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12-2021

# Where Do We Start? Improving College-Prep Resources Available to Students of Color

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LS400: Senior Capstone

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December 20, 2020

**Abstract**

This paper serves to demonstrate and respond to the severe lack of college preparation (college-prep) resources available for students of color in the k-12 public education system. College-prep resources are crucial for students to be able to make the transition from high school to college. First generation students are especially in need of these resources as they lack the knowledge that second-generation students may receive from their parents who have already been through the process of applying, transitioning, and experiencing what higher education is like. Surveys were administered to current high school students of color applying for college. Survey data includes the number of current college-prep resources available to them, their knowledge of these resources, and their opinions on what other resources they would find necessary when applying to college. The responses given by students were compared to existing data on current resources available to students in predominantly communities of color as compared to students in predominantly white communities. Based on the comparisons, the suggestions from the students will be given to the schools where these students attended. This will give school faculty the opportunity to push for expansion of resources available to these students and future students. This allows first generation students a more equitable opportunity as white, and second-generation students when applying to higher education. In the long-term, this is hoped to increase the chances of these students getting into college and continuing to be successful as college students.

**Literature Synthesis and Integration**

The substantial imbalance in preparation for specific racial and ethnic subgroups, as well as low-income and first-generation college students, is one of the most pressing issues that must

be addressed through college and career readiness. Students of color in particular, are significantly less likely to be college-ready, with those in high-poverty schools being the least prepared. This is an issue because the lack of college preparedness resources for students of color gives them an unfair competitive advantage in obtaining a professional career, and that has held back many of these individuals from rising out of poverty and obtaining a better life through the attainment of an adequate college education. Many students of color who graduate from high school do not continue their education after graduation. Those who do enroll in college frequently find that they need developmental or remedial courses to succeed. College and job readiness aren't just decided by the courses taken; students must also be aware of college culture, have good study habits, and be aware of available resources. Cognitive methods, subject understanding, academic contextual abilities, and awareness are the four aspects of college readiness. Cognitive strategies are required for college-level work since they are ways of thinking and processing information. Intellectual openness, inquisitiveness, analytical skills, the development of well-reasoned arguments, the appraisal of various or competing perspectives, precision and correctness, hypotheses formulation, and problem-solving tactics are among them.

Content knowledge is the fundamental understanding of all subjects that serves as the foundation for further study. Basic concepts in English, math, science, social studies, and the arts give students the context and foundation they need to absorb more challenging material. Academic behaviors are ones that show self-awareness, monitoring, and control on the part of the student. Students should be able to demonstrate ownership of the learning process by setting objectives, asking assistance, continuing in courses, and interacting with teachers in an adequate way. Time management, prioritizing courses, good note taking, organization, and successful participation in study groups are all examples of study competencies. Contextual awareness and

skills refer to the unique understanding of expectations and how to interact with instructors and students. Students must also know how to choose the right college, manage the application and admissions processes, apply for financial aid, register for classes, and deal with other details.

Everything mentioned above is critical information that all students should be aware of before beginning college, but this is not the case for the vast majority of students of color, who do not receive enough college preparation in high school. As an aspiring educator and a student of color, I can empathize with this issue of not obtaining sufficient college preparation in high school, and as a result, I faced various obstacles that made achieving my educational aspirations difficult.

Prevalent examples of minorities being underprepared for college are all over. For example, African American students are less likely than white students to have access to college-ready courses. In fact, in 2011-12, only 57 percent of black students had access to a full range of math and science courses necessary for college readiness, compared to 81 percent of Asian American students and 71 percent of white students. Even when black students do have access to honors or advanced placement courses, they are vastly underrepresented in these courses. Black and Latino students represent 38 percent of students in schools that offer AP courses, but only 29 percent of students enrolled in at least one AP course. Black and Latino students also have less access to gifted and talented education programs than white students. African American students are often located in schools with less qualified teachers, teachers with lower salaries and novice teachers. Students of color are often concentrated in schools with fewer resources. Schools with 90 percent or more students of color spend $733 less per student per year than schools with 90 percent or more white students. Low-income students are less likely to take a core curriculum, and less likely to meet readiness benchmarks on college entrance exams.

While low-income students have seen the largest gains in college aspirations, they have not had similar gains in college enrollment. Technology based learning, increased instructional time, and personalized approaches have been shown to improve high school algebra scores, including for students who enter high school underprepared in math. Assistance for parents can begin with discussions surrounding the cost of college, specific types of colleges, their academic programs, and various financial aid opportunities. For many students, the actual price of college is significantly greater than what the recruitment literature, conventional wisdom and even official statistics convey (Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2016). Goldrick-Rab & Kendall discovered, "The current approach to higher education financing too often leaves low-income students facing unexpected and sometimes untenable expenses" (2016). Information and guidance for college should be provided through announcements, newsletters, pamphlets, university representative presentations, counselors, resources in the school library, and information on teacher's bulletin boards, etc. (Martínez, 2015).

Coming from the east side of Salinas, California, like myself, many students of color face similar challenges, and it is critical to prepare the next generation of students of color for college. Doing so will provide a better future for us, and as a result, our community will benefit greatly because crime levels will drop and there will be fewer low-income families. In the article Unequal Opportunity: Race and Education by Linda Darling-Hammond it is mentioned, "Americans often forget that as late as the 1960s most African-American, Latino, and Native American students were educated in wholly segregated schools funded at rates many times lower than those serving whites and were excluded from many higher education institutions entirely." (P. 4). This displays the topic's history as well as how students of color have historically faced educational disadvantages when compared to white students. A solution to this issue according to

Darling-Hammond can be providing students of color with access to rigorous coursework. "Students need access to high-level courses with quality instruction to prepare them for the rigors of college by increasing their content knowledge and cultivating their higher order thinking skills." (Pg. 4). "Students who have access to college-level academics in high school are more likely to seek and succeed in higher education." (McGee, 2013; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011 page4). Many high-minority schools do not offer some challenging classes, like Algebra 2, making it impossible for children to gain the academic abilities needed to enroll and excel in college.

School counselors are an important part of resolving this issue in education. For students hoping to attend college after high school, school counselors are an important source. "According to research on college and career planning, school counselors can be highly effective advocates, helping students identify their best options based on their potential and goals (Ward 2006 page 11). To guarantee that all students succeed, counselors must have high expectations for them and work constructively with them. School counselors should use their advocacy positions to work with low-income kids of color and their families to address marginality, culture, and power dynamics that affect college readiness. Academic planning is an important role for college success. Students of color may not recognize that not taking challenging high school curses impacts their college prospects if they do not receive guidance. In the article High school students discover they are not prepared for college, staff writer Jasmyn Sanchez quotes, "I think it depends on the kid, some students are very prepared, and some aren't," said SHS guidance counselor Ms. Theresa Onody. "Use the resources you can use, talk to parents, guidance counselors. If you don't know what you're going to do, and you don't talk, then we can't help. If you're not going to speak up or advocate for yourself then, who will?" (P.2) this is

an example of how some counselors from our local town have little effort to help our students of color. Therefore, proper counselor guidance is vital for their college preparedness and success, having a counselor that cares about students of color makes a huge difference. "Students of color compared to white students are placed in schools with large class sizes, receive less challenging curriculum, and have fewer qualified teachers in terms of levels of education." (Darling-Hammond P.9). Students of color have a lower chance of succeeding in college since their high schools do not adequately prepare them. In general, high-minority schools, especially those with a large percentage of low-income children, are deficient in a number of areas.

The problem is that high schools in Salinas, particularly those in the east, provide fewer high-level courses that prepare students for college. Students are obliged to take remedial classes in college if they do not take these courses, which promote higher-order thinking skills. Due to a limitation of qualified school counselors who are passionate about students, it is common for students to be assigned to counselors who have excessive caseloads, making it impossible to offer students of color and their families with the support they require in the college preparation process. When students of color believe their counselor or teacher does not anticipate them to attend college, they are less likely to seek college information. The importance of teachers and school staff understanding the life and culture of these students makes a huge difference, and even better when the teachers look like, and share similar stories to those of their students of color. In the video Students of color in Colorado discuss the importance of diversity in education a high school girl mentions, "It's really important for kids of color that we see people that look like us and then we know that they're with us and that they're supporting us" 0:22-0:28". When teachers and school staff build relationships with students, they spark motivation in these students, and being able to see their enthusiasm motivates them to go the extra mile for them,

rather than avoiding relationships and projecting stereotypes about students of color that limit their academic success. Students of color are less likely to seek college information when they perceive that their counselor does not expect them to go to college.

Students of color should have the opportunity and preparation necessary to succeed in college because the distribution of opportunity in a society that is becoming increasingly reliant on information and education is a subject of tremendous anxiety and concern for all Americans of all backgrounds. "When you're in college you need at most five hours to study for each class and I don't think everyone is prepared for that," said sophomore Jason Chen. "In high school what we do is easy and doesn't require a lot of work compared to assignments in college." Some students don't feel academically prepared for college because there are fewer academic expectations in terms of following directions, completing assignments on time, and much more. In college, most students find it integral to follow directions and hand in assignments on time in order to get a good grade. "In my opinion, overall, I feel that teachers have low expectations of students when it comes to excelling academically in projects, assignments, tests, and much more," said junior Nina Goldschmit. "As a result, we are really not as prepared as we should be academically for college."

### Setting the Stage: It All Began with A Story

There were numerous things that I saw growing up in a household of five siblings, with myself being the second youngest. My three elder siblings all completed high school, but that was the extent of their education. Other people I knew likewise just graduated from high school and that was it; they did not go to college, and if they did, I would notice that years had passed, and they had not graduated. As my senior year approached, I became increasingly interested in

attending college, but I was concerned that I would not be able to achieve, let alone be admitted. College was always a sign of achievement to me, something that only a few individuals reached. When my senior year began, I discovered how terribly my high school had failed to prepare me for college. Advanced physical education, art, firefighting class, Student aid, and English were among the six classes I took during my senior year. It's nice to mention that my senior year was quite easygoing and simple. Thankfully, I was able to complete high school and do something that few of my peers had the opportunity to do by attending a community college.

It was time for my first day of college. I felt more nervous than excited as most students often feel. I felt similar to how I felt as a freshman in high school. I had no idea which classes to take or what to expect because I didn't have any direction or advice from anyone who had gone to college. That first semester I took three courses; Math, English, and Political Science. During the first week, I discovered why so many of my friends who went to college got stuck and never finished. Each course included a large amount of homework for me to complete. Homework was not something I was used to doing during my final year of high school, and I was not used to doing a large amount of homework every week from all of my three classes. I lost enthusiasm to attend class due to a lack of preparation and little to no guidance, and as a result, I dropped out. My second semester, I attempted again, this time with the assistance of a counselor who provided me with a list of classes to take; nevertheless, out of the four classes I took, I only passed one and dropped the other three. I came to the realization that college was not easy at all and I gave up. It was winter of 2016 and I was working with my mother in the freezing fields pulling hoses out of the ground. I worked for 6 months and that little spark of motivation for me to give college one last try lightened up in me. Thanks to that experience I regained my motivation and I was determined to graduate college. On my third effort, I not only contacted one but 3 counselors for

assistance. I also went to the early assistance program three times a week and received the help I needed from tutors. My ability to manage my time was also crucial to my achievement. Understanding that I would have to devote a significant amount of time to each class helped me prepare for college, and thanks to the changes and assistance I acquired for that semester, I passed all of my classes for the first time ever. An achievement I thought impossible just one semester prior.

Passing all of my classes that semester gave me hope and confidence that I could graduate from college and become the first person in my family to do so. I not only graduated college, but I am also one week away from graduating from a four-year university, thanks to hard work and perseverance, as well as help from people around me. "If I passed all of my classes that semester, I can pass all of my classes the following semesters," was the message I told myself over and over. My older siblings, as well as many of my friends and acquaintances, did not attend college, and if they did, they did not graduate, not because they lacked the ability to do so, but because they did not receive adequate preparation from their high schools and lacked programs and support that would have given them a fair chance of succeeding in college. That lack of preparation and guidance for future students that share my same story will end with me. I will make a difference in the lives of my future students and make sure that my school gives our students the resources they need to succeed and also give them the right guidance and tools. Against all odds I was able to graduate college and in the process of graduating a four-year university. If I was able to do it many other students can and will too. All they need is the proper preparation, guidance, resources, and experience mentors that will give them the right tools they need to succeed and not only attend college, but most importantly graduate from college/university.

**Methods**

8 high school students (2 students per grade) from a predominantly minority populated school will be interviewed. Alisal High School is located on the east side of Salinas CA, a low-income side in a majority agricultural town with a majority uneducated population. Salinas has one of the highest high school dropout rates, at about 41% compared to the US average of 12%. Additionally, only about 13% of the population in Salinas has a bachelor's degree or better. First generation student status, low income, and other external factors may play a role in the amount of resources available to them which will affect their ability to prepare to transition to college. (Town Charts: Salinas, CA; Education)

Participants were male and female, currently attending high school between the ages of 14 and 18. Two (2) freshmen, two (2) sophomores, two (2) juniors, and two (2) seniors were chosen to improve diversity in responses and have a base of comparison between grade on mentality about college. Students must identify as Hispanic, black or anything other than white to qualify to be interviewed.

This topic is meaningful to me because I come from a low-income minority community that had low quality schools with little to no college prep resources. I have the same background as many of the participants. I want to make sure that my project is well-supported, so that I can help these students. Coming from the east side of Salinas, California, like myself, many students of color face similar challenges, and it is critical to prepare the next generation of students of color for college. Doing so will provide a better future for us, and as a result, our community will benefit greatly because crime levels will drop and there will be fewer low-income families. Improving the students' education level improves the material conditions for them and the future

generations. As data shows, there is a positive correlation between education level and income. Income level is a strong predictor of crime rates in communities. From this we can comfortably say that an increase in education level in these communities will have positive impacts in more ways than one.

Below is an example of the questions that were asked to the students during the interview. The first five questions target the issue of awareness of college-prep resources and their availability to the students. The latter two questions aim to get a sense of the academic goals of the students being interviewed to get a relative understanding of how every grade level perceives college and their academic goals.

(Required Questions)

1. What do you know about college prep resources? What do you see as the challenges with accessing college-prep resources throughout high school?

2. What is currently being done to provide college prep resources - by whom - and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?

3. What do you think should be done about how much access students of color have to college-prep resources?

4. What do you think are the challenges to doing something about increasing college pre resources?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about college-prep resources at your school?

(Additional Questions)

6. Do you plan to go to college?

7. If your answer was yes, what have you done to prepare for college? If your answer is no, why not?

All volunteer participants chose whether or not to participate in this research project. Once they verbally consented to participate in the study, an actual consent form was then given to the students where the details of the study were explained. The consent form will also require the signature and consent of a parent or legal guardian as they are minors. The consent form also explains that should they choose to participate, they still have a choice not to answer any questions they are uncomfortable with for any personal reason. For the in-depth interviews, I assured them that all names will be removed to protect anonymity. Additionally, all interviews took place in a comfortable manner and in a relaxing situation, where interruptions and distractions are minimized. Participants were interviewed individually. If it was not possible to interview participants in person, they were invited to complete a phone interview or paper and pencil survey of the same questions. Face-to-Face interviews took less than one hour, were audio-recorded (with participant and parent consent) and took place at their school. After the interviews are conducted, the data will be analyzed, and responses will be divided to find common responses.

Data will be analyzed by dividing the responses according to common themes. Since there is no quantitative data being reported, the common themes that are received will be assessed and will be listed in order of the amount of times that they were mentioned. Most commonly mentioned responses are at the top of the list while rare or non-common responses will be lower on the list. The most common responses will be categorized as "important" to high school students.

**Results**

Based on existing research and personal experience, it is safe to assume that there is no one solution that can fix all the disproportionate lack of resources available to students of color in these overlooked schools and communities. One possible solution could be giving more opportunities like after school, summer, or winter break educational seminars and workshops for both students and parents. Educational workshops and seminars serve as opportunities to prepare the students as well as the parents for what they must do to apply to college as well as preparing them for what will be coming from applications, financial aid applications, and acceptance letters. The process of transitioning from high school to college does not entirely rely on simply submitting college applications. Financial aid applications and applying for other financial assistance such as grants, scholarships, and if needed student loans are necessary to understand and complete during the process of transition. Understanding how to boost your status to improve your chances of getting into a university is especially important early in high school to ensure enough time to complete extracurricular options that will provide depth to a student's application. From community service, to internships, jobs, certifications, professional affiliations, and technical training all can aid in helping an applicant stand out above the rest.

While educational seminars and workshops throughout the year are in my eyes the most beneficial option to tip the scales back to balance in favor of the students of color in under-resourced schools and communities, there is a big barrier in the form of resources available to schools and districts to financially support these kinds of programs. Simply giving pamphlets and flyers to parents is more feasible as this is simple and quick as well as very effective. This will also remove any problems of people not getting the information because they cannot make it to the in-person workshops and seminars. Lack of available time on behalf of the

parents is a real possibility as most parents of these kids are forced to work year-round because of their material conditions. Often leaving these students having to care for their younger siblings or even having to pick up jobs after school themselves to help support their family. Pamphlets are also very cost-effective tools that remove the problem of financial support from districts. The problem with pamphlets is the lack of communication between parents and school staff. Because there is only so much information that can be placed on these pamphlets, parents may have questions and would be less likely to ask questions if they have to then take time individually to ask school staff. The group environment may bring a level of comfort for these parents. Another problem is the reliance on students to actually give the pamphlets to parents and speak with them on what they are about or for. Pamphlets are more financially realistic but lack the positive aspects that in-person workshops and seminars have.

As mentioned before there are a number of limitations of the proposed solution. Some limitations include the available space provided by school as well as the available support by the staff to actually run these workshops. Finding staff that would be willing to do these workshops voluntarily if there is no financial support by the school or the district would be extremely difficult. One possible way to ensure enough staff is by asking recently graduated students who are still in the community to volunteer. Possibly seeking a partnership with the local community college or a professor from said college to offer extra credit or course credit in exchange for their time aiding the school in these seminars. This can benefit the school, the students, and the volunteers equally. The school benefits from not having to pay staff extra hours and only having to provide the location for these workshops and seminars. The students benefit from having face to face interactions with students that have recently done these same procedures, providing a sense of relatability. Lastly, the volunteers benefit from the extra credit or course credit from

providing their time. Another possible limitation can be the availability on behalf of the parents because of work restraints and other responsibilities. As mentioned, these parents are in low income communities and because of their material conditions, must work year-round and often have to leave these students to care for younger siblings or even having to find a job themselves to help support their families. Finding ways to work around these limitations is crucial. One way to fix this is by having these seminars year-round to better work with the community members' time availability. Having often reminders sent via voicemails, emails, and other forms of communications can help increase the number of attendants to these workshops significantly.

In person workshops are still a more effective solution as they provide the participants with the opportunity to ask more questions and receive more information and answers quickly as well as hands on opportunities to help the students.

## Reflection and Action Documentation

For my capstone project, I looked at how students of color, predominantly in minority schools and communities, are experiencing a lack of college-prep resources. I wanted to examine this issue because access to college-prep resources is incredibly important for all students, especially those of color, low-income, and first-generation. Unfortunately, those groups of students are the ones with least college-prep resources. Being as passionate as I am about academic achievement in my community, I set out to research how much of an issue this was for students in Salinas, CA. I choose to focus on Alisal High School, which is located in a Hispanic community on the lower-income side of Salinas. The school is very diverse and, given its agricultural location, I assumed students here were feeling a strong pressure to work in agriculture rather than pursue higher education based on anecdotal personal examples. I wanted

to study this school in particular because I felt that its demographics and location meant that students were not being adequately supported with college-prep resources. This is the school with the most ethnic diverse population out of all the schools in the city. The school with the most students in the low socioeconomic status. The school with the least amount of diverse staff available to mirror the needs of students.

For my study, I interviewed eight high school students from Alisal; they all lived in a minority community and identified as students of color. There were two students of every high school grade level participating in the study and there was a roughly even mix of male and female students. I asked them what they knew about college-prep resources and what challenges they had accessing any at their school, what were the strengths and weaknesses of any current college-prep resources, and what they thought should be done regarding the access students of color had to these resources, among other questions. The aim of my study was to identify some key themes among students who may be very close to this issue; as a result, there is a focus on qualitative data. I found that the majority of students mentioned wanting more opportunities like educational seminars and workshops, not only for them, but for their parents. They wanted more support from their parents when it came to filling out college applications and FAFSA, but also for things like understanding the significance of acceptance letters. I found this especially surprising because I had anticipated that students would ask for more student-centered resources, but instead they placed a lot of emphasis on parent-centered resources. But even the students were able to acknowledge that the reason Alisal does not have these resources is because of its lack of qualified staff and funds. Another important thing to note is that the majority of students said that they planned to go to college yet felt that their school was not supporting them enough. This study was a great first step. In the future, larger and more empirical studies should be

conducted on the same topic. It is crucial that these students are not forgotten about. Low-income minority schools should be assessed, so that a substantive recommendation can be made to the school. Additionally, this process is something that students, parents, and the entire community should be involved in so that momentum could build up, and lead to actual change.

This small study began to tap into something very special that needs to be known: students in these low-income minority populations want to be invested in and succeed. When California fails to give these schools the resources they need, it is wasting academic potential and we cannot continue to allow for that.

## Action Documentation

For the Action Documentation aspect of my project, I created a poster inviting students to ask their counselors and school administration for more information and opportunities regarding the college application, as well as the financial assistance application process and what comes with the entire sequence of transitioning to college once accepted. The poster included questions to ask the administration, ways to ask them, and the benefits of what these opportunities could bring them and the school as a whole.

The initial draft of my poster was very simple and simply encouraged the students to ask their counselors for information about college and assistance in the application process. This resource is not an attempt at a larger solution to this systemic issue, but instead to serve as a reminder to students that they can push for systemic change while still advocating for themselves. The poster is shown below in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.**



THINKING ABOUT COLLEGE?

FEELING UNDER-PREPARED?

SOME QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK YOUR COUNSELOR:

1. What are some resources available to prepare me for college currently?
2. Based on my circumstances, is there financial help I can take advantage of?
3. Where can I find more information about college and college assistance?
4. Is there free community college resources available to me?
5. What educational resources are available to my parents?

MORE TIPS TO GET MORE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO YOU AT YOUR SCHOOL!

- Ask Student body to help propose more resources available to students.
- Get in contact with people who have already graduated and are currently in college.
- Ask your teachers about tips on how you can prepare for college (every person has a different experience).
- Create groups to complete applications to help each other out.

For more information, reach out with questions: hmosqueda@csumb.edu

Evidently, individuals seeking assistance will only make a marginal impact, whereas an entire shift in the school or district can greatly impact the community and its members. I then added ways to ask the counselors and even the administration like principals and vice principals to bring about more opportunities to the campus. Even getting in touch with the student body at the school is a great way that I pointed out could fast track the conversation with administration. If student body officials push for more resources for the students, the administration may take this much more seriously than if individuals ask for this directly.

So far, students have communicated that they have started to work with their student body officials to communicate their need for college-prep resources to their administration. I am grateful that my study may have pushed students to realize that change can begin with them.

An important next step for this entire issue is to fund larger empirical studies in these schools to assess their needs. The study should involve students, parents, and community members because momentum will be needed to call on larger school administrations to adequately fund the college-prep programs that will be proposed. In the meanwhile, students need to be encouraged to be their own advocates because while the system has issues and it certainly isn't fair that so much perseverance is needed from these students, if they do not advocate for themselves, no one else will.

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