

What Is Education For?

The End of Repeatability, the Case of AB 811, and the Ultimate Downsizing of Community College

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Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.

– John Dewey

Few instructors I know planned to teach at a community college, but once they found themselves in front of a classroom they became enamored with the experience and grateful for the opportunity to share their discipline with others. The best instructors I know embody an approach to education that goes beyond achieving degrees and getting a job. In fact, teaching gets to deeper endeavors, from self-actualization to changing the world. Changes in the community college system in the past 10 to 15 years, advocated by special interest groups and passed through legislation and Title V changes, have devalued the learning experience and reduced the community college mission to certificate, degree, and transfer to four-year institutions. Nothing is wrong with certificates, degrees, and transfer—in fact, we wouldn't be in our positions without them—but things that have intrinsic value that used to be integral to community colleges, such as basic skills and lifelong learning, have been deprioritized and defunded. This started happening in the early 2010s, with the end of repeatability, when students could enroll in activity classes multiple times for credit, thus gaining an enriching learning experience that goes beyond one semester. This past year, an attempt to bring back some semblance of repeatability emerged in the form of AB 811 (Fong), and in spite of it passing in the Legislature overwhelmingly, it faced opposition from special interest groups that resulted in Governor Gavin Newsom's veto.

The fight over the bill shows two visions of education that are not necessarily contradictory but show vastly different priorities between faculty and special interest groups. One vision, the one I and others embrace, values certificates, degrees, and transfer but sees learning as valuable in and of itself. The other vision sees learning as a means to an end—students learn the material in order to pass classes that lead to certificates, degrees, and transfer. Student success, then, becomes defined according to external accom-

plishments of the student, and the personal enrichment of the student is incidental. Education itself becomes reduced to the hoops students jump through, and instructors are reduced to placeholders of those hoops.

A Bit of History and Numbers

The end of repeatability was a process over a couple of years in the early 2010s. The 2012 report from the California Community College Task Force, Advancing Student Success in California Community Colleges, reshaped community college education. The task force, mandated in 2011 by SB 1143, was charged “to examine specified best practices and models for accomplishing student success” (SB 1143). The report contained 22 recommendations, but one that has proven to have a major impact on lifelong learning stands out:

The Board of Governors and the Legislature should ensure that state subsidization for instruction ... is used to offer those courses that support a program of study and

are informed by student education plans. *Courses that do not support programs of study and that solely serve an enrichment or recreational purpose should not be subsidized with state funds.* Rather, colleges should utilize community education and other local funding options to support such classes *if they choose to offer them* [emphases added].

In its November 2013 document “Credit Course Repeatability Guidelines,” the State Chancellor's Office further solidified its opposition to repeatability by specifying that colleges should “limit to one time the number of times a student could enroll in the same physical education, visual arts, or performing arts courses” (29). This restriction against course repeatability contributed to a decline in enrollment in California Community Colleges. While overall enrollment fell between 2010 and 2022, enrollment in Fine and Applied Arts and Physical Education classes fell at a steeper rate. **Table 1** shows the numbers of Full-Time Equivalent Students lost, and **Table 2** shows the percentage change in enrollment:

Table 1:
Full Time Equivalent Students in the Community College System, Fine and Applied Arts, and Physical Education for Selected Years.

	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	Fall 2014	Fall 2022
State of CA	570,411.15	538,749.08	514,026.69	524,920.35	524,811.20	436,310.54
Fine and Applied Arts	49,372.65	45,464.49	42,490.95	41,170.65	40,246.33	32,299.51
Physical Education	19,014.32	16,511.76	14,633.00	11,898.08	11,272.52	5,935.57

Source: California Community College Chancellor's Website

Table 2:
Percent Change in Enrollment in the Community College System, Fine and Applied Arts, and Physical Education for Selected Years.

	Fall 2010–11	Fall 2011–12	Fall 2012–13	Fall 2013–14	Fall 2010–22
State of CA	-5.55	-4.59	2.12	-0.02	-30.73
Fine and Applied Arts	-7.92	-6.54	-3.11	-2.25	-52.86
Physical Education	-13.16	-11.38	-18.69	-5.26	-220.35

Source: California Community College Chancellor's Website (calculations by author)

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Here’s another way to look at these data: Between 2010 and 2022, the State of California lost about 134,000 full-time equivalent students. Fine and Applied Arts lost about 17,000 full time equivalent students and Physical Education lost about 14,000, with a decline of 220% (that is not a typo). This means that about 13% of the loss in enrollment occurred in the areas that the new repeatability rules targeted.

Enter (and Exit) AB 811

In this context, last year Assemblymember Mike Fong introduced AB 811, which would allow “for a student to repeat, up to, but not exceeding, 2 times, a credit course in arts, humanities, kinesiology, foreign languages, and English as a second language, for which the student previously received a satisfactory grade and which the student is retaking for enrichment or skill-building purposes”¹ (California legislative information). Not only was AB 811 an opportunity to recapture some enrollment, but to enhance lifelong learning and strengthen ties to the local community. Supporters of AB 811 noted the connection in the following statements:

- » Representative Mike Fong: “AB 811 lifts the cap on the number of times a community college student may re-take a course ... they are taking a class for enrichment or professional development purposes” (Assembly Committee on Higher Education).
- » California Federation of Teachers: “Expanded repeat-

ability options provide students who are not concerned necessarily with transferring to another institution with more practice, and more engagement in their community to hone their skills and enjoy a lifelong learning benefit by the community college system” (Assembly Committee on Higher Education).

- » Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (as stated by Virginia May): “[A]llowing a student to repeat a credit course for which they have secured a satisfactory grade gives them the opportunity for additional enrichment and improved skills that can significantly augment their personal and professional abilities, leading to improved employability and emotional, mental, and physical well-being” (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges).
- » City College of San Francisco Student Chancellor Heather Brandt: “Current limits on course repeatability disproportionately harm underserved students such as students of color, system-impacted students, and students with dependents, like myself. AB 811 is the difference California community college students need—an important step towards creating accessible, equitable, and inclusive learning institutions” (California Federation of Teachers).

The Student Senate for California Community Colleges, California Community College Independents, and several community college districts also supported AB 811. The

opposition was led by, shall we say, “the usual suspects.” A “diverse coalition of higher education equity research, civil rights, social justice, and student leadership organizations,” including Education Trust-West, The Campaign for College Opportunity, and California Acceleration Project, stated in a “letter of concern” after the introduction of AB 811, “Allowing students to repeat ... a credit course for which the student previously received a satisfactory grade for enrichment and skill-building purposes could have a significant impact on those college aspirations, including time-to-degree and college affordability” (The Institute for College Access and Success). Bringing in an equity argument Education Trust-West went further, as recorded in the AB 811 hearings: “We are concerned that repetition of credit courses will lead to Black and Latinx students repeating credit courses they do not need for their degree OR not receiving the necessary academic supports to succeed on their first try” (Assembly Committee on Higher Education).

After several amendments and iterations, the bill finally went to Governor Newsom’s desk. In his veto message, Newsom wrote,

In recent years, the California Community Colleges (CCC) have been intently focused on improving student success, reducing excess course units and improving transfer rates. While one of the main goals of this bill is to help increase enrollment at the CCC, it also creates a fiscal incentive for community colleges to encourage

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repeating certain credit courses.... My administration continues to be committed to working with the Legislature, the CCC and stakeholders to find other ways to increase enrollment at the CCC. But this bill moves us away from our shared, stated goals [Newsom 2023].

Predictably, Education Trust-West responded much like Newsom’s veto message. Speaking for Education Trust-West, Rachel Ruffalo wrote, “for the roughly 80% of community college students who intend to transfer, taking additional courses unnecessarily can prolong their efforts to earn transfer credit and lead to greater attrition” (<https://west.edtrust.org/press-release/the-education-trust-west-responds-to-governor-newsoms-veto-of-ab811/>).

¹ The original version of AB 811 allowed for students to repeat a course up to five times but was reduced to twice in subsequent versions.

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The framing of the arguments prompts a fundamental question: What is education for? Some would argue that personal enrichment, lifelong learning, skill development, and promoting democracy are valuable in and of themselves and that community colleges are ideal venues for these purposes. The winning side obviously disagrees.

Lessons from AB 811

The first lesson from AB 811 is that the idea of “community” is being taken out of community colleges. In theory, the state Board of Governors is supposed to help “maintain as much local authority and control as possible” (Galizio 2021: 27). With the end of repeatability and the veto of AB 811, the state Chancellor’s office and Governor Newsom’s veto are denying use of state resources for the needs of the local populations. This was put to me more bluntly by an administrator at my own college who said to me about the ending of repeatability: “The thinking is ‘if you want to take an exercise class, join a gym.’”

Second, the veto of AB 811 shows the power of the special interest groups such as Campaign for College Opportunity and Education Trust-West. These special interest groups are heavily funded by educational philanthro-capitalists such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (among

many others). The role that foundations are playing in shaping education policy is vast, growing, and undemocratic. Those of us who work in education should have a stronger voice in shaping policy than those who do not.

Third, the end of repeatability is part of a larger picture to turn community colleges from places of exploration and self-development to “get ’em in, get ’em out,” like widgets on an assembly line. AB 705 and 1705, which effectively ended remedial education in math and English, also have a similar effect—reducing enrollment. Although many colleagues whom I respect are supporters of Guided Pathways, the argument for implementing it has been “students are taking too many classes”—classes that they end up not applying to a degree. This means that classes are hoops for students to jump through and instructors are the hoop holders.

Finally, if we downsize the community college mission to focus solely on certificates, degrees, and transfer, the logical outcome will mean the downsizing of community colleges as institutions. This means less access for our students and the loss of faculty and staff jobs throughout the system. How much can we shrink and still be viable? AB 811 was an attempt to bring students, as well as the value of lifelong learning, back to community colleges, and unfortunately it was shot down by those with other agendas. ■

MARCH IN MARCH 2024

On March 7, both faculty and students gathered in Sacramento for the March in March. With spirited chants and vibrant signs, participants marched across Tower Bridge to the California State Capitol. At the Capitol, attendees had the honor of listening to speakers including James McKeever, President of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) 1521 Faculty Guild, Assemblywoman Pilar Schiavo, Jason Newman, President of Los Rios College Federation of Teachers (LRCFT) 2279, and our very own Advocacy Manager, Anna Mathews, among others.

It was an inspiring afternoon, and we are excited to persist in our efforts, alongside our community college students, to bring community back to community colleges.

