



The Education Justice Argument for Investing in Equity

The "achievement gap" is really an opportunity gap

Policy makers and educators often deplore “the achievement gap” in college graduation, which impacts students who are low-income, first-generation and underrepresented. However in focusing on unequal *outputs*, too often we overlook jaw-dropping inequities in *inputs*, such as high rates of poverty and unequal dollars spent per student. This fact sheet examines “the achievement gap” in universities, community colleges and K-12 schools. What are the unequal learning conditions and life chances that cause it?

SF State has an average per-student ‘educational and general expenditures’ amount of \$12,682 – less than half of the national four-year public institution average of \$28,831.⁷

Inequities at Community Colleges

Almost 75% of all Latina/o and two-thirds of all African American students who go on to higher education in California go to a community college. However, only 20% of all transfers to four-year institutions were Latina/o or African American.⁸

California community colleges have always been very poorly funded, with less than half of the dollars per student of the badly-funded Cal State University system and one fifth the dollars of the University of California system.⁹ California ranks 50th of the 50 states in spending per postsecondary student,¹⁰ dragged down by community college funding.

The Century Foundation points out: “A central problem is that two-year colleges are asked to educate those students with the greatest needs, using the least funds, and in increasingly separate and unequal institutions. Our higher education system, like the larger society, is growing more and more unequal.”¹¹

A detailed study by the UCLA Civil Rights Project showed that in California, pathways to a bachelor's degree are segregated. Students attending underresourced high schools usually go directly into inner city community colleges that have little transfer capacity – few seats in transfer pathways, poor counseling ratios, etc.

Conversely, a handful of community colleges serving high percentages of middle-class, white, and Asian American students are responsible for the majority of all transfers in the state. These schools are focused on transfer, with more seats in transfer pathway courses, better counseling ratios and strong transfer culture. UCLA researchers conclude that this setup makes “a mockery of the promise of equal opportunity.”¹²

After six years, only 34% of African American and 30% of Latina/o students actually transfer to a four-year university.¹³ In a state in which over half of all public school students are Latina/o or African American, this situation spells bad news for the future of California.

Unequal Life Chances



Almost 29% of California's children live in poverty, and our state ranks #50 as the state with the highest poverty rate, adjusted for cost of living. California also ranks #50 as the most unequal state in the nation, with more millionaires and billionaires than any other state.¹

About one in 10 of Cal State University's 460,000 students is homeless, and one in five doesn't have steady access to enough food.²

Nationally, one in five community college students said that in the last 30 days, (s)he had gone hungry because of a lack of money. 13% had experienced a form of homelessness in the last year, having been thrown out or evicted, lived in shelters or abandoned buildings, or gone without a place to sleep at all. Far more — just over half — were at risk of each of those conditions. A majority had financial aid and jobs, but it wasn't enough.³

Inequities at Universities

California has nearly the worst gap in bachelor's graduation rates between underrepresented students and their white peers – it ranks 49th out of the 50 states.⁴

After six years, only four out of ten African American students in the Cal State Universities have graduated with a bachelor's degree, and six out of ten Latina/o students.⁵

From 2008 to 2013, state funding for higher education in our state plummeted 24%.⁶ This means, for example, that

Metro is a redesign of the first two years of college to prepare students for graduation, transfer to university and meaningful careers. Metro has an emphasis on reaching students who are low-income, first-generation and/or underrepresented. Each Metro Academy (Metro) is a school within a school for up to 140 students, and may be located at a community college or a university. The distinguishing feature of the program is a cohort design in which a group of students take general education classes together each semester over four semesters. A study showed significant cost reductions per graduate, because the program sharply reduces attrition and speeds graduation.

Inequities in K-12

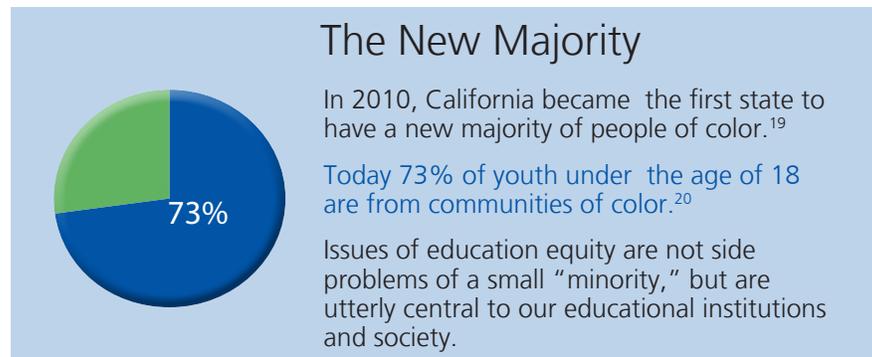
Inequities in postsecondary education build on severe inequities in K-12 education. California's K-12 schools are among the most segregated and unequal in the US. A 2012 study shows that in California, state and local government and district spending totals \$4380 less per student per year at schools which are 90% or more students of color, compared to schools that are at least 90% white. These highly segregated learning conditions impact 40% of all Black and Latina/o students.

In California the average school with high numbers of students of color has 759 students. If an average-sized school got an extra \$4,380 for every student, this would mean an extra \$3.3 million per year for each school.¹⁴

Our state also ranks 42nd in per pupil spending in K-12,¹⁵ and 50th on other measures, with the worst ratios of teachers, guidance counselors and librarians per student.¹⁶

Funding inequities translate into radically unequal learning conditions:

- Many low-income students of color are assigned less experienced and less qualified teachers, with high rates of teacher turnover.¹⁷
- Many schools are critically overcrowded and have teachers who rate their facility as poor or only fair, or report evidence of cockroaches, rats, or mice. 50% of social science teachers say their classrooms lack an atlas, globe or dictionary.¹⁸



Conclusion: The Equity Imperative

When unequal learning conditions and life chances are made visible, the frame shifts from deploring "an achievement gap," to seeing an "opportunity gap" or educational debt.²¹ While the term "achievement gap" tends to point toward the performance deficiencies of individual students, the term "opportunity gap" points toward the need for institutional and social change.

Recognizing that many students have attended poorly-resourced public schools, Metro devotes a modest investment of extra resources to providing proactive counseling and tutoring and placing students into supportive cohorts that follow a course pathway together.

Some ask, "Why are we doing something extra for some students--shouldn't we give all students the same support?" This question calls out the key differentiation between *equality*—doing the exact same thing for every student—versus *equity*, making adjustments to meet different needs. Over many decades, students in low-income and communities of color have experienced a profound disinvestment in their futures. The data shows quite clearly that if we close our eyes to the realities of the unequal conditions that students have faced, that it is the "likely suspects"—disadvantaged students—who will continue to be disproportionately locked out of graduating from college and university. Education justice calls us to proactively respond to the weight of our unequal histories. This is the equity imperative.

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