Expert Spotlight

Christopher Edley, Jr.

ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS: TAKING THE LONG VIEW ON THE RIVER OF OPPORTUNITY

This paper was written by Christopher Edley, Jr. in the summer of 2023, when we asked him to be a contributor to our research brief series in response to the U.S. Supreme Court decision on race-conscious admissions. This paper is a testament to Chris' passion for justice and visionary leadership for achieving a more equitable education system for all. We were heartbroken at the sudden passing of this titan and legal scholar in May 2024. But most of all, we are grateful that Chris dedicated his life to expanding opportunity and that we were privileged to know and learn from him.

The Campaign for College Opportunity

affirming EQUITY
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> *We know that human potential is not related to race, ethnicity, class, or gender. Yet, for that potential to be fully realized depends heavily on the distribution of socially and culturally constructed opportunities.*
>
> – Christopher Edley, Jr.

An unflagging commitment to maximizing the number of high school graduates who are ready for college and careers is essential to our social contract. Advocates and institutions alike must not lose sight of this as they soldier through newly created obstacles to achieving an inclusive higher education.

In June 2023, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) set aside decades of doctrine and precedent to end race-conscious college admissions. The most direct impact of the SCOTUS ruling is falling on those colleges that are both selective and use race as a consideration in admissions or financial aid. Those institutions are critically important gateways to leadership positions in business, society, and government, among other sectors. Equitable access to these gateways is essential for our country to make real progress in achieving its ideals of equality and opportunity. The court has made it more difficult to combat injustice in higher education by restricting the use of a powerful tool. Imagine battling cancer without the aid of surgical interventions or chemotherapy. Colleges and universities will need to recommit themselves to equal access and inclusion by all legal means available and assess their current admissions practices for equity, as covered in other briefs in **Equity, Inclusion, Action**, a national initiative driven by the Campaign for College Opportunity. But how do we ensure that more non-privileged students are eligible and prepared for college?

Now, it is even more important that we increase the number of college-ready Latinx, Black, Asian American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NHPI), and American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) high school students who wish to transition to emerging industries that require a college education. The kind of mobility these potential students imagine for themselves is impossible without proper readiness to take advantage of and succeed in college. It has never been more important to build a broad and diverse pool of students who aspire to postsecondary education—and who are well-prepared for college success. Secondary schools must better prepare their students for college, while postsecondary institutions must reconsider their own preparation to support all students for success.

In this paper, college readiness should be understood to mean fortifying high school students' eligibility for college admission, as well as their reasonable chance of postsecondary success. In the "production" of achievement and degree attainment, it is useful to distinguish academic from non-academic factors. Academic factors are generally understood to be related to curriculum and classroom achievement. For our purposes, non-academic factors include social-emotional skills and healthy child/adolescent development. In a third category are various conditions that enable learning, such as a feeling of safety, healthy meals, and proper heating/cooling school facilities for students to learn in—all of which are related to college achievement, attainment, and readiness.

Ways of Thinking About College Readiness	
Academic Readiness	Curriculum content, exposure to learning activities, achievement
Non-Academic Readiness	Social-emotional skills, child development, financial planning
Enabling Conditions	Safety, infrastructure, transportation, food, diversity

Academic Readiness

People generally think of college readiness as the attainment of a particular threshold or standard of achievement. This definition is inadequate, especially for policy purposes, because it provides so little guidance for action, and because students' life circumstances and aspirations are so varied. We should think of readiness as "a reasonable chance of postsecondary success," as defined by the aspirations of a well-informed student and the relevant institutions.

An essential characteristic of academic readiness is academic exposure to a variety of academic subject areas—this has long been considered a foundation for postsecondary education and careers. It answers the question, "*What is secondary education?"* which until the mid-20th century delineated the education expected by society for everyone—the exception was historically privileged men who planned to join the socioeconomic elite and automatically were admitted to postsecondary schools. Earlier in the century, this broad academic exposure also became a mark of preparation for postsecondary study or college. The useful element of standardization was introduced by widespread adoption of qualification or entrance examinations, conceived as a progressive means of distributing postsecondary opportunities based on criteria aside from wealth and status. Many state boards of education, however, have maintained a commitment to following rigid sets of content or curricular frameworks, taken together with standardized score thresholds in content mastery (such as grades and/or test scores). Several states still insist on high school exit exams as a graduation requirement, rather than using other valid metrics to assess accountability standards. For those high school students hoping to graduate, these types of tests can represent yet another hurdle to attaining a diploma or its equivalent, a necessary prerequisite for higher education and most career technical education.

While this paper does not explore standardized testing, it bears mentioning that some students lower their college and career aspirations as a result of receiving non-optimal test scores, or even when facing the prospect of having to take such a test. In truth, no matter their psychometric or predictive quality, college readiness tests have the potential to do more harm than good. Their metrics do not always represent if a given student is college-ready, nor do rigid sets of guidelines apply to all students, regardless of other factors. To understand more about the impact of standardized tests on college admissions, another brief in this series, **Advance Equity by Rethinking Use of Standardized Tests**, offers great insight by discussing the equity implications of requiring college applicants to submit an SAT or ACT score as part of an application for college admission. That brief also discusses the consideration by college leaders of test-optional polices and ways in which test-free policies may address equity concerns related to standardized tests in college admissions.

In California, for example, the basic opportunity for exposure to foundational academic content is measured by access to and high-quality instruction in the "A through G" academic categories. Eligibility for any of the 23 California State University (CSU) campuses or any of nine University of California (UC) campuses requires that students take courses in:

A	**History/social science**	**2 years**
B	**English**	**4 years**
C	**Mathematics**	**3 years**
D	**Science**	**2 years**
E	**Language other than English**	**2 years**
F	**Visual and performing arts**	**1 year**
G	**College-preparatory elective**	**1 year**

California's 116 community colleges admit students through open enrollment. Independent colleges define students' readiness themselves, being subject only to accreditation standards, although most of these colleges in California also require A-G courses.

A key dimension of nonacademic readiness is planning for college, especially financial planning, which is intrinsically linked to academic readiness. Indeed, high school students may not even pursue college preparatory courses if they believe that college is financially unattainable for them. Financial preparation supports academic preparation, and succeeding at a high level academically can offer more financial opportunities in the form of scholarships and performance-based assistance.

Regardless of their level of academic success, high school students who want assistance with the costs of attending college are not "ready" unless they have completed the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) or similar paperwork. The corresponding support that aids readiness is straightforward, at least in concept: counseling, technical assistance, and simplification of the application and admissions process. Post-affirmative action and race-consciousness in college admissions, these investments are more important for inclusion. Unfortunately, there are chronic, endemic shortages of effective college and career counselors who can properly guide students to see the opportunities available to them. Two briefs on **financial aid practices** and **mandatory FAFSA completion policy reforms** offer policy makers, college leaders and high school leaders solutions for improving financial aid access and opportunity.

In many ways, postsecondary academic readiness depends on the opportunities that students accumulate, miss, or lose, beginning in early childhood and continuing indefinitely. The familiar pipeline metaphor is insufficient, in that it describes how an end state, such as a diverse body of computer scientists in the U.S., is to an extent determined by who enters college and who drops out (individuals or groups) along the way. This is too limiting, suggesting only one path is possible. Instead, imagine scores of tributaries, representing opportunities, flowing into a river of readiness that broadens and deepens. Some of the river may be diverted or evaporate, but additional tributaries may offset what has been lost.

We know that human potential is not related to race, ethnicity, class, or gender. Yet, for that potential to be fully realized depends heavily on the distribution of socially and culturally constructed opportunities. With the Supreme Court decision, however, it is very clear that opportunities will be more limited or lost altogether. Observed disparities in group outcomes are created not only by observable group disparities in opportunities, but also by our failure to provide support and interventions that would mitigate systemic disadvantages. Efforts before this ruling to remedy K-12 and college preparation in systemic ways that improve the quality of education and opportunity have not fully succeeded, resulting in persistent and glaring racial disparities. **Improving the quality of public education in America and closing racial opportunity gaps has become even more urgent today.**

Indicators of Equity in Outcomes and Opportunities

To effectively address disparities and encourage equity, both individual outcomes and the systems themselves must be subject to scrutiny and measurement. In recent years, this task has been approached in several different ways. Policymakers, advocates, and researchers have produced scores of proposed educational scorecards intended to define excellence, equity, or both. In 2018, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine formed a study committee charged with designing a national system of pre-K-12 educational equity indicators. In its unanimous, peer-reviewed report[1] the following year, the committee recommended a definition of equity together with indicators for seven dimensions of student outcomes and nine indicators of resources or opportunities. Table 1 below summarizes a new set of equity indicators based on examining a range of disparities that must still be addressed to ensure that more students are prepared for postsecondary and career success.

For each indicator, the panel of experts on the committee also identified one or more "constructs" to guide follow-up on work needed to select data sources and, over time, maximize comparability across jurisdictions. The National Academies report was on pre-K-12 equity, but all but a few of the indicators apply to postsecondary readiness, as well.

Table 1. Pre K-12 Educational Equity Indicators, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and

Subgroup Outcome Disparities	Subgroup Opportunity Disparities
1. Kindergarten Academic Readiness	1. Access to and Participation in High-Quality Pre-K Programs
2. Kindergarten Self-Regulation and Attention Skills	2. Students' Exposure to Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Segregation
3. Engagement in Schooling	3. Access to Effective Teaching
4. Performance in Coursework	4. Access to and Enrollment in Rigorous Coursework
5. Performance on Standardized Tests	5. Curricular Breadth
6. On-Time Graduation	6. Access to High-Quality Academic Supports (e.g., tutoring)
7. Postsecondary Readiness	7. Nonacademic Supports for Student Success (e.g., counseling, access to social/health services)
	8. School Climate
	9. Non-Exclusionary Discipline Practices

Charge to the National Academies Indicators Committee (2018-19)

The committee will develop a set of indicators around equity in educational outcomes and relevant inputs for pre-K through the transition to post-secondary education. In doing so, the committee will:

- ✓ Examine existing indicator systems in education and child well-being.
- ✓ Review a wide range of research related to these systems and the types of outcomes that are important for the education system to achieve.
- ✓ Examine research on school and non-school inputs that are related to those outcomes, the extent of inequality in these inputs and outcomes, and interventions that have been shown to improve outcomes.

Opportunity Indicators

The importance of these indicators cannot be overstated. Since the end of Jim Crow school segregation and the enactment in 1965 of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), we have seen decades of stop-and-start efforts to promote equity with K-12 "reforms." These indicators, if properly created, represent a way to create a basic level of clarity around enabling students' college opportunities. Much of the gap in achievement, attainment, and readiness has persisted because reforms have failed to reach some fundamental determinants of the opportunities and rewards available to children and youth.

Effective and Experienced Teachers

Postsecondary readiness is boosted when students have access to effective teachers. Constructs for this opportunity indicator might include professional experience and full (rather than emergency) certification. Implementation details would include such choices as counting in each school the average number of student classroom hours spent with teachers who have more than three years of service. Note that teacher experience, however measured, is only a proxy for a direct measure of "effectiveness," much less effectiveness with struggling students in a particular classroom.

Rate of Successful Enrollments and Completions of College Preparatory Curriculum

Access to college preparatory curriculum is an inadequate measure of true opportunity for a high school student. A course may be on a list of offerings but in practice unavailable to all students who want it. Additionally, a guidance counselor with unchecked implicit bias might steer certain students away from needed courses. The better indicator, therefore, is the rate of successful enrollments in and completions of the course, rather than the mere offering of it.

Performance and Grades in College Preparatory Courses

On the outcome side, one indicator is a student's performance in courses. Constructs might include one's high school GPA, and implementation details could include the time period used for the calculation. This example also illustrates that the full design of an indicator may include myriad details, whether those

choices are considered elements of the construct or merely aspects of implementation. Is the GPA weighted for honors courses or for more challenging schools? Does the calculation capture a student's GPA improving over time?

It is important to choose indicators that will inform consequential, pragmatic decisions among teachers, school leaders, and faculty members who set standards for transition from high school to college, as well as nonprofit change agents capable of intervening to promote equity in services to low-income, first-generation students.

Addressing the Whole Child and Family

Social forces, community circumstances, and family life are almost entirely beyond the reach of traditional school-centered efforts. Schools can provide some meals, for example, but both social science and brain science have established that the chronic stress of food insecurity takes a toll on learning and development.[2] Schools can provide some mental health interventions and support, but lack the resources and structures to create a level playing field for learning.

One crucial development over the past three decades has been a wide, scientific consensus that chronic stress, adversity, and trauma can have powerful effects on learning and development. Especially important is that this assumption and conviction by educators and social scientists is now supported by a strong consensus among brain scientists.[3] We understand much more about the mechanisms of disadvantage and how to respond.

Unfortunately, the policy implications of these scientific developments and advances have not been fully understood or incorporated by education policymakers and social justice advocates as they develop their legislative and advocacy priorities. As long as these inequities persist, the research community must work harder to be a better partner to equity advocates, and equity advocates need to focus on implementation challenges, not just the budget allocations or the legislative wins.

The science is clear: Trauma, adversity, and poverty impact a child's ability to learn, but with the right interventions and support, every child can learn and unlock the human potential within. But educational outcomes will remain unacceptable for the neediest and most disadvantaged students if we expect the schools to eliminate these disparities solely through their hard work and education budgets. This silo-bound thinking is why our progress has fallen short. In truth, we need the systems—schools and the adjacent bureaucracies serving children and families—to identify and address the whole of each child's needs as related to educational success. If a student is diagnosed with dyslexia, it must be detected early, with the student given ready access to appropriate interventions and supports within and outside of the school system. At present, the latter is mostly neglected in favor of the former, putting the burden on school systems that are under resourced and inadequate through no fault of their own.

We are heartened by the number of states that have made substantial investments in the "whole child" approach to education, including investments in community schools that seek to break down these silos. We must be prepared, however, to do the hard work and not just issue the press release. A good example of this disconnect is California's investment in the California Community Schools Partnership Program, with over $4 billion allocated in 2021 over five years. The theory was and is sound: integrating services and supports, while improving teaching and learning. The pressure, however, to get the money out before districts and school leaders have time to develop the knowledge and tools for building effective partnerships with other agencies and the community has led to very uneven implementation and outcomes.

Equity in college readiness, including both achievement and attainment, and academic and non-academic preparation, will fall short without missions, resources, and accountability that are blended and braided to close the persistent opportunity and outcome gaps.

Conclusion

To maintain a focus on achieving equitable college readiness, the educational community must have the wherewithal to be vigilant and influential. This is more important now that the Supreme Court decision has created more barriers to many explicitly race-related strategies to support inclusion and boost upward mobility.

Despite the challenges, we know that strategies to support greater opportunity do exist. Returning to the river metaphor, perhaps the Supreme Court's near ban on race-conscious college admissions can be limited to downstream opportunities, so that some upstream tributaries of opportunity will continue to have some discretion over how to achieve inclusion. It may be possible to limit the constitutional bar from consideration of race to benefits that are more concrete and closer to some ultimate reward. For example, there is no barrier to allocating extra guidance counselors to high schools with the lowest rates of college matriculation—a decision that lies with local school districts, rather than at higher levels of state or federal government.

Of course, we do not know what constitutional constraints may be imposed upon schools and districts that seek to use group-targeted interventions and supports to boost the proportion of underrepresented groups among the college-ready student population. The least risky approach, from a legal strategy, will be school policies that are framed in universal terms. But a more efficient (and safe) approach could be to use "circumstance-targeted" criteria for allocating efforts and resources (e.g., creating zones of economic mobility).

For example, districts or states can expand efforts in schools with concentrated poverty, a weak college-going culture, or that have high proportions of non-native English speakers. Some services, such as **after-school tutoring or summer activities**, could be priced depending on family income. They could be free to families in means-tested food programs, like the federal Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and cross-subsidized by modest charges to other families. Or instead of family income, pricing could be based on collective factors, like school performance or concentrated poverty. Any of these approaches will, by their nature, be both under- and overinclusive of disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities, and the targeting will have a moral and educational justification wholly independent of race. The approaches will be correlated with race because poverty is causally related to discrimination, structural racism, and language obstacles.

Regardless of how the policies are characterized, they must benefit the neediest students in the most challenging settings. Creating an **effective connection between schools and mental health providers, or innovative instructional technology to support quasi-independent enrichment and remediation**, are just two examples of frameworks that can be applied to increase the possibilities for universal improvements.

The critical nuance is that equity must be central to any measure of success. For example, if a superintendent or high school principal is evaluated based primarily on the proportion of students in her school or district who go to college, then she may pay less attention to the academically neediest students at risk of not even graduating. Instead, **assigning equal or more weight to the goal of narrowing group disparities in college-going** students would better serve equity goals.

There is no question that the Supreme Court's constitutional restrictions on race-conscious admissions in higher education will further degrade the structure of opportunity across the nation, hobbling efforts to create more racially inclusive colleges and universities. We can be sure that anti-equity advocates will seek ways to overstep the reach of the court's decision. But there are ways to counter this regression. For higher education, the harm to equity-focused efforts can be somewhat mitigated by local, state, or federal actions that employ ideas like those listed earlier in this section. With substantial dedication to creatively expanding postsecondary readiness, coupled with energetic and determined advocacy, it may come to pass that the Supreme Court's decision—and the court itself—will have little relevancy.

Endnotes

1. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). Monitoring Educational Equity. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/25389.
2. No Kid Hungry. (2023). How does hunger affect learning? https://www.nokidhungry.org/blog/how-does-hunger-affect-learning.
3. Yu, J., Haynie, D. L., & Gilman, S. E. (2024). Patterns of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Neurocognitive Development. JAMA pediatrics. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2024.1318.

About Christopher Edley, Jr. & Acknowledgments

Christopher Edley, Jr. was a renowned leader in civil rights, education policy, and administrative law with a deep commitment to public service and the promise of education. He served as dean of UC Berkeley's School of Law from 2004-2013, spent 23 years as a law professor at Harvard Law School—where he co-founded the Harvard Civil Rights Project—and was most recently the co-president of The Opportunity Institute, which he also co-founded.

Chris advised numerous presidential administrations, championing issues like welfare reform, housing and urban development, food insecurity, anti-poverty efforts, and affirmative action. He was a devoted champion for students, leaving an indelible legacy in the fight for equitable opportunity and racial justice.

We are releasing this paper with the permission of Chris' widow, Maria Echaveste, an incredible leader, scholar, and advocate in her own right. We thank Michele Siqueiros and Vikash Reddy, Ph.D., for editing this research series. We are also grateful to Alison De Lucca, Sylvia Hurtado, Orville Jackson, and John Rogers, who provided feedback and guidance on this paper.

About the Equity, Inclusion, Action Initiative

The Campaign for College Opportunity is a California non-profit bipartisan policy and research organization focused on a single mission: to ensure all Californians have an equal opportunity to attend and succeed in college in order to build a vibrant workforce, economy and democracy. In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court announced a decision to curtail the use of race in college and university admissions, a powerful tool that has been used to address the legacy of racial injustice and advance the inclusion and integration of Latinx, Black, Asian American, NHPI, and AIAN students. In response, the Campaign for College Opportunity has launched a national initiative—Equity, Inclusion, Action—promoting evidence-based solutions through practice briefs and toolkits that advance more equitable strategies in college preparation, admission, affordability, and success to ensure those who have been historically excluded and underserved by our colleges and universities have a real opportunity to go to college and succeed.

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