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OPINION

Editorial: Why make it more difficult to apply to Cal State?

By THE TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD

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Only about 60% of California State University students graduate within six years. No wonder Cal State leaders want to do what they can to raise that number. But their most recent proposal for accomplishing this, by requiring all applicants to take a fourth year of high school math or a similar course, goes too far and could undermine the very students the state college system is trying to help.

Cal State officials point out that introductory college-level math courses, which are mandatory, are still a stumbling block for incoming freshmen, especially black and Latino students. Students who take four years of math before entering Cal State — or other courses involving quantitative reasoning, such as physics, economics or personal finance — are far more likely to pass college-level math classes, university officials say. Already, 78% of Cal State students have those four years under their belt before entering college, but that number is slightly lower for black and Latino students.

Students who have taken extra math-oriented courses are also more likely to graduate college. The question is whether taking the extra year of math actually causes that outcome, or whether this is a case of correlation rather than causality. It may be that there are other factors — family income and better schools, for example — that make certain students both more likely to take and pass the extra year of math in high school *and* more likely to earn a degree.

Requiring all applicants to Cal State to take the fourth year could substantially raise Cal State graduation rates — or perhaps not. But at the front end, it also would make it harder for students to apply to Cal State, especially black and Latino students whose high schools are less likely to offer the required classes or have qualified teachers to lead them. It's been just a few years since Los Angeles Unified School District started requiring students to take all of the so-called A-G courses, a set of college prep courses that are mandatory for both Cal State and University of California entry, and getting to this point has been a tough lift. This would add another requirement to the list.

L.A. Unified opposes the new math requirement.

And if 78% of Cal State students already take the fourth year of high school math but only 61% are graduating within six years, there clearly are other issues preventing students from completing their college work.

The additional math course wouldn't be required until 2026; the delay is designed to give school districts a chance to hire teachers and add course offerings. And even then, waivers would be given to students whose schools don't offer any courses that would fill the requirement.

Waivers wouldn't solve the problem, though. Schools might offer courses considered eligible by Cal State — such as calculus or physics — but which are too difficult for many otherwise qualified applicants. Or as school districts scramble to create enough courses, the classes could become crammed or taught by unqualified teachers. The waiver system could also be so complicated that it confuses and discourages some students.



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The proposal raises some big questions about what a college education ought to encompass in changing times. Are extra math classes in high school really necessary for all Cal State applicants — including those who want to major in, say, English literature, philosophy or theater? Or should the basic entrance requirements ensure that students arrive prepared for a good general education, with more tailored requirements being applied to different fields of study, much as the British higher-education system does?

It might make more sense, for example, for Cal State to require extra quantitative reasoning courses only of students who plan to major in STEM-related fields. They already are more likely to have taken a fourth-year math course before college. The university also should introduce any changes incrementally, checking to see whether the extra requirement makes enough of a difference to be worthwhile and considering other steps that might be at least as effective at raising graduation rates.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that students arrive at Cal State with the tools they need to succeed. Once there, they should be offered more than just a vocational pathway to a job; ideally, the university will produce informed and curious citizens, prepared for a lifetime of reading, continued education and critical thinking. As Cal State seeks to raise its graduation rates, it should keep those goals in mind.

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