

Aisha Lowe

By: Ashmi Patel and Alison Kadlec
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My Story

"What has fueled my focus on education and my passion for equity is seeing the difference an education can make, for the community college students we serve, and by living it myself, as an African-American child in San Francisco's school system."

Dr. Aisha Lowe has been actively thinking about education issues since she was a middle schooler. Growing up in a single-parent household, the sacrifices of her mother and grandmother made it possible for her to attend elite private institutions. Seeing the differences in opportunities that she had compared with a majority of her peers, grounded her lifelong commitment to education and equity. At the age of 15, she was already questioning the unfair status quo and seeking opportunities to create change.

Lowe's dedication to equity is what drives her work as the Vice Chancellor of Educational Services and Support for the California Community Colleges (CCC). In this capacity, Lowe plays a pivotal role in the work CCC is doing to lower barriers to equitable student success as part of the Strong Start to Finish network. Lowe provides leadership for Educational Services divisional activities, including transfer and non-credit curriculum, and system-wide technical assistance delivery.

Making progress in the system

Research shows that prior to AB 705, the majority of first-time students enrolling in California community colleges are placed in developmental education courses, and many are not moving on to credit-bearing courses. Through CCC's partnership with Strong Start to Finish, Lowe is working to change this. Under her direction, 73 college districts and 115 public 2-year universities in the California system are now aligned around key strategies:

- Eliminate the use of single placement test scores for placing students into remedial courses.
- Establish and expand math pathways across all institutions.
- Provide guidance and implementation strategies to support ESL learners.
- Use quantitative and qualitative information to understand and advance reforms.
- Integrate developmental education reforms within guided pathways.

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Education policies are changing!

Recently, California has made efforts to bring system-wide improvements by passing Assembly Bill 705. This law prohibits community colleges from requiring students to enroll in traditional developmental education courses unless data demonstrate that the students are highly unlikely to succeed in college-level courses, and that enrollment in a pre-transfer course will improve the likelihood of completing a transfer-level course within one year. For Lowe, this is a critical step.

"We are talking about overcoming one of the longest-standing historical barriers to students' academic progress in the higher education system. I think history will bear witness, as we see the results three years down the road, five years down the road, to the benefits of this change."

During the first year of implementing AB 705, colleges made steps in offering fewer remedial courses and replacing them with corequisite models. These changes have increased student completion with twice as many students completing transferable English and math requirements. Between fall 2015 and fall 2019, one-term completion rates increased from 14% to 40% in math and 27% to 61% in English. This means over 57,000 more students completed transfer-level English and over 31,000 students completed transfer-level math.¹

The change begins with us

According to Lowe, the way to remove barriers and increase equitable outcomes for all students across California starts with educators removing the barriers in their own thinking, innovating, and planning. She encourages educators to envision ideal and equitable systems, and to then figure out what needs to be dismantled in order to bring that vision to life.

"Today, I am sensing a momentum that we're ready for change in ways that I have not felt before. We have historically done a lot of tinkering around the edges in education reform. I think what we need and what I would encourage educational leaders to do is to blow it up and start fresh."

About Alisha Lowe

Dr. Lowe became a CCC Vice Chancellor of Educational Services and Support in March 2020. She previously served as Associate Professor of Education at William Jessup University, as well as the Dean of the Office of Academic Research. Additionally, she has served the students at the Los Rios Community College District, Sierra College, and CSU Sacramento as an adjunct faculty member. Her passion for education equity flows from these direct experiences with community college students.

¹Hern, K., Snell, M., and Henson, L. (2020). Still Getting There: How California's AB 705 Is (and Is Not) Transforming Remediation and What Needs to Come Next. Sacramento, CA: Public Advocates.

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