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*Research to Make a Difference*

# UC/ACCORD

**Critical Conditions for Equity  
and Diversity in College Access:  
Informing Policy and Monitoring Results**

**Jeannie Oakes**

*A multi-campus research center harnessing UC's research expertise to increase the quality and equity of California's diverse public schools, colleges and universities.*

Californians are determined to open the doors to college for California students from diverse schools and communities. For this to happen, educators and policymakers need information that goes far deeper into California's education system than what is currently available—test scores, API rankings, and rates of CSU and UC eligibility. Although these indicators convey important information about the outcomes of K-12 schooling, including inequities in college preparation, they provide no clues about *why* particular students, schools, and communities achieve poorly. Neither can they guide policymakers or educators as they seek programs and policies that will improve the results.

To help policymakers and educators monitor the state's progress toward reducing disparities in achievement and college access, UC ACCORD is developing and reporting annually on key education indicators, including *status indicators* and *leading indicators*.

**Status indicators** will report educational outcomes that are needed to understand school success and the equity of school achievement. These outcomes include such measures as the size of the achievement gaps among various groups of students and the relative representation of students from groups among UC eligible students.

**Leading indicators** will monitor whether the state is furthering its capacity to reduce disparities in learning resources and opportunities. UC ACCORD has conducted and drawn upon considerable research to develop leading indicators. These indicators point to a set of conditions that students in educationally disadvantaged communities require for learning and successful college preparation. For the most part, middle and upper-middle class youngsters from college-going families routinely enjoy these conditions in their schools and communities.

- Safe and Adequate School Facilities
- A College-Going School Culture
- Rigorous Academic Curriculum
- Qualified Teachers
- Intensive Academic and Social Supports
- Opportunities to Develop a Multi-Cultural College-Going Identity
- Family-Neighborhood-School Connections

Together, these seven conditions are the basis for a comprehensive, research-based framework for understanding the barriers to equity in achievement and college going and for monitoring the state's progress toward removing those barriers. Most important is that these conditions are alterable through improved policy and practice; therefore, they can become key targets for intervention. ACCORD's indicators can inform policymaking aimed at increasing diversity in educational achievement and successful college participation.

We define and explain the importance of each of these conditions below. Examples of studies that support the importance of each condition are reported in the notes at the end of the paper.<sup>1</sup>

- **Safe and Adequate School Facilities.**

**What is it?** Students must attend schools that are free of overcrowding, violence, unsafe and unsanitary conditions, and other features of school climates that diminish achievement and access to college.

**Why Does it Matter?** Schools must be free of overcrowding and deteriorating facilities so students and teachers can devote their attention and energy to learning and teaching.<sup>2</sup> At schools where laboratory, athletic, and teaching facilities are in decay or under-resourced, faculty quit at alarming rates. Unsafe, deteriorated, and overcrowded schools threaten students' social values of integrity, discipline, and civic-mindedness and allow little enthusiasm for life-long learning.<sup>3</sup> Overcrowding reduces students' ability to pay attention and increases school violence.<sup>4</sup> In such schools, students achieve less; rates of teacher and student absenteeism are higher than at schools that do not have these problems.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes overcrowding is addressed by putting students on year-round, multi-track schedules with fewer days of school. These students suffer interrupted and lost instructional time; limited access to advanced courses and specialized programs; ill timed breaks and correspondingly limited access to extracurricular activities and enrichment programs; and poorer academic performance.<sup>6</sup>

- **A College-Going Culture**

**What is it?** In a college-going culture, teachers, administrators, parents, and students expect students to have all the experiences they need for high achievement and college preparation. Adults encourage students to exert the necessary effort and persistence throughout their entire educational career, and adults work diligently to eliminate school-sanctioned alternatives to hard work and high expectations. These high expectations are coupled with specific interventions and information that emphasize to students that college preparation is a normal part of their childhood and youth. Students believe that college is for *them* and is not reserved for the exceptional few who triumph over adversity to rise above all others.

**Why Does it Matter?** Students' learning is strongly tied to the expectations of those around them and the quality of their opportunities to learn. Minority students, in particular, perform poorly when their teachers do not believe in their abilities.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, in a college-going culture, educators believe that all of their students can learn at very high levels. A school culture that expects all students to spend time and effort on academic subjects and emphasizes that effort will pay off fosters high levels of academic achievement.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, high expectations alone are not enough. However, when high expectations are present, teachers seem more able and willing to provide rigorous academic instruction and press for high standards. In turn, students respond to high expectations with greater effort, persistence, and achievement.<sup>9</sup> Caring adult advocates who provide specific information and encouragement for college going help students achieve that goal.<sup>10</sup> They facilitate close, supportive relationships and keep tabs on their students' progress.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, school-created peer groups can help students believe that college going and the hard work it takes seem "normal."<sup>12</sup> Students in such groups support one another's aspirations, share information, and counter the many forces in low-income communities that work against high achievement.

- **Rigorous Academic Curriculum**

**What is it?** Students are prepared for and have access to algebra in middle school and college preparatory and AP courses in high school.

**Why Does it Matter?** Students' course taking is key to their attending a four-year college, and the sequence of these courses, leading to advance work in high school, must start in middle school and early high school.<sup>13</sup> Students learn more in advanced courses with a rigorous curriculum. Further, advanced courses are required by competitive universities. The impact is particularly powerful for students of color. Often, students who thought they were "succeeding" in high school by getting good grades are devastated to find out that their courses have not prepared them with the skills, knowledge, or advanced credit to enter a four year college.

The more academic courses students take, the more positive their schooling outcomes. Advanced courses have positive effects on student achievement, particularly in science and mathematics, in students' preparedness for college, and in their success in college-level work.<sup>14</sup> Eighth graders who take algebra perform considerably better on the NAEP mathematics exam, and the more math they take the better they do.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the intensity and quality of students' high school courses is the most powerful factor in increasing students' chances for completing a four-year college degree, and that impact is far greater for African American and Latino students than any other pre-college opportunity.<sup>16</sup> Preparing for challenging high school classes demands a rigorous middle grades curricula—one undifferentiated by ability groups or tracks. Most students learn more in high-level classes (ability groups or tracks) than do students *with comparable prior achievement* who take lower level classes.<sup>17</sup> This should give pause to those who may believe that if students do not take advanced classes it is because they are not smart enough or are lazy.

- **Qualified Teachers.**

**What is it?** Knowledgeable, experienced, and fully certified teachers provide instruction that engages students in work of high intellectual quality. Importantly, in diverse communities, high quality teaching makes valued knowledge accessible to students from diverse backgrounds.

**Why Does it Matter?** One of the most powerful factors in students' academic success is their access to well-prepared teachers. Teacher quality including teacher certification status, degree in field, and participation in high-quality professional development all have a significant impact on student outcomes.<sup>18</sup> Improving the quality of teaching in the classroom has the greatest impact on students who are most educationally at risk, and, in some instances, the effects of well-prepared teachers on student achievement are stronger than the influences of student background factors, such as poverty, language background, and minority status.<sup>19</sup> Well-qualified teachers provide a wide range of teaching strategies: they ask questions that make students think and answer fully; they address students' learning needs and curriculum goals; they make subject matter accessible to diverse groups of students;<sup>20</sup> and they make rigorous learning satisfying and fun. Poorly qualified teachers spend more time on drill and practice.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, well-prepared teachers of students of color and language minority students use strategies that bridge students' home culture and language with the knowledge and skills that matter at school. They demonstrate a valuing of all cultures in the academic curriculum.<sup>22</sup>

- **Intensive Academic and Social Supports**

**What is it?** Teachers and counselors play a pivotal role in informing and preparing secondary students for college. Yet, all students require supports and assistance that takes place outside the classroom or school. To navigate the pathway to college successfully, students need support networks of adults and peers who help access tutors, material resources, counseling services, summer academic programs, SAT prep, coaching about college admissions and financial aid, and other timely assistance.

**Why Does it Matter?** Pointed efforts to provide students with the resources and information crucial for college preparation are particularly important for low income minority students who may not have the “social capital” or “college knowledge” necessary to negotiate the academic pipeline.<sup>23</sup> Interventions that bring additional assistance to low-income minority students boost their achievement in elementary school, their success in college preparatory middle and high school classes, and their likelihood of admission to and success in college. This help is more effective when it provides additional instruction on the material in students' regular classes than when it consists of a separate remedial curriculum. Teachers and counselors are the primary sources of “college knowledge” for Latino families, and they serve as “cultural brokers” for students seeking information and strategies for college access and academic success.<sup>24</sup>As the College Board makes clear to schools offering Advanced

Placement courses to disadvantaged minority students, “[S]chools with successful AP programs realize that not only should students be challenged with a rigorous curricula and motivation for learning, but the support network should also be present that makes it possible for them to succeed and difficult to fail.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the social networks students develop when they work one-on-one or in after-school settings with college students and well-informed adults can provide a form of access that students lack elsewhere in their families and communities.<sup>26</sup> When students in academic support programs become friends, they are more likely to succeed.<sup>27</sup>

- **Opportunities to Develop a Multi-Cultural College-Going Identity**

**What is it?** Students see college going as integral to their identities; they have the confidence and skills to negotiate college without sacrificing their own identity and connections with their home communities. They recognize that college is a pathway to careers that are valued in their families, peer groups, and local communities.

**Why Does it Matter?** Race and culture play an important role in shaping students’ college-going identities, and this role is related to the historical underrepresentation of many minorities in colleges. Partly as a result of past and present cultural and racial attitudes in the broader society, students of color may believe that college “is not for me.” Alternatively, they may believe, often with some cause, that they cannot hold both the cultural identity and language they have as well as the identity of a high-achieving student. Adults must work to shape a school culture that does not force students to choose between the culture, language, and values of their community and the majority culture and values that are broadly, if unnecessarily, associated with high academic achievement.

In contrast to commonly held views that low income students devalue education, studies suggest that they more likely turn away because of a real or perceived lack of opportunities.<sup>28</sup> A recent RAND study of low-income high school graduates who were eligible to attend the University of California, but chose not to, found that the students were most deterred by their beliefs that the university is “not for people like me,” and that that they weren’t prepared for the university’s high demands.<sup>29</sup> These perceptions arise, in part, as students internalize negative labels assigned to their racial and cultural groups. Black and Latino students are most susceptible to what Claude Steele terms “a stereotype threat.” That is, students who perceive that their race plays a role in their performance perform poorer on measures of academic achievement.<sup>30</sup>

Creating community and school-based programs help create environments where college attendance can be seen as the norm, not the exception, for students of color. Students benefit when outreach and student support programs are located in the worlds that students inhabit.<sup>31</sup> And when these students can look up to older youth and adults as models for college and college-based careers, they develop identities that also define these choices as valued ways to give back to their families and communities.<sup>32</sup>

- **Connections among Families, Neighborhoods, and Schools Around College Going**

**What is it?** Connections between families and schools build on parents' strengths and consider them a valuable education resource for students. Educators and community groups work together to ensure that all families have access to essential knowledge of college preparation, admission, and financial aid. Moreover, parents and the community are actively involved in creating all of the other critical conditions described above.

**Why Does it Matter?** Ongoing, respectful, and substantive communications between schools and families is as important to school success in low-income neighborhoods as it is in affluent ones.<sup>33</sup> Going beyond the annual parent-teacher conference, successful urban schools engage parents in seminars, workshops, and other outreach efforts to help parents gain knowledge about a wide range of education issues. These may include standards and assessment, tracking and access of underrepresented students to post-secondary education, sharing of information sources within the school, on the Internet, and elsewhere, to name just a few. The emphasis of this “scaffolding” is not just to transmit necessary facts and procedures, but to give parents the tools for them to become effective advocates for their children. This emphasis, already adopted by affluent parents, is necessary to help low income parents understand and negotiate the pathway to the post-secondary education system.<sup>34</sup> Too often, resources that exist in language minority communities that are untapped because of the perception that parents who speak (and read and write) another language cannot be resources, when in fact, they can help promote a love of literacy through literacy activities in their own languages—an enrichment that is not inconsistent with even the strictest tenets of Proposition 227. Community organizations such as local churches and boys' and girls' clubs can help tap into community resources as well as communicate to parents the importance of providing their children with a challenging curriculum, as well as supporting parents who want to see positive changes implemented. University-school partnerships can also provide essential scaffolding for school success.<sup>35</sup>

Over time, UC ACCORD's Indicator System will develop a comprehensive portrait of the trajectories that various sub-groups of California students take through the K-12 system into college and the university. It will place these trajectories in the context of critical transitions from childhood to college and the schooling conditions described above. Because these conditions are predictive of college attendance, the degree to which they are available to all students in California schools tells us a great deal about educational equity. Any effort to provide fair and equal access to the state's institutions of higher education must rely in part on a system of tracking these critical school resources and assessing their equitable distribution.



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<sup>1</sup>While the importance of these conditions is supported by a large number of studies with consistent findings across locations, populations, educational outcomes, etc., we provide only illustrative examples here.

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<sup>4</sup>Astor, R., Meyer, H. & Behre, W. (1999) Unowned Places and Times: Maps and Interviews about Violence in High Schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36, 1, 3-42.

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<sup>12</sup>Mehan, H., and others.(1997). *Constructing School Success*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>13</sup>Oakes, J., Muir, K. & Joseph, R. (in press). Access and Achievement in Mathematics and Science: Inequalities that Endure and Change. In J. A. Banks & C. M. Banks, (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

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<sup>15</sup>Education Trust, (1988). *Education Watch 1998: State and National Data Book*, 2,

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Washington, DC: author, p. 21.

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