



California Community Colleges

Transcription

California Community Colleges Podcast - Episode 18

Guest Host: Daisy Gonzales, Deputy Chancellor

Guests: Lena Carew, Executive Director of Students Making a Change (SMAC) at City College of San Francisco, and Yair Tapia, student leader

Daisy: Hi, I'm Dr. Daisy Gonzales, deputy chancellor of the California Community Colleges. Welcome to another podcast brought to you by the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. I'm joined today by Yair Tapia, who is a student at City College of San Francisco, and Lena Carew, the executive director and co-founder of SMAC, which stands for Students Making A Change. SMAC has become very active and advocating for students, both at City College of San Francisco and really throughout the community college system. One of the issues that SMAC focuses on is the implementation of a new law, AB 705, which changes the way colleges assess students entering college and the way they place them in classes. Welcome.

Yair: Thanks.

Lena: Thanks, Daisy.

Daisy: We really appreciate your time. And I wanted to talk to you a little bit more about SMAC. Can you tell us how SMAC was formed and what your goals are?

Lena: We formed StudentStudents Making A Change when I was a student here at City College of San Francisco in 2010. We were birthed from a movement here on campus to close the racial equity divide here for students of color, primarily recognizing that there is a difference in achievement and completion for students of color.

And early on, I remember learning about the data and understanding the challenges and unique barriers that students of color face in community colleges. And being in some ways reassured that it wasn't all my fault that my experience was shared. And in that way, I felt a great sense of unity, as well as deeply compelled to do better and to support the college and doing better.

And we did that by voicing our experiences and working with the college to change policies and practices that we identified as our greatest challenges and barriers to success. And one of the early challenges that we identified was access to college-level courses.

I eventually transferred to UC Berkeley where I studied business. But prior to that, I had to take seven math classes before transferring and took me five years to transfer. And through that journey, many of my peers did not transfer, they did not succeed. And I knew that that was due to structural barriers. We knew that that was not because students can't do it or don't want to do it. But we knew that there were changes in policies and practices that had to happen in order to ensure success for these students.

So we formed Students Making A Change in partnership with the community-based organization called Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth that does incredible work here in San Francisco to support high-quality public education for all students in San Francisco, K through 12, and develops youth leaders and parent advocates to support their kids here in public schools. So we partnered with Coleman to help us form a chapter here at City College to essentially, extend the work that they were doing in K 12 to support public education at the community college level. And since then, we've taken on several different campaigns to increase success and completion for students of color and community colleges, both here at City College of San Francisco as well as statewide.

Daisy: Thank you for that background, Lena. And you're right. For decades, research has suggested that when used as a primary criteria for placement, standardized test tend to underplay students. And evidence shows that community colleges are placing too many of our students into remedial education. Let's talk a little bit about Assembly Bill AB 705 and the background behind your organization getting involved. AB 705 requires colleges to take into account high school coursework, high school grades, and high school grade point average when determining placement upon enrollment. SMAC has become very familiar with the legislation. So I would love to hear from Yair. Yair, why is it so important for students to rally around raising awareness on this issue?

Yair: I think when we first gathered up to think about what was important to us, we found out that a lot of us had been affected by remedial courses in one way or another. In my case, I struggled with remedial classes. And just kind of like Lena was saying, it wasn't because I wasn't ready for the courses. In fact, I had taken English classes in my high school. And I remember the high school grades and the test and I was doing great in high school with reading comprehension and writing, and reading overall, literature, right? I'm an English major. And I was placed two levels below transfer level. The first places were easy, but then you know, life happens. And there were a lot of things I had to balance with. I'm also an AB 540 student, so I had other issues to worry about. And eventually, I felt marginalized because I wasn't getting any support in this class and I was passing the rest of my classes.

And so when we talked amongst ourselves, SMAC leaders, we found that it wasn't just my case, it was also that they had taken remedial courses in math and in English, and we saw the need and the opportunity to just let folks know about AB 705, because if we were affected, and we were in a room and everybody in the room was affected, we started to think larger, right? Because one of the things SMAC does aim for is structural change, and it became more evident that students were deeply impacted. Based on our own experience, we understand that we are capable students.

And upon finding out that some of my colleagues did not know about AB 705, that really raised the awareness, right. And it brought it to the forefront again, because they didn't know about it. We just started to think about what other students had no idea about it. And I began to ask my social groups, and within my social groups, they were like, "Yeah, I'm affected by it. I'm placed at this level." And it just became obvious to us that this is really important for students success, particularly because it's a structural issue here.

And it also was quite concerning that there wasn't a lot of...I'm just gonna call it propaganda or there weren't a lot of information available for students after the law had been passed. So even when the law passed, there wasn't a lot of movement on campus, meaning that no one knew about it. And the reason some of our SMAC Fellows found out about it was because SMAC brought this issue upfront. And it just became an issue of transparency. "This is the law, students should know their rights," period.

Daisy: Thank you, Yair. I'm looking at some of that data and the challenges that you mentioned are structural. And in California, more than 170,000 students are placed in remedial education or basic skills, math courses, with more than 110,000 never completing the math required to earn a degree. And certainly, as you mentioned, students of color are more likely than white students to be sent to multiple remedial courses that do not count towards their college degree. Some students from SMAC attended our board of governors meeting in September and shared many of their personal stories with their challenges with assessment and remedial education that were quite compelling.

Lena, I'm wondering, from your point of view, what are some of the other challenges that students are also facing?

Lena: Thank you for that question. Yeah, so some of the challenges that we're seeing on the ground here at City College varies depending on the experience of students. So, for example, some students have started the sequence and they're curious to know what this law means for them if they've already begun remediation. Does that mean that they get to bump up? Some are frustrated that they didn't know that the law was going to pass or that the legislation was in process and with that information may have made a different choice as to whether they would begin remediation. Some students haven't begun the process or are just now matriculating into City College of San Francisco.

And then, of course, there's the group of those that began remediation, dropped out, began again, dropped out. And for a variety of reasons, those 170,000 students that you mentioned, did not complete their math requirements. So what about those students that have really been blocked from their goals as a result of these harmful sequences?

So in our experience, and I'll let Yair speak to this more because he has more to say about it. But in our experience, this is in fact, from an implementation standpoint, quite complex. So yes, at the beginning, our Ask to the college was to just let students know if

they're legal, right, according to the law. But it gets much more complicated as to what are the implications for their educational plans moving forward as a result of the law.

So students are taking agency, and this is where SMAC has become a real force on campus, and taking the lead in many ways to ensure that students have the information that they need to make a choice about their enrollment and registration for courses in the spring and making a determination as to whether they will hold off on registering for English and math courses until the next fall, which would be fall of 2019, when the college is slated to be ready for co-requisite classes so that we are best supporting students to enter into college level, especially for those that have not taken remedial courses, or have been out of school for a while and haven't taken math or English.

Daisy: Yayir, would you like to add anything else?

Yair: Yeah, of course, I think some of the issues that we've encountered have been structural issues, right? Like the English department and math department, they have sequences that they need to either undo or completely just get rid of so they can start developing new sequences for students. And that's a process that takes time. And unfortunately, because of bureaucracies, that is not taking place, right? We've met with the math department and English department, but even the college, which is the bigger parent institutions needs to push this forward so that the English department and the math department can really get their sequences ready.

What will happen most likely is that if nothing is ready, then implementation won't be ready by fall. And again, right, these are students who are capable students today, and some of these classes hurt their GPAs and their goals, ultimately.

Daisy: So I have a question for you, Yair, as a student, just a really big change for our system. And I had an opportunity to talk to a few students this last week, and a few of them are afraid. Why do you think a change like this is so scary or difficult?

Yair: Oh, my. Okay. So I think there's this insidious belief that students are not ready and that we're actually helping students with remedial courses, right? And so what happens is that if you lower the bar, it demoralizes the students, right. A student comes in and they think they're ready for college and they know they're ready for college, but then they're administered a test or they're placed below transfer level. And that changes the attitude towards college. Again, this insidious believe that these classes are meant to help.

So the other part of it is that after a student is told by administrators that this is here to help you and as administrators, the student thinks that they have our best interests in mind, they think that it's their right to help us. And the change again, to think that we're not ready if there's someone who has authority tells us that we're not ready, it changes our attitude completely. And it's a scary move because at that moment, we go from believing in ourselves to depending on you, right, and it completely takes out our agency away. It gets no credit to the experiences that we've had in high school or elsewhere that prepare us for college-level courses.

Daisy: So I'm nearing my final question. And that is the board of governors in January, will consider adopting the regulations that will spell out in detail what colleges need to do to comply with AB 705. What is SMAC going to do leading up to that meeting?

Yair: There's a bunch of things that we're doing right now. We're asking our administration for transparency everywhere, all on campus, on their website, The students really need to know about this law. We're asking for counselors to be trained, which is something we can hopefully, expand all across the state. One of the larger problems again, it's not just with students not knowing the law, but it's also counselors that we've run into who have no idea what AB 705 is. And then we've had to educate them on the law, right? It shouldn't be our job as students, our job is to focus on our school work and not to train counselors.

And so we're definitely pushing counselors, particularly because that is where a student goes to, right? It's almost the first point of contact in our college journey. So we're definitely pushing for training all across California for faculty, even, and counselors, for sure. Definitely pushing to abolish all placement testing.

Daisy: Anything you'd like to add?

Yair: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think that the core requisite classes need to be in development right now. Those core recs [SP] will be instrumental in our success. The support needs to be there on the college's behalf. A student should not have to spend 10 hours, 19 hours, whatever, outside of the classroom to get the material done. That institutional help should be provided

Man: Yair, do you see this as a civil rights issue?

Yair: Yes, I think so. I think ultimately, I took the math on my college, right? And I'm not a math major, but I kind of just glanced at the numbers, and I considered how much a student with a bachelor's degree makes in a year, and how much money our communities were losing, right? So I did the math and looking at the numbers, I expected a large number, right. But then, in one year, there's millions of dollars, millions, millions of dollars that black and brown communities do not get because students are not getting their degrees. And that was extremely painful.

Again, we're underrepresented, black and brown students are underrepresented in remedial courses. And when you look at the data, and the data shows that students are ready, and they do much better when placed in transfer level, and then administrators or AB 705 does not become implemented because of bureaucracies, then, yes, then it is a civil rights issue. And Oh my god, it's so important to look at the data, right. But people will argue data, unfortunately. But still, this is why SMAC is pushing so much for this.

Lena: If I can add, I think this is one of the greatest equity issues we've ever faced in California Community Colleges. And I feel like other than certain circles, nobody is talking

about it, that the implications of AB 705 and what it means for communities of color that Yair was speaking about before, all students across California, 2.3 million community college students is enormous. We can't divorce this from the context of the growing bubble of student loan debt, which impacts disproportionately students of color, of course, as well.

And there are certainly many great implementation challenges. But what we're talking about here is changing the core beliefs of educators, and what students are capable of doing, and who should or should not succeed. And that is very difficult to face, I think, for folks to believe first, that what we've been doing is harmful. And instead, where the conversation tends to live is in the intent of our historical approach to basic skills education. Well, our intention was to support students along the way, take it slow and easy, fill those gaps that were missed in their high school education, etc. But instead, what that does is that it doesn't allow us to have a really thoughtful conversation about the deep negative impacts that we've experienced, that I've personally experienced, that Yair has personally experienced, that we know to be true that we've known to be true.

And we're at a moment where the research evidence is our personal lived experiences. And we have policy and law that is responsive to that. And when this is fully implemented and we have the hearts and minds changed of educators and administrators and students, the internalized belief that we can and will succeed is going to take some time because that internalized belief has been informed by a strong message from educators that we cannot succeed, that we're not ready for college.

Daisy: I have one more question that I was wondering about. Yair has used the word, structural, several times. I'm wondering about the work that you've done at City College of San Francisco, and what are some of the celebration points, the milestones that you've reached, that you think should be replicated across the state?

Yair: Transportation is an issue here at City College. We're a Community College where it's not just San Francisco folks that are coming into the city, we have folks from the outer Bay Area, all the way up to like Bay Point, Antioch, Livermore, San Jose, coming up to City College. One of the things that I worked on was a proposal for a transportation scholarship for students, which again, it's meant to structural change, right, to provide students with not just for books, right? We have to understand that there's a wide demographic of students, right? Mothers, high schoolers, people that are coming back to City College.

There's also a big problem in academic probation, right? I took a break from City College. And when I came back, I found that I was in academic probation. I had no idea about it. I joined a committee and right now, I voice my concern about transparency. And they are currently in the process of hiring an expert to deal with transparency, right, to bridge that gap. But like I said, I am an AB 540 students. I work for VIDA, which stands for Voices of Immigrants Demonstrating Achievement. I spent a lot of my time there. A lot of the lessons that I learned with SMAC I take to my community.

One of the biggest structural changes that I feel is definitely needed is a support in the form of stipends for AB 540 students, which is a bit different from DACA students, right? It's AB 540 students with DACA, particularly stipends to help bridge a financial gap and students for could focus more on their studies. Yeah, shorter sequences, right? Oh, I can pull up a list if I have more time. But I think student Involvement should be at the forefront, right? Administrators should not be making decisions at all without student input, particularly structural change, right? When it comes to things like AB 705 because again, there's a big disconnect when it has been decades since a person has been a student. Students know what's going on on the ground.

Lena: Can I add one thing to this list? So one area of work that Students Making A Change has championed and supported here at City College that I think should be considered on a state level is closing the digital divide for community college students. And what that looks like in the 21st-century is different from the 20th-century. In the '90s, we had a lot of focus around access to devices, does a person have a computer? And what we've learned through our development of students in SMAC as well as our support of students and other partner groups on campus is that many students have access to a device, but that device may or may not be supportive of the academic demands.

So often, the challenges that we see that students have with 21st-century learning if you will is access and know how to use the technologies that many of us take for granted. So creating and collaborating on documents online, how do you upload and send them, right, through the digital technologies? There's been an increase in implementation of our learning management systems here at City College. We know that there's a great initiative around online community colleges, which is important, but what we'd be interested in is an initiative that acknowledges that there is a digital divide that is determined in part by race and other demographics, as well as an understanding and appreciation that students at community colleges are coming from all different types of backgrounds and may have issues with connectivity to a network.

Having Wi-Fi at home is actually very inaccessible for many students, and they're finding many different ways to access the connectivity that they need. But any initiative around access to devices, access to connectivity, as well as a look at the curriculum itself and how we're integrating thoughtfully, digital technologies, to prepare students for transfer and for the workforce so that they're being supported by schools to develop these skills in high demand in that they really do need, and in there facing that they're being supported in this specific way across all of their courses, that it's not just a workforce development or a vocational program, but that this is truly integrated so that they're developing the capacities that they need.

Daisy: Well, thank you, Yair and Lena for joining me today. We really appreciate your time. We wish you the best of luck.

Yair: Thank you, Daisy.

Lena: Thanks, Daisy.

Daisy: You've been listening to another episode of the "California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Podcast." Thank you for listening.

Man: Be sure to join us for the next California Community Colleges podcast.

Man: This has been a California Community Colleges presentation.