

## Podcast Series on Remedial Education Reform AB 1705

### Episode: Guest Eric Armstrong and Host Paul Fain Transcript

Paul Fain: I'm here speaking with Eric Armstrong of the College of the Sequoias. Erik, how are you?

Erik Armstrong: I'm doing well. Thank you for having me.

Fain: I'm really curious. I know you've been teaching in remedial education for a long time, but if you could just give us a sense of your experience and your journey to where you are now.

Armstrong: Yeah, I've been teaching freshman composition for about 13 or 14 years since I started grad school. I've been teaching in the community college system almost exclusively California community college system almost exclusively since leaving graduate school, mostly in the Central Valley. So Junior College, City College and the College of the Sequoias, where I am a full time professor of English.

Fain: And can you talk to me about your experience of what works best and the systems that you were trained in and where you ended up?

Armstrong: I was fortunate. I am a product of California State University Chico's composition program, English generally, but a composition track. And it was a program that essentially started a requisite model years ago where they removed remedial education because they knew that students weren't receiving credit. They would complete those courses, but it wouldn't necessarily mean they completed the course they needed to to graduate to do things at the four year level. And so they essentially ran a requisite model when I was there, and I taught some of those workshops as an undergraduate. Unknown

I taught the freshman composition courses as a graduate, and I worked in their writing center both as an undergraduate and graduate student when I left. You graduate and you look for a job. I started in the California community college system, and it was a very different feel because you're kind of expected to teach remedial courses. This is the way a lot of the curriculum is designed across the state 1 to 3, maybe four levels below transfer level. When I started there, I acclimated to a different system. Right. I'm a brand new faculty member out of graduate school and it was a very different system to work in, but one that I felt like that's the new system, right? I was being trained in a new layer of the California higher ed system, and I thought, okay, well, this isn't what I'm used to, but this is what is kind of expected. And so I was very much thrown into the remedial education at that point.

Fain: And talk to me about over the years how you saw the reforms take effect and that experience for you as an instructor.

Armstrong: The reforms for me as an instructor. Personally, I think we're a long time coming. When I started teaching early on at Modesto Junior College, in that first year of being a full time faculty member there, I quickly learned that my remedial students in those classes, I shouldn't say my roommate, they should say the remedial classes. They were placed there and they were students of color predominant. And as I taught higher level courses, one level below transfer or transfer level English or even the subsequent course, which is usually like a logic and composition course, those classrooms became more predominantly white. Even though I was working in Hispanic serving institutions throughout the Central Valley, where two thirds of our students are of Hispanic descent. Right. And one would expect that they would be represented in those classes, but they really weren't. And it was a moment of cognitive dissonance for me. But then the kind of geography of the landscape at the time was these were normal parts of the course of the coursework. They were sequence layers to prepare students to be successful in their transfer level courses. And because I care about my students, I wanted them to be successful. And I taught those courses passionately, tried to engage students so that they would be prepared. And then data and you get experience in the field and you start to see, wait a second, do they need these things? And so I was primed when acceleration push was happening in California, where the idea was to reduce those sequences from three for the levels below to like one level below if you could. Right. But either way, to reduce the sequence for your students. And so we engaged in that. And then when AB 705 came to really change the landscape even more to say like no, even that one level below is not serving students best. I was really ready for that because the training I'd actually come from said that that was likely the best model to support all the students. And particularly because of where I'm working and in the locations that I've been teaching, that means helping students of color who have been historically disadvantaged by those remedial structures. And so I think I was ready to do that and engage in it, and I've been doing that for the last couple of years.

Fain: So obviously you've seen the aggregate data. You have an understanding of the statewide experience here. But in your personal experience as an instructor, have you seen a difference in the classroom, you know, the students you're serving and the success stories being not necessarily as much stratified by race?

Armstrong: Absolutely. One of the few first changes, even in the accelerated model, right, was students who were typically placed in the lowest level were suddenly in this, you know, one level below transfer. And students where I would interview them and I would ask them like, hey, how does this feel to you? Right. And they would tell me, I feel like I'm being treated like a college student. I don't have to retake the class that I've taken. I took in high school that they felt like they were trusted, like they were believed in to do the work. And that is hugely motivational for, you know, trying to keep a student engaged for 18 weeks. Right. And retain them so that they can be successful by the end of the semester is a sense that it's meaningful to them and that it helps with their education and that we value them as instructors, as the institution. I can give you one good example from the acceleration model

where a student was coming from New Jersey and had already taken developmental ed there and was going to be placed in the lowest level developmental ed in our sequence. We had just started the accelerated model and so that student took that course and she was amazing, became a tutor, completed within a year of the freshman composition course. Right. She is now a teacher. She almost won a writing contest in the class that I was teaching because I encouraged her to submit her essay to a writing magazine for college students in a contest. And she got I always tell the students that if you get a rejection letter that is specific to your essay, that means they read it and they liked it. And that's what she got was a specific letter of rejection. I said, You keep that in your file because that's a good badge of honor as you learn to write. And she felt that change, that the system didn't treat her like she didn't understand what she was doing or couldn't learn or had to retake these courses. And those classes were much more diverse. Suddenly you saw more Hispanic students, right? Or students who identify as Hispanic, more African-American students in the higher level courses. And that's even increased in AB 705 landscape after the implementation officially in 2019. Locally, 100% of our students are in freshman composition. But if we take away the requisite course right, which is in many ways still flagged as kind of remedial support course, but taken simultaneously, that number is of students who are eligible for freshman composition without support is above 80%. If you look at just the year prior to that, prior to the implementation as a total for the district, for our district, it was 40 something percent. If you look at you disaggregate that right, you start to see exactly what that means for the rest of the students that we had a predominant access for white students who enjoyed like a 50 to 60% access to freshman composition, but a 30% access for Hispanic students. And so you teach the class now, and I am in a classroom that looks like the dev ed classes of years ago when I first started teaching there diverse across the board. It's wonderful for students to be in a space that is like you are a college student and you're expected to do the college level work and we're going to do it together. I don't need to tell you this change is hard, particularly for instructors who've been working with vulnerable students on this for their whole careers.

Fain: What about your experience can help your peers? Both can see the urgency and the motivation to do this and to feel confident that it'll be the best way to serve students.

Armstrong: One of the things that I've been speaking to my colleagues recently is I think it takes a personal reckoning first, and that's not easy, but it is super important. And I'll give just a brief example. I have a colleague who, after we made the changes, we were in the hallway talking and she commented in in this kind of moment of clarity, what about all of the other students for the years that I've been teaching? Right. There were impacts that were disproportionately felt, particularly by students of color. And when you have that reckoning, when you see that like it's really separate from our intent or our desires as teachers when the system is constructed in such a way to produce a result. And I think that acknowledgment really helps instructors take on new challenges because we get caught up sometimes in our identity as teachers and wanting to be really successful, wanting to really

support our students. And if we get too caught up in that, we feel like we want to protect that identity in that space. But if we can separate ourselves as teachers from the system that was producing the results and we can see the wonderful results where we're experiencing now, that still has work to do, don't get me wrong, but it's wonderful compared to what was happening years ago. We can then make changes for ourselves, right? Because we're addressing the systemic problems and then we feel okay to engage in what we need to engage in as teachers in the classroom. What works for the students we're teaching in the way that we teach right in this new system. So I think that's part of it is our identity. It's a sense of reckoning, our current selves with our past selves in that different system and acknowledging that it's not because we were bad people. I wasn't a bad teacher because I taught the remedial courses I was given when I first came out. I was still a very good person with good intentions. I think the second thing is, is that we have to see part of what we're doing is learning and growing as teachers. And I think we're really primed for this in graduate school. Right. We're learning. We want to learn all the things. Right. And part of this new changes is a continuation of that learning and development. We're going to need to think about how do we teach those students who have been historically left out of this environment? And if we can start to think about that, we think about ourselves as learners and teachers. Perfection is not the goal. Improvement is the goal. And if we can make those spaces. My experience is found that when faculty find space in that away from their previous identities and the previous system and a space to learn and grow, they take on big challenges and they're willing to take on institutional change. The leading from the middle group in California is big on this, that faculty can be leaders from the ground and moving and changing how classrooms are structured, how systems are structured, and then ultimately how students are successful in those environments.

Fain: Well, Erik, we'll leave it there. Thank you so much.

Armstrong: Yeah, thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.