

Streamlining a Multi-Semester Developmental Sequence at Illinois Central College

The Situation

In response to a state mandate requiring developmental math to be completed in a single semester, Illinois Central College saw an opportunity to streamline their multi-semester sequence. Historically, students were required to take up to three developmental math courses before reaching college algebra, resulting in multiple exit points where students could fall off track. The goal became clear: create a one-semester course that would effectively prepare students for success in college algebra while supporting engagement, confidence, and persistence.

The Process

A team of five faculty members, supported by Almy Education, spent six months redesigning the developmental math course. Rather than compress three classes into one, they identified only the content essential for success in college algebra. Topics like absolute value were removed, while foundational skills (e.g., simplifying radicals and recognizing patterns) were prioritized. The new course, Essentials of Elementary and Intermediate Algebra, focuses on mathematical thinking. Students practice identifying patterns and writing rules, building both confidence and competence. From day one, the course fosters a growth mindset and encourages students to try new approaches without fear of being wrong.

Instructional strategies include:

- Spiral problems that revisit key concepts while introducing new ones
- Randomized group work to promote collaboration
- Vertical whiteboards to support active problem-solving
- Custom MyOpenMath homework combining skill practice and conceptual thinking

The Results

The redesigned course launched in Spring 2023 with small cohorts. Early indicators are positive: students earning an A or B in the developmental course are performing well in college algebra. Moreover, the streamlined structure reduces the number of potential exit points from three to one, allowing for improved tracking and fewer drop-offs.

Beyond metrics, a cultural shift is underway. Faculty across the department are adopting research-backed instructional strategies. Classrooms are more dynamic, and students are more engaged. As one instructor noted, when students weren't forced into rigid algebra rules too early, they did "a lot more great math thinking." The course's focus on essential skills, active learning, and growth mindset has transformed developmental math into a meaningful and empowering experience.



Getting Started With Your Gateway Redesign

If your institution is exploring how to redesign gateway courses or ready to lead broader transformation, Almy Education is here to help. Our expert-led sessions prioritize faculty engagement and momentum, paving the way for collaborative redesign that drives student completion and institutional success. Whether launching your first initiative or scaling existing reforms, you'll leave with a strategic blueprint for advancing your gateway course redesign and sustaining positive impact even after our engagement ends.

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