education policy analysis archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,
open access, multilingual journal

Arizona State University

Volume 34 Number 54 June 9, 2026 ISSN 1068-2341

Outliers for Equity: Choosing (and not Choosing) College Preparation in California's Riverside County[1]

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Citation: Kolluri, S., Smith, T. M., Li, Y., Ream, R. K., & Guarino, C. (2026). Outliers for equity: Choosing (and not choosing) college preparation in California's Riverside County. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 34*(54). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.34.9130

[1] We appreciate the John Randolph and Dora Haynes Foundation for their generous support of this research.

Journal website: http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/
Facebook: /EPAAA
Bluesky: @epaa.bsky.social

Manuscript received: 31/1/2025
Revisions received: 21/12/2026
Accepted: 23/2/2026

Abstract: Some schools prepare more of their students to succeed in college than others. This case study in Riverside County seeks to identify high schools that are outliers in college outcomes and illuminate processes that might encourage or discourage college enrollment and persistence. Leveraging the theory of loose coupling and interviews of educators in outlier schools, findings suggest that schools frame college readiness differently, and constraints on choice may expand college opportunity. While schools had similar policies regarding college-going, how educators considered for whom these policies would apply distinguished high- from low-ranking schools. Specifically, high-ranking schools limited opportunities for students to opt-out of college preparation, offered Career and Technical Education that emphasized career *and* college, and though often deficit-oriented, saw student characteristics as malleable in guiding students toward college.
Keywords: college readiness; choice; college-going culture

Casos atípicos en favor de la equidad: Elegir (y no elegir) la preparación universitaria en el condado de Riverside, California

Resumen: Algunas escuelas preparan a un mayor número de sus estudiantes para tener éxito en la universidad que otras. Este estudio de caso en el condado de Riverside busca identificar escuelas secundarias que constituyen valores atípicos en términos de resultados universitarios y esclarecer procesos que pueden fomentar o desalentar la matrícula y la permanencia en la educación superior. Basándose en la teoría del acoplamiento laxo y en entrevistas con personal educativo de escuelas consideradas atípicas, los hallazgos sugieren que las escuelas conceptualizan la preparación universitaria de manera diferente, y que las restricciones a la elección pueden ampliar las oportunidades de acceso a la universidad. Si bien las escuelas contaban con políticas similares respecto al acceso a la universidad, la manera en que el personal educativo consideraba para quiénes se aplicarían dichas políticas distinguía a las escuelas de alto desempeño de aquellas de menor clasificación. En particular, las escuelas mejor clasificadas limitaban las oportunidades para que el estudiantado renunciara a la preparación universitaria, ofrecían Educación Profesional y Técnica que enfatizaba tanto la carrera profesional como la universidad y, aunque a menudo desde perspectivas orientadas por el déficit, consideraban que las características del estudiantado eran maleables al orientarles hacia la educación superior.
Palabras clave: preparación universitaria; elección; cultura de acceso a la universidad

Casos atípicos em prol da equidade: Escolhendo (e não escolhendo) a preparação para a universidade no condado de Riverside, Califórnia

Resumo: Algumas escolas preparam mais estudantes para alcançar sucesso no ensino superior do que outras. Este estudo de caso no condado de Riverside busca identificar escolas de ensino médio que constituem valores atípicos em relação aos resultados de acesso ao ensino superior e esclarecer processos que podem incentivar ou desencorajar a matrícula e a permanência universitária. Com base na teoria do acoplamento frouxo e em entrevistas com educadores de escolas consideradas atípicas, os resultados sugerem que as escolas enquadram a preparação para a universidade de maneiras distintas, e que restrições à escolha podem ampliar as oportunidades de acesso ao ensino superior. Embora as escolas apresentassem políticas semelhantes relacionadas ao ingresso universitário, a forma como os educadores definiam para quais estudantes essas políticas se aplicariam distinguia escolas de melhor classificação daquelas com menor desempenho. Especificamente, escolas com melhores resultados limitavam oportunidades para que estudantes optassem por não participar da preparação universitária, ofereciam Educação Profissional e Técnica que enfatizava tanto carreira quanto universidade e, embora frequentemente orientadas por perspectivas deficitárias, viam as características dos

estudantes como passíveis de transformação ao orientá-los para o ensino superior.
Palavras-chave: preparação para a universidade; escolha; cultura de ingresso no ensino superior

Outliers for Equity: Choosing (and not Choosing) College Preparation in California's Riverside County

The value of a four-year degree is as high as it has ever been (Katz, 2025), but access to college in the United States remains strongly influenced by entrenched social inequalities. College-going has long been stratified by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, and the challenge has remained prevalent into the 21st century. College access is expanding, however, and many students from marginalized communities successfully transition to college. In many cases, these students describe supportive schools and educators that guided them to postsecondary success (Kolluri, 2020; Warren, 2016). Some schools are clearly more effective than others in preparing students for college (Cannata et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2015). In this study, we look to these outliers for guidance on how school leaders can more effectively develop programs of college-going for students from marginalized backgrounds. In designing this study of all comprehensive high schools in Riverside County, California, we asked:

- How are the schools with the highest college success rates in a region serving majority students of color organizing college readiness strategies that expand college access and success to more of their students?
- What are the college readiness strategies employed in schools where fewer students are experiencing success in college?

Ultimately, we find that schools that produce the highest rates of college-going success for marginalized students have leaders who offer less choice to students about preparing for college. Administrators at these schools gave students less opportunity to opt-out of college preparatory coursework; offered Career Technical Education pathways in addition to—rather than instead of—college pathways; and viewed familial dispositions and knowledge of college-going as malleable rather than fixed. In this sense, schools presented college preparation not as one option among many, but as a central component of the high school experience for marginalized students. Indeed, this limitation of choice might also be viewed as a raising of expectations and a deliberate expansion of postsecondary aspirations and opportunity for students. In what follows we map the theoretical evolution of college choice frameworks and suggest how moving further from notions of choice can bring us closer to college-going practices that support the postsecondary dreams of all students.

Research and Theory about College Readiness

Improving College Outcomes

Some schools are better than others at achieving positive college-going outcomes for marginalized students. KIPP schools, for example, a charter network that has long made college-going a central component of its identity, was shown by a 2019 Mathematica study to significantly improve college enrollment and persistence outcomes for students who won the lottery to attend their schools (Coen et al., 2019). Dobbie and Fryer (2015) found similar results for students attending schools in the Harlem Children's Zone. Avery and colleagues (2006) evaluated the extent to which low-income students responded to a financial aid initiative that would have given them free tuition at Harvard University, finding that students were far more likely to do so if they attended high schools with a more robust track record of guiding students to elite colleges. In 2011, Roderick

and colleagues reported that school-level measurements of college-going culture were strongly predictive of student enrollment in better colleges. Secondary educational contexts matter for college success.

In considering high-school efforts to prepare more students for college success, scholars have identified two primary school-level characteristics that matter: academic rigor and college knowledge. Both of these are elements of Corwin and Tierney's (2007) conception of "college-going culture" in high school. Academic rigor includes the availability of advanced coursework such as honors, Advanced Placement, and dual enrollment options. College knowledge regards the extent to which students understand the requirements for college acceptance, enrollment, and financial aid. Schools with strong college-going cultures encourage broad participation in academically challenging course sequences and design policies and practices that inform students about college-going requirements and opportunities. Such an approach is especially valuable at schools serving marginalized communities (Knight-Manuel et al., 2019).

Research linking academic rigor to postsecondary success is abundant (Adelman, 2006; Blagg, 2025; Perna, 2005). Student participation in courses like Advanced Placement (Conger et al., 2023) and dual enrollment (Hemelt et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2018) have been linked to college-going outcomes. Ensuring that students actually engage with academically rigorous courses may also matter. Elements of school climate such as school safety and extracurricular activities can shape whether students can take advantage of academically challenging opportunities (Knight & Duncheon, 2020). And for students of color, cultural relevance can help. Ethnic Studies courses, college preparatory classes that highlight the lived experiences of marginalized groups, have been associated with improved college-going outcomes (Bonilla et al., 2021). Engaging students in challenging learning opportunities is associated with college success.

College knowledge has also been shown to play an important role in college-going outcomes. Indeed, much research has pointed to programs that can provide benefits by way of information to college-aspiring students of color like AVID (Black et al., 2008; Mendiola et al., 2010), Puente (Contreras, 2011; Ream, 2005), Math Engineering Science Achievement (MESA) (Hailey et al., 2011), and the Posse program (Maton et al., 2000). Some schools combine options for college with options for career. The notion of combining college-preparatory coursework with career-technical education (CTE) in the high school curriculum is not new (Clark et al., 2007), schools that are effectively combining college and career opportunities are rare. Indeed, a robust slate of college-going programs has emerged in high schools to supply marginalized students with college-going information and to encourage more of them to choose college (Contreras, 2011).

More recently, though, college-going practices have faced ideological setbacks, as the value of college itself has been questioned by political leaders across the political spectrum. To many, the "college-for-all" ethos promoted heavily at the beginning of the 21st century, was misguided. A bevy of scholarly musings called into question the "college for all approach" (Glass & Nygreen, 2011; Kolluri & Tierney, 2018, Noddings, 2011). Carey (2024) criticized the "college over everything" nature of college readiness programs specifically serving boys of color, many of whom were not interested in pursuing college. College has thus recently been framed as less of a necessity that all students must prepare for, and more as a choice. Some students will prepare for college and attend; others will not. In this choice-based framing of postsecondary opportunity, a college-going culture might matter only to those students who choose to pursue college. In what follows, we explore the vision of college "choice" at the heart of some framings of college readiness and how that framing has been troubled in the sociological literature of college-going.

College as a Choice?

The "choice phase" of the college-going process may be the most researched of all the stages of college-going (Perna, 2006). Researchers have extensively interrogated whether and where students ultimately opt to enroll. When choosing, students unfamiliar with college might "undermatch" (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Smith et al, 2013), "overmatch" (Dillon & Smith, 2017), or be discouraged to enroll entirely by unsupportive mentors (Palardy, 2014). Students choose majors with significant implications for their future earnings (Andrews et al., 2024). If choice is at the heart of college-going among minoritized communities, a key solution is to enhance information sharing and create policies that facilitate their choosing college. With the available information, students must make difficult choices with significant consequences for their college-going futures.

However, choice models have come under scholarly scrutiny for their inability to predict social outcomes, particularly with respect to college-going among marginalized groups. Choices can frustrate. In retail contexts, Schwartz (2004) argues that eliminating consumer choices can greatly reduce anxiety for shoppers. Jolls, Sunstein, and Thaler (1998) emphasize how choice and information are inadequate predictors of behavior. They argue that "bounded rationality" limits the extent to which all the relevant variables can be factored into decision-making. "Bounded willpower" shapes an individual's ability to follow through with choices for long-term betterment in the face of more immediate concerns and comforts. "Bounded self-interest" suggests that decisions for the sake of one's own advancement may conflict with the concerns of friends and family, arguing that more communally oriented students will eschew individualistic aims for collectivist ones. Kolluri and Tierney (2020) argue that the bounds of rational choice are particularly relevant to the college preparation and choice process among marginalized students. For example, Acevedo-Gil (2017) has illuminated how the choice processes are particularly entrenched in questions of racial identity for Latinx students. Parents are particularly essential to Chicanx students' college transitions (Ceja, 2006; Garcia & Mireles-Rios, 2020). Class also matters. Many low-income families underestimate the availability of financial aid, and these perceptions shape how their children engage in high school (Hall et al., 2012).

Indeed, academic decisions may be less about choice and more about dispositions related to racial, ethnic, and class upbringing. Borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu, Perna (2006) suggests that *habitus* can shape college decision-making. Habitus is a "structuring structure" that shapes individual engagement in the social world (Bourdieu, 1987). It is an embodied set of dispositions that directs an individual's movement through institutions. For Bourdieu, marginalized cultural homes were disadvantaged by their misalignment with the cultures of schools. Habitus informs academic aspirations in that a student's household will shape how they experience success in school and what seems possible in their academic future.

Thus, a vision of college-going that centers choice may disadvantage students for whom the choice of college is misaligned with their material realities. Whether schools frame college as a choice could matter significantly, especially when those schools are serving students from marginalized communities. Importantly, all schools do not enact policies in the same way, and this may be particularly true in regards to college readiness and choice. In what follows, we consider the theories of organizational habitus, loose coupling, and the particular implications for college readiness and college choice.

Theorizing Organizational Habitus, Loose Coupling and College Choice

Bourdieu's notion of habitus has been applied by organizational scholars to demonstrate the constraints on college choice for students in marginalized communities. McDonough's (1998) work on organizational habitus frames how students in high schools serving racially minoritized youth

underprepare them for college-going. Educators in these institutions, McDonough found, designed policies that they believed would match the realistic postsecondary opportunities of their students, which by and large, did not include college. Other scholars have adopted this notion of organizational habitus to demonstrate how schools serving marginalized communities only offer college opportunity to a select handful of youth (Reay, 1998; Ingram, 2009). Institutions serving marginalized students, organizational habitus suggests, are complicit in their students' marginalization.

The theory of organizational habitus as originally conceived, however, may be too rigid to explain much of the complex and dynamic social world college readiness. Other scholars of college readiness and higher education have found the original theory useful but have been criticized the theory's inability to account for institutional variation (e.g. byrd, 2019). Atkinson (2011) criticized applications of organizational habitus for essentializing organizations and neglecting the webs of networks in which they were situated. Kolluri (2019) and Çelik (2021) considered how an organizational habitus might respond not just to social class, but to other messages and relationships in the social world when designing postsecondary preparation for students. In short, though schools serving marginalized students may certainly develop an "organizational habitus" that constrains college choice in response to limited opportunity in marginalized neighborhoods, other influences may compel them to do otherwise.

As noted above, college-going is presently caught in crisscrossing ideological currents that may shape how organizations conceive of college preparation. Namely, policies of college readiness consider choice and necessity. On the one hand, "college-going cultures" have been constructed so as to encourage all students to prepare to get two- or four-year degrees. More students from marginalized backgrounds ought to attend college, the argument goes, so schools need to ensure they are all prepared for college upon graduation. On the other hand, some have pushed back against the "college for all" ethos as short-sighted and misaligned with the needs of many students, including (or especially) those from marginalized backgrounds (Carey, 2024; Rosenbaum,. 2010). As a policy, college readiness is an amorphous construct, where different schools and educators may apply the idea very differently.

To understand how such a slippery construct is applied in schools, we draw on the "loose coupling" concept developed by institutional theorists to explain how policy implementation can vary across institutional contexts. In loosely coupled institutions, Weick, a founder of the concept, defines loose coupled organizations wherein sub-institutions, "are responsive [to one another] but retain evidence of separateness and identity" (Weick, 1976, p. 3). An abundance of evidence suggests that schools are loosely coupled organizations (see Elken & Vukasovic, 2019 for review) and Weick's early formulation of the concept (1976) analyzed schools as the paradigmatic case. Schools feature components that suggest they are part of the same system—groups of same-age students instructed by one teacher, led by an administrative team, guiding learning in math, English language arts, social studies, and science for students between the ages of 5 and 18. However, each school and district retains unique elements—class sizes, teacher salary, elective requirements, and other components—that can all vary substantially between schools and districts.

Loose institutional coupling can happen in multiple directions, and two are of particular relevance here. First, institutional coupling can happen between schools and districts. There exist overarching standards and policies at national and state levels that push schools in similar directions, aligning them with one another. One such policy with implications for college readiness is the Common Core State Standards Initiative, whereby the state adopted national curricular standards and aligned exams administered to all public schools. The standards, explicitly designed with a college-readiness focus (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of

Chief State School Officers, 2010), might be expected to cultivate curricular alignment between school districts. A second coupling is between K-12 and higher education systems. Policies like A-G requirements—the high school courses required for admission to public California universities and Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses—academic opportunities to earn college credit in high school—exemplify the linkages between the K-12 and higher education systems.

Because educational systems are loosely coupled, however, efforts at policy alignment face inevitable institutional headwinds. In a study on a curricular implementation of the Common Core State Standards, for example, Rowan and White (2022) found that loosely coupled educational systems led to the "fragmented use of the founders' orchestrated system of instructional resources by most organizations in the network" (p. 105). In addition, scholars have demonstrated that loose coupling between K-12 and university systems leads to programmatic misalignment. Pitre (2011) writes "the array of loosely coupled programs, agencies, and services involved in student college transitions" stems from "organizational politics and lack of coordination" and "may stand in the way of effective implementation" (p. 7). Loose coupling creates misalignment between schools and within the K-12 and higher education system.

The analysis here offers two contributions to theoretical discussions of loose coupling. First, we explore loose coupling in an area of contestation. As college readiness transforms (incompletely) from educational expectation to individual choice, viewing college readiness through the lens of loose coupling gains new urgency. This transformation remains challenged, as some continue to advocate that all young people prepare for college while others contend that doing so will harm many students (Kolluri & Tierney, 2018). This contestation is an opportunity to further understand how loose coupling can lead to disparate manifestations of policy implementation as institutional actors negotiate meanings of the policy.

Second, in a dataset that focuses on schools with distinct college-going outcomes, we can consider how loosely coupled policies might have implications for students. The loosely coupled system of schools and their policies suggest that college readiness may be interpreted very differently across school sites, namely, as a choice or as a necessity, and the pathways available to students as a result may be shaped by these interpretations. In this analysis, we return to the concept of habitus. Since loose coupling means there exist significant differences in organizational habitus—how an institution frames opportunity for students—these differences might shape students' individual habitus and what they view for their future selves as attainable (McDonough, 1998). In this process, the long-term implications for students can be profound.

Data and Methods

Riverside County is an important setting for this investigation. While much scholarly attention has been paid to marginalized students in urban contexts (e.g., Jun & Tierney, 1999; Nienhusser & Ives, 2020), less is known about students outside of urban centers (Saenz & Torres, 2003). Riverside County abuts Los Angeles County on its southeastern border. Considerably sparse in population compared to its urban neighbor to the west, Riverside County consists of vast rural expanses and large suburbs, extending all the way to the state border with Arizona. Riverside County is approximately 50% Latinx, 32% White, 7% Black, and 7% Asian. High school graduation rates in Riverside County have increased dramatically over the last decade, rising from 78% in 2010 to over 90% in 2020, higher than the California state average graduation rate of 84.2% (California Department of Education, nd). Three major public universities serve the region, but a recent Lumina Foundation report states that of the 25 largest urban areas in the nation, the Inland Empire had the lowest percentage (27.2%) of adult residents with postsecondary degrees. The region has experienced a substantial increase in racially minoritized residents (Pyun & Stucka, 2021).

In a collaboration with the Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE, see Appendix A for more information on this collaboration), the research team conducted a comparative case study to provide rich, in-depth descriptions of high schools that prepare students well for college success to comparable schools that prepare their students less well, while also allowing for cross-school synthesis (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Stake, 1995). Working with RCOE, we jointly defined the research questions around how schools support college readiness. For case selection, we employed statistical methods to identify outlier high schools: the highest- and lowest-performing schools on college-going and persistence metrics after controlling for student and school characteristics (Podolsky et al., 2019; Sass 2012). We focused both on two-year and four-year contexts since persistence across either context can be beneficial for postsecondary attainment (Ann Clovis & Chang, 2021). Next, we conducted interviews of teachers and leaders at all of the high schools ranked in the top and bottom six to determine how each school was organizing college readiness experiences for its students. Interviews with administrators and counselors were informed by prior interviews with district leaders and school surveys we conducted about college-going practices. Through this process, we cataloged approaches to college readiness with differing outcomes in a county that faces profound challenges in preparing students for college.

Case Selection

The top six and bottom six Riverside County high schools were identified using the largest positive and largest negative residuals produced from school-level regressions of college-going rates and persistence rates on a set of school-level characteristics for school years 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19, representing three cohorts of high school graduates. There were 52 high schools in the analytic sample.[2] Our regression model is as follows:

$$College.Going_s = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Student.Characteristics_s + \beta_3 Prior.Student.Characteristics_s + \beta_4 School + \epsilon_s$$

$$Persistence_s = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Student.Characteristics_s + \beta_3 Prior.Student.Characteristics_s + \epsilon_s$$

The dependent variable *College Going*$_s$ represents the percentage of seniors in school *s* who enrolled in a two- or four-year college and the dependent variable *Persistence*$_s$ represents the percentage of seniors in school *s* who persisted beyond one year of college enrollment. *Student Characteristics* are aggregated from student-level data (N = 25,510)[3] and represent the percentages of

[2] Special schools like charter schools were removed from the data so only traditional public schools are ranked.

[3] While our original intent was to run student-level regressions, we ultimately used the aggregated school-level data released by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) due to excessive missingness on the dependent variable in the student-level data. There is missing data in the student-level dataset that does not exist in the aggregated school data because students may block their postsecondary educational records from being shared based on privacy rights outlined in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Analysis conducted by the NSC shows that California's average block rate was about 9% and nationwide about 4% over 2017–18, 2018–19, and 2019–20. Nationally, Hispanics have the highest block rate (~6%) amongst all racial/ethnic groups, and block rates are consistently higher in two-year institutions than four-year institutions. In our student-level Riverside County data in 2018-19, we estimated that 30.1% of students were blocked—a much higher rate than California's overall average.
Blocked educational records may impact the student-level models in nonrandom ways, causing them to underestimate college-going and persistence rates and downwardly bias the residuals for some schools. However, the aggregated school-level data is not affected by FERPA blocks because no student-level information is provided.

students in school *s* with the following characteristics: race/ethnicity,[4] gender, free-and-reduced-price lunch eligibility, disability status, English learner status, and parent education.[5] The *Prior Student Characteristics* variables include average standardized scale scores in mathematics and English Language Arts from the state Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) assessment in 8th grade for the cohorts of students who graduated high school in 2018-19 only,[6] as well as the percentage with 8th-grade student disciplinary actions for all three cohorts.

The school-level residuals (ε) are the difference between the actual and predicted college-going and persistence rates after conditioning on the school-level student characteristics. Positive residuals indicate that a school exceeded predicted expectations for its student population, while negative residuals indicate underperformance relative to comparable schools. Consistent with prior research on identifying school effectiveness and positive outliers, these models were not intended to estimate causal effects of high school practices on postsecondary outcomes. Rather, they served as a screening tool to identify schools whose outcomes differed substantially from what would be predicted based on observable characteristics, thereby guiding case selection for qualitative inquiry.

To obtain a determination of school effectiveness that was robust across cohorts over time and outcome definitions, we combined ranking information from multiple regressions to create a final ranking of the schools. These rankings were derived from school-level models using three college-going outcomes and two persistence outcomes. Because we had three graduating cohorts with college enrollment data (2016–17, 2017–18, and 2018–19), we estimated separate models for each year and computed three sets of residuals. The college-going rates were calculated as the number of students who enrolled in a two- or four-year college, divided by the number of students in the school who graduated in that year.

The two persistence measures were drawn from the 2016–17 cohort, which was the only cohort for which postsecondary enrollment data were available through the first year of college. The first persistence rate was calculated as the number of students who continued to enroll in a two- or four-year college after the first 12 months divided by the number of students who graduated from the high school. The second persistence rate was calculated as the number of students who continued to enroll after the first 12 months divided by the number of students from the school who initially enrolled in a two- or four-year college. Although persistence is shaped by both secondary and postsecondary contexts, prior research indicates that high school preparation is meaningfully associated with early college persistence (Adelman, 2006; Bowen et al., 2009; Horn & Kojaku, 2001; Niu & Tienda, 2013). Persistence outcomes were therefore included as a complementary indicator of college success. Some general statistics describing the top- and bottom-ranked schools are provided in Appendix B.

We used three methods to combine the five sets of residuals into effectiveness rankings for the schools: persistence ranking, mean residual ranking, and frequency ranking. Each approach is detailed in Appendix C, and the three rankings were robust and strongly correlated (see Appendix

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[4] The race-ethnicity variables are indicators for Asian, Black, Hispanic, and others, with white as the omitted category.

[5] The parent education variables are indicators for no high school, high school graduate, and some college, with college graduate as the omitted category.

[6] We use prior test scores from 2018-19 only because the prior 8th grade standardized test scores for 2016-17 and 2017-18 cohorts are either incomplete or missing: 2012-13 is the 8th grade year for the 2016-17 cohort, which was the last year that the STAR assessment was administered before being phased out, and 2013-14 is the 8th grade year for the 2017-18 cohort, where there was no assessment. This means that only the college-going model for the 2018-19 cohort has the prior 8th grade standardized test scores.

D). We initially identified the top five and bottom five schools, approximating the upper and lower deciles of the distribution. However, because ties emerged across ranking methods, we expanded the sample to the top six and bottom six schools to preserve consistency and robustness across outcome measures and cohorts.[7] Three of the top six schools appeared in all three combined rankings, while the remaining three appeared in two of the three rankings. Similarly, three of the bottom six schools appeared in all three rankings, and the remaining three appeared in two rankings.

The remaining 40 schools comprised a middle group that did not substantially exceed or underperform predicted college-going or persistence outcomes once student and school characteristics were taken into account. While many of these schools demonstrated relatively positive absolute college-going outcomes, they did not consistently outperform expectations across cohorts or outcome measures in the way that the focal outlier schools did. The purpose of the analysis was therefore not to characterize the full distribution of schools, but to identify clear positive and negative outliers for in-depth qualitative comparison.

Interviews

The lead author interviewed one administrator and one counselor involved in college-going programs at each of the top six and bottom six schools. The interviews were framed with participants as efforts to understand the college-going practices of the school. We did not inform participants there was a ranking component involved, and as such, the interviewees did not know if their schools were in the top or the bottom groups. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately 45 minutes and were conducted over Zoom due to COVID-related restrictions. The questions regarded college-going cultures, educator's perceptions of their students, and the general strategies that schools took to guide students to college-going and college success. Through the interviews, the lead author sought to understand how schools conceived of the strengths and challenges of their college readiness programs as well as the philosophies that undergirded their development and implementation.

Analyses

After interview responses were transcribed, the researchers on the team coded all documents in two rounds. In the first, we applied in-vivo codes, leveraging the specific words of participants as codes. Next, we met as a team to develop a codebook around emergent themes and college-choice frameworks. The final coding scheme was informed by emergent themes in the data as well as the theoretical frameworks of college choice. Themes from the interview data were discussed with the group after various interviews were conducted, and these included themes like choice and "college and career tensions." Themes also emerged theoretically, grounded in theories of institutions and college readiness we explored alongside analyzing the data. The codebook included five parent codes and 21 child codes. Parent codes included college-going strategies, college-readiness strategies, college culture, relationships, and social contexts. After the creation of the codebook, the lead author re-coded all of the interviews, memoing after one high-performing and one low-performing set of school interviews to reflect on emergent themes. The high- and low-performing schools were coded one after another to illuminate emerging differences between them. After memos were written, they were re-read and compared to determine themes that emerged from the data. The

[7] We initially only took the top five and bottom five schools (as they approximate the top ten and bottom ten percent of our sample), but due to ties in the number of their appearances in the three combined rankings, we decided to take the top six and bottom six schools (12 in total) instead.

emergent themes were brought back to the research team who offered feedback regarding the coherence of the themes and the strength of the data to support them.

Of course, the positionality of the researchers informed the research. The first author who conducted all the interviews is a brown man of mixed racial background (South Asian and White). He is a former teacher who previously worked at a school where all students took a required college- and career-preparatory curriculum. This background could likely have influenced how questions were developed and how interview participants responded to them. Three of the other researchers were White and one was an Asian immigrant. Scholarly backgrounds included policy, sociology, and quantitative methodology. Though all qualitative data was collected by the first author, we analyzed the data collectively, and that analysis was again likely informed by our professional backgrounds.

Findings

Educators at the 12 focal schools—both at the top and bottom of our college-success rankings—mostly viewed their schools as effectively guiding students toward college. In response to an open-ended question about how they prepare students for college, nearly all respondents described robust college-going cultures, including college and career fairs, college decorations around campus and in classrooms, and/or college and career decision days, among other cultural practices aimed at college preparedness. They all reported offering numerous options for college-ready coursework such as Advanced Placement and dual enrollment opportunities with local community colleges. All schools placed a strong emphasis on FAFSA completion, and some high- and low-ranking schools required FAFSA completion as a graduation requirement. The policies across the school districts were similar, and graduation requirements were all mostly aligned with prerequisite credits of the UC and CSU system. All of the schools, though, allowed students to graduate with a D-grade, while the university systems would only consider applicants who earned a C in core coursework. On the surface, college-going practices varied little among the 12 high schools.

Important differences emerged, however, when considering how college-going was framed culturally between the high schools at the top and bottom of our rankings. At the center of the development of college cultures rests the question of choice. Students might choose to prepare for college. Additionally— or alternatively—they might choose to prepare for careers. Families might—or might not—choose to encourage their children to attend a competitive university far from home. While expansive choice is typically seen as an unquestioned force for good in a U.S. society grounded in freedom and capitalism, more choice may be detrimental to college-going. Notably, choice appeared to be more constrained at the high-performing high schools. First, students at these schools were more likely to be given little option to avoid college preparatory coursework. Second, Career Technical Education at high-ranking schools was more often presented in addition to, rather than instead of, college readiness. Third, the expectation that marginalized families would opt out of college was strongly resisted in the highest-ranking institutions in the sample.

Option or Aspirational Opportunity in School Structures?

An important distinction that emerged between the high-ranking and low-ranking schools was the extent to which college-going was framed as a choice for students and parents. In particular, "A-G courses"—a slate of academic coursework required for acceptance to California public university systems—were at the center of college-readiness considerations at the school sites. Also, while none of the schools aligned their graduation requirements exactly with the A-G requirements of California universities, high-ranking schools designed course-taking systems that compelled students to complete A-G coursework. More importantly, however, the high-ranking schools

engaged in discourse with their students in such a way that communicated limited options, as one counselor noted, insisting every student would be "following A-G, whether you like it or not."

There were small differences in course enrollment practices with respect to A-G completion between the high- and low-ranking schools. Administrators at the high-ranking schools described all their courses as A-G certified. High-performing schools had to build structures into schedules to ensure that students who "want to do everything" have the capacity to stay on the A-G track and participate in other activities their school offers, such as sports or performing arts. When students received a D-grade in a course, the high-ranking schools were intentional about providing multiple opportunities to retake the course. Some provided seven-period days to ensure adequate space for A-G completion in addition to Career and Technical Education pathways and other activities. They emphasized allowing students to make up Ds in summer school or in online coursework. While some of the low-ranking schools adopted similar practices, others did not. One counselor described limitations on when students could make up D grades: "Our summer school, unfortunately is not for Ds. It's only if a student gets an F," she said. "So their remediation has to be done somewhere else that's accredited, or they have to do it during our school day." Some low-ranking schools' graduation requirements were more misaligned with A-G requirements than the high-ranking schools, in both math and foreign language, for example. Ultimately, A-G completion rates in 2018, the final year of data collection, on average were about 14% higher at the high-ranking schools than the low-ranking ones.

Perhaps more essential than the specific systems and enrollment practices around A-G requirements was the messaging students heard from counselors and administrators about college-going expectations. Counselors and administrators at high-ranking schools described how they communicated with students about the A-G requirements, often framing them as a requirement as opposed to an option—again, shaping students' aspirational opportunities. "We make the decision for them," a school principal at a high-ranking school explained. Even acknowledging not all students were bound for four-year universities, schools directed their students to complete all the A-G requirements. A counselor at another school explained, "We highly encourage our students to stick to the A-G, even if they're going to community college, because the data shows … if a student takes [A-G coursework], they're more likely to be successful in community college." Another administrator justified her school's philosophy for limiting students' options to avoid college-going pathways:

> Many kids really don't know what their path is. They just don't. They're coming out fresh out of middle school. When you ask kids what they want to do with their life, their typical answer is I don't know, right? Or they're picking the careers that sound the most glamorous … And so what I would say is at 9th and 10th grade, who am I, or who are we to decide where that kid is destined to go?

Even when students started off poorly in their high school career, counselors at high-ranking schools continued to insist on college preparation. One counselor described telling students, "I'm looking at some of you guys' transcripts and they're less than stellar. But here's the thing**,** it's a minor setback for a major comeback."

Many students having started on the A-G pathways would eventually advocate to come off it—asking out of certain A-G courses or declining to make up D grades. Counselors at high-ranking schools resisted acquiescing to these requests, often insisting on engaging a parent first:

> Most of our classes are A through G, but if a student's going to drop a class that they really need, like their junior, senior year … we try to talk them out of it, and we notify parents like if they do this, this is what can happen as far as they won't be able to apply to a four-year right out of high school.

A counselor at another high-ranking school adopted a similar approach to students requesting to leave the A-G pathway: The only time I ever take the kid off A through G is if I hear from a parent and they're like, "I don't care if he goes... they go straight to university out of high school." Students at high-ranking schools who wanted to leave A-G pathways had to navigate barriers erected by educators who wanted them to remain eligible to four-year universities.

While educators emphasized constraining student choice at the high-ranking schools, many educators at low-ranking schools celebrated the choice they offered to students about college preparedness. Among the bottom six schools, administrators and counselors emphasized giving students "all the options." Students were given the option to choose between getting a high school diploma and becoming college eligible. "We also want to make it possible for all our kids who aren't going to a university, no matter what we say to them, to at least earn their diploma," a principal at a low-ranking school explained. This approach was framed as "freedom." One counselor said, "Yeah in ninth grade they can, just because they have that freedom then, they have the three years opposed to that first year, where they can say, "You know what? I can take care of that later." The students were encouraged to follow their own paths. "It's not about my dream. It's about what is your dream?" one counselor explained. A principal at another high school summed up his choice philosophy around college-going:

> I try to give them as much information as possible about all of their options after high school and regardless of what decisions that they make, it's more about them trying to make some informed decision about what their choices are going to be and what choices they want to make afterward.

College-going was seen as one choice among many choices at low-ranking schools, and students were encouraged to make the best decision they could with the available information.

At one of the low-ranking schools in the sample, students were placed on pathways early in their high school careers and were described as "A-G" or "non-A-G" students. This decision was made with families as early as ninth grade. The assistant principal explained,

> If we know a kid wants to go straight to a four year, wants to remain A-G compliant, there is a math pathway that ensures that. If we know that that's not a priority for their family … but there's also a level of coursework that is graduation compliant, but not necessarily college prep. And so there's not necessarily tracks, but options.

Another principal said, "A lot of kids fall off the A-G path in 9th grade." Forcing all kids to remain on it, "would just be too much for some kids." The notion of "options" for college and non-college pathways were more common among low-ranking schools.

Administrators at both sets of schools believed they were doing what was best for students and offered messaging and support to students depending on the specific goals they had. For the high-ranking schools, the goal was to maintain a college opportunity for all students. As such, the supports for those students included advising that pushed students into college pathways and opportunities to make up D grades. Students for whom college eligibility was slipping away were messaged to make a "major comeback." At lower ranking schools where fewer students pursued and persisted in college pathways, options were prioritized over opportunity. The supports for students focused on information about the various postsecondary pathways, some of which would not include college eligibility. Messages from counselors in these schools emphasized choice. Messaging and supports differed across the high-ranking and low-ranking schools that emphasized either opportunity or choice.

College *and* Career vs. College *or* Career

CTE programs that allow students to develop career and technical skills in high school were common, though their framing was distinct between high- and low-performing schools. The distinction might be described as college *and* career versus college *or* career. In high-ranking schools, pathways were designed to prepare students for college while simultaneously providing skills for careers, ensuring that students who took career technical education were also framed as college-bound. In some low-performing schools, CTE pathways were framed as an alternative to college preparation.

In low-ranking schools, choice was emphasized regarding career or college-going paths. As one principal explained:

> We re-did our mission statement and our vision three years ago, so part of that is we really want kids to have the opportunity to make a choice, whether it's college readiness, career readiness … so whichever direction it is that they wish to go.

Within CTE pathways, another principal said that students could meet college-going requirements "if they so choose." Another explained that regarding college or career, "They can do one or the other, but at least it gives them the option to stay on that pathway." This ideology of choice regarding college and careers was common among low-ranking schools.

Students at low-ranking schools were given the choice of pursuing careers in skilled trades while in high school. One counselor asserted "not every kid is college-bound, and some kids just need their high school diploma and will be wonderful mechanics, or wonderful electricians one day." Another school offered carpentry, and students were connected with the carpenters' union in the area. At another school's "college decision day," they also included celebrations of students entering trades, "because we realize that every student is not going off to college." At one school, the counselor described teachers who encouraged non-college career pathways. He said, "Some teachers will say, 'Hey, hospitality's right here. Why not go into hospitality? It's huge. Agriculture is right here, why not go into agriculture?'" This ability to choose vocational pathways—often at the expense of college preparation—was emphasized at the low-ranking schools.

While some counselors at high-ranking schools similarly emphasized a "college or career" approach, many of the high-ranking schools prepared students for both college and career in ways that educators at low-ranking schools did not. For example, one counselor at a high-performing school noted, the career technical education program "doesn't pigeonhole a student into deciding really early, I'm a college-bound student, or I'm a career, but really, really integrates them together." She emphasized that students should "explore different areas as they prepare to go to college." Another counselor described how this required some convincing for her more career-focused students. "The truth is they don't need A-G in order to do a lot of these new solar CTE programs. So for me, my philosophy is you want every door open and that means pushing yourself to do your A-G's too." A both/and approach to college and career was emphasized in many of the high-ranking schools.

Preparing students for both college and career was often a heavy lift. A very small school in a sparsely populated rural community at the top of our rankings, for example, developed a computer science career pathway despite limited resources. One principal at a high-ranking school summed up these challenges: "It has definitely been a journey to make sure kids are ... not just career ready, but college ready."

Characteristics as Fixed or Malleable?

Deficit framings of racially minoritized students (i.e., holding marginalized students and/or their families responsible for the challenges placed on them by unjust social structures; Davis & Museus, 2019) were common across high- and low-ranking schools. For example, at a low-ranking school, a White[8] principal described the "community culture" as failing to understand the "value of education." Educators from high-ranking schools often agreed. One White counselor described more "Hispanic" families as, "traditionally that's the culture that doesn't put a high value on education." Deficit ideologies were prominent across the schools in the sample. This, of course, is a problem, as deficit ideologies about students and families constrain opportunity (Valencia, 2010).

At high-performing schools, however, administrators and counselors were more reflective about their own mindsets[9], and more often emphasized the malleability of their deficit characterization of students. They were less likely to accept that the ideologies and orientations to college-going among students and their families were fixed. Consider, for example, the White deficit-minded counselor at the high-ranking school who claimed the "culture" of her "Hispanic" students did not value education. She described the following story as informative to her experiences with her students:

> I had a student a couple of years ago … He was a valedictorian. And he was just amazing … and he didn't apply to a single college. And I did everything I could to convince him. And I even stepped outside the box. I thought, "Okay, maybe he doesn't value a woman's perspective. Maybe he doesn't value a blonde's perspective. Who knows?" All I cared about was... he wasn't buying into what I was trying to do. And so I went to my AP (assistant principal) who was very charismatic, very likable, the students loved him … So he talked to him a little bit and "No." And then even our principal at the time ... He was a strong Hispanic man, … Well, as it came out in the long run, his family worked very hard. Laborers. He was viewed as being lazy because his family was out working while he was in the house studying. So I mean, to me, that was such a big picture situation … We poured in everything we had and he stood his ground.

This counselor assumed familial deficits. She made generalized assumptions about all Latinx families, problematically extrapolating from just one interaction. Again, this deficit perception is a problem. Certainly, the young man and his family may have had very good reasons to not pursue university at this time. But the counselor went to great lengths to test the malleability of their stance. To this counselor, college choices could be changed.

This belief in the existence of barriers, but that they could be overcome, characterized the high-performing schools. In connection with the ideology of choice, the high-ranking schools sought to push back against choices families made, but the low-ranking schools expressed resignation to accept familial decisions. To address potential familial hesitations about college, a counselor at a high-ranking school brought in their U.S. Representative to talk about his experiences going to Harvard as a person with marginalized identities. They had a school board member "share her story, and she was actually a graduate of [our school], how she went to a community college and then transferred to a university … Our students are definitely people that, if you met them, they're definitely hardcore as far as like, they can overcome anything." The counselor even connected to a program that allowed students to meet Michelle Obama. "It was something they said they had never

[8] All races were based on surnames and interviewer perceptions. We did not ask about how participants self identified. Race is included here because of the racializing nature of deficit ideology.

[9] This of course, does not excuse the existence of the deficit ideology in the first place.

pictured in their lives because of where they come from," she explained. While educators at high-ranking schools were not reluctant to identify perceived deficits of their students' families and communities, they believed that challenges could be overcome, and considered often innovative, community-oriented means of doing so.

Comments from educators at low-ranking schools, meanwhile, suggested they were resigned to the inevitability of perceived deficiencies within families and communities that would preclude college attendance. A White principal remarked,

> Part of that is the culture of our families here, not willing to let them leave home. I'm sorry, I would love for them to go to a four-year college but if the best way to get them there is to do two years at [a local community college] and then transfer, not because of just the finances but because I've got to convince those parents. Culturally, my wife is Hispanic; her parents did not want her to leave home ever.

The principal's statement belied the fact that Riverside County and the surrounding areas were home to numerous four-year universities. In addition, the principal did not consider the potential benefits of remaining close to home for college. Instead, the principal resigned to his opinion that "Hispanic" families had certain characteristics that were not malleable.

The belief in immovable cultural deficits was shared by educators at other low-ranking schools. One White counselor said, "Probably at least 70% of the people are born and raised here and stay here." She described an elaborate system of "watershed" payments, connected to an agreement between the government and a local Indigenous tribe, that she said could amount to more than one hundred thousand dollars once students earned a high school diploma. Though only a handful of students at the school were identified as Indigenous, she emphasized these payments as a significant barrier to college readiness. Another counselor expressed a confused exasperation regarding why more of her students did not work harder, exclaiming, "If I could answer that question, I'd be a millionaire." Shortly thereafter, she recommitted to a familiar trope about Latinx families to explain low levels of college enrollment, "It's their culture."

Two rural schools exemplify this divide around the malleability and non-malleability of deficits. Both schools are in rural contexts 30-45 minutes from the nearest community college. They serve transient, largely immigrant populations, and operate with scant resources. At the low-ranking school, the principal described some students as unsalvageable with respect to college-going. "It's either a full for or against," he said. "The middle of the road's not really there. So, it's either, 'Yeah. I agree, and I'm making my plans to do it,' or, 'That's not for me.'" Instead, he reasoned that the pull of local agricultural jobs would inevitably drive students away from college and to the fields. "Some of them will continue to do work with their families that are already in town and just that's their job and career path … a community mindset of being in a rural area where you don't have that much accessibility to [college]."

The Latino principal at the high-ranking rural school expressed considerably more optimism about changing mindsets. He said,

> The majority I think we have been able to convince. And most of the time I use myself as an example …. I am a first-generation college-going student, college graduate. I come from a family of seven where my four siblings did not go on to higher education. And so I tell our families, education is the way to break out of that cycle. I'm fortunate enough that I can say with conviction that if you allow your child to go on to college and they take care of business, this is going to start a new trend in your family. And you're going to allow them to have a better life … The message is always there from our school, that you can go to college, you're capable, here's a plan to make that happen.

He noted that the school had changed. "When I first arrived there, we didn't have a very good college culture." The counselor at the school added, "They're good-hearted kids. They just need more tools to be able to help them fight through the challenges they face in their community." The principal here avoids seeing students and families as hopelessly deficient and instead holds his own school accountable to better guide families to understand the opportunities that college can afford. Though familial deficiencies were assumed in schools across the sample—suggesting that problematic deficit ideologies remain pervasive in K-12 settings—the choices that were informed by those perceived deficiencies were viewed as far more malleable in high-ranking schools.

Discussion

As noted above, Riverside County is ripe for investigation into college-going. The schools serve a substantial working-class and Latinx population, two groups who have faced significant barriers to college-going. The county education office has a dedicated emphasis on enhancing college-going and has developed collaborations to achieve their college-readiness objectives. Importantly, in our analysis of college-going statistics in the county, broad distinctions emerged. Indeed, their college readiness programs were loosely coupled, and perhaps as a result, schools had very different outcomes with respect to college-going and college persistence. Across multiple years of college outcomes, there were clear outliers in the data. To understand these outliers, we recap here the distinctions in college cultures across the schools and consider the implications for theories of college-going.

Considering the Differences Among Schools

Despite wide variation in college-going outcomes, interview data suggested that the schools across the county adopted similar policies and practices regarding college preparation. All schools had college-going traditions and resources, and they encouraged college-going in an often vibrant and celebratory fashion. They all sought to provide students and parents with as much information about college and financial aid as their staffs could muster. All schools described college preparatory opportunities, with numerous AP courses and bustling AVID programs broadly advertised to students. These types of programs did not appear to differentiate the low- from the high-ranking schools regarding their predicted college access. Educators in both contexts problematically expressed deficit mindsets about their students. A degree of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) occurred with respect to college-going.

If schools had similar college readiness practices and both expressed deficit mindsets, what might explain the differences between the schools with respect to their students' college-going and persistence? In this article, the data push us to consider the notion of choice—for which there seemed far more siloing of decision-making in schools. Framing college preparation as a choice—one to be considered by students and their families as they negotiate a multitude of options in the high school experience—is associated with fewer students attending and persisting in two-year and four-year universities. The schools that saw the most students attend and persist in college and university settings were the ones that described stark limitations on student choice. Students were automatically enrolled in A-G approved courses and offered scant opportunities to leave the pathway before graduation. They were told that CTE pathways included college-readiness expectations. Though educators at these schools applied cultural pathology to their students and their families, they insisted that "deficiencies" could be overcome. Schools that ranked the lowest on our college-going metrics offered choice throughout these processes by creating different pathways for A-G and non-A-G students, offering robust CTE pathways devoid of college preparation, or by

acquiescing to perceived parent resistance to college-going. These policies were undergirded by ideals of "freedom," and this approach differentiated the low-ranking from the high-ranking schools.

Reconsidering Theories of College Information and Choice

As is consistent with the theory of loose coupling, these institutions maintained identities separate from one another. This manifested in distinct college readiness practices. The argument here thus advances arguments complicating narrow visions of organizational habitus in marginalized schooling contexts. Instead, even across schools serving similarly working-class populations, educational approaches differ. Assertions that loose coupling exists between organizations and may be particularly prevalent in educational settings is supported by the data here. College readiness practices are loosely coupled across high schools.

Crucially, as might be expected in the realm of college readiness, this loose coupling primarily unfolded along the axis of choice. Choice is at the heart of current debates of college readiness. Some argue that all students need to prepare for college when in high school, others believe some ought to opt out of college preparation and prepare instead for the workforce. Certainly, most, if not all, educators want the best for their students, but there exist what Orton and Weick (1990) call "unclear means-ends connections" (p 206) when the outcomes of varying policies are uncertain. This "causal indeterminacy" (p. 206), Orton and Weick argue, undergirds much of the loose coupling seen in organizational settings. In simple terms, institutional actors, unclear how their decisions will play out, will make different decisions in different institutions.

In addition to its associated uncertainty, college readiness is contested. This contestation, we suggest, may further the looseness of its coupling between schools. In this study, this proved to be the case. Though there were similarities across schools in terms of activities aimed at building a college culture, the main distinction between the schools was associated with the central debate: whether college preparation ought to be a choice or a requirement. Thus, loose coupling in institutions was reinforced by the contested nature of the loosely coupled component.

Finally, the loose coupling of college readiness has consequences. Schools in which college preparation was not framed as a choice saw more students attend and persist in college. This outcome suggests that the differing manifestations of organizational habitus might have some impact on the individual habitus. When choices are narrowed for students, college-going may become more embedded in the habitus of the working-class student who could likely be the first in their family to attend college. Of course, the mechanisms of this relationship would be in need of more exploration, but the findings here challenge the deterministic nature of habitus and suggest that loose coupling can compel heterogeneity in college-readiness practices (organizational habitus), with real implications for students (individual habitus).

The findings reported here suggest that providing information, support, and choice may not be enough to get promising students from marginalized groups to apply to, attend, and succeed in college. Choice has been consistently described as a central component of college preparation (Perna, 2006). Choice models, however, overlook the constraints on rationality that might compel students to make suboptimal decisions about college going (Kolluri & Tierney, 2020). For example, although college and career standards underlie both the Every Student Succeeds Act and Common Core State Standards, our study suggests that just having the option to prepare for both college and career is not enough. Instead, we see college readiness as a function of a schoolwide discourse that can restrict or expand the ability of students to choose college preparation.

Implications

College counselors, teachers, and administrators might all take note of the findings here. Certainly, many in high schools do not believe that all students should attend college, and ought to be given the choice about deciding whether to prepare for it in college. While this decision makes sense, seemingly, offering this choice may ultimately constrain opportunity. Fewer students attend college. Fewer persist when they do. Providing college preparation, though, need not come at the expense of allowing students to explore careers as well. Counselors might find ways to both acknowledge that not all of their students will be best served by college and to ensure that they are able to achieve there if they one day decide that college would serve them. Schools might consider "guided pathways" that direct more students to prepare for college and career. Policies that encourage schools to approach postsecondary preparation in this fashion could meaningfully expand opportunities for students.

This project also seeks to encourage future research on postsecondary preparation in high school. Subsequent work might interview students to better understand their perceptions of choice around college information. Other research might explore how distinct ideologies about college choice emerge across different high school campuses. Given the importance of expanding college opportunities to more students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, this study seeks to encourage more research into the stubborn challenge of college access and to shift the foundation of a body of research that has rested heavily on choice.

Conclusion

The findings from Riverside County challenge a popular approach to college readiness that centers on choice. Certainly, the findings are limited in their generalizability. California is unique in its specificity in outlining college readiness expectations, and few states have policies similar to A-G requirements to guide K-12 schools. Nonetheless, even in schools without explicit college readiness requirements, students may be offered information and choice about whether to engage other components of the college transition process. Considering findings in Riverside County, we encourage scholars in California and perhaps elsewhere to consider redefining what it means to have an effective college-going culture that moves beyond choice and information.

College readiness may not solely be about exposure and information, but immersing students in the expectation of college readiness, empowering them to internalize a sense of a college-going self. The contrasts that emerged regarding college choice in the highest and lowest ranking schools in this large California county suggest an avenue for future work at the boundary of choice and college culture. How schools frame college choice matters—even if constraining curricular choice simply keeps the option to go to college open longer.

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Volume 34 Number 54 June 9, 2026 ISSN 1068-2341

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Open Access Journals, EBSCO Education Research Complete, ERIC, Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson), QUALIS A1 (Brazil), SCImago Journal Rank, SCOPUS, SOCOLAR (China).

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