

Brief: Increase College-Going Rates in California and Fulfill the Goals of LCFF

As unrealistic as it may be to expect 100% college going rate for high school seniors, it is equally unrealistic to expect to increase college going rates without strategically developing both instructional and learning-support strategies. The forthcoming shifts in California's education funding process created by the new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), which places school finance decisions at the local level while requiring certain specific priorities are met, will give the phrase new meaning. LCFF will require schools and school districts to think "outside of the box," and to develop cogent plans to meet a new and progressive set of measures for California's educational system, including improving college, post-secondary enrollment and completion and graduation rates.

The natural inclination for school administration during times of school reform is to first consider instructional strategies as a means of addressing almost everything associated with school reform goals including college, postsecondary and graduation rates ; however research points to the importance of utilizing untapped non-instructional approaches (Adelman & Taylor, 2006).). This brief provides a number of well-documented and researched strategies supporting school counseling programs as a method for increasing the 4-year college-going rate.

The Extent of the Current Problem:

The caliber of a student's experience in high school has important implications for college enrollment and completion, however recent research points to discrepancies between current practices and college attainment in California's schools (de Cos, Chan, & Salling, 2009). A recent UCLA report found California's 4-year college going rate to be one of the worst in the country. New York and Massachusetts high school students were twice as likely to go to a 4-year college directly from high school as students from California (Rogers, Terriquez, Valadares, & Oaks, 2006). College-going rates in California also vary significantly depending on a student's ethnicity, gender, and the type of region where the student's high school was located (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2007).

California's low college-going rate has been documented for the better part of four decades and can be directly correlated to high student-to-counselor ratios (Rogers, Terriquez, Valadares & Oak, 2006). California has the largest student to school counselor ratio in the country (1:1016) and is quadruple the recommended 250:1 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association. The high ratios result in counselors having limited time with students, limited resource capacity and limited organizational commitment. Likewise, because of the myriad of responsibilities placed on high school counselors due to additional non-counseling responsibilities and high caseloads a state of triage occurs. Counselors have limited opportunity to do substantive work with 9th and 10th graders because of the pressing needs of 11th and 12th graders as well as lack of efficiencies in the program (Plank & Jordan, 2001). While a quality college preparatory program includes classroom presentations, counseling interventions, parent involvement, and targeted counseling towards identified populations, it remains one of the areas of least support for California students, partially attributable to the excessively high

student to school counselor ratios and school administrators requiring their counseling staff to spend a disproportionate amount of time on non-career/college school priorities (de Cos, Chan & Salling, January, 2009).

Strategic steps needed:

The amount of time devoted to college counseling is significantly correlated with positive college-going rates (ref). Private schools counselors report spending more than 50% of their time on college counseling, compared to high income public schools that spend only 25% on college counseling and low income public high schools that spend even less (Clinedinst, Hurley & Kawkins, 2011). Three critical determinants of college-going behavior include access to financial resources, rigorous academic preparation, and information on the college choice process. Nowhere is this more evident than in the underserved student population within our schools. Programs such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) have been shown to positively impact the transformation of schoolwide academic culture, resulting in dramatic increases in college and career success (Kouba, 2011)). The AVID program is primarily directed towards underrepresented populations; however, it is also designed for whole school and district implementation. School counselors often serve as campus coordinators of AVID, collaborating with teachers and empowering students in academic, career, and life skills.

The value of school counseling in supporting college and career attainment for students is also captured in recent research by Engberg & Gilbert (2013) who utilized a nationally representative data set investigating 21,000 9th graders in 940 schools (or approximately 76% of public schools). Engberg & Gilbert employed a multi-stage design for generalization to 4.2 million students in 23,000+ schools. Three key characteristics emerged as strategies to improve four-year college-going behaviors and rates: 1) evidence of norms and resources of high school counseling departments; 2) percentage of hours school counselors spent on college counseling; and 3) the average school counselor caseload. Nine school improvement considerations emerged:

- 1) Reduce school counseling caseloads
- 2) Allocate school counselors' time toward college-related tasks
- 3) Make college preparation the priority among the goals of the school counseling department
- 4) Ensure organizational habits of high schools support a college-going culture
- 5) Provide resources for the school counseling department to function as an important intermediary in enhancing college opportunities include resources allocated toward financial aid assistance, college fairs, and course-taking opportunities at four-year colleges
- 6) Increase the percentage of students enrolled in AP classes
- 7) Focus on the overall high school learning environment which can increase productivity by reducing violence and other school-related problems (e.g. tardiness, absenteeism, dropout rates)
- 8) Student field trips to 2-year colleges should also include visits to 4-year college institutions
- 9) Provide professional development for high school counselors to develop a college counseling knowledge base and the skills necessary to develop a meaningful college counseling program (Engberg & Gilbert, 2013).

Using data from the 2009 High School Longitudinal Study (HSLs), Engberg & Gilbert identified information on the counseling infrastructure of high schools and made recommendations for how specific norms and resources of school counseling departments correlate with college enrollment outcomes and college-going climate. Three categories were identified: 1) *Divergent Schools*, with a limited focus on college preparation and limited resources dedicated to facilitating college opportunities; 2) *Emergent Schools*, which had more available resources than divergent schools, however lacking a strong focus on college preparation; and 3) *Convergent Schools*, which held a strong focus on college preparation with an emphasis on facilitating the college choice process (ref).

Divergent Schools (6%)	Emergent Schools (59%)	Convergent Schools (35%)
Limited % of time spent on postsecondary counseling. Low/average counseling caseloads. Norms of the counseling department not centered on college-going Few resources available to facilitate college choice process	High % of time devoted to college prep. Highest average counseling caseloads. Beneficial resources offered in college choice process Norms have not yet placed high priority on college-going	High % of hours devoted to college prep. Lower average counseling caseloads. Norms and resources, providing a more optimal environment for college-going behaviors <i>(Engberg & Gilbert, 2013)</i>

School counselors also coordinate career pathways programs, early college programs, and the Early Assessment Programs. They also are trained to prepare students to take the ACT and SAT, and to facilitate college partnerships that provide traditionally underserved youth with pathways to and through college.

While California’s Legislative Analyst’s Office asserts “the vast majority of districts will see significant increases in funding under the LCFF,” the difficult and necessary work for school districts in the next few months will be to set the foundation for how funds will be prioritized to meet a myriad of new requirements – not just those created by LCFF, but also by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS challenge districts to prepare 21st century students to be competitive in an increasingly diverse, global market place. Rigorous and relevant academic preparation will be required during and after high school. Strategically focusing both on classroom instruction and school counseling services is a wise approach to meeting the expectations of both CCSS and LCFF if we are to ensure educational equity and access to college for all students. Credentialed school counselors are specifically trained to provide student support services aimed at identifying and resolving barriers to achievement, and creating pathways for student achievement. Improving school counseling opportunities for students is a necessary and significant factor in the college choice process, particularly for underserved students, and a critical component in any comprehensive college access strategy.

Reference

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Authors:

Loretta Whitson is the Executive Director of the California Association of School Counselors, an 18-year veteran district administrator overseeing pupil and student services, former Commissioner of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and a visiting professor with the California State University, Northridge.

Diana Stephens, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor and Coordinator of the School Counseling Credential Program at California Lutheran University, an educational consultant and facilitator for culturally inclusive schools, and co-author of *Culturally Proficient Collaboration: Use and Misuse of School Counselors*.