

# **Increasing College Readiness for Disadvantaged Students Through an Online Growth Mindset Summer Bridge Program**

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**ABSTRACT:** Legitimizing home as a locus of learning has never been more critical to student success than now, during the world's pandemic. Post-COVID 19, public education as an institutional "home" must be supported in a way that addresses the following question: how best can leaders manifest a paradigm of equitable college access through home learning for all in the face of a rising counter-paradigm of xenophobic nationalism, populism, and debunking of ethnic inclusiveness? Coloniality's control of knowledge (Ayala & Ramirez 2019) has led to an information gap, which construes an unfair opportunity gap experienced by non-White groups in the U.S. public education system. This study will explore bridging that gap in an online blended learning method designed to champion all students regardless of race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status through targeted trainings with their school counselors. What is needed will be a disruption of epistemologies, knowledge systems and traditions of those who have been systematically marginalized via racialization. By shifting norms through access to previously privatized ways of knowing, the institutional punishment of students lacking financial resources can be flipped into a new narrative of increased equity and shared privilege.

**KEYWORDS:** blended learning method, disadvantaged students, summer bridge program

## **Background of the Study**

The purpose of this three-phase study that began in 2018 and is slated to continue into 2021 and beyond, has been to contribute to research measuring usefulness of an online tool to increase equitable access to college and career readiness for disadvantaged teens in Title I high schools. Using quantitative instruments, the GRADS Initiative is designed to measure the enculturation of a college- and career-ready mindset using digital technology in an online blended learning program operationalized as a video-driven community of practice. This leverages real-life counselors who support students through the process and share knowledge among and between themselves in order to increase the body of knowledge regarding improving outcomes for this particular demographic of students.

Phase 1 of this research, 2018, piloted the GRADS Initiative in fifty high schools in seven states, and was conducted in collaboration with Jobs for America's Graduates ("JAG"), a non-profit organization (Jobs 2020). Participants were located in AZ, CA, KS, NC, NJ, NM, and SD. JAG leaders established two primary objectives; (1) that students in the JAG network would attend and persist at levels proportionate to opportunities colleges actively offered their students from low socioeconomic status, and (2) that they would help ensure career-readiness for those who were not college-bound, whether that was trade school or other pathways. One school that participated was Downtown Magnet High School. Located within Los Angeles Unified School District, this school is part of the second largest district in the United States.

As an example that demonstrates challenge facing districts across the nation, LAUSD has more than 250 high schools, Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest in the U.S., has more than 250 high schools. Only one in four of these from the Los Angeles Unified School District go on to earn college degrees, according to UCLA's report of a 2017 study sponsored by the Los Angeles Education Research Institute (Foulsham 2017). Although 70 percent of LA's public high school graduates enrolled in either 2- or 4-year colleges, only 25% persisted to earn a college degree within six years. While 75% of counselors report they have adequate information

to help students with the college application and financial aid process, fewer than half indicated having enough time to give the individualized college application assistance each student requires. Counselors at 75% of LAUSD schools agree with the statement that “some students at their schools are not getting the help they need”. Counselors refer to massive 1,000+ student caseloads and competing requirements placed on their time by administrators during the school year as a primary reason they cannot help students with the college application and financial aid process in the current paradigm. They are often asked to spend as much time coordinating academic testing (PSATs, AP exams) and performing non-counseling activities as advising students in ways that can drive the district’s vision that they are there to “ensure all students graduate college-prepared and career-ready” (LAUSD n.d.). According to the 2017 UCLA-Luskin survey results, nearly all school counselors offer some level of college readiness support, but “students still need more help with the college application, financial aid and college enrollment process” (Foulsham 2107). Separate from adult perceptions, about 20% of 12th graders in the survey agreed that they didn’t feel that their counselors had helped them understand how to get into college. In fact, most L.A. Unified high schools have come to rely on external service providers to help provide college application, financial aid and college enrollment assistance. In a post-COVID19 world, these high-touch, in-person modalities are not viable.

This research explores whether participation in the GRADS Initiative’s program as overseen by their on-Zoom college counselors can improve the college and career readiness and confidence levels of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. GRADS is an acronym standing for Greater Retention and Access for Disadvantaged Students. Research questions are: (1) To what extent, if at all, does exposure to digital student activities in the GRADS Initiative improve the college/career readiness and confidence of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds? and (2) To what extent, if at all, are the demographic characteristics of race/ethnicity, gender, ESL status, free/reduced lunch status, and whether parents have graduated college related to gains on the outcome measures of college/career readiness and confidence after digital student activities in the GRADS Initiative?

## Literature Review

The theoretical framework for this study is drawn from books and peer-reviewed articles relevant to college and career readiness in U.S. and international high schools. Central to this exploration is the ability to promote positive student outcomes during a summer program. The phrase “summer melt” has been used to describe several trends of concern in the U.S. educational system: (1) students who go home at the end of 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade and do not return to complete their high school educations; (2) situations where 12<sup>th</sup> graders who had considered applying to college when they were in 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grades fail to do so, often due to confusing and costly procedures they are not confident they can navigate; and (3) when graduating 12<sup>th</sup> graders who had indicated an intention to attend a college or university during spring of senior year do not actually enroll the upcoming fall. Longitudinal studies by the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) have established that summer melt rates are much higher for lower income students, by 15%, than for higher income students after statistically controlling for academic achievement differences. In a post-COVID-19 world, with students quarantined at home and their futures in the balance, the GRADS Initiative project will explore to what extent, if at all, a blended learning digital experience with their counselors can help to reverse the melt.

Primary authors and measures influencing this research include Anderson-Butcher et al. (2016), who co-created the *Career and College Readiness* (CCR) scale. This assesses the degree to which secondary students perceive their self-efficacy and preparedness for a college education and/or future career paths. Citing Conley (2008), the researchers suggest that student perceptions of future opportunities after high school are influenced by how much and what caliber of support they receive while in school. The GRADS Initiative uses the CCR scale as its first measure. A second measure used is ITIS, the Implicit Theory of Intelligence Study. Psychologists have

argued for decades that conscientiousness is more a major aspect of human personality than a habit or skill in adults. For younger people, however, including teens, components of conscientiousness seem more malleable, as defined by contributing factors including organization, thoughtfulness, self-control, and goal-directed behavior. Carol Dweck's (2007) ground-breaking work provides an important anchor to the larger argument of implicit theories. The GRADS experience is designed to mold perceptions so students believe that intelligence is largely a matter of effort and learning the right strategies. Given that effort, challenges, and setbacks are natural parts of the learning process, the social-emotional learning component of this study is set to carefully balance the internalizing behaviors (for example, positive self-talk) with more practical externalizing behaviors (such as taking directed action toward specific goals).

Poynton & Lapan's (2017) article *Aspirations, Achievement, and School Counselors' Impact on the College Transition* details data related to Michelle Obama's *Reach Higher* (2020) initiative, which focused on encouraging under-represented populations to adequately prepare for postsecondary education and career training. Retention is a desirable key outcome to be measured, for both school districts and universities. In the GRADS Initiative, the ability to provide summer bridge program addressing students' perceptions of college and career readiness, implicit intelligence, and confidence to aspire is built upon a theoretical foundation. Castleman, Page and Schooley (2014) conclude that financial confusion and concerns regarding higher education constitute the primary reason for student melt. Citing "lack of support for managing the logistics of transitioning into college", they underscore that this is particularly problematic for first-generation college students, whose homes lack the social capital needed to offset overburdened public high school counseling offices. GRADS postulates that by securing increased confidence and work habits in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, that statistical cliff may be avoidable. The fact that LAUSD college counselors are assigned to entire student populations—sometimes as many as 2,000 students at a time—makes securing tangible modalities for helping large numbers of students at a time critical to the success of the district. With a focus on financial aid literacy and an understanding of aspirational strategies in the GRADS Initiative providing central supports to keep options open for all, historically disenfranchised students have a more fair shot at a future that includes college and career readiness, regardless of race/ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

## Conclusion

Institutional racism is alive and well in America's public high schools. The National Association of College Admissions Counselors has reported a national average of only 38 minutes per student per year with counselors—time spent in course selection for the following year with no opportunity to engender confidence, growth mindset, and other social-emotional learning constructs to change the vision of all students graduating college-prepared and career-ready into a tangible and obtainable objective. By harnessing the power to decolonialize knowledge dispersion, marginalized populations can be released from within systems of oppression and institutionalized prejudice. As Michelle Obama writes in her memoir *Becoming*, she was told by her public high school counselor that she was "not Princeton material". With innovation and a firm commitment to underserved teens, a more equitable future for all students is attainable.

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