

**Exploration of Institutional Theory in One California Central District Office That  
Shapes College Preparedness and Enrollment**

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## Abstract

To impact college enrollment rates, and subsequently college attainment throughout the United States, particularly among low socioeconomic status students, college enrollment outcomes must become a priority at the state, district, and school levels. Central school district offices across the United States face demands by educators and policymakers to ensure that students are prepared for college. The way in which central district offices respond will likely be influenced by the availability of resources. Drawing on institutional theory, this exploratory case study examines how one central district office's funding practices and resource allocations influence college preparedness and enrollment in California. The researchers interviewed central district leaders and high school administrators ( $N = 10$ ) to explore their perceptions of financial strategies and barriers that impact college preparation and enrollment rates, particularly in California, a state that ranks 40<sup>th</sup> in college enrollment. The analysis illustrates the resource challenges from the perspective of school administrators that interfere with preparing students for college, such as a limited authority to use site-level funds to hire qualified teachers to meet the instructional needs of their students. Further findings revealed that despite fiscal resources dedicated from this central district office to remove funding barriers that typically interfere with low-income and minority students' access to college, districts must move beyond the core curriculum to ensure that students are *ready* for college.

*Keywords:* institutional theory, college preparedness, college enrollment, school administrators, central district, barriers

## **Exploration of Institutional Theory in One California Central District Office That Shapes College Preparedness and Enrollment**

Within the last 30 years, the college enrollment rates in the United States have increased among all ethnic groups, from 11 million to 20.4 million (Bryan, Young, Griffin, & Henry, 2015). In California, specifically, a state with more than 1,000 central school district offices, educating more than 6 million students, the college enrollment rates have skyrocketed, particularly among various ethnic groups (Affeldt, 2015; Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009). For example, college enrollment rates among Latina/o students, the fastest growing ethnic group in California, increased by 74% from 1991 to 2001 (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). Valliani (2015) found that college enrollment rates among African-American students in California have increased 33% from 2004 to 2013. They were underrepresented at four-year public and nonprofit universities and overrepresented at community colleges and for-profit colleges (Valliani, 2015). Despite significant college enrollment gains across ethnic groups (Bryan et al., 2015; Cox, 2016), California ranks 40<sup>th</sup> in the nation on college preparedness and lags behind other states in college attendance (Johnson, 2010).

Over the last decade, many states have introduced policies, programs, systems, funding strategies, and practices aimed at improving college preparedness and enrollment outcomes (Bae & Darling-Hammond, 2014; Johnson, 2010; Pitre, 2011), placing central district offices in key positions to influence college-related outcomes. Specifically, California's Department of Education (2017) recently adopted new a college and career accountability system, College and Career Indicators (CCI), to evaluate how well prepared students are for college or career by completing a series of

rigorous coursework. College preparedness/readiness (CPR) is defined as the preparation level that students need to succeed in college without the need for remediation (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Today, central district offices in the United States, as well as in California, provide students with more access to rigorous college preparatory and advanced courses such as Advanced Placement (AP), Career Technical Education (CTE), dual enrollment, and International Baccalaureate (IB) to meet the eligibility requirements to gain college admissions (Johnson, 2010). A report released by the Public Policy Institute of California indicates that over the last 10 years, course completion rates to meet the college entrance requirements to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) have increased more than 28% (Jackson & Rodriguez, 2017). However, other research suggests that California high school graduates, on average, are academically less qualified for college than high school graduates in other states (Johnson, 2010). Venezia and Jaeger (2013) suggested that one reason why students are less prepared for college is because of the difference in what is taught in high school and what colleges expect.

Policymakers and educators agree that postsecondary preparedness, enrollment, and attainment in the United States are critical to remain competitive in the global market (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; Nunez & Kim, 2012). Among low socioeconomic status (SES) students, this is especially important and has prompted the need to understand barriers to college preparedness and enrollment as a priority at the state, district, and school levels. For example, these barriers may include high student-to-counselor ratios that create large caseloads for counselors, low social capital, and a lack of resources. A contrary example, the *frog pond* effect, has shown resourceful high

schools to negatively impact students' postsecondary goals through *winner-take-all* organizational practices (Espenshade, Hale, & Chung, 2005). Even though barriers such as high student-to-counselor ratios can impact matriculation to postsecondary institutions, past research also indicates that researchers lack consensus on the benefits of high schools with low or high amounts of resources (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Espenshade et al., 2005; Owens, 2010; Riegle-Crumb, 2010). Consequently, there is a need for further research to determine how funding practices and resource allocation within central district offices influence or interfere with postsecondary goals. Additionally, it is possible that all school district resources may or may not be as influential to postsecondary goals. This study seeks to examine the impact of these funding resources.

### **California Budget Context**

Prioritizing college preparedness and enrollment in state budgets is critical for K-12 schools across the United States in order to influence low college enrollment rates and workforce gaps. Chingos and Blagg (2017) argued that state funding policies regarding public schools are complicated. Although each state's funding policies, models, and formulas are unique (Chingos & Blagg, 2017), one of the challenges identified by many researchers that is detrimental to college preparedness and enrollment rates is a state's funding challenges (Bardhan & Walker, 2011; Chingos & Blagg, 2017; Freelon, Bertrand, & Rogers, 2012; Hill, 2012; Johnson, 2010; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, & Li, 2008). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), 29 states were still providing less funding to public schools since the 2008 recession (Leachman, Masterson, & Figueroa, 2017). In many states, such as

Arizona, Idaho, Mississippi, and North Carolina, to mention a few, funding levels in K-12 education have been cut by seven percent (Leachman et al., 2017).

Over the last three years, the infrastructure and funding levels in California K-12 public schools have decreased by 10% (Conklin & Smith, 2004; Freelon et al., 2012). California public schools spend less funding on K-12 education than other states (Affeldt, 2015; Freelon et al., 2012). In 2007-2008, California was ranked 44<sup>th</sup> in per-pupil spending (Affeldt, 2015) and continues to fall behind the national per-pupil spending average (Freelon et al., 2012). From 2013-2014, California spent less in per-pupil spending (\$3,462) than the national average (\$12,156), which has resulted in schools reducing the number of course offerings, laying off teachers and school counselors, restricting course choice, cutting instructional materials, eliminating counseling resources, and a host of other resources (Fensterwald, 2017; Freelon et al., 2012), all of which impacts college preparedness and enrollment.

In 2013-2014, California adopted a funding system, the local control funding formula (LCFF), which allows the state to allocate funding to school districts based on student needs (Bae & Darling-Hammond, 2014). Two purposes behind LCFF is to organize resources equitably and to offer additional resources to those students with the greatest need (Affeldt, 2015). Under LCFF, central district offices experience more freedom to allocate funds. However, Affeldt (2015) noted that while LCFF allows central district offices more discretion on how they spend state dollars and on what goals they set, they must focus on eight priorities (basic services, student engagement, school climate, parent involvement, student achievement, course access, implementation of state standards, and other student outcomes). Although California has adopted a new

funding system to support under-resourced schools and students, full implementation is not expected until 2020-2021 (Affeldt, 2015). In addition, LCFF did not increase K-12 funding; the state simply redistributed existing funding (Affeldt, 2015), and is yet to know the full impact it has on public districts and schools.

### **Central District Office Context**

Another barrier that interferes with college preparedness and enrollment rates in the United States is institutional structures and power dynamics. Central district offices have complex structures, including systems, priorities, metrics, and accountability standards that frustrate decision-making at the school site level (Honig, 2004; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Researchers noted that fiscal oversight is more prominent at the district level rather than school level (Conklin & Smith, 2004; Perna et al., 2008; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Some states have centralized their public school finance systems such as Michigan and Kansas (Chingos & Blagg, 2017), which researchers have found creates greater equity for students (Johnston & Duncombe, 1998; Zimmer & Jones, 2005). However in many states, educational decisions are decentralized. For example, decentralized finance systems in California give over 15,000 public school districts the authority to make instructional design decisions on behalf of 49 million students (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Such structures influence the academic and non-academic resource allocation for African-American, Native-American, and Latino students who are more likely to attend high-poverty public schools (Bryan et al., 2015; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

Within a decentralization funding structure, school districts often maintain fiscal control over 80 percent of the school resources, leaving school administrators' limited

budget flexibility to determine personnel decisions and how resources are distributed (Conklin & Smith, 2004). For example, school districts may decide the number of school counselors that can be hired for each site to support the academic, career, and social/emotional needs of students and to determine whether funding is available for college visits. Yet, research has shown that when school administrators have control over resource allocations, student performance improves (Roza, Davis, & Guin, 2007). Nevertheless, researchers note that states with both centralized and decentralized funding systems experience unintended consequences (Johnston & Duncombe, 1998; Zimmer & Jones, 2005), and for some states those consequences are reflected in low college enrollment rates, particularly among minority students and students from low-income families (Bryan et al., 2015; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

For instance, Freelon et al.'s (2012) study on 227 high school principals, of which 22 percent were from California, found that schools with 90 percent or more Latino, African-American, and Native American students were more likely to have unqualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, offer less instructional days, fewer counseling and college access opportunities, and an inferior college curriculum than those schools with more Caucasian and Asian students. Further findings revealed that funding cuts prevented students from taking accelerated courses in summer school, limited intervention courses needed for struggling students, and interfered with offering core curriculum required to meet most college eligibility requirements. Unlike schools serving wealthier families that rely on additional funding through property tax increases and private donations, high-poverty schools rely heavily on families, who oftentimes cannot



afford additional expenses (Freelon et al., 2012). Such budget constraints have contributed to low college enrollment rates in California (Johnson, 2010).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine how one central district office's funding practices and resource allocations shape college preparedness and enrollment in California. Over two decades from 1997-2016, previous research on college preparedness and outcomes had focused quantitatively on how high schools in the United States prepare students for college (Hill, Bregman, & Andrade, 2014; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hill, 2012). More recently, one study from the Midwest has emerged on the central district office's role on school improvement outcomes (Mania-Singer, 2017). However, few studies have examined institutional theory qualitatively in the context of central district office's funding practices and allocation of resources to increase college preparedness and enrollment. Further, the utilization of institutional theory as a guiding framework advances the knowledge on fiscal strategies used by a medium-sized central district office in California that supports college access, particularly among students from low SES backgrounds.

Studies on institutional theory in the context of public education has increased over the years (Burch, 2007). Institutional theorists argue that there are informal (habits, norms, and policies) and formal (legislation and regulations) rules that govern, influence, and ultimately shape institutions (Burch, 2007; Meyers & Rowans, 1977; Rowe & Wehrmeyer, 2001). When exploring the complexities of institutions, researchers have used institutional theory to examine educational policies, practices, and resources that operate under multifaceted regulatory and fiscal structures from outside agencies,

such as federal and state government (Burch, 2007; Hanson, 2001; Hill, 2012; Meyers & Rowan, 1977). Building on the seminal work of Meyers and Rowan (1977) and the concepts of organizational learning and memory, institutional theory concentrates on structural constraints in organizational environments (Hanson, 2001; Hill, 2012; Meyers & Rowan, 1977; Ogawa, 2016). This theory can assist with insights into fiscal and structural challenges as well as pressures faced by central district office leaders and school administrators when increasing college preparedness and enrollment outcomes. To shed light on the phenomenon, the following research question was asked: How do central district funding practices and resource apportionment influence college preparedness and enrollment outcomes?

### **Method**

A qualitative case study design was chosen to understand how central district office funding practices and the distribution of resources promote or interfere with college preparedness and enrollment outcomes. The primary unit of analysis is the central district office. This method allows for a comprehensive description from the viewpoint of high school administrators and central district office leaders on institutional policies and practices that advance or hinder college trajectories.

### **Participants**

We selected six leaders at the director-level who work directly with high schools and four school administrators (principals and assistant principals), five males and five females. All participants were employed in an urban district or in high schools in California. All the participants held master's degrees, 10 held administrative credentials, one of the four administrators held a doctoral degree, and one of the central district

leaders held a doctoral degree. The age range of the participants was 40 to over the age of 54 years, with an average of 15 years of experience in education. Each district leader was responsible for oversight or access to school budgets, programs, and site resources. Each school administrator had fiscal responsibilities.

### **Central District's Demographics**

The central district for this study has over 30 elementary, seven middle, and seven high schools. The central district was public and located in California. In 2015, the total number of students served within the central district was 40,000, of which 12,000 were in grades 9 through 12. Of the students enrolled, over 80% were identified as low SES and participated in the free/reduced lunch program, 32% were English learners, and .01% were foster youth. Students' ethnicities included: 10% African-American, 80% Latino, 5% Pacific Islander, and 5% Caucasian (California Department of Education, 2015).

### **Central district's college and career preparedness approach**

Consistent with California's newly created CCI's, this central district office is held responsible for ensuring that students are college- and career-ready by attaining one of the following measures: a passing score on at two or more AP or IB exams; completing at least two semester/three quarters of an academic or CTE dual enrollment course; scoring at least a 3 on both the ELA and Mathematics on Smarter Balanced Summative Assessment Consortium (SBAC); completing the A-G college eligibility requirements for the UC or CSU systems plus one of the above criteria; or completing one CTE pathway plus one of the above criteria (California Department of Education, 2017).

To address the CCI's, this district has incorporated the following approaches: increased professional development opportunities for teachers across all subjects; all students are encouraged to take AP/IB courses; all non-A-G courses have been eliminated from course offering to ensure that students satisfy the college eligibility requirements; students are offered college-level courses through a local community college on the high school campus; and intervention and tutoring support is offered for all students enrolled in AP/IB courses. In 2017, the district-wide graduation and college preparedness data increased (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Central District College Preparedness Rates*

<b>Descriptors</b>	<b>2016 Rates</b>	<b>2017 Rates</b>
Graduation	87%	91%
AP Enrollment	90%	80%
AP Exam Pass Rates	40%	55%
A-G Course Completion	37%	45%
College Enrollment (2-and 4-year)	54%	60%

*Note.* All numbers in the table have been rounded up.

### **Central district's funding approach**

College preparedness and outcomes are supported by several funding sources at the central district level (See Table 2), outlined in the local control accountability plan (LCAP), which is a strategic planning document that underscores how central district offices will address the eight funding priorities and outlines the expenditures needed. Community members, school site personnel, students, and other stakeholders are

invited to offer feedback on the central district office’s plan to allocate funding within the context of the eight priorities.

**Table 2**

*Central District College Preparedness and Enrollment Funding Allocations through the LCAP*

<b>Descriptors</b>	<b>Year 1 LCAP (2018-2019)</b>	<b>Year 2 LCAP (2019-2020)</b>	<b>Year 3 LCAP (2020-2021)</b>
CPR Activities			
CTE Pathways			
Advanced Placement	\$25,000,000	38,000,000	45,000,000
Innovation			

*Note.* Data were derived from the LCAP on the central district office’s website and rounded up.

## Measures

**Interviews.** Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were a source of data for this study. The researchers used institutional theory as a basis to construct 10 interview questions. The 10 interview questions centered on funding practices and policies, and resource allocation. Validation of the interview questions was conducted by an expert panel of doctoral-level professionals in the field of education. Two members of the panel had been school principals and district personnel for more than 20 years and one member had worked in education for 30 years. The first researcher sent the interview questions to a panel of three experts via email and requested feedback. The panel did not suggest any changes.

**Archival materials.** The researchers used the LCAP as a secondary data source. Specifically, the LCAP showed the amount of funding allocated towards each LCFF priority, detailed the central district’s metrics and objectives, and recommended an action plan for an implementation year, over a three-year period.

**Focus group data.** Data were collected on three participants. The focus group questions were derived from the interview questions and were used to answer the research question. The focus group session lasted more than 60 minutes. The focus group generated rich data and allowed the researcher to delve deep and explore the research questions (Stalmeijer, McNaughton, & Van Mook, 2014). Validity and reliability were strengthened through the triangulation of multiple data sources.

### **Data Analysis**

The method of analysis selected for this study was thematic analysis, which involved identifying patterns, insights, or concepts in the data that helps to explain why those patterns are there (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The process of thematic analysis allowed the first researcher to search across the interviews, focus group, and archival materials to identify repeated patterns for meaning and potential codes, and to identify themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The process of open and axial coding allowed the researcher to break apart each data source, make connections, and categorize the data. The first researcher divided the transcribed individual and focus group interviews into manageable units, which occurred by arranging the participants' responses under the theoretical construct, interview, and focus group questions. This process offered the first researcher a more efficient method to view and find commonalities from the participants. In addition, coding of the college-related archival materials allowed the first researcher to authenticate information from the interviews and focus group discussions as well as corroborate codes and potential themes.

## **Trustworthiness Procedures**

Researchers used the process of triangulation and member checking to strengthen construct validity during the data collection process, which strengthens the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. The selection of triangulation allowed the researcher to collect data using a combination of sources (semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and archival materials) to incorporate multiple perspectives. Although archival materials did not require insight from the participants to increase the researchers understanding due to its pre-existing nature (Yin, 2014), the materials were instrumental in authenticating information from the interviews and focus group and were determined to be a valued data source.

Another method used to strengthen trustworthiness was member checking. The first researcher asked each participant to review the interview and focus group transcriptions to check for accuracy and offer feedback. Each participant returned the transcripts within the one-week timeframe with no corrections or feedback.

## **Results**

### **School Administrators' Perspectives**

**Internal and external institutional pressures.** One of the themes that emerged in this study was internal and external institutional pressures. Some school administrators expressed frustration with decisions made by the central district office regarding funding practices, specifically having limited authority to use site-level funds to hire qualified teachers to meet the instructional needs to effectively impact college preparedness. Without qualified teachers, the belief expressed was that many students would be underprepared for college, making it difficult for schools to meet the state

college readiness accountability standards, which creates external pressure. One administrator (P3) stated:

*The expectation is for all of our students to take rigorous coursework to be prepared for college, but the budget is not tied to ensuring that kids are college-ready. Preparing kids for college go beyond offering workshops, presentations, and helping students with the mechanics of the college application. Preparing kids for college is tied to instruction. I need more money to hire qualified teachers who can skillfully teach the core curriculum. Many of my teachers do not have the skills to help students prepare for the rigor of college.*

Another administrator (P1) added:

*We are accountable for increasing our Advanced Placement rates, ensuring that students meet the SBAC standards, and all the other college and career readiness indicators set forth by the state. You have so many different things within schools that you must improve that we're basically mediocre at everything.*

One administrator (P4) working in a school with the highest AP scores and college-going rates in the district commented, "Limited funding adds a tremendous amount of pressure on educators. We're asked to do so much with very little. Now that the State has developed a new way to measure college readiness, our teachers are buckling under the pressure." Adding a different perspective, another administrator (P2) stated:

*Our biggest challenge is not budget flexibility, it is getting adults within the school to believe that every student must move on to the next level of education to survive. Right now, not everyone has the expectation that every student has the potential and ability to go to college. It's simply not their priority.*

**Equity versus equality.** Another theme prevalent in the analysis was the idea of equity versus equality. For instance, one school administrator (P3) with the highest



population of English-language learners, foster and homeless students, highest low-income population, and 38 percent college-acceptance rate in the district expressed that each school receives the same amount of money rather than giving each school the resources they need to meet the demands by the state and district office. He stated:

*The district has taken a one-size-fits-all approach to keeping everything uniform instead of allowing schools to meet the individual needs of the students. The bulk of the funding goes towards personnel. We're told the number of personnel that we can hire even if we need more personnel to support the growing number of students.*

Another administrator (P4) with the highest student enrollment in the target district indicated, "My biggest problem is the lack of equity with how funding is distributed by our district. My colleagues at other sites with fewer students receive the same dollar allocation, number of teachers, and counselors." Another administrator (P1) indicated that although leaders in schools are doing their best to get their students prepared for college, he believes that limited and unequal funding prevents schools from fully supporting college preparation and enrollment. He stated: "The money from the district office goes to schools to promote the core curriculum, which is a high school diploma. We cannot prepare kids for college without addressing personnel and resource equity."

Although school administrators identified several challenges and expressed concerns about budget autonomy to make important decisions about resource allocation to bolster college preparation and outcomes rates, they all expressed having done their best to put programs in place to "level the playing field," For instance, eliminating courses that do not meet the California public university system entrance requirements, increasing the number of college-level course offerings during and after

school, and institutionalizing an online college readiness tool, *Naviance*, to educate students and families about college and career options.

### **Central District Office Perspective**

**Underfunding.** Central district leaders offered their perspective on budget flexibility, funding challenges, strategies and resource allocations that either interfere or promote college preparedness and enrollment in the midst of underfunding in California. One district leader in the focus group (P7) provided insight into the overall condition of budget flexibility and some of the challenges most public central district offices face in California and stated:

*The reality is that public schools in California are simply underfunded. With the enormous increase in retirement contributions, many district offices are struggling to remain solvent. Such a phenomenon impacts programming, hiring decisions and limits the types of resources needed to promote our goals outlined in the LCAP, including college readiness.*

Another focus group participant (P6) from the central district office added, “One of the challenges in our district is the perception that the state has given additional monies to support students, but that’s not true. We still operate on lean budgets.” Adding to the conversation on funding challenges central district offices experience, P5 stated:

*In urban school districts, there will never be enough money to hire more school personnel, pay the enormous cost for benefits, run expensive programs, purchase new books every year, purchase new technology or renovate old buildings and classrooms. There simply is not enough money, so we must teach school leaders how to work with a lean budget.*

Another district leader (P9) added:

*People do not work in urban public education because there's tons of money and resources available, we work in these districts and within schools because we want to make a difference in public education. We believe that students of color and those from low-income backgrounds have the potential to succeed. Is it fair that school districts are underfunded? No, but we try to make the best of a difficult situation.*

**Prioritizing college readiness.** While central district office leaders agreed that limited funding was challenging, they also agreed that preparing students for college and career was the number one priority. For example, one leader (P10) during the interview highlighted that the district allocates a significant amount of money to support college preparedness and stated:

*Every high school offers career-technical education (CTE) pathways and dual enrollment courses through a local community college. We've dedicated over \$9 million dollars to building college knowledge amongst school counselors, advanced placement (AP) teachers, and K-12 classroom teachers. In addition, over \$5 million dollars have been allotted for teacher professional development.*

One female district leader (P5) indicated:

*We pay the bulk of AP exam fees for our students, which is over \$90 per student. We also allocate each high school funds to offset the cost of college application fees for students who are not eligible for a fee waiver. We recently partnered with our local four-year college to tutor our AP students to bolster the exam pass rates. Without these funding dollars towards college and career resources, many of our students simply would not apply to college.*

Offering a different viewpoint, another district leader (P7) and former male principal added:

*We recognize that our school principals, assistant principals, teachers, counselors, and other site personnel are fighting to not only prepare our kiddos for college, but they have the added pressure and responsibility to meet state mandates, ensure that kids are not absence or truant from school, identify outside resources when students are struggling emotionally, address remediation, provide intervention, you name it, they do it.*

### **Discussion**

California's new accountability system has created demands and pressures for central district offices to measure how well schools are preparing students for success beyond high school. School administrators criticized central district leaders funding approach and argued that certain practices created barriers that interfered with preparing students for college. Some of those barriers included funding restrictions (limited funds to hire skilled teachers), resource allocations (inequity in the distribution of resources), limited decision-making (instructional and curriculum decisions are made at the central district office rather than by site leaders), and budget autonomy (ability to make decisions that would address specific school needs). For instance, one administrator indicated that the district's one-size-fits-all approach does not work when the student population increases to over 2600, while at another school within the same district, the student enrollment is 1700, and yet both schools receive the same resource allocation. This approach leads to resource imbalance and affects school personnel's ability to serve the targeted needs of each student.

Further analysis revealed internal and external demands imposed on school sites by the state and district levels to prepare students for college using an accountability system that may or may not determine whether a student is truly prepared for college.

For example, Jackson and Rodriguez (2017) argued that meeting the college eligibility requirements in California alone does not mean that students are ready for college.

While central district leaders admitted that California public schools located in urban areas are underfunded, the data revealed deliberate funding strategies within the central district office that helped to remove fiscal barriers that typically interfere with a student applying to college. We found that central district leaders allocate millions of dollars through the LCAP to support a variety of college access efforts within high schools. Some of these efforts include funding college applications, advance placement costs, international baccalaureate fees, college course tuition and books through dual enrollment, college and graduation tracking tool such as *Naviance*, and professional development opportunities for all teachers and counselors. However, this study also found that despite resources dedicated to removing funding barriers that typically interfere with low-income and minority students' access to college, consistent with the literature findings (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013), preparing students for postsecondary success starts with quality instruction that goes beyond the core curriculum.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited by the research design, geographic location, and sample. The use of a single, exploratory case study design restricted the study to one district in California, which limited the results of this study to a specific region. Further, only four school administrators and six central district office leaders participated in this study, which represented a small number. As a result, this study was limited and may not be representative of all public high school administrators and central district office professionals.

Another limitation was that the first researcher works in the target central district office. To prevent bias, both researchers did not make assumptions based on what participants chose to share. In addition, the second researcher works in another state and had never met the participants, which allowed for an unbiased viewpoint when writing the analysis.

### **Implications**

Arguably, the key to increasing college enrollment rates within central district offices is the prioritization of college enrollment at the state level and increased funding to hire skilled teachers. Several administrators indicated that while preparing students to be college-ready is a state priority for K-12 public schools, increasing college enrollment is not. In addition, school administrators indicated that the central district provides funding to support college applications and activities, yet no additional funds are dedicated to hiring quality teachers. Based on this study, several practical implications emerged. To impact college enrollment rates, and subsequently college attainment throughout the United States, particularly among students from low SES backgrounds, college enrollment outcomes must become a priority at the state, district, and school levels. While California's new college and career indicators emphasize increasing access to rigorous college/career preparatory, advanced, and college-level courses while enrolled in high schools and completing a plan-of-study to graduate, it does not capture the number of students who apply to or attend college or the number of students who need to take remediation courses once they enter college. Thus, one practical implication for central district office's is to include a college application and enrollment goal as part of the LCAP and school improvement plan each year to

determine the impact on college enrollment outcomes. In addition, central district offices should further explore remediation data to determine whether students are college-ready as defined by many colleges and universities.

Another practical implication for central district offices is the need for additional funding for school counselors to serve underserved students. School counselors can play an important role in exposing students to information on college and making sure they are taking the courses needed that can help them meet the college eligibility requirements. Other implications emerged for school administrators. For instance, school administrators should form a postsecondary leadership team and include school counselors, AVID teachers, assistant principals, and department leads to discuss and devise a plan to introduce college planning starting with students in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In addition, the postsecondary leadership team can determine a scalable, inclusive delivery system for all grade levels to increase the college-going rate among underserved students. While resource imbalances and fiscal constraints may continue statewide and within central district offices, taking an inclusive approach to tackling low college enrollment rates may help school administrators prioritize job duties of school counselors.

### **Future Research**

Future research could study additional central district offices in California as well as in other states to better understand how systemic barriers to postsecondary outcomes are addressed. Also, there is very little information regarding alternative funding revenues, such as tax revenues of legalized marijuana sales, paid to school districts each year for educational programs. These programs may promote

postsecondary enrollment and training. Mentioned earlier, schools serving wealthier families rely on additional funding through property tax increases and private donations while high-poverty schools rely heavily on families, who oftentimes cannot afford additional expenses. Marijuana sales taxes are new to the state of California and future research could explore how this revenue stream may impact postsecondary outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

College preparedness and the attainment of postsecondary education is an important economic metric in the United States and will be for the foreseeable future. As more states prioritize postsecondary outcomes through the adoption of college and career readiness standards and the Common Core standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), central district offices can become conduits to help improve college preparation and enrollment rates. While many states have introduced policies, programs, systems, funding strategies, and practices aimed at improving college preparedness and enrollment outcomes (Bae & Darling-Hammond, 2014; Johnson, 2010; Pitre, 2011), prioritizing college preparedness and enrollment in state budgets is critical for K-12 schools across the United States to address the low college enrollment rates and workforce gaps.

Postsecondary enrollment and attainment begin with success in high school, which is defined as graduates leaving with the skills and knowledge to thrive in postsecondary education or skilled workforce (Conklin & Smith, 2004). California's CCI, a broad means for the state to measure how well schools are preparing students for success beyond high school, may be useful in helping central district and high school leaders better align their instructional practices beyond the core curriculum to address



low college enrollment rates. Despite the fiscal and resource challenges that school administrators face in impoverished public schools, the role of the school counselor is arguably the most critical in supporting the postsecondary trajectories of low SES students. As the demand increases for higher college enrollment rates and for a skilled, educated workforce, several approaches may be beneficial. This study of one central district office in California offers insight to central district and school leaders across the country that promotes the hiring of school counselors and skilled teachers to support that every student graduates high school ready to pursue college and their career.

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