**What’s in a college course number? Lots of confusion**

***Bill would direct similar community college courses across the state to carry same number; faculty groups oppose***

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course numbers with other schools in the Los Rios District.

At Pasadena City College, college algebra for STEM majors is labeled Math 003. At Cypress College, it’s Math 141 C and at Napa Valley, it’s Math106. For anyone hoping to enroll in the same course at Oxnard College, look for Math R115. At Cuyamaca College, try Math 175. And at College of the Sequoias, it’s Math 035.

On and on across California’s public community colleges, courses that basically cover the same material and are recognized as being interchangeable in fulfilling requirements for majors and transfers are assigned different course numbers. That process confuses community college students trying to transfer to a four-year university, critics say. Students may not know whether they are taking the right courses and may inadvertently repeat some if they take classes at more than one community college, either in person or online.

Proposals to develop a statewide common numbering system have been debated for nearly three decades. A shadow system already tries to identify similar courses at different colleges, but some say it’s not enough and not easily available to students.

Now, a new effort is underway to create a broad new numbering system that would be accessible and easily understandable to all community college students and cover many more courses. It would ensure that similar courses at any California community college are aligned so they fulfill the same transfer requirements for California State University and the University of California systems. If California adopts the changes, it will join 17 states, including Arizona, Florida and Texas, that have or are developing common course numbers for their lower division courses usually taken in the first two years at public colleges and universities, according to a [survey](http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBquest3RTA?Rep=TR1802) by the Education Commission of the States.

A bill in the California state Legislature, [AB 1111](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB1111), would require the state’s 116 community colleges to adopt a common numbering system that would cover general education classes and those needed for transfer into various majors at universities. The Assembly’s Higher Education Committee unanimously approved the legislation on April 22.

The idea to phase in a new common numbering system by 2025 was among the recommendations of the recent [Recovery with Equity](https://www.capostsecondaryforall.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Recovery-with-Equity_2021Feb15.pdf) report organized by Lande Ajose, Gov. Newsom’s senior policy advisor for higher education, and the Governor’s Council for Post-Secondary Education.

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Backers say the change is an important step to help improve the [low transfer rates:](https://www.ppic.org/publication/increasing-community-college-transfers-progress-and-barriers/) Only 19% of community college students who say they intend to transfer to universities do so within four years. Faculty organizations oppose the change, saying it will divert time and resources from much-needed reforms, such as better financial aid and ensuring students pass their classes, no matter what the catalog numbers. Those professors also criticize it for usurping the authority of the 73 districts that run the community colleges.

The bill’s author, Assemblyman Marc Berman, D-Menlo Park, said the “current system is unnecessarily confusing for students and that the differences in course numbers can unintentionally set students back and create a barrier to timely transfer.” Without a common course numbering system, he added, “students are struggling to transfer credits between institutions and plan out a coherent road map to earning their degree.”

Supporters include William Scroggins, president of Mt. San Antonio College, a Southern California campus with a strong record of transferring students.  Scroggins said that a statewide common numbering system “would be very useful and very empowering for students.” It would especially help students who are the first in their families to attend college and may not receive enough academic counseling on campus, he added.

[](https://mk0edsource0y23p672y.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/bermanacr-70-bone-marrow-donation-awareness-month-550-05-06-19.jpg)

*Assemblyman Marc Berman*

The Berman bill faces headwinds as it moves now to the Assembly Appropriations Committee. The statewide community college Academic Senate recently approved a [resolution](https://www.asccc.org/sites/default/files/Resolutions%20Spring%202021%20Adopted%20Resolutions.pdf) to oppose AB 1111, saying it is not needed, would cost too much and “would create undue and unnecessary difficulties for colleges.” Beyond the changes needed in information systems, schedules and transcripts, upward of 150,000 courses would have to be reviewed to see which align and which might have to be changed.

The [Faculty Association of California Community Colleges](https://www.faccc.org/) also argues against the plan. FACCC’s president-elect, Wendy Brill-Wynkoop, said she does not think that the number of students taking wrong or repetitive classes is high enough to “warrant the insane amount of time, effort and money” that statewide course numbering would require. Besides, she and others point to a system that already aims to help students and faculty choose and qualify courses for transfer.That system, called [Course Identification Numbering](https://c-id.net/courses/search) or C-ID, works fairly well, they contend, although critics say it is very limited in scope and adds another layer of bureaucracy.

The C-ID system began in 2007 and expanded in response to state legislation. With faculty review, C-ID has produced “descriptors” for about 400 types of lower division and transferable courses, detailing the material to be covered and sometimes the texts and amount of student work. Community colleges send in their courses for review in hopes they will be approved and then assigned to one of those descriptors and its numbers in the background. Classes often wind up with two numbers — that of their home college and the C-ID one.

Nearly 22,000 community college classes now fit into one of the descriptors, but there are more than 150,000 courses across the system, officials said.

More significant, most community college students never see or know about C-ID numbers, although some campus catalogs list them next to their own course numbers. Their counselors and online guides are supposed to inform them whether their courses will help their transfer applications to one of the 23 California State University campuses.

For example, College Composition is ENGL 100 or 110 in the C-ID system. It is described as an “introductory course that offers instruction in expository and argumentative writing, appropriate and effective use of language, close reading, cogent thinking, research strategies, information literacy, and documentation.” Students are supposed to be assigned at least 6,000 words of formal writing.

Students statewide see differing courses numbers in their home college course catalogs: ENGL 1A, ENGWR 480, ENG 200, ENGL 150 and others that fit the C-ID slot.

Sound complicated? That’s the point for reforming it, according to Jessie Ryan, executive vice president of the Campaign for College Opportunity, a nonprofit that seeks to expand college attendance and success. The C-ID system was developed as a tool for counselors and faculty and it wrongly “assumes students and families are savvy enough to navigate a fairly complex online portal,” she said. Berman’s proposal, she added, will help assure students “that a class will count and is recognized.”

Berman acknowledges many details remain to be worked out, including cost and timing. But he said he does not think those will be a barrier. The C-ID system and nomenclature can be the base of new public-facing numbers, according to the assemblyman. “We want to build upon something that already exists,” he said.

If it passes, the reform will face complications of what specific numbers to use and how to treat classes at the three community colleges in the state that operate on an academic calendar of three “quarter” terms in a school year rather than two semesters.

A trial run of sorts took place 17 years ago. The Los Rios Community College District at that time developed a new course-numbering system for its then three colleges: Sacramento City, American River and Cosumnes River. (A fourth, Folsom Lake, was added later.)

The schools shared some common numberings but also had conflicts and differences. It took much planning to create across-the-board replacements, according to Kale Braden, who was on the planning task force at the time and is now American River’s associate vice president of instruction and enrollment management.

The district wound up better off with the new system, but Braden worries how that could work statewide. “It was a pretty heavy lift for just the three colleges,” he said. “I have trouble imagining the lift” for all the colleges across California.

The Los Rios district’s chancellor, Brian King, testified in favor of AB 1111 at the committee hearing. He described the change at his colleges as a success because it helps students get to a four-year degree.  “Simplicity benefits our students,” he said.



[**Larry Gordon**](https://edsource.org/author/lgordon)**covers higher education, with a focus on challenges students face in entering and finishing college.**