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Lost Transitions: *The Cost of Inter-sector Misalignment for English Learners in Community Colleges*¹

By Tatiana Melguizo, Stella Flores, David Velasquez, and Tim Carroll

INTRODUCTION. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) guarantees equal opportunity for each K-12 public school student, with special attention for disadvantaged and high-need students. One critical population is English Learners (ELs), a diverse population of students with a native language other than English who are eligible for academic support as they build proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing in English.²

Most English Learners are reclassified as English proficient well before graduating from high school based on meeting multiple district-identified proficiency standards, an important achievement on the path to college access, completion, and success in the labor market. Many former ELs also meet separate benchmarks indicating readiness for success in postsecondary English coursework. However, misalignment between the K-12 and postsecondary sectors may undermine college-ready students' academic achievements. For example, one study documented that the majority of students who met college-readiness standards in high school were nonetheless placed into developmental math upon entering community college.³ Less is known about misalignment in English, including how misalignment shapes the academic trajectories of college-ready former English Learners.

Using student records from a large urban school district and a large community college district, we evaluate the prevalence of inter-sector English misalignment – defined as the placement into developmental coursework of students who have previously met standards indicating readiness to succeed in college-level English – and investigate the relationship between college-readiness among ELs, college English course placement, and credit accumulation. We note the extent to which ELs' achievements are honored as a sequential step into postsecondary schooling and find that inter-sector English misalignment is associated with negative student outcomes.⁴

This brief summarizes results from a study focusing on English Learner classification, home language, race, and ethnicity, in California. As home to the largest population of English Learners⁵ and a center of debate over the education of multilingual students, California is a critical site for understanding the links between English Learners' K-12 and postsecondary opportunities. ELs in the state, like the rest of the nation, are concentrated in large, urban, public school districts.⁶ Former EL students disproportionately enter community colleges⁷ which have historically started most students in developmental courses.⁸ However, recent policy developments including AB 705, have sought to create a more direct pathway to college-level coursework for the majority of students. This policy brief provides some indication of the breadth of college-ready students who have the potential to benefit from these policy goals.

Results show that more than 70% of all college-ready students in our sample experience English misalignment and that former English Learners, Black and Latina/o students,

and students whose home language is Spanish experienced higher misalignment rates than their peers. Further analyses find that misalignment is negatively associated with postsecondary outcomes, with college-ready students who are placed into developmental English completing approximately five fewer transferable units on average compared to their peers who are placed directly into college-level coursework. Nonetheless, former EL students who experienced misalignment completed about six more transferable units on average than their English-only peers and similar numbers of units to their multilingual peers who were never classified as EL. Promisingly, our analysis suggests that even though EL students are more likely to experience English misalignment, and this misalignment is associated with reduced credit completion, there has been no “multiplier effect” of these two phenomena. We proceed to discuss the background and context for the study, followed by an overview of our analytical strategy and conclude with the summary of results and policy implications.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

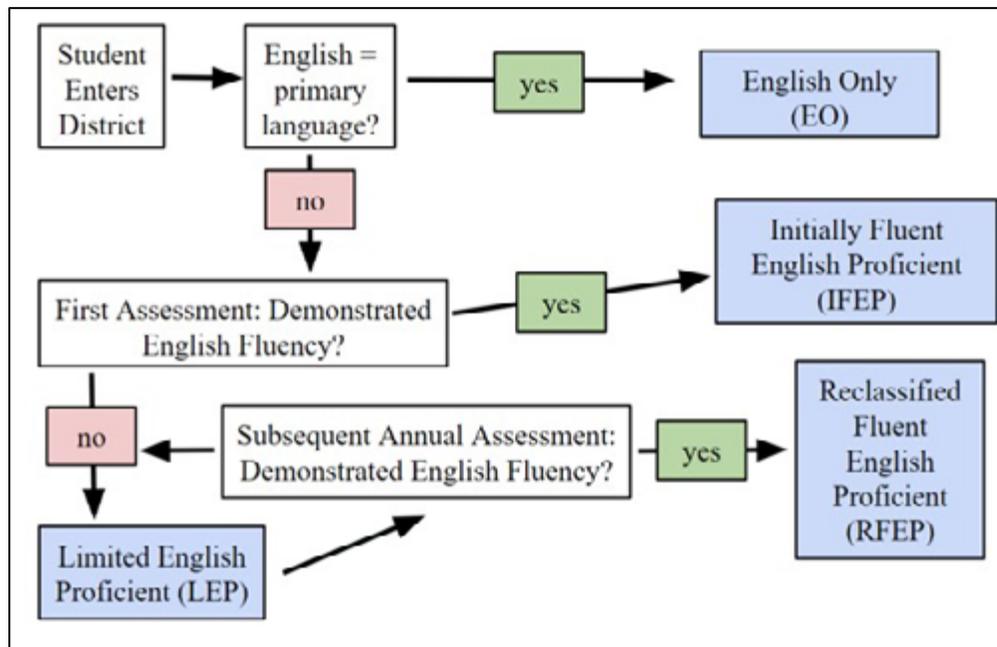
While federal policy dictates EL students’ legal rights, states have a great deal of autonomy in structuring and implementing EL-oriented policies. California is a particularly important setting for this research because it educates the largest EL population in the nation: over two million ELs accounting for almost a fifth of the State’s total public-school enrollment in 2018-19.⁹

Furthermore, most ELs first start at a community college,¹⁰ and California is home to the largest community college system in the nation, educating over two million EL students each year.¹¹ Recent California policies aim to reduce educational achievement gaps across the K-20 pipeline. The California legislature passed Assembly Bill 705 (AB 705) in 2017, which requires California Community Colleges (CCC) to move away from placing large proportions of students into developmental education and instead place most students directly into college-level coursework while using multiple measures to determine what additional academic supports, if any, are appropriate for a given student. This is a fundamental shift away from relying on standardized placement tests and placing the majority of CCC students into below-college level courses. The CCC Chancellor also directed campuses to support all students but also pay particular attention to unique student populations such as ELs.¹² This study was conducted before AB 705 was implemented and provides insight into the challenges that AB 705 aims to address, with implications for campuses to consider as they continue to adapt to the new policy environment.

A knowledge of the English Learner classification process is relevant to our analysis, as we categorize students based on their mono- or multilingualism and past EL status. Through this process (outlined below and in Figure 1), students are classified into one of four EL statuses based on their home language, initial English proficiency, and subsequent gains in proficiency:

- » Upon entering the school district, students with a home language of English or American Sign Language are designed as English Only (EO, henceforth “monolingual”).
- » Students with a home language other than English or American Sign Language take an English language assessment.
 - » Those who pass are classified Initial Fluent English Proficient (IFEP, henceforth “multilingual never ELs”) and are assigned to mainstream education without EL support services.
 - » Those who do not pass are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP, also referred to as English Learners) and receive instructional support aimed at building English proficiency.
- » ELs are reassessed annually, retaining their EL status until they meet English proficiency standards, at which time they are designated Reclassified Fluent English Proficient (RFEP, henceforth “multilingual former ELs” or “former ELs”) and participate solely in mainstream education without any EL support services.

Fig. 1: English Learner (re)classification process



Most extant work on ELs is focused in K-12, but recent research has shown significant disparities between former EL and non-EL students at various points in the educational pipeline from high school to college,¹³ and ELs often lack access to advanced English coursework in high school.¹⁴

After graduating from high school and entering the community college system, the assessment and placement process determines if students are placed into college-level or developmental coursework. While specific details vary by campus, most colleges had similar processes¹⁵ requiring students to take a placement exam (typically the College Board’s ACCUPLACER). Those who score above a threshold set by their college are eligible to enroll directly in college-level courses, while those who score below the threshold are assigned to complete one or more developmental courses before they are eligible for college-level work; developmental courses do not count toward a degree or transfer eligibility. EL students can be at further disadvantage in college placement because of overreliance on language tests and lack of adequate advising.¹⁶ Researchers have found that California community college EL students received little guidance on how to navigate the placement process and select academic pathways.¹⁷ Furthermore, language-minority students often had to take multiple courses between initial course placement and transfer-level courses.¹⁸ College students with a native language other than English express not being taken seriously, not being considered intelligent, or not being able to take part in the dominant culture due to their accent.¹⁹ These experiences highlight persisting raciolinguistic ideologies that paint students as deficient and multilingualism as a barrier to success as opposed to a cognitive advantage.²⁰

This study uses rich administrative data from both a large urban school district in California and a large community college district, with students’ demographic information, English Learner classification in high school, placement test scores, high school and community college transcripts, and community college unit (credit) attainment. Our sample includes students who – graduated from high school and enrolled in community college between 2005 and 2014 with a goal of transferring to a four-year university.²¹ The study is particularly focused on the trajectory and outcomes of former EL students (i.e. those students who were classified as RFEP as of their high school graduation) compared to multilingual students who were never classified as English Learners (i.e. IFEP) and with English speakers (i.e. EO). Students who were still classified as English Learners (i.e. Limited English Proficient) at the time of high school graduation are not included in the sample.

The study addresses three research questions:

1. How prevalent is Inter-sector English Misalignment (ISEM), defined as the placement of students who met English college readiness standards during high school into developmental English courses upon matriculation in college?
2. Are there disparities in the prevalence of ISEM by EL status (i.e., former ELs vs. multilingual students never classified as ELs vs. monolingual English speakers), by race/ethnicity, or by home language?
3. What is the relationship between experiencing Inter-sector English Misalignment (ISEM) and postsecondary credit accumulation, and how does credit accumulation differ for former ELs and non-EL students?

RESULTS

First, we identify the prevalence of misalignment in community college English course placement across three different indicators of college readiness. Next, among students who met at least one of the three college readiness indicators, we assess whether the prevalence of misalignment varies by student characteristics including former EL status, race/ethnicity, and home language.

Figure 2. Developmental English placement of college-ready students by HS college-readiness indicator

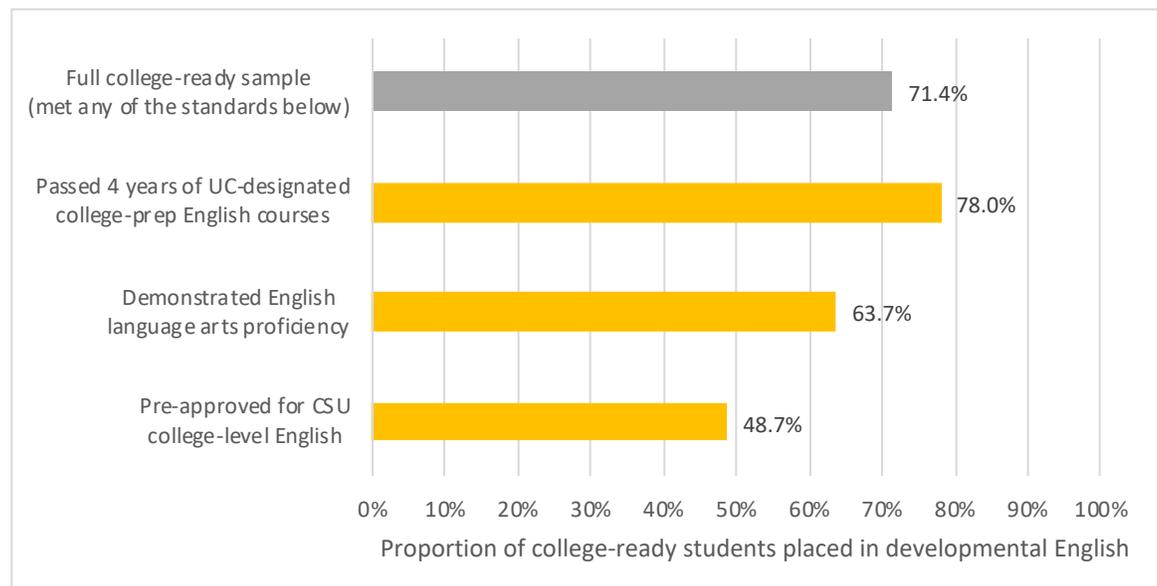


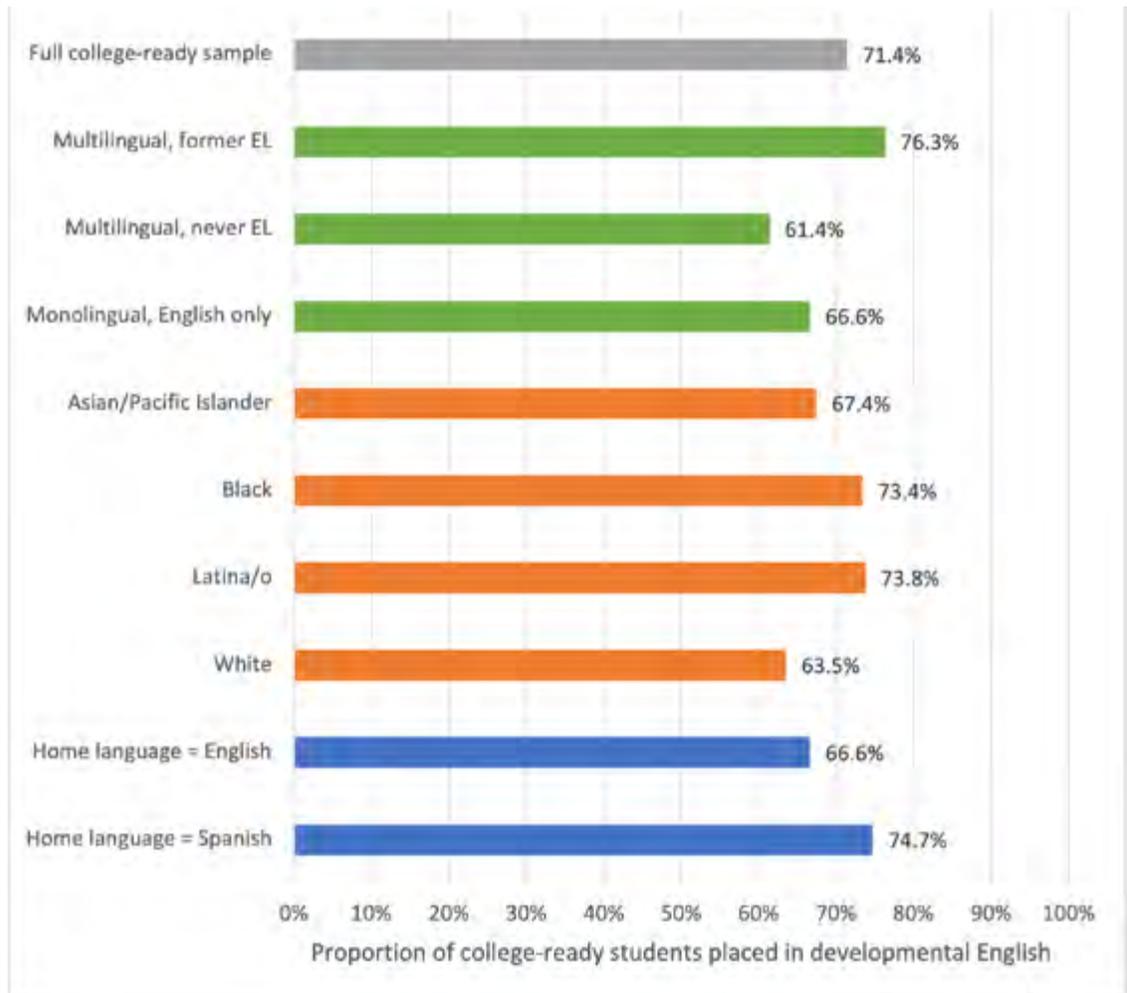
Figure 2 shows the prevalence of inter-sector English misalignment, with bars indicating placement rates for students meeting three measures of college readiness, as well as for the full college-ready sample of students who met at least one of the three indicators:

1. **Passed four years of college prep English courses:** Met A-G requirements; took and passed eight semesters of UC-designated college- better.
2. **Demonstrated English language Arts proficiency:** Scored proficient or advanced on the CST-ELA California standardized English exam
3. **Pre-approved for CSU college-level English:** Participated in the voluntary Early Assessment Program and designated as ready for college-level English at the California State University system

Over 70 percent of students who met at least one of these three standards (the full college-ready sample) were placed into developmental English. More than sixty percent of those students who demonstrated English language arts proficiency on the CST-ELA, and nearly eighty percent of students who passed four years of college preparatory English, entered community college without access to college-level English. Even among students designated as college-ready based on the EAP – the most stringent readiness indicator since participation is voluntary and self-selected – almost half of students experienced English misalignment. These results indicate that inter-sector English misalignment has indeed been a widespread phenomenon during this time period, with access to college-level English coursework the exception rather than the norm even for students who had previously demonstrated readiness to succeed in college.

Misalignment is widespread but its prevalence is not consistent across student populations. Below, Figure 3 shows disparities in the prevalence of misalignment by student demographics. Over 76 percent of former ELs were placed into developmental English, compared to only 61 percent of multilingual never ELs and 67 percent of monolingual students. Students with Spanish spoken as their home language (including both former ELs and never ELs) were placed into developmental English courses at higher rates than non-Spanish speakers. Finally, inter-sector English misalignment was disproportionately prevalent among Black and Latina/o students, with lower rates of misalignment for college-ready Asian/Pacific Islander students and the lowest rates among White students.

Figure 3. Developmental English placement of college-ready students by EL status, race/ethnicity, and home language

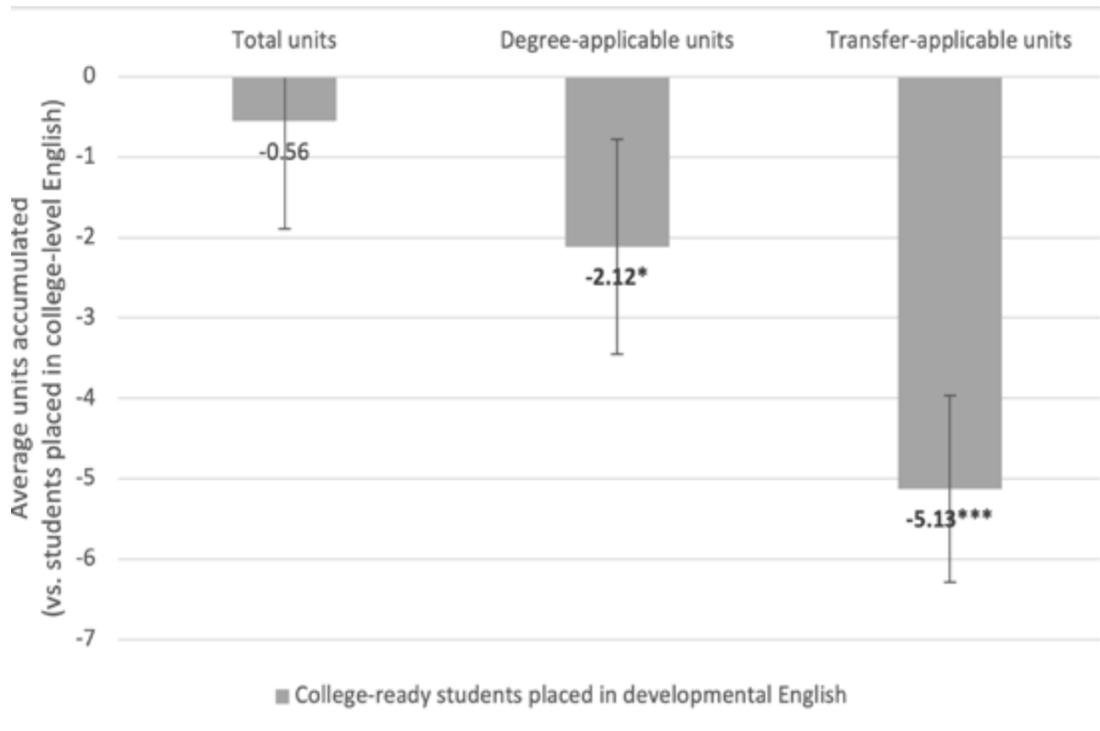


ENGLISH MISALIGNMENT AND UNIT ACCUMULATION

Because of the prevalence of inter-sector English misalignment across the college-ready sample and because former EL students disproportionately experience misalignment, it is important to understand the relationship between misalignment and postsecondary outcomes. To this end, we conducted a series of multivariate analyses that examine the relationship between English misalignment, former EL status, and community college outcomes, while controlling for student background and demographic characteristics. This analysis is not causal—that is, we cannot establish whether misalignment itself caused the disparities presented below or whether differences in outcomes are attributable to other unobserved factors. Instead, the analysis is designed to estimate the magnitude of outcome disparities among students who met similar college-preparation standards.

Figure 4 shows the relationship between English misalignment and progress through community college as indicated by the accumulation of English units (bars show the 95% confidence interval). We include results for total units completed, degree-applicable units, and our primary outcome of interest, transfer-applicable units. Among students who met at least one of the three college-readiness indicators (i.e. the full college-ready sample of Figs. 1 & 2), college-ready students who were placed into developmental English accumulated two fewer degree-applicable units and five fewer transferable units on average than their peers who were placed in college-level English. Five units is a substantial proportion of the sixty units required for transfer eligibility, which is especially relevant because all students in this sample indicated a potential interest in transferring to a four-year college.

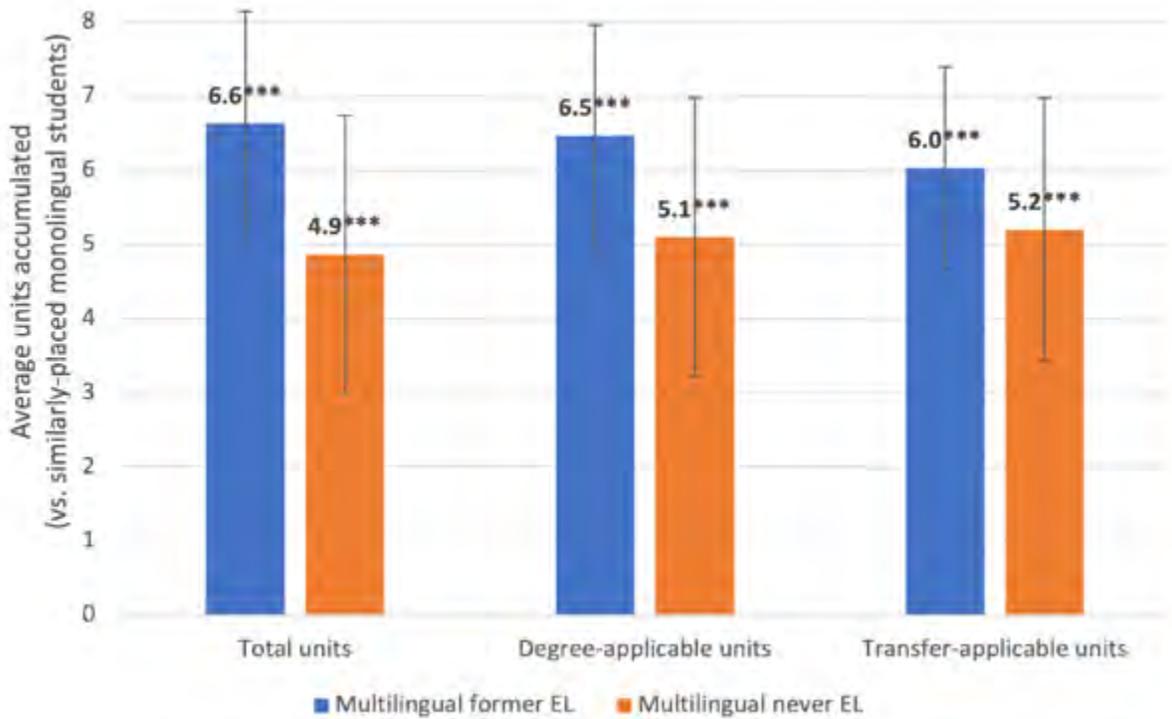
Figure 4. Community college unit accumulation penalty for college-ready students experiencing misalignment



Next, we explore whether there is a relationship between EL classification and student outcomes. Figure 5 shows the relationship between language status and English unit accumulation, estimating the numbers of units completed by former ELs and multilingual never-ELs relative to their monolingual English-only peers (after controlling for misalignment and academic/demographic background; bars again show the 95% confidence interval).

On average, former ELs completed six more transferable units than similarly-placed monolingual students, with unit accumulation comparable to or slightly higher than similarly-placed multilingual never ELs.²² Separate analyses explored the possibility of an interaction between misalignment and EL status; although college-ready former ELs are placed into developmental English at higher rates than their peers, we found no evidence of a “multiplier effect” or double penalty in terms of transferable units for EL students who do experience misalignment.

Figure 5. Community college unit accumulation advantage of college-ready multilingual students



DISCUSSION

Overall, these results show that a substantial majority of students who previously met standards indicating readiness for college success did not have direct access to college-level English courses upon enrolling in community college and were instead placed in developmental courses. Even with these high overall rates, there were still major disparities by student ethnicity and home language, and former English Learners were more likely to experience misalignment than their monolingual (English only) and multilingual never EL peers.

The regression analysis confirms a negative and statistically significant association between students’ English misalignment and transferable units completed. Holding all else constant, students who experienced misalignment on average accumulated two fewer degree-applicable units and over five fewer transfer-applicable units than their peers who were placed in college-level English. 5.1 transferable units is equivalent to almost two courses and a substantial proportion of the 60 credits required to transfer to a four-year CSU campus. For students with

limited financial resources, the added expense of extra credits can delay or impede degree attainment or transfer to a four-year university. This is especially concerning, given that this population of students has a stated goal to transfer to a four-year university.

But looking specifically at the relationship between EL status and postsecondary outcomes, our results show that after controlling for misalignment (and various demographic and academic characteristics), multilingual former EL students managed to complete six more transferable units on average than monolingual students, with additional evidence of unit accumulation comparable to similarly-placed multilingual never-EL students. This positive association between former EL status and the number of transfer units completed suggests a possible multilingual advantage that may help EL students who experience misalignment.

CONCLUSION

These findings offer a few key takeaways. First, the data suggest that, even though ISEM was prevalent across all student groups during the analysis period, it was disproportionately common for former EL students, Black and Latina/o students, and students in Spanish-speaking households. As colleges move away from widespread developmental course placement, they should ensure that new curricular policies and support systems serve these student populations well. Second, while college-ready former ELs were more likely to experience English misalignment than their monolingual and multilingual never-EL peers, after controlling for misalignment they actually earned several more transferable units than similarly-placed monolingual students, with an accumulation of transferable units comparable to or even slightly higher than their multilingual never-EL peers. This is consistent with the premise that multilingualism is a valuable skill and an academic asset and suggests that supporting multilingual students to maintain their home languages has the potential to strengthen long-term academic outcomes, even as students' progress through college-level English.

As California Community Colleges continue to implement AB 705, expanding students' initial access to college-level coursework with academic support is a promising first step. Researchers and policymakers should continue to evaluate how misalignment affects students, how to expand students' college readiness within the secondary education system, how to best serve all students in the new policy environment, and how to strengthen the connections between secondary and postsecondary educational opportunities to ensure that students' preparation for college creates a pathway to long-term academic success.

The full version of this paper can be found in **The Journal of Higher Education**.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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Endnotes

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22 We discuss former ELs' outcomes in comparison to "similarly placed" students because these analyses control for misalignment, as well as academic and demographic background; see the full paper for more detail.