

Initial Review of CSU's Early Start Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite numerous efforts to improve college readiness since the mid-1990s, about half of incoming freshmen to the California State University (CSU) still require remedial coursework. In 2012, CSU started a new program to improve college readiness called Early Start. This program requires incoming freshmen who do not pass CSU's placement exams to begin remediation during the summer. Chapter 430, Statutes of 2012 (AB 2497, Solorio), requires our office to report on Early Start participation, demographics, and outcomes. About 27 percent of CSU freshmen participated in the program in 2012. Because CSU did not provide data on Early Start outcomes, we were unable to evaluate whether Early Start affected the time needed to remediate or the percentage of students who became college ready within one year.

We recommend the Legislature remain focused on the broader issue of remediation rather than focusing on Early Start—a single remediation program that the state never authorized or funded. To this end, we recommend the Legislature eliminate the remaining Early Start reporting requirements and consider broader studies focused on the underlying causes of high remediation rates. Specifically, we recommend the Legislature consider: (1) the appropriateness of CSU's placement exams and cut scores, (2) whether CSU is accepting students who fall outside its eligibility pool (the top one-third of high school graduates), (3) the rigor of college preparatory coursework in California high schools and the timing of test results that inform coursework taken during the senior year, and (4) whether existing state subsidy policies encourage CSU to address high remediation rates.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, CSU began implementing its Early Start program. Early Start requires incoming freshmen at CSU who have not demonstrated college readiness in English or math to begin

remedial coursework before taking their regular coursework. Most students satisfy this requirement by enrolling in a specially designed course at a CSU campus during the summer. Chapter 430 requires

our office to report certain information about Early Start by January 1 of 2014, 2016, and 2018. This first report provides enrollment and demographic information on Early Start participants. Although Chapter 430 also requires our office to report data

on Early Start outcomes, CSU was not able to provide data on program outcomes at this time. Below, we provide background on CSU's college-readiness efforts, report initial Early Start findings, and raise issues for legislative consideration.

BACKGROUND

This section discusses the college readiness of incoming CSU freshmen, CSU's efforts to address high rates of underprepared students, and CSU's initial implementation of Early Start.

Remediation Has Been a Significant Issue at CSU

Many Freshmen Enter CSU Unprepared for College-Level Work. Under the California Master Plan for Higher Education, CSU admits students from the top one-third of high school graduates in the state. Many students entering CSU, however, are not college ready, as measured by certain test results, even though they meet CSU's admission requirements. Nearly every year since the late 1990s, at least 50 percent of freshmen have required remediation in English or math.

Remediation Can Result in Additional Costs for the State and Students. Remediation can increase costs for the state because the state pays for students to become prepared for college in high school, then pays a second time to remediate students after they enter CSU. The state provides the same amount of funding to CSU for remedial courses as it does for college-level courses (except for Early Start courses, which do not receive General Fund monies). Remediation also can increase costs for students under certain circumstances. In many cases, taking remedial classes does not change the amount a student pays in tuition for a semester because these classes are covered with their regular tuition payments. However, if remediation results in students taking

longer to graduate, they may have to pay tuition for additional semesters. Students also may pay more if they take remedial classes during the summer since these classes are not covered by their regular tuition payments.

CSU Implements Initial Remediation Policies in the 1990s

CSU Sets Goal to Reduce Remediation. In 1994, CSU Trustees expressed concern about the college readiness of incoming freshmen. In 1996, the Trustees set a goal to have 90 percent of incoming freshmen ready for college-level courses by 2007. (At that time, 43 percent and 53 percent of freshmen required remediation in English and math, respectively.)

CSU Requires Placement Tests, Sets One-Year Limit on Remediation. In 1998, CSU began requiring incoming freshmen to take the English Placement Test (EPT) and Entry Level Mathematics exam (ELM) before enrolling in college-level English or math. The CSU also began requiring students who did not demonstrate proficiency based on these tests to enroll in and complete remedial courses within one year. (Over time, the percentage of remedial students who complete remediation within one year has risen slightly—from 79 percent for entering freshmen in 1998 to 84 percent for entering freshmen in 2011.)

CSU Adopts High School Test to Measure College Readiness. In 2004, CSU implemented the Early Assessment Program (EAP) to provide a measure of college readiness to high school

students in their junior year. If junior-year students demonstrate proficiency in both English and math based on the EAP, they are deemed college ready. Students who receive a score of “conditional” or “conditionally ready” on the EAP can demonstrate proficiency by enrolling in an approved course during their senior year and earning a C grade or better. The CSU also has specially designed high school classes in English and math that allow CSU-bound students who complete the classes during their senior year of high school to place into college-level courses as CSU freshmen. If students do not demonstrate proficiency through the EAP, they are required to take the EPT and/or ELM at a CSU campus on a designated test day during their senior year. (Eighty-three percent of students who took the junior-year state assessment also took the EAP in 2013, up from 72 percent in 2006.)

Campuses Take Various Other Approaches to Remediation. During this time, CSU campuses pursued a variety of other approaches to address college readiness. At first, some CSU campuses began offering Summer Bridge, a program for low-income and first-generation college students during the summer before freshman year. Summer Bridge includes remedial classes in English or math as well as college orientation and counseling. More recently, many CSU campuses have adopted “stretch” English programs. These programs are two-semester courses taken in the fall and spring that cover remedial material at a slower pace and with extra support. The CSU campuses have also pursued other remedial strategies, including a one-week math boot camp held immediately before fall classes begin.

CSU Implements Early Start Across System in Summer 2012

Early Start Policy Inspired by Existing Summer Programs. To build on these existing remedial efforts, CSU convened a systemwide

conference on remediation in October 2008. Several presenters described existing “early start” programs (such as Summer Bridge) that addressed gaps in student preparation prior to freshman year. At the time, more than two-thirds of CSU campuses offered some kind of early start program for underprepared students. In May 2009, the CSU Board of Trustees directed the Chancellor to study existing summer remediation programs and establish a systemwide policy for early remediation. In March 2010, the Trustees adopted a policy requiring early remediation systemwide and called the new program Early Start. (Though the Legislature directed our office to analyze the results of the Early Start program, the state was not involved in the creation of Early Start.)

CSU Sets Goals for Early Start. Early Start only requires students to demonstrate that they have *started* remediation prior to the fall of their freshman year. Students are not required to *complete* remediation or even to pass into the next course in the remedial sequence. However, CSU has voiced several broad, overlapping goals for Early Start that go beyond beginning remediation earlier, including:

- Reduce the time it takes students to remediate.
- Reduce time to graduation.
- Increase degree completion.
- Reduce costs for CSU and students.

Campuses Implement Early Start in Two Phases. In the summer of 2012, the first phase of Early Start began. All admitted freshmen who were deemed “at risk” in English or “not proficient” in math based on their proficiency exam scores were required to enroll in Early Start. (At-risk refers to the bottom quarter of all test takers, whereas not proficient also includes higher scoring students

who did not pass the exam.) The second and final phase of Early Start implementation begins in the summer of 2014. In this phase, all students who are not proficient in English will have to enroll in Early Start. (A few groups of students are exempt from the Early Start requirement, including out-of-state and international students.)

Early Start Supported by Student Fee Revenue and State Lottery Funds. For Early Start courses, CSU charges students \$182 per unit, roughly the same per-unit rate it charges full-time students during a regular academic semester (assuming 15 units per semester). Early Start is primarily supported by this tuition revenue, while state lottery funds cover the cost of providing financial aid. Students with expected family contributions of less than \$5,000, as determined on their Free Application for Federal Student Aid, receive a full fee waiver. (This is the same threshold used for federal Pell Grant eligibility.) Unlike other remedial courses taken during the fall and spring terms, Early Start is not supported with state General Fund monies, according to CSU.

Campuses Implement Early Start in Various Ways

Variety of Early Start Options Available. The CSU requires campuses to offer, at a minimum, a one-unit option for satisfying the Early Start requirement in English and math. (The Maritime Academy is not required to offer Early Start programs, but its students must still fulfill the requirement at another campus.) Aside from this requirement, CSU has left it up to the campuses to develop specific Early Start programs. Early Start options at the campuses include both in-person and online courses, ranging from one to three units. Students may enroll in these courses at the campus where they will enroll in the fall or at a campus closer to where they live. Some students may satisfy the Early Start requirement by participating in

a “legacy” summer program (such as Summer Bridge) that predates Early Start. Alternatively, CSU policy allows students to fulfill Early Start by enrolling in an approved summer course at a community college, though this option has not yet been implemented.

Differing Campus Philosophies Guide Early Start Offerings in English. Early Start offerings in English at each campus are partly determined by campuses’ philosophies on remediation. In particular, English instructors at some campuses informed us that they believe remedial English should not be compressed into a shortened summer experience and that isolating reading and writing skills from the rest of students’ freshman-year curriculum reduces opportunities for cross-curricular learning. English instructors at these campuses typically offer only one-unit Early Start English courses. These one-unit courses are designed only to fulfill Early Start requirements and are not intended to remediate students fully or advance them to a higher level. Many campuses rely heavily on one-unit English classes to enable students to meet the Early Start requirement. For example, about two-thirds of the Early Start English courses offered during the summer of 2013 were one-unit classes. English instructors at other campuses, however, offer three-unit Early Start English courses, which are designed to allow students to complete remediation or advance to a higher level. A similar pedagogical divide does not exist in campuses’ approaches to math remediation.

One-Unit Early Start Math Courses Do Not Always Allow Students to Demonstrate Mastery. In Early Start math courses offered for two or three units, students typically demonstrate mastery of material by earning a passing grade in the course. Students then are able to pass out of one semester of remediation or remediate fully. In some cases, students in one-unit math courses have similar opportunities to demonstrate mastery. For

example, at one campus, students who completed a one-unit, online course were invited to campus to take exams that would enable them to pass out of one or two semesters of remedial math. Some campuses, however, did not have such clear pathways for students to demonstrate mastery after

completing a one-unit Early Start math course. For example, faculty at one campus told us that students who completed their one-unit course could theoretically retake the math proficiency exam but this exam was not offered at that campus at that time.

INITIAL EARLY START FINDINGS

This section reports enrollment and demographic data for students participating in Early Start during the summer of 2012. As noted earlier, CSU did not provide us with sufficient data to evaluate program outcomes. Figure 1 shows a list of the statutory data requirements and which data CSU was able to provide.

Enrollment in Early Start

Early Start Participation Varied by Campus. In 2012, 15,214 students (27 percent of CSU’s freshman class that year) registered for Early Start systemwide. (In that same year, 44 percent of CSU freshmen required remediation. Fewer students registered because only a subset of students needing remediation in English were required to participate in Early Start the first year.) As shown in Figure 2 (see next page), the percentage of freshmen who participated in Early Start at each campus varied significantly, from a low of 2 percent to a high of 58 percent. Much of this variation likely is due to differences in the preparedness of entering students at each of the campuses.

Most Students Met Early Start Requirement. The vast majority of

students who enrolled in Early Start fulfilled the requirement. (Campuses set different criteria for meeting the requirement but generally students have to show a good faith effort to complete the course.) Specifically, 91 percent of participants systemwide satisfied the English requirement, while 95 percent satisfied the math requirement. At most campuses, more than 90 percent of students who participated in Early Start English or math satisfied the Early Start requirement in that subject.

Demographics of Early Start Participants

Higher Percentages of Latinos, Blacks, and Financially Needy Students in Early Start. Figure 3 (see next page) reports demographic information for 2012 Early Start participants. Compared to the entire 2012 freshman class, the

Figure 1
Reporting Requirements Specified in Chapter 430

Reporting Requirement	Sufficient Data Provided by CSU?
Number of enrollees in Early Start and the number completing the program.	Yes
Demographic information on Early Start participants.	Yes
Information on how Early Start affects remediation rates compared to 2010-11.	No
Information on how Early Start affects time taken to remediate.	No
Number of Early Start enrollees (1) becoming proficient, (2) not remediating, and (3) disenrolling from CSU one year after completing the program.	No

Chapter 430, Statutes of 2012 (AB 2497, Solorio).

Figure 2
Early Start Enrollment by Campus^a

2012			
Campus	Students in Early Start	Total Freshmen	Percent of Freshman in Early Start
Bakersfield	528	1,328	40%
Channel Islands	285	756	38
Chico	459	2,714	17
Dominguez Hills	700	1,214	58
East Bay	690	1,572	44
Fresno	896	3,139	29
Fullerton	1,081	4,526	24
Humboldt	235	1,237	19
Long Beach	1,166	4,276	27
Los Angeles	1,226	2,908	42
Maritime Academy	26	198	13
Monterey Bay	329	902	36
Northridge	1,324	4,149	32
Pomona	609	3,120	20
Sacramento	1,000	3,151	32
San Bernardino	905	2,448	37
San Diego	223	4,240	5
San Francisco	1,249	3,807	33
San Jose	654	3,384	19
San Luis Obispo	72	3,635	2
San Marcos	643	1,783	36
Sonoma	527	1,749	30
Stanislaus	387	1,109	35
Totals	15,214	57,345	27%

^a Data shown reflects campus where student is enrolled for regular academic year, but a student may take Early Start at a different campus.

Early Start program had higher percentages of Latino and black students. Specifically, 57 percent of Early Start participants were Latino, compared to 41 percent of the entire freshman class, while 8 percent of Early Start students were black, compared to 5 percent of all freshmen. A lower percentage of whites and Asians were in Early Start compared to all freshmen. Additionally, a higher proportion of Early Start students, 65 percent, qualified for financial aid, compared to 51 percent of the entire freshman class.

Women in Early Start Outnumbered Men by More Than Two-to-One.

Women made up 69 percent of Early Start participants, compared to 31 percent who were men. The entire freshman class showed a gender imbalance, but not to the same extent: 57 percent of freshmen were women, compared to 43 percent who were men.

Figure 3
Comparison of Early Start Participants With All CSU Freshmen

2012		
Demographic/Category	Early Start Participants	All CSU Freshmen
Latino	57%	41%
White	15	26
Asian	14	17
Black	8	5
Other ethnicity	6	11
Female	69	57
Male	31	43
Eligible for financial aid	64	51

RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus on Remediation More Broadly, Instead of Requiring Reports on Early Start. Typically, the state focuses on setting overarching goals and priorities for CSU, while allowing the university to design and implement the specific strategies needed to accomplish these goals. This approach acknowledges that the university has more expertise in designing educational programs, as well as a governing board that is responsible for overseeing university programs. For these reasons, we recommend the Legislature eliminate the remaining Early Start reporting requirements and stay focused on the overarching policy goal of improving college readiness rather than focusing only on a single remedial program that the state never authorized or directly funded.

Explore Possible Causes of Remediation. As noted above, about half of CSU's entering freshman class requires remediation each year. Despite many efforts to address remediation over the years, the reasons why so many students entering CSU are not college ready remain unclear. The Legislature could authorize broader studies that explore the main reasons remediation rates remain so high. Specifically, we recommend the Legislature explore the following possible explanations:

- **Placement Exams.** Do CSU's placement exams, the EPT and ELM, accurately predict performance in college-level classes? Do the exams test skills and knowledge that are consistent with state priorities and essential for college success? Are the cut scores for the exams set at an appropriate level? Do the cut scores result in too many students identified as needing remediation?
- **Eligibility Standards.** Is CSU accepting the top third of California's high school graduates, consistent with the state's Master Plan for Higher Education, or is it drawing from beyond this eligibility pool, which could result in higher numbers of students requiring remediation at CSU?
- **High School Preparation.** Is current high school preparation adequate for college success? Should CSU strengthen required high school coursework, for example by requiring a fourth year of math? Why are students not becoming college ready during their senior year after taking the EAP in their junior year? Does the timing of the junior-year assessment and reporting of results need to be better aligned with senior-year course selection?
- **Financial Incentives.** Are financial incentives encouraging CSU to address high remediation rates? Should the state pay for remedial coursework at CSU at the same rate it pays for college-level courses, as is current practice during the fall and spring terms? Alternatively, should the state fund these courses at the community college credit rate or enhanced noncredit rate (to reflect the fact that remedial courses cover pre-collegiate material)? Alternatively, should the state not subsidize these courses at all, as is CSU's current practice for Early Start remedial classes taken during the summer term?

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