

## **Title**

When rigor and relevance go hand-in-hand: An exploration of mutuality in three studies examining college readiness policies through research-practice partnerships

## **Choice of Sections**

1. Postsecondary Education
2. Effects of Education Policies

## **Session Organizer + Moderator**

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## **Panelists**

- **Carrie Miller**, Los Angeles Education Research Institute, [carrie.miller@laeri.org](mailto:carrie.miller@laeri.org)
- **Michelle Hodara**, Education Northwest / REL Northwest, [michelle.hodara@educationnorthwest.org](mailto:michelle.hodara@educationnorthwest.org)
- **Diana Mercado-Garcia**, Stanford University / Stanford-SFUSD Partnership, [dmercado@stanford.edu](mailto:dmercado@stanford.edu)

## **Panel Justification**

Despite the existence of peer-reviewed academic research considering a variety of policies or interventions aimed at improving high school students' college readiness (e.g., Chapa et al., 2016; Latino et al., 2018; Taylor, 2015), choosing which programs and services to offer ultimately rests with practitioners (Roderick, et al., 2009). Unfortunately, the degree to which practitioners engage with peer-reviewed academic research when considering policies appears scarce (NCRPP, 2016). Indeed, recent work has identified multiple challenges to effective practitioner engagement with research. For example, some studies suggest that although education leaders value research, the longer timelines accompanying rigorous research do not align with the rapid cycle decision-making occurring in practice (NCRPP, 2016; Turley and Stevens, 2015). Moreover, other studies describe practitioner use of research as complex, messy, and often misunderstood (Coburn and Stein, 2010; Coburn et al., 2009; Coburn et al., 2009). If one goal of research is to improve policymaking, it is clear that investing in better communications strategies once the research is finalized will not be enough.

In this panel, we will further explore the tensions underpinning the research process when there are two goals (often competing) to consider: producing rigorous, peer-reviewed research and producing quick-turnaround evidence that will ultimately be used. To facilitate this discussion, we purposely bring together three studies examining college readiness policies at the district or state level and reflecting different descriptive and quasi-experimental designs. The different questions, contexts, and methodological approaches will enable us to have a rich discussion as to when the aforementioned goals, rigor and use, can appropriately be attended to.

A second feature of the panel is that all three studies have been conducted through a research-practice partnership (RPP), long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations between researchers and practitioners to address problems of practice (Coburn, Penuel, and Geil, 2013). Although RPPs differ in structure and arrangement, one common goal is supporting research use. As such,

the panel will also discuss instances when rigor and relevance (and use) go hand-in-hand, and explore conditions that support mutuality of the goals, rather than competition.

To start, each panelist will provide project details, from describing initial negotiations of the questions through findings and expected use. The moderator will then facilitate a full group discussion of the tensions and tradeoffs encountered during their research through the following questions:

- How was the research design selected? What is the role of descriptive research in advancing project or partnership goals? Do you define rigor differently than your practitioner partners? What does this imply for the work?
- How is currently available peer-reviewed academic research on college readiness considered in your contexts? When is locally produced evidence preferred and why?
- How was the plan for supporting use of the research developed? Did this influence the research design (how)?
- What new opportunities are available *because* this work is conducted in an RPP?

The panel will also allow the audience time to ask questions of the panelists and engage in a discussion of how RPPs can conduct rigorous, relevant research that informs policy and practice.

### References

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## ***Abstract 1: LAUSD Students' Pathways to College***

### **Why this research?**

Completing a college degree has become increasingly central to individuals' economic and social well-being (Hout, 2012; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). In recognition of the importance of a college education, many states and school districts have implemented policies and practices focused on preparing students to enroll in and complete college. Over the last several years, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has expanded the availability of resources and supports intended to ensure students are college eligible, successfully navigate the college application process, and enroll in college. To support and inform LAUSD's efforts to increase graduates' educational attainment, the Los Angeles Education Research Institute (LAERI) and UCLA have partnered with the district to conduct a series of research studies designed to provide a more comprehensive picture of students' postsecondary pathways.

### **What is this research about?**

This study examines LAUSD's class of 2017's participation in the college application process and the association between the availability of school-based college access supports and students' college application behaviors (e.g., whether and where students applied to college). We describe students' two- and four-year college application rates; the types (e.g., institutional control, selectivity) and the number of colleges to which students applied; and how students' participation in the application process differed by gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, linguistic background, and academic preparation. We also examine whether students' college application behaviors, taking into account their academic preparation prior to high school, differed based on the college access resources (e.g., having access to a college counselor) available at their high schools.

### **How was this research carried out?**

Since 2015, LAERI has partnered with the district to conduct a series of research studies to understand the college access supports available in the district's high schools; students' college enrollment, persistence, and completion; and the extent to which differences among schools seem to contribute to differences in students' college-related outcomes. A central aspect of our partnership's postsecondary research has been collaboratively developing data collection mechanisms and measures that capture key moments on the path to college (e.g., learning about college admissions requirements, submitting a college application) and the availability of school-based college access supports. LAERI partnered with the district to design college-related staff and student survey items for LAUSD's annual school climate survey and a senior exit survey, which gathers data on whether and where students applied to college, were accepted, and planned to enroll. These new survey data provide the first systematic look at LAUSD students' college application behaviors.

### **What empirical approach was taken?**

This study draws on survey data from the district's 2016-17 student and staff school climate surveys and district administrative records. We linked students' 2016-17 survey responses to their demographic, academic, and behavioral data, as well as their responses to prior years' school climate surveys (N of analytic sample=17,243; 60% of all 12<sup>th</sup> graders who attended traditional high schools and affiliated charter high schools in 2016-17). We also constructed a

school-level dataset using student and staff survey data that characterizes schools' college-access resources (e.g., the resources and services schools offered and the percentage of students who reported receiving those services).

We used these datasets to conduct descriptive analyses of the class of 2017's two- and four-year college application rates, the rates at which students applied to specific types of colleges (e.g., public versus private), the number of colleges to which students applied, and how students' application behaviors differed across subgroups. We also examined the association between schools' college access supports and students' application behaviors, conditional on students' demographic background, academic, and behavioral characteristics measured prior to high school entry, using multilevel mixed models.

### **What does the research find?**

Our analyses indicate that most LAUSD twelfth graders submit a college application or register for a community college. By January of their senior year, about 80% of LAUSD twelfth graders had applied to or registered for at least one college. Nearly two-thirds had applied to at least one four-year college. Students' four-year college application rates varied by gender, ethnicity, parents' educational attainment, linguistic background, and academic preparation. The magnitude of these differences decreased when we compared students with similar levels of academic achievement.

A majority of the district's students applied to public, in-state colleges. The four-year colleges to which students most frequently applied were located in or near Los Angeles (e.g., California State University (CSU) Los Angeles, UCLA). Students who applied to four-year colleges typically submitted four or eight applications.

Our preliminary analyses of the association between school-based college access supports and students' college application behaviors suggests that, among school that serve similar students, college application rates vary across schools and even among schools that serve similar students. We are continuing to refine these models and will present more complete results during the panel.

### **What are the key tensions and tradeoffs your team had to consider when doing this research?**

During the panel, we will highlight three tensions and tradeoffs that shaped how we approached data collection, data analyses, and reporting our results:

- 1) The benefits and challenges of collaborating to develop district data collection systems for district improvement purposes rather than researchers engaging in data collection for a specific research study.
- 2) The tensions that arise from researchers' preferences for policy or program implementation to be embedded within strong research designs and practitioners' needs to provide discretion and choice to participants and to make immediate decisions).

3) Tradeoffs of reporting results in short research briefs rather than more comprehensive reports (e.g., easily digestible summaries versus more nuanced discussions of findings).

### **References**

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***Abstract 2: Supporting the transition to college: Accelerated learning access, outcomes, and credit transfer in Oregon (Education Northwest / REL Northwest)***

**Why this research?**

Oregon has invested significant resources to expand access to accelerated learning (i.e., educational experiences that allow students to earn college credit in high school), and education leaders are committed to ensuring that these programs are sustainable, equitable, and effective. Carried out in partnership with the members of the Graduation and Postsecondary Success (GPS) alliance, this report is intended to guide policy and practice focused on improving accelerated learning programs in Oregon. GPS is a cross-sector group of Oregon education leaders from K12 and postsecondary state agencies, districts, and schools focused on closing equity gaps in high school graduation and college completion. Members of the research alliance helped shape the research questions and design and provided feedback on the report.

**What is the research about?**

This study examines accelerated learning participation rates overall and by model among Oregon public high school students in 2013/14, 2014/15, and 2015/16. The study then focuses on students in the high school class of 2014/15 and examines the influence of accelerated learning on high school graduation, college enrollment, and college persistence. The study also presents findings on these students' transfer of college credits to public in-state universities and community colleges after high school, providing the first empirical evidence on accelerated learning credit transfer in the state.

**What empirical approach was taken?**

The study used data from various sources to build a longitudinal database that linked K-12 records, accelerated learning data, and postsecondary outcomes. The following methods were used:

- *Participation in accelerated learning:* The study team calculated rates of accelerated learning participation of Oregon public high school students, and used OLS and logistic regression analysis to identify school- and student-level predictors of accelerated learning participation.
- *High school-to-college outcomes:* Using propensity score weighting, the study examines the relationship between accelerated learning and outcomes for students who were expected to graduate from public high school in 2014/15.
- *Credit transfer:* The study team calculated the proportion of college credits earned in high school that were accepted at Oregon public universities and the transfer of dual-credit college math and English composition among students in the class of 2014/15. The study team also estimated OLS and logistic regression models to identify predictors of accelerated learning credit transfer and the likelihood of taking the same or a lower-level English or math course in college (compared to the dual credit course).

### **What does the research find?**

*Participation in accelerated learning:* Participation in all forms of accelerated learning coursetaking increased over a three-year period. The most common form of accelerated learning in Oregon in 2015/16 was dual credit, with a quarter of all high school juniors and seniors taking a course. The second most common form was AP, with 22 percent of juniors and seniors taking an AP class. Most schools in Oregon offered at least one form of accelerated learning, and largely driven by differences in AP/IB participation, schools in urban areas had higher accelerated learning participation rates than schools in rural and suburban locations.

For individual students, economic disadvantage had the largest negative association with accelerated learning participation compared to all other demographic and achievement factors, and schools with a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students had lower participation rates in accelerated learning.

*High school-to-college outcomes:* In the class of 2014/15, accelerated learning participants were 30 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school, 25 percentage points more likely to enroll in college, and 22 percentage points more likely to persist in college than their matched peers who did not take accelerated learning in high school, and findings were consistent for Black, Latino/Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native students. The positive association between accelerated learning and education outcomes varied in magnitude based on accelerated learning model.

*Credit transfer:* Fifteen percent of students in the class of 2014/15 transferred less than half the credits they earned in high school to the Oregon public university they attended after high school. Students who were economically disadvantaged had a lower rate of transfer credits accepted than the rate for all students. The university a student attended after high school was not related to that student's credit transfer rate.

Taking dual-credit college math and English allows students to complete courses in high school that are key prerequisites for many postsecondary programs. However, nearly a quarter of students who earned credit from dual-credit math in high school and 9 percent of students who earned credit from dual-credit English in high school in the class of 2014/15 took the same or a lower-level course at the community college or university they attended after high school.

### **How will your partners integrate this research into their decisions, practice, or thinking?**

Oregon stakeholders plan to use these findings to guide policy on accelerated learning expansion efforts, continue their statewide emphasis on providing access to historically underserved student groups, and inform future research efforts. The study suggests a need for further investigation into inequities in access to accelerated learning across student groups and schools, interviews with or a survey of high school and college staff members and accelerated learning students to understand what information high school students have about requesting credit transfer and associated barriers they face, and an examination of potential implicit biases or barriers that prevent low-income students from transferring college credits they earn in high school.

**What are the lessons learned?**

Stakeholders from K-12 and higher education have different, sometimes conflicting, research questions and policy priorities related to accelerated learning. This project attempted to address all questions across all stakeholder groups in Oregon, and in doing so, produced a very long and exhaustive report. To facilitate use of the findings by stakeholders, the report must be accompanied by coaching around interpretation and use of findings. Thus, the final report will be complemented by a brief infographic that highlights the most policy-relevant and actionable findings and multiple in-person and virtual research briefings that are tailored to the audience.

### ***Abstract 3: SFUSD Early College Project, Stanford-SFUSD Partnership***

***What is the research about?*** The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) Early College project is a multi-year causal analysis of the effects of an Early College intervention on EL student college credit completion, high school graduation, and immediate college enrollment. The Early College program intervention aims to improve students' high school experience, college transition, and college enrollment by providing whole cohorts opportunities to dually enroll in City College of San Francisco (CCSF) courses. The school district started implementing the Early College program in Spring 2017, and approximately 400 students at two high schools have participated, taking three to six units of college-level courses per semester. The first year of the study has involved a causal analysis of the program effects. The study also uses student surveys to gain insight into the mechanisms that may potentially lead to program effects. Our research questions, developed collaboratively with the district, are:

- (1) What is the impact of Early College opportunities on: college credit completion prior to graduation, high school graduation, and immediate college enrollment?
- (2) What are EL students' experiences and perceptions of the Early College program?

***Why this research?*** English Learners (ELs) lag behind their peers in postsecondary attainment. High school ELs are less likely to take college preparatory classes and are 18 percentage points less likely to graduate in four years. Only 18% of ELs advance directly to four-year colleges, compared to 43% of native English speakers. Instead, ELs are more likely to enroll in two-year colleges or not participate in higher education at all. As the EL population continues to grow, so does concern over their underrepresentation in higher education. Furthermore, research shows that Early College High Schools have positive effects on students from groups underrepresented in higher education, such as racial minorities and first-generation college goers. However, little is known about the impact of Early College opportunities on ELs. Recognizing these broader educational trends in their own district, administrators designed the Early College intervention to address these issues and approached Stanford researchers to assist with the evaluation of their Early College intervention. Thus, the research partnership simultaneously sheds light on local district issues and speaks to important gaps in the education research literature.

***How was this research carried out?*** This study has been carried out in partnership with SFUSD from its conception to guarantee that the development of the study is aligned with both district goals and researcher interests. The role of the researchers has been to provide the methodological expertise and knowledge base of the empirical literature in this area, while district administrators have been instrumental in providing feedback about the local relevancy of the topics of study, which has led to a more insightful research design. Furthermore, as research partners, the district has helped navigate district bureaucracies to ensure appropriate data collection. However, both parties have sustained a practice of collaboration throughout the process. As an example, district administrators and Stanford researchers worked together to identify variables to include in the analysis of the administrative data and to develop a student survey that would appropriately guide departmental aims in improving the Early College program.

***What empirical approach was taken?*** Our analytical approach involves a difference-in-differences-in-differences (DDD) analysis of 10 years of administrative records and matched

National Student Clearinghouse data. Leveraging the exogenous policy change in 2017, we examine the outcomes of pre- and post-program cohorts of students in treated and untreated high schools and compare ELs to non-ELs. Overall, the SFUSD Early College study draws from two data sources: (1) administrative records, including National Student Clearinghouse Match; and (2) student surveys. Analysis of administrative records helps us identify the effect of Early College on students' academic outcomes. Survey responses from current SFUSD students provide insight into students' experience with SFUSD's college and career preparation services and the Early College opportunities to inform district administrators and school staff about how the program is used and accessed. As such, the study draws from a variety of student outcome measures that extend beyond test scores.

***What does the research find?*** Our preliminary findings from the first year of data collection suggest that the Early College intervention has a large significant effect on college credits earned during the period of participation in the program (12<sup>th</sup> grade). Furthermore, we find that there is some positive effect on high school graduation, but there is no effect on immediate college enrollment. Meanwhile, survey results suggest that EL students perceive the program to be a useful resource for preparing them for college. The majority of EL students report being satisfied with the community college courses, and more than half of EL students report that they are currently trying to obtain a certificate or college degree in an area related to the community college courses they took. Additional first year findings and survey responses from high school students and graduates will be reported.

***What are the implications for practice?*** The preliminary results suggest that Early College opportunities are perceived as being useful for EL students, but that there may be more advising needed to help EL students materialize their aspirations to actual college enrollment after high school graduation. We expect the findings to inform the design and implementation of college and career readiness programs throughout the district and to contribute to our understanding of Early College interventions for different student subpopulations.

***What are some key lessons learned from this work, especially around working collaboratively with practice-side folks?*** Working collaboratively with practitioners has improved the research design of the study. With both causal analysis of program effects and survey analysis of student experience, we are able to not just diagnose the effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness) of the intervention, but also uncover possible mechanisms that help explain the results so that the district can improve on the design of their program. Furthermore, access to administrative records from the district coupled with student surveys has allowed for a balance of analyzing existing data and collection of new information.