

California State faculty still upset about remedial ed changes but compromise emerging



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Protests still surround a [California State University plan](#) to eliminate remedial education and overhaul other undergraduate requirements, but hints are emerging of a possible compromise between administrators and faculty on timing and implementation.

The CSU's central office is offering campuses a possible delay in carrying out parts of the sweeping education reform plan that has attracted strong faculty opposition, according to a [letter to campus leaders](#). However, the university system otherwise insists that it will end non-credit remedial education, drop placement tests and impose other major reforms.

In an unusual show of dissent the CSU faculty has been especially critical of the timetable for the reforms, virtually all of which were supposed to be in place by fall 2018. They say they need until at least fall 2019 to redesign courses and get trained for new material.

The reforms are aimed at getting students past academic roadblocks and improving graduation rates at the largest public university system in the country.

The recent discussion “signals that, beneath the smoke, give and take has begun,” said Harry Hellenbrand, a professor at CSU Northridge and previously the school's provost and vice president for academic affairs. He has been active in that campus' vociferous resistance to parts of the administration's executive orders on the new program.

Toni Molle, spokesperson for CSU chancellor Timothy White, said that “numerous conversations” are taking place between the central administration

and both the system-wide faculty senate and individual campuses, with suggestions on how to move the plan along. But she emphasized that faculty do not have the power to block the executive orders, although some professors claim they do so and may try to.

Meanwhile, she said that many campuses are “well on their way to implementing the executive orders. The benefits to students are too great to further delay.” She noted that the chancellor’s office has reallocated more than \$10 million to campuses to support faculty to revise courses and train for new procedures.

In what appears to be an attempt to seek a compromise and calm faculty fears, the university’s central administration is offering the 23 CSU campuses a path to delay implementation for some aspects of the central office’s reforms. Two campuses have already received a one-year delay for implementing parts of the plan that require many current four-unit courses to become three units, among other major changes.

In addition, CSU officials say they are seeking ways to soothe worries that ethnic studies and cultural diversity classes at Cal State Northridge may no longer be a requirement once system-wide changes are put in place.

The possibility of a compromise may be apparent after a [meeting](#) of the system-wide Academic Senate on Thursday and Friday in Long Beach. The CSU Board of Trustees [meeting next week](#) will discuss Chancellor Timothy White’s reforms as well; the trustees have the power to override his orders, but there’s no indication they will.

Motivated to improve the [system’s graduation rate by 2025](#), the chancellor’s office over the summer ushered in executive orders meant to reduce the burdens students face in attaining a degree and to overhaul courses that research suggests lead to thousands of students dropping out each year.

The changes include an end to making intermediate algebra a [prerequisite for taking general-education math classes](#) for students not pursuing a math-heavy major and doing away with non-credit remedial math and English courses — virtually all by fall 2018. For students who need it, new credit-bearing courses will combine college level and catch-up material, with extra hours of instruction

and tutoring. Campuses will eliminate their own placement tests and rely on students' high school grades and other standardized exams to make decisions about which courses students should take.

But in September the Academic Senate of the CSU made its opposition clear, voting to urge White to delay the reforms until fall 2019. Faculty said they would need more time to overhaul large chunks of their course content and structure. Since then, the local senates of 19 campuses have issued their formal grievances, amplifying the frustration felt by faculty statewide.

Ratcheting things further, the campus senate at CSU Northridge voted last month to “not participate in the implementation of” White’s executive orders — a radical step that may put the campus on a collision course with the chancellor’s office.

“In over 30 years in the CSU, I have not seen an impasse like this one,” said Hellenbrand.

Christine Miller, chair of the statewide Academic Senate, said recently that faculty have the responsibility for developing and approving the curriculum and that “a faculty body could simply refuse to implement curricular revisions they believe are not in the best interest of students.”

While “no one wants that,” Miller said, “it reflects how seriously faculty take their professional responsibility as stewards of the curriculum.”

Around the CSU system, some faculty claim the reform plans will lead to a general dumbing-down of requirements, a contention that system leaders strongly deny. Other criticisms focus on specific issues, some of them technical and others highly political.

One part would require many four-unit general education classes to convert to three units, a process that may require big changes in programs for general education and majors, plus course syllabi.

In a letter to campus presidents, CSU system executive vice chancellor Loren Blanchard recently wrote that his office would consider “a narrowly defined

request for extension of the implementation” of such parts of the executive orders. Campuses have until Nov. 15 to submit their requests for the extensions.

Two universities — Sonoma State and CSU Monterey Bay — already have received a one-year delay to implement provisions of the White’s executive orders, including addressing the need to change many four-unit courses to three.

At CSU Northridge, faculty are very concerned that their campus requirement for students to take cultural studies classes about ethnic, gender and class issues will be lost in the changes because they will not be specifically required in the new CSU system rules. White’s office recently signaled to CSU Northridge that an exemption could allow the school to keep cultural studies classes as part of the revised general education curriculum — classes required for graduation to expand the knowledge of students in subjects beyond their majors.

“We have had numerous conversations with (CSU Northridge) and have shared solutions that will allow them” to maintain those classes as requirements and still comply with the executive order changes, Molle said.

But so far, the Northridge faculty remain opposed and say that the offer does not sufficiently protect those classes. Faculty “won’t believe the offer until is in writing from the [chancellor’s office],” said Michael Neubauer, a math professor at CSU Northridge and author of the faculty resolution to not implement White’s reforms.

In another issue, some faculty who are paid based on the number of units they teach fear their wages may be affected by parts of the plan. “If our units get cut, our pay gets cut. It is just that simple,” said Karen Davis, a statewide faculty senator and lecturer at CSU Monterey Bay. Others say the end to remedial education may lead to job cuts.

In response, Molle said, “We do not anticipate a loss of positions.”

Blanchard’s letter, while permitting some delays, will not allow any for other major tasks such as removing all remedial-education courses — classes that students who are deemed unprepared for college math or English must take before they can advance in the curriculum. The chancellor’s office cites evidence from other states that suggests enrolling students needing remediation

instead in college-level courses with added support leads to higher graduation rates. And that occurs “without compromising academic rigor,” said system spokeswoman Molle.

But some faculty leaders remain uneasy and are sticking to their positions that the changes are too top-down and too fast.

“You can mandate changes in the curriculum, but it’s really difficult to mandate the way professionals respond,” said Steven Filling, chair of the statewide faculty senate from 2014 to 2016 and a current senator representing CSU Stanislaus, where he is a professor of accounting and finance.

CSU Northridge math professor Katherine Stevenson, co-chair of an influential task force that detailed how the system could restructure its math instruction, called for more caution on eliminating remedial classes. “If we had a little more time then we could run some pilots on campuses ... and then we could actually have some data and then expand in the second year without creating a giant experiment.”

“It’s not that we’re cranky old men and women,” Stevenson added. “We’re rightfully concerned about the students for whom we feel responsible.”

No matter what happens to the administration’s plans, faculty will continue to fine-tune their instruction to help students, said Neubauer of CSU Northridge. “It’s not, ‘I’m taking my ball and going home,’” he said. “We’ll keep working on curricular changes.”