Some skeptics swayed by CSU course reforms

More students are succeeding in math after elimination of remedial classes.

Rogelio Perez has long struggled with math. Had he entered California State University last year, his C grades and low standardized test scores would have steered him into a noncredit remedial math class. He would still have had to pay for the class and fallen behind at least a semester in his path toward graduation.

But under a sweeping reform in the nation's largest four-year public university system, Perez is doing college-level work in statistics and algebra, aided by 150 minutes of extra instruction every week. And he'll get college credit if he passes — which looks likely because he's earning an A so far.

"I feel this is a really good system because the extra review helps us understand more and in depth," said Perez, a Cal State Dominguez Hills freshman who is the first in his family to attend college. "Without it, I'd probably have the same trouble I had in high school."

The first results are in for the Cal State system's controversial move last year to eliminate noncredit remedial classes and replace them with regular courses, buttressed with extra support, that count toward an undergraduate degree. Last fall, nearly 7,800 students like Perez were able to pass those higher-level math classes, according to data released Monday.

In both 2017 and 2018, about the same number of first-year students — 17,400 — were unprepared for college-level math. About two-thirds of those who enrolled in one anyway succeeded under both the old and new systems. But the number of students who did so under the new reforms increased dramatically — 7,787 students last fall, compared with just 950 the previous year.

"What's exciting to me about this data is that it refutes a theory that... all of these students who are unprepared for college math [will] fail," said James T. Minor, a CSU assistant vice chancellor. "The data simply do not support that. Disproportionately, low-income, black and brown students are now earning college credit."

The reforms, announced by Cal State Chancellor Timothy P. White in an August 2017 executive order, are expected to aid a systemwide push to boost four-year graduation rates from 19% in 2012 to 40% by 2025. White also ordered that all students be assessed for college readiness not merely through one placement test — a measure widely criticized for inaccurately evaluating students who are low-income or underrepresented minorities — but through [See Cal State, B5]
Course reforms win over critics

[Cal State, (from B1)]

multiple criteria, including high school courses, grades and standardized tests.

White's orders upset many faculty members, who said the chancellor failed to adequately consult them. Critics were unhappy with his decree to make the switch across the system all at once in just a year rather than phase it in. And some doubted that unprepared students could succeed in college-level classes.

At Cal State Northridge, some faculty critics note that 4 in 10 students still failed to pass the reformed classes last fall, an outcome essentially unchanged from the remedial offerings the previous year. But campus Provost Stella Theocharou said those students now save money and time by bypassing noncredit classes.

CSUN math professor Michael Neubauer, however, still has questions. He said the new math classes are essentially the same as the old remedial ones. "My concern is that students are getting college credit for what?" he said.

At other campuses, the results have won over skeptics. Cal State Sacramento has been among the most successful of the system's 23 campuses, especially among students not planning to major in science, technology, engineering or math. About 92% of them passed the fundamental algebra course last fall, compared with less than 60% in the comparable remedial math course the year before.

"I was nervous we would push students into coursework they were unprepared for, and I'm delightedly embarrassed to admit I'm wrong," said David Zeigler, chairman of Cal State Sacramento's mathematics and statistics department.

Key to the success, Zeigler said, was a redesign of the curriculum to make it more relevant to students—showing how polynomials can be used to model blood pressure or the stock market, for instance. The math faculty experimented with boot camps and online tools. They also offered extra support in class and by hiring more student instructors to help their peers.

Cal State L.A. has made similar changes. Faculty re-designed its math program to cater to those majoring in the sciences and math and those who aren't. They developed a program offering teaching tips. And the academic support unit, called "Smart Start," follows up with students who are floundering three times each term to offer extra help.

Michelle Hawley, Cal State L.A. associate vice president, said she's learned to see student potential in a new way. "I was very skeptical and thought it was just a shortcut," she said of the reforms. "But I learned that just because you can't pass a test doesn't mean you're not capable of learning the subject."

At Cal State Dominguez Hills, math instructor Gia Nguyen aims to engage students with real-life examples—teaching probability by having them throw dice, for instance—and puzzle out problems together. The campus requires first-year students who are least prepared for college-level work to take math in both the summer and one term in the regular school year along with supplemental instruction. Their pass rate is about 68%, compared with 79% for students who don't need extra support, said Matt Jones, the math department chairman.

"That's reasonably close, and we feel we're bringing students up without the long path to get there," he said, adding that both groups use the same textbook and are held to the same standard.

For many students, the reforms seem to be a hit. In their weekly review class last week, freshmen Abril Petralcico and Bryanna Llevasos worked together on practice problems for an upcoming midterm exam, figuring out standard deviations, means and medians. The math instructor, Susan Huniu, went from group to group, fielding questions.

Llevasos, the daughter of immigrants and the first in her family to attend college, said the engaging teachers and review sessions are helping her grasp a subject she never particularly liked. In high school, she said, she often got Cs in math.

"I always struggled with math," she said. "But I've had really good teachers here and I get what they're teaching."

Her goal this semester: a B in math and college credit.
On-campus parking is coveted real estate

At Cal State L.A. and other schools, lots full by midday are a reality for students. SUSA N A H U S S A I N

Four years ago, Anahí Olide would drop off her young son at day care and then head straight back home for several hours before driving 30 minutes to Cal State L.A. for class.

In order to snag a parking space before the tourists of our town walk up the 23-year-old child development major was reliant on the school to drop her off at her own convenience. She was at this status even though her first class doesn’t start until 1 p.m.

“It was not that bad when I first started here,” Olide said. “I mean it was still full, yeah, but if you drove around a few times you would eventually find a parking space. Now, it’s really ugly.”

At Cal State L.A., the busy lots, often chosen by midday, are now a daily reality for students, who have taken to social media to vent about the parking scramble they often must go through just to get to class.

The university has partly closed two large parking lots because of construction projects, resulting in the temporary loss of about 1,200 spaces over the last year, said Cal State L.A. spokesman Robert Lopez.

The challenge is far from unique to the L.A. campus. Several California State University campuses, such as the University of California campuses, have large commuter populations. That is especially true of universities in larger urban areas, including Long Beach, where relatively few students live in campus housing.

For the first eight weeks of the fall semester at Cal State Long Beach are particularly busy, said Robyn Anne Woodard, campus director of operations. Last fall, the university rented an on-campus parking lot off site just for those eight weeks and students to use off campus.

Cal State Long Beach spokesman Andrew Ed- wards said parking “is pretty much a constant issue.”

Cal State Northridge has roughly 22,000 parking spaces but hosts 43,000 students and more than 4,000 faculty and staff, “so we have to be creative,” said Carmen Chamorro, university spokesperson.

To help deal with congestion, Cal State Northridge launched an app that provides information about how many spaces are available in lots and parking structures at once.

“Parking spaces are between 130 feet and a hard place. We want students to be able to come to campus and not feel frustrated when they get here,” said Gerald Weilman. As associate professor of public administration at Cal State Northridge, he studies transportation policy.

“We do this, even though it has a detrimental impact on our transportation network, because we are so underfunded and so constrained in the use of being able to park where we want it,” he said.

On social media, some students complain that universities sell more parking permits than they have spaces. But Lopez, the Cal State L.A. spokesman, says it’s typical to sell more permits than spaces because not everyone on campus at the same time.

Cal State L.A. sold 5,304 permits last semester to students and employees, but only 4,400 on-campus spaces. Every year, Cal State Long Beach sells about 22,000 permits for 14,000 parking spots. Lopez emphasized that the parking situation is temporary. This fall, the university plans to reopen one of the parking structures, closed in March 2018 and expanded to about 2,000 spaces, giving the campus a net gain of 3,000 spots, he said.

The other lot, which was closed in December, will be resurfaced. Student housing complex to accommodate the university’s enrollment, which has increased by roughly 85% since 2002, Lopez said. The housing project, scheduled to open in spring 2021, would provide space for the approximately 1,000 beds for freshmen and sophomores.

In the meantime, some Cal State L.A. students and staff say they would campus parking at all. Zita Piancaro, 22, refuses to pay the $500-per-semester student parking permit due to price.

A DRIVER AND PASSENGER look for a parking spot in one of the busy lots at Cal State L.A. Students have taken to social media to vent about the parking scramble they often must go through just to get to class.

A STUDENT walks down the stairs of a parking garage under construction at Cal State L.A., which like other CSUs campuses has a large commuter population.