



Appreciating a College-Going Culture in Public Education

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Introduction

Ventura County's public high schools are failing to prepare the vast majority of its students for college admission. This is based not on the quality of the education students receive, but rather, on the simple fact that nearly two-thirds of Ventura County students do not complete the needed courses for admission to the two state university systems. According to the California Department of Education (2016), in 2015-2016 only 34.2% of Ventura County high school graduates had completed the "A-G Requirements," which is the necessary curriculum required for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems. The differences are even starker when one compares the college readiness rates of Ventura County to those of Los Angeles County and the state over time. In this paper I will demonstrate how Ventura County and its largest high school district, Oxnard Union High School District (OUHSD), consistently underperform on graduating students who are eligible to apply to a UC and CSU when compared to neighboring Los Angeles County and its largest district, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). For Latina/o students, the largest minority group in both counties, the disparity between Ventura County and Los Angeles County and the state is even greater.

Literature Review

The topic of college readiness is one that is of continuing importance to researchers in education. The question of whether students graduate high school prepared for college and careers has become a national priority in the last ten years (Center on Standards and Assessments Implementation, 2016). The literature actually cites California's A-G requirements as an example of how state university systems have tried to provide a way to determine whether a student is prepared for its higher education system (Balfanz et al., 2016). The same report also describes how some districts within the state have adopted the course sequence as their standard for graduation (Balfanz et al., 2016, p.22).

There is also specific interest in the issue of Latinos, specifically Latino males and their decreasing participation in higher education. Victor Sáenz and Luis Ponjuán published a seminal study on the phenomenon of the vanishing Latino male in higher education (2009). As they state very succinctly in the first sentence of this article, "Latino males are effectively vanishing from the American higher education pipeline" (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009, p.54).

Analysis of A-G Completion Rates

If we start by comparing the California State and Ventura County A-G completion rate (the percentage of high school graduates who complete all the required courses for admission to the UC and CSU systems) it is clear that Ventura County is well behind the state average, 45.4% compared to 34.2%, respectively. This was not always the case, however. In 1996, the Ventura County completion rate was 35.7% and the state's was 35.4%. Ventura County actually did *better* than the state at that time (CA Department of Education, 1996). In the twenty years since, the A-G completion rate in Ventura County got worse while it got better across the state (see Table 1).

Table 1: A-G Completion Rate Comparison Over Time

	California	Los Angeles County	Ventura County	LAUSD	OUHSD
1995-1996	35.4%	40.7%	35.7%	49.8%	33.9%
2015-2016	45.4%	49.6%	34.2%	54.9%	27.1%

The same trend holds true if we compare Ventura County to Los Angeles County. Twenty years ago the completion rate in Los Angeles was 40.7% compared to Ventura's 35.7%, a difference of only 5%. In 2016 that disparity increased to 15.4% (Ventura at 34.2% and Los Angeles at 49.6%). Again, Ventura's rate went down slightly while Los Angeles followed the state trend with its rate increasing.

Finally, if we compare the two largest districts with high schools in both counties, OUHSD and LAUSD, we see the same trends, only magnified. In 1996, 33.9% of OUHSD graduates were eligible to apply to a UC or CSU, while in LAUSD this number was 49.8%. Twenty years later this gulf of 15.9% ballooned to 27.8%. LAUSD increase their A-G completion rate, while OUHSD's completion rate went in the opposite direction, decreasing by 6.8%.

If we do the same comparison but only look at Latino students we see the same general underperformance of Ventura County and OUHSD. Additionally, even though there was some slight improvement in the Latina/o completion rates over this period, this was dwarfed by the improvements elsewhere in the state.

Again, Ventura County and OUHSD have lower A-G completion rates for Latina/o students when compared to the other groups. Comparing Ventura County to the state between 1996 and 2016, the completion rate difference went from 2.7% to 13.9%. Between counties the difference grew from 10.2% to 21.2%. Finally, when we compare the two districts, again we see the gulf widening, going from 20.3% to 31.3% (see Table 2).

Table 2: A-G Completion Rate Over Time for Latina/o Students

	California	Los Angeles County	Ventura County	LAUSD	OUHSD
1995-1996	22.3%	29.8%	19.6%	40.7%	20.4%
2015-2016	37.2%	44.5%	23.3%	53.5%	22.2%

Another important point here is that over that twenty year period LAUSD has managed to nearly eliminate the A-G completion rate gap for its Latina/o students. In 1996 Latina/o students had a completion rate of 40.7% as compared to 49.8% for the entire district, a gap of 9.1%. That has been reduced to just 1.4% in 2016. Though there has also been a reduction in that gap in OUHSD, there is a significant difference. In LAUSD the overall A-G completion rate *rose* and the Latina/o rate also *rose*, almost meeting it. In OUHSD, though, the overall rate *fell* and the Latina/o rate rose slightly thereby narrowing the gap.

These numbers show that while the A-G completion rates in the state and its largest school district have been on an upward trend over the past twenty years, the rates in Ventura County have gone in the opposite direction. Additionally, the completion rates for Latina/o students in Ventura County are still languishing in the low twenty percent range while they are increasing elsewhere.

Conclusion

As a result of numbers like these, it is clear that the school districts that oversee Ventura County's high schools, particularly OUHSD, are failing to prepare its students for post-secondary options. Specifically in OUHSD, they are failing to accomplish their number one goal which is to, "Prepare students for College, Career and Life readiness, ensuring that every student is challenged to successfully access rigorous curricula and 21st Century learning strategies that lead to tangible post-secondary outcomes" (Oxnard Union High School District, 2017, their emphasis).

A common sense solution to this problem is to align the district's graduation requirements to the A-G requirements. In LAUSD, the class of 2017 was the first class required to pass the A-G requirements with a C or better to graduate from high school (Phillips et al., 2015). However, LAUSD is far from the first to align their requirements in this way. As of 2015 at least a dozen school districts had made the A-G coursework their default graduation requirements (Leal, 2015).

I want to be clear that I am not using the word "failing" lightly here. This is not an indictment of the public school teachers in Ventura County, OUHSD, or the teaching in these schools. The data presented in this paper do not speak to that. Public schools are often blamed for many of society's ills. For example, David Berliner posits that it is poverty that leads to failing schools, not the other way around and that when poverty is factored in, our public schools are doing much better than we are typically led to believe (Berliner, 2014). This paper does not refute that argument. However, I would argue that by allowing over 70% of your students to graduate high school and not be eligible for admission to the UC or CSU, and for that not to have changed in twenty years, something is failing. In this case I believe it is the districts that determine the high schools' curricula, not the schools, that are ultimately responsible for this failure.

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Ernesto Guerrero

However, districts also have the solution within their grasp, though, by moving to align their graduation requirements to the A-G curriculum. It will not be an easy process as shown with the example of LAUSD (Phillips et al., 2015) but it is a necessary one if Ventura County wants to be a leader in post-secondary preparation rather than languishing behind as the rest of the state moves in the opposite direction.

About the Author

Dr. Ernesto Guerrero is the Director of Academic Advising at CSU Channel Islands and an Adjunct Professor of Educational Leadership at California Lutheran University. He has over eighteen years of experience in academic advising and student success programs having previously worked and taught at UCLA. Dr. Guerrero studies student success and retention, specifically in underrepresented student groups.

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Appreciating a College-Going Culture in Public Education

Ernesto Guerrero

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