

September 23, 2019

Re: A Proposal to Modify First Year Admission Requirements for the California State University

Dear California State University Board of Trustees,

College admissions requirements have a complex relationship with high school opportunity: On the one hand, colleges' course-taking requirements can be a lever for improving the availability of rigorous high school courses. Since high school offerings tend to migrate over time in the direction of college admissions requirements, those requirements can be a way to raise the bar for all students.

On the other hand, because that voluntary migration is — by definition — uneven, raising admissions requirements risks magnifying existing racial and socioeconomic inequities. Absent concrete strategies to address such inequities within and across schools, that predicament can't be solved with simple waivers or exemptions.

For example, it has been more than two decades since California State University began requiring applicants to take a pattern of 15 courses known as "a-g" courses. This pattern includes three math courses, and CSU as well as the University of California both recommend that students take four. Nevertheless, more than a [third of districts](#) in the state require only two math courses for graduation, according to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). At the opposite end of the spectrum, a few districts require four. Such differences put tens of thousands of students, especially Black, Latinx, and low-income students, at a disadvantage, simply by virtue of where they live.

The inherent tension between admissions expectations and high school realities explains why equity advocates (joined by my project, Just Equations) are wary of a current [proposal](#) from CSU to add a 16th course to the "a-g" pattern. The requirement could be met by a variety of math, science, or elective courses with

quantitative reasoning components. But not every high school offers that variety — and few do so at the scale needed to provide equitable opportunities.

To allay concerns that the proposal would disadvantage students at lower-resourced schools that educate mostly Black and Latinx students, CSU officials have discussed offering exemptions. Students whose schools don't offer the requisite courses would be held harmless, they say. It's possible that approach could help. But it's hard to say for sure, because the proposed policy revision they released earlier this month includes no mention of it. (CSU officials reference this idea in a document to trustees, but nowhere in the proposed revisions to state code.)

As Opportunity Institute Co-founder Christopher Edley, Jr. has noted, any such exemption would need to be carefully designed, since the very students who could be disparately impacted by the policy are unlikely to know about and seek a waiver. "This problem cannot be cured with some kind of a waiver mechanism unless we know in advance what the waiver criteria will be, and there are credible, enforceable assurances that waiver authority would be used in a non-arbitrary fashion and without any burden on students to seek that waiver," Edley told the CSU trustees in [testimony](#) prepared for an August hearing. (He was ill that day, so I read his remarks.)

Math requirements are too often used as a form of pedigree, a marker of privilege that disadvantages students who are already underrepresented in college, as described in Just Equations' 2018 report, [The Mathematics of Opportunity](#). That is why Edley's comments went on to say that the proposal should apply only to school districts where "CDE has certified that the conditions of math opportunity are equitable, as defined by the State Board of Education."

CSU officials, seemingly in response to that suggestion, have said that they hope to establish a "working partnership" with the California Department of Education to "classify schools" with limited qualifying course offerings to "automate" the process of exempting students.

But, this potentially good idea will remain just that unless CSU codifies it within the proposed policy revision. Currently, good intentions (which come and go as staff transition) are the only assurance that the promised partnership will come to pass.

Also, to genuinely address math opportunity, any classification system needs to go beyond looking at which courses are offered to how students access them. Given the history of tracking in math classes, it is essential to look within and across schools to make sure that students aren't prevented from accessing the required courses based on characteristics like race, ethnicity, and income. Advocates have been pressing the CSU system for evidence that their proposal wouldn't have that effect, but so far most of the evidence is coming from other sources.

In a [study](#) recently published by PACE (Policy Analysis for California Education), Michal Kurlaender and colleagues found that, with respect to mathematics, African American, Latinx, and low-income seniors were far less likely to enroll in advanced math courses. They also found at least 300 comprehensive high schools where zero seniors were taking advanced math. Niu Gao and Hans Johnson of PPIC pointed to [factors](#) like counseling, course placements, and high school graduation requirements as contributing to inequities in completion of the current "a-g" course pattern.

And a [study](#) by RTI International, using the same 2015 student data RTI had used to conduct the 2017 University Eligibility Study for then-Governor Jerry Brown, also found that had the proposed CSU requirements been in place in 2015, eligibility rates for African American and Latinx students would have been proportionately far lower than those for other students. (Their analysis didn't account for elective courses since it is not yet known which ones would meet the requirement.)

For an additional course requirement to enhance equity, it needs to be implemented in a way that addresses such factors. That's exactly where a "math opportunity" classification system could help — if it is codified as policy. A classification system needn't stop at identifying whom to exempt. With or without a change to admissions, it could be leveraged to support and incentivize efforts to develop engaging and rigorous quantitative reasoning sequences for high school students. That could help reduce the existing gap between high school offerings and university expectations, leading to more students being prepared for postsecondary success — exactly what CSU leaders say they want.

Given that CSU is the primary math teacher preparer in the state, the system is ideally positioned to help with that work. That's especially true if system leaders

provide support to CSU and UC faculty who are already working around the state in math readiness partnerships with high schools.

It's only fair to provide the assistance and scaffolding high schools need to ensure equitable math opportunity. Students shouldn't have to pay the cost for the gap between the idealized use of admissions requirements to boost high school preparation and the messier reality on the ground.

Sincerely,



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