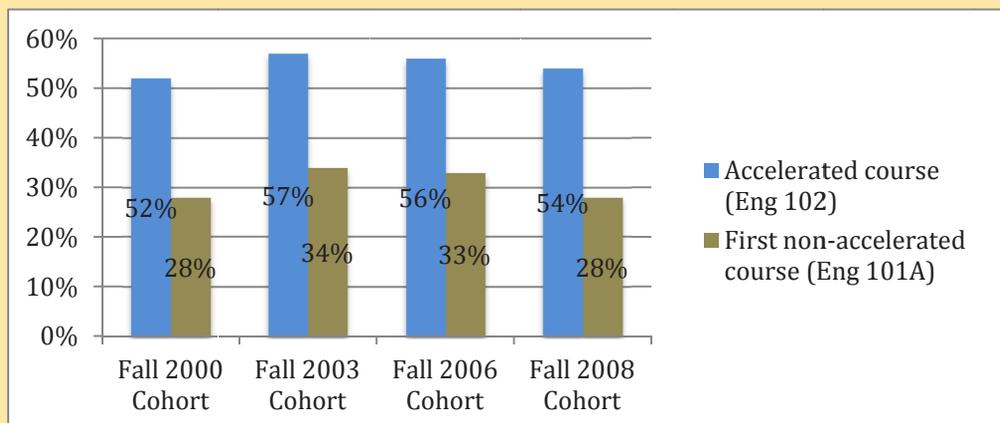
Despite the absence of a minimum placement score, students from Chabot's accelerated course complete college-level English at substantially higher rates than students who start in the longer sequence.

Chabot's developmental curriculum is based on the principle that what under-prepared students need to be ready for college English is not grammar workbooks or assignments that ask them to write a paragraph about making a tamale. They need practice in the same kinds of reading, writing, and thinking they'll be asked to do in the college-level course, with more guidance and support than needs to be given to better-prepared students.

Developmental students at Chabot read full-length books, mostly nonfiction, and they integrate ideas and information from these books in their essays. This approach guides both the accelerated and non-accelerated paths at Chabot. The difference is simply pacing and whether students have one or two semesters to demonstrate sufficient academic literacy to move into college English.

What's striking about the Chabot data is that the trend has remained so consistent over the last decade. During this time, the college significantly increased its offerings of the accelerated course. In fall 2000, Chabot offered 24 sections of English 101A (the first non-accelerated course) and just

FIGURE 1
COMPLETION OF ENGLISH 1A WITHIN 3 YEARS, CHABOT COLLEGE



N = 1,605 accelerated students; 1,996 non-accelerated students

Data from the Basic Skills Progress Tracker, Data Mart, California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. Students were followed for three years from their first enrollment in a developmental English course (English 101A or 102) and tracked for all subsequent enrollments in English. Completion rates include students who passed 1A at any point within the timeframe (first attempts and repeats).

13 sections of English 102 (the accelerated course). By fall 2007, the balance had shifted, with 25 sections of the accelerated course and 18 sections of the first non-accelerated course on offer. The number of accelerated sections has further increased since then. In fall 2011, the ratio of accelerated to non-accelerated sections was three to one.

The accelerated class now serves a majority of developmental students rather than the minority who enrolled when fewer sections were available. And yet, English 1A completion rates have barely moved. This is important to keep in mind when skeptics hypothesize that accelerated students complete college English at higher rates because of differences in student characteristics: they are presumed to be self-selected, better motivated, better skilled, etc. If that were true, the completion rates would be expected to decline as most students were channeled into the accelerated path and the population became, presumably, *less* self-selected, motivated, skilled, etc. But that has not happened.

Accelerated students face just three exit points in their path through college English instead of five. Continuing the earlier thought experiment where 80 percent of students pass and persist at each level, we end up with 51 percent of the accelerated cohort completing college English (.80x.80x.80), compared to 33 percent for the two-semester sequence (.80x.80x.80x.80x.80). It's no coincidence that these hypo-

thetical numbers are so close to the real data. The patterns are predictable.

In the math world, accelerated courses like Path2Stats haven't been around as long, but the first three student cohorts at Los Medanos College illustrate that a shorter, redesigned sequence can dramatically increase completion rates in college-level math. Students enrolling in the accelerated pre-statistics course completed college math at as much as 4.5 times the rate of students with comparable placements in the traditional sequence. "The numbers are still small," says Snell, "But they provide proof of concept. The canary has gone into the mine and come out just fine."

But what about the weakest students, those scoring at the very bottom of placement tests? The above table shows that students placing into pre-algebra or arithmetic have performed less well in the accelerated pathway than students with higher placement scores. However, these students do not have better results in the slower sequence, where they complete college math at a rate of just 9 percent.

At Chabot, we see a similar pattern among students with the bottom 20 percent of scores on the Accuplacer reading and sentence-skills tests. These students are much less likely to pass the accelerated class than students with higher scores (45 percent vs. 65 percent). However, their pass rates are equally low in the first course of the slower sequence.

FIGURE 2
LOS MEDANOS COLLEGE

Student placement in math sequence	Path2Stats % of students successfully completing college statistics in one year	Traditional Path % of students successfully completing college-level math course in three years
Transfer level	100% (3 of 3)	
Intermediate Algebra	82% (18 of 22)	33% (215 of 651)
Elementary Algebra	78% (25 of 32)	17% (102 of 598)
Pre-algebra or Arithmetic	38% (21 of 55)	9% (45 of 507)
Unknown placement	57% (4 of 7)	
Overall Completion Rate	60% (71 of 119)	21% (362 of 1756)

Path2Stats data include only students' first attempts at courses within one-year timeframe (no repeats). Data for Traditional Path include first attempts and repeats within a three-year timeframe.

The pattern holds true even for students scoring in the bottom seven percent of Accuplacer scores: their pass rates are lower than those of higher-scoring students, but they see no gains from enrolling in the slower sequence: they pass the accelerated course at a rate of 48 percent, compared to 45 percent for the first non-accelerated course. At both Chabot and Los Medanos, we can see that although low-scoring students are at higher risk than other students, they are not better served by a slower, multi-semester sequence.

SHARED PRINCIPLES FOR ACCELERATION

In addition to providing training and coaching to the pilot colleges working closely with us, the California Acceleration Project does a lot of outreach to make a wider case for acceleration. By the end of 2011, our workshops and conference presentations had reached more than 90 of California's 112 community colleges, along with community colleges from more than 30 other states. In these workshops, we talk about our campuses' experience with acceleration, and we share video footage and materials from our own classrooms. But we do not intend for colleges to adopt the Chabot and Los Medanos models off the shelf.

Instead, we're trying to provide a concrete vision of the possible. We want faculty and administrators to leave with the sense that students are capable of more than low-level courses typically ask of them, as well as with ideas for how they can help more students make it to and through college-level courses. Rather than strict models to adopt, we offer principles for curricular reform.

- *Increasing completion of college-level English and math requires shorter developmental pathways and broader access to college-level courses*

The length of developmental sequences must be significantly reduced to eliminate the many points at which students are lost by not passing or not enrolling in courses in the sequence. Colleges should also experiment with lowering the barriers blocking student access to college-level courses.

- *We must reduce our reliance on high-stakes placement tests*

Standardized placement tests are notoriously poor predictors of student performance. We need to stop using these tests to separate students into rigid "levels" and instead allow them to demonstrate their capacity in challenging, supportive, streamlined pathways.

- *Streamlined developmental curricula should reflect three key principles:*

Backwards design. Rather than requiring all students to go through a single generic English, reading, or algebra curriculum, literacy and math instruction should be aligned with

students' educational pathways. For students pursuing technical credentials, this might involve contextualized literacy and quantitative skills embedded in a vocational program. For students in academic, transfer-oriented paths, it might include pre-statistics and "practice English 1A" classes like those at Los Medanos and Chabot.

Just-in-time remediation. Current models of developmental education often break down complex skills and ways of thinking into discrete sub-skills, then deliver these skills up front to students in a linear, step-by-step curriculum. We argue instead for immersing students in challenging, authentic literacy and quantitative tasks and providing targeted reviews of foundational skills at the moment they are relevant to the higher-order work at hand.

Intentional support for affective issues. When developmental students aren't successful in their classes, the core issue is often *not their ability to handle the course content*. They may well have the capacity to write a good essay or solve a particular math problem. But when they encounter a difficult task, or receive critical feedback, or start to feel hopeless about their prospect of success, many of them will disengage, withdraw effort, and even disappear from class. Successful accelerated instruction involves classroom policies and practices that keep these dynamics from derailing students, such as intervening early with struggling students, grading policies that allow students to recover from a weak start, and building in time for one-on-one work with students.

In the California Acceleration Project, we argue that these are the necessary conditions for stopping the blood loss from our developmental arteries. If we leave our long sequences unchanged, we will never see meaningful progress in student completion. We can't address the problem simply by increasing tutoring, or adding a student success course, or linking classes through learning communities. As valuable as these interventions can be, the problems in developmental education are structural

If we leave our long sequences unchanged, we will never see meaningful progress in student completion.

A student officially placed two levels below can be advanced directly to college English, and a strong developmental student can even earn credit for the college-level course through the credit-by-examination process.

and fundamental. Our solutions must be as well. The good news: there are many, many ways to go about this.

LOCAL ADAPTATION

Across California, colleges are considering these principles and making changes they think will work locally. Not every math department is ready to implement something like Path2Stats, but many colleges have implemented “compression” models of the standard developmental math sequence, such as combining previously separate courses in elementary and intermediate algebra into one, more intensive course, thereby eliminating the redundancy and the exit point between the two classes.

Another approach to acceleration: Chaffey College offers a three-week math review to students who place into arithmetic (four levels below college-level math), then allows students to retest. The majority of students completing the review have re-tested into intermediate algebra (one level below); Chaffey then offers late-start sections of the course so that students can complete four levels in one term.

Another acceleration strategy involves “mainstreaming” students who might otherwise have been placed into developmental courses directly into college-level English and math. Sometimes these approaches provide additional support, as in the highly successful Accelerated Learning Project at the Community College of Baltimore County, where upper-level developmental English students enroll in a regular college composition class along with a simultaneous small-group support class taught by the same instructor. Tennessee’s Austin Pea State University has also seen impressive results from replacing remedial courses with mainstreaming models.

Other versions of mainstreaming qualify students for enrollment in a regular college-level course through

mechanisms other than the placement exam, such as recognition of high school coursework. Fresno City College, for example, reviews students’ high school transcripts and allows those who have passed Algebra II to enroll directly in statistics.

In San Diego’s Grossmont-Cuyamaca district, students who had passed high school courses aligned with the college curriculum were allowed to enroll in the college English course regardless of their placement scores. Brad Phillips described the program in an online article for *Good Education*:

Like many of their fellow freshmen nationally, a whopping 95 percent of high school graduates from West Hills [High School] who received As and Bs in their senior English courses did not “pass” the placement test. Yet when allowed to enroll in college-level courses instead of remedial classes, 86 percent successfully completed college-level English, lost no time in their progress, and stayed on course toward earning a degree.

Berkeley City College has developed its own unique approach to accelerating developmental English students. The college’s traditional curriculum had – depending upon how you interpreted it – either two or four levels of developmental courses. There were officially two levels, but each level had an “A” and “B” course to allow for easy repeatability by unsuccessful students. Many faculty—particularly those juggling part-time work at multiple colleges—mistakenly believed that students were required to take the A and B courses in sequence, so the two levels often became four. English 1A completion rates were predictably low.

More recently, the English department has been retooling their classes using backwards design, giving developmental students assignments similar to the kinds they’ll see in the college-level class. Then, near the end of the semester, faculty get together for a blind portfolio review to assess students’ work against a rubric of competencies required for exiting college English. When assessing the portfolios, instructors don’t know the students’ names or the course in which they were enrolled. Based upon the quality of the work, a student officially placed two levels below can be advanced directly to college English, and a strong developmental student can even earn credit for the college-level course through the credit-by-examination process.

“Our department chair Jenny Lowood has been *on fire* about this work,” says Cleavon Smith, a Berkeley City College faculty member and network coordinator for 3CSN. One of the issues spotlighted in the portfolio reviews is the arbitrariness of the line between students placed two levels below and one level below. The department responded quickly, piloting an open-access, one-

semester developmental course that leads directly to college English. The class is four units of regular class time, with an additional three hours of scheduled lab in a computer classroom, where students work with the instructor and several tutors and receive individualized guidance on their writing. The college started small, with Smith teaching the first section in spring 2012, but plans for fall 2012 include replacing most sections of the two-levels-below course with this high-support accelerated model.

Among the 17 pilot colleges participating in the California Acceleration Project, there is a lot of variation in how the principles of acceleration are being implemented. In math, all seven colleges are offering new pre-statistics classes that provide a shorter alternative to the traditional algebra sequence, but some are doing open-access courses with no pre-requisites, while others have arithmetic or pre-algebra pre-requisites. Some use fairly traditional approaches to math pedagogy, others have built their curriculum around online statistical materials, and others have adopted the project-based learning and statistical software programs used at Los Medanos.

Some colleges have started with just one or two sections per semester, whereas the College of the Canyons is offering 11 sections in spring 2011, including an extra-accelerated version that compresses the pre-stats and college-level classes into a single semester. Gerda says they anticipate expanding to 20 sections of pre-stats per semester within a year.

Of the ten colleges piloting accelerated English in the project, several are implementing a model similar to Chabot's—an open-access, one-semester course that integrates attention to reading and writing and serves as a "practice 1A" class. Solano College's cumbersome traditional curricular structure had several different levels and required lab co-requisites plus departmental finals—and students had been getting stuck and never getting out. "We were tweaking

and tweaking and tweaking an English program that was set up maybe 10 years ago," instructor Melissa Reeve explained. "I was at the point where I said, I'm not putting my energy into any more tweaking. There's something fundamentally wrong with what we're doing. If I'm going to do something, it needs more be more radical."

Los Angeles Trade Tech adapted Chabot's model for their own population by pairing it with specific vocational programs, so that students are part of a cohort. Reading and writing skills are now contextualized within students' chosen fields.

Other colleges were interested in Chabot's approach but did not feel they could implement it on their own campuses, at least not initially. Yuba College, for example, had four different levels of reading and writing classes below college English, or eight remedial courses in all. It felt like a big leap to go from this curriculum to a single, open-access, integrated course. What they did instead was to pilot integrated reading and writing courses at different levels of their existing sequence, along with a course that combined the bottom two levels (four courses, 16 units total) into a single 6-unit course.

Kyra Mello was the instructor who piloted the latter model. Using backwards design from college English, she gave students challenging readings and essay assignments, and she was impressed with the quality of the work they produced. At the end of the semester, Mello used Yuba's pre-requisite challenge process to enable many successful students to skip the next one to two levels of the sequence. She believed that *all* of these students could have handled moving directly into the college course, but she put most of them into the course one level below because she felt concerned about jeopardizing the new acceleration effort if her colleagues teaching English 1A said, "This student shouldn't have been in my class."

Teaching with an emphasis on acceleration and backwards design makes a lot more sense to Mello than traditional skill-and-drill approaches to remediation. She came to Yuba after completing the master's in composition program at Chico State University, where she says the focus was on mainstreaming under-prepared students rather than remediating them: "My professors and my mentors always taught us that students were highly capable and intelligent," Mello said.

She struggled to adapt to the long sequences in the community college world, with classes on how to write a sentence and assignments like, "Write a paragraph about your favorite room." Before officially teaching an accelerated course in fall 2011, she did her own version of acceleration: "I just expected more, and they always delivered."

Yuba's early pilots paved the way for more significant changes to the curriculum. The English department decided to eliminate the bottom two levels of developmental courses entirely, and all full-time faculty agreed to teach the new open-access course two levels below college English. Mello

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says that the faculty are planning to work as a cohort—meeting once or twice a month, teaching a common book, and organizing their classes using backwards design.

They will also share some of the affective-level interventions that Mello and her team learned in the California Acceleration Project, such as reaching out to students when they show signs of struggle, having a “fess-up” routine that holds students accountable for doing the reading, and using class time to have students collaboratively make sense of the assigned readings. Mello says the college is also moving away from offering separate reading classes, considering instead one-unit reading courses linked to challenging classes across the curriculum, such as biology.

Other approaches piloted in the California Acceleration Project: Pasadena City College created special sections of its course one level below college English, reserving ten out of the 25 seats for students who had officially placed two levels below. Fullerton College took several sections of its course two levels below college English and taught them to the outcomes of the course one level below. Students who demonstrate sufficient mastery at the end of the term can jump directly to college English through the pre-requisite challenge process; those who don’t can still advance to the class one level below.

All of these approaches illustrate how creatively faculty have implemented the principles of acceleration: shortening sequences, reducing reliance on placement tests, redesigning curricula, and giving students access to more challenging tasks. The statewide movement also illustrates the power that can be generated when colleges work together in collaborative networks like the California Community Colleges’ Success Network (3CSN). “It’s hard to do things without a community,” says Gerda, recalling the 3CSN workshop he attended where he first heard about Path2Stats. “What I saw that day was the chance to do this in a community. You didn’t have to do it alone.”

NEXT STEPS: MORE COLLEGES, MORE RESEARCH, AND A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

As a second group of colleges joins the California Acceleration Project in summer 2012, we will also be conducting research into outcomes from the first 17 colleges. 3CSN is partnering with California’s Research and Planning Group to track how many students from the accelerated pilots complete college-level gatekeeper courses in English and math, compared to students with similar placements in the traditional sequences. The Community College Research Center is also studying the initiative in its Scaling Innovation project, funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to understand what it takes to spread curricular and pedagogical innovations in developmental education.

We have worked as well with the Research and Planning Group and the state chancellor’s office to create a new co-

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hort tracking tool that enables all 112 California community colleges to see how many students complete college-level English and math from different starting points in their sequences. Yuba College, for example, can go online and see that in fall 2006, 55 students began its developmental writing sequence four levels below college composition. Five years later, at the end of spring 2011, just two of those 55 students had completed college English – 3.6 percent of the original group. This kind of data mobilizes faculty to rethink their approach to remediation, as Yuba did when it cut its developmental sequence in half.

The California Acceleration Project is also linking up with community colleges in other states to build a national acceleration movement. The Accelerated Learning Project of the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) is one of the other major players in this movement, having inspired more than 30 colleges in multiple states to implement mainstreaming models of acceleration in English.

Each June, CCBC hosts the national conference on acceleration; this year the event (June 6-8, 2012 in Baltimore) will be co-sponsored by the California Acceleration Project. Together, CCBC and the Project have made the case for acceleration to the 29 states participating in Complete College America, the American Association for Community Colleges, the National Association for Developmental Education, and the colleges participating in the multi-state Achieving the Dream initiative.

It’s a promising time for community colleges. Research from the Community College Research Center has provided a much clearer sense of the problems we face, as well as promising solutions for these problems. Buoyed by the Obama administration’s emphasis on college completion and investments by national philanthropic organizations

such as the Hewlett, Gates, and Lumina Foundations, the movement to reform developmental education is gaining momentum, and accelerated courses are being piloted around the country. Some states—Virginia and Arkansas, for example—have even made accelerated learning models the centerpieces of statewide reform efforts.

It is also a precarious time for community colleges. We know that our current multi-level remediation systems are not working and that change is imperative. But we need to ensure that we don't end up compromising our commitment to at-risk students in the process. We cannot simply cut the bottom levels of our existing se-

quences and deny access to the students placed there, as some states are contemplating in the form of a “floor” for remediation.

In this time of constrained state budgets, we must be vigilant to protect the broad-access mission of the community college and the students that developmental education was intended to serve. We need to cut levels, not students. The results from Chabot and Los Medanos make clear that the “lowest-level” students are much more capable than we have believed. It's time to unleash their capacity through challenging, supportive accelerated courses and fulfill the promise of a more level playing field for under-prepared students. ☐

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