

Engaging Partners in Collective Inquiry to Advance Equitable College Attainment

BACKGROUND

In 2015, College Futures Foundation launched a five-year initiative to leverage the position of community foundations to address low rates of college attainment in California. College Futures saw that community foundations play a unique role, positioned at the intersection of practice, funding, policy, and advocacy. Further, community foundations have relationships with donors, regional leaders, the education community, and local organizations. And, they have the potential to create and articulate a cross-cutting agenda that could connect educational equity, college attainment, and community vitality.

With this in mind, College Futures brought together seven community foundations, centering the goal of transitioning traditional, merit-based scholarship programs to a more strategic, need-based approach. College Futures viewed this transition as a way to improve college completion rates for low-income, first-generation students, seeking to enhance the community foundations' capacity to increase college attainment.

As part of this initiative, the Gardner Center supported each foundation in using a set of processes and tools that built their capacity to undertake improvement efforts within their own institutions, and leveraging this capacity to engage their community partners in collective inquiry. The foundations used contextual knowledge and collective inquiry to design, implement, and improve their strategic, need-based scholarship programs internally and in conjunction with partners. Beyond that, the community foundations employed these strategies to engage regional partners in addressing issues of college attainment and educational equity. In so doing, each foundation found ways to increase the impact of its leadership by building a culture of improvement.

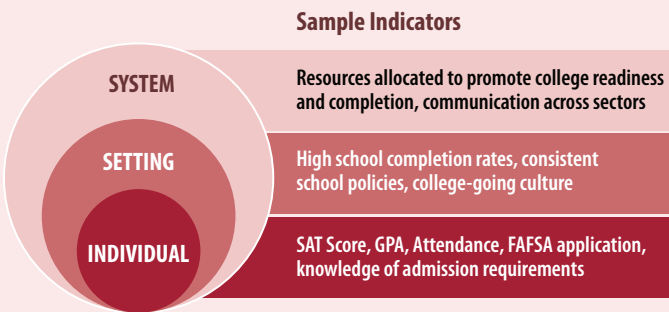
The Gardner Center at the **Stanford Graduate School of Education** compiled publicly available data as a tool to build a broad understanding of the local education landscape as well as the importance of considering the data in relation to research-informed indicators at the individual, setting, and system levels.

Building on the contextual knowledge, the Gardner Center supported the foundations and their partners as they engaged in a cycle of inquiry and explored ways to address issues of equity, explicitly and intentionally. These strategies paved the way for these leaders to listen and learn from local experts while sharing their own expanding knowledge and advancing regional college attainment goals together.

CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE

THE TRI-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

assumes that changes in system-level factors will stimulate and support (or frustrate) changes in settings, which in turn will (or will not) lead to positive change in youth outcomes.



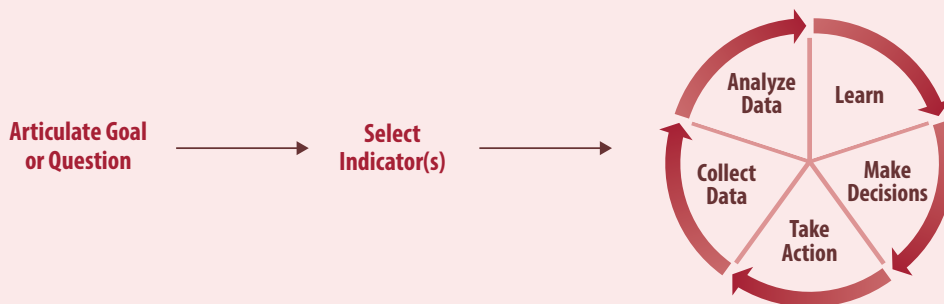
College Readiness & Completion Indicators include those related to:

- academic preparedness
- academic tenacity
- college knowledge

STARTING A CYCLE OF INQUIRY

Articulating a goal or question informs the process of selecting indicators.

Indicators should be research-based, measurable, malleable, actionable, and meaningful/impactful.



COLLECTIVE INQUIRY

Data collection leads to analysis, which in turn informs learnings. Sometimes additional data is gathered at this point. Learnings lead to decision-making and taking action, after which the cycle continues with data collection, illuminating the results of the actions and opportunities for collective improvement.

WHAT ANALYSIS MUST TAKE PLACE?

- Who analyzes the data? How? When?
- Do we need to analyze any historical data?
- Who monitors the process?
- What are the data analysis needs?

WHAT INSIGHTS DID WE GAIN? CAN WE NAME PRIORITIES?

- Are we ready to make some choices around strategies, interventions, and supports?
- Do we need more data or analysis?
- Do we have the expertise to analyze data?

WHAT DATA MUST WE COLLECT?

- Who collects and monitors these data? How? When?
- What are the data collection needs?



DO WE HAVE ENOUGH INFORMATION TO MAKE CHOICES AND TAKE ACTION?

- Who makes the decisions?
- What decisions or rules are in place?
- Who informs stakeholders about decisions?
- Who else needs to be included?
- Do we need more data or analysis?

INDICATOR

- Why did we choose this indicator? How does it relate to our goal or question?
- What dimension of college readiness does it measure?

WHAT STRATEGIES OR ACTIONS MIGHT WE UNDERTAKE?

- Who is responsible for executing actions and strategies?
- Who monitors execution and effectiveness? How?



1. ARTICULATING THE QUESTIONS

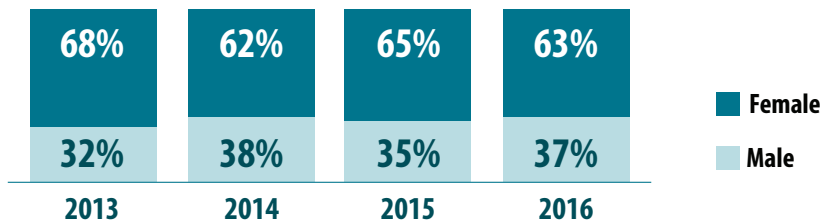
Why are we not serving more young men? How can we do better?

In 2011, the **California Community Foundation** created the Los Angeles Scholars Investment Fund (LASIF), a pooled fund to support organizations that: (1) provide quality college access and success services; (2) have a successful track record of helping low-income and underrepresented students overcome barriers to and through college; and (3) fill gaps in unmet financial need through scholarships.

After five years, we found that while the program was effective in supporting college access and support and success services, there was a marked gender gap. We asked ourselves why that was, and how we could reach more young men.

To better understand the context, we employed the Gardner Center's tri-level lens to review a range of information. We studied local data and learned that male students, and especially young men of color, were falling behind their female peers at key milestones and transitions on the pathway to and through college. We reviewed research and literature to see how our education landscape reflected the national situation, and we reached out to partners to gather more nuanced perspectives. With this information, we answered our questions: We were not reaching young men because the ecosystem of college attainment supports (and funding practices) was not meeting their needs; to do better, LASIF would need to transform that ecosystem.

The tri-level research framework has been enormously useful and influential in strategy and grantmaking design. Within LASIF's Young Men of Color college access/success work, the approach led to a strategy that simultaneously invested in individual-, setting-, and systems-level changes. Since then, we have applied the framework across nearly all of our education portfolio, including the design of a large-scale private-public partnership that sought to provide services (individual level), while also building a stronger ecosystem of community supports (setting level), and influencing the way a specific public agency operates (systems level).



2. COLLECTING DATA

To answer these questions, we looked into:	Service gaps over time	Financial aid uptake
	SAT/ACT participation	Postsecondary access and success

3. ANALYZING DATA

We found that male students, and especially boys and young men of color, are falling behind their female peers at multiple key milestones and transitions in the pathway to and through college. They're less likely to take the SAT, be awarded a Cal Grant, or complete a degree at a CSU within 6 years.



4. SELECTING INDICATORS

OUR FOUNDATION & REGION

Learning informs foundation, partner, and policymaker actions

LASIF & NONPROFIT PARTNERS

LASIF scholarship awardees reflect narrowed gender gap

YOUTH

Evidence of progress by young men of color towards individual-level indicators (e.g., FAFSA completion)

5. LEARNING

A research and listening tour included:

- Nonprofit partners
- Educators (multiple levels)
- Youth
- Published research
- Donors
- Other funders



6. DECISIONS & ACTIONS

- ✓ Added objectives across grants to focus on young men of color
- ✓ Nonprofit partners changed award criteria or processes
- ✓ Launched a 2-year, \$2M program to support 20 grantees in exploring how to reach more young men of color
- ✓ Convened nonprofits, educators, and donors to share best practices



Prior to 2015, Kern Community Foundation's role with respect to education was much like the role of community foundations across the country: soliciting money from donors and distributing it in the form of scholarships and programming. While supportive of students and programs, this did not necessarily increase educational opportunities community-wide.

Building on contextual knowledge gleaned through participation in the College Futures initiative, we began to engage education leaders in community convenings designed to foster understanding of regional issues. We established a dialogue designed to elevate the importance of data, indicators, and collective inquiry in support of equitable college attainment. We encouraged stakeholders from PK-12, community college, and our local California State University to share their data and strategies. We also sought to collectively identify priority areas and consider indicators that would illuminate challenges, inform strategy, and measure results, leading to learning and improvement and, ultimately, improved outcomes.

The inquiry and engagement by players across institutions led to the creation of the Kern Education Pledge in 2018. The Pledge stems from a shared belief that no single program or institution can solve complex, large-scale education and workforce readiness challenges alone. Improving student outcomes at scale requires innovative and sustained collaboration across institutions, businesses, civic organizations, nonprofits, and investors.

The Pledge unites educational leaders at every level (PK-20) with community stakeholders to embrace a Cradle-to-Career solution. The approach is steeped in the principles of continuous improvement and supported by a collective impact framework that provides a common agenda, shared measurement tools, opportunities for mutually reinforcing activities, and a communication platform. Six work groups have developed Theories of Action that cultivate a culture of inquiry and improvement. By regularly measuring progress in pursuit of agreed upon goals, the Pledge is creating lasting, systemic change and improved student outcomes for all Kern County students.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Kern County needs more college graduates



2. CREATING A STRUCTURE FOR COLLECTIVE INQUIRY

Kern Education Pledge Working Groups

- 1 Kinder Readiness Work Group**
Children enter school ready to learn
- 2 Literacy Work Group**
Children read at grade level by the end of 3rd grade, students demonstrate reading proficiency by the end of 8th grade
- 3 College & Career Readiness Work Group**
High school students graduate, ready to succeed
- Postsecondary Enrollment & Program Completion Work Group**
Students enroll in and complete a postsecondary program/pathway and enter the skilled workforce
- Data Sharing Work Group**
Create and deploy a PK-20 data warehouse/analytics solution
- Chronic Absenteeism Work Group**
Reduce chronic absenteeism rates in Kern County

3. ENGAGING IN INQUIRY

KERN STARTS: A Kinder Readiness Working Group

GOAL:
Children enter kindergarten with a solid foundation of skills necessary to be successful in school

INDICATORS

- # OF KINDER STUDENTS COMPLETING A COMMON ASSESSMENT
- # OF KINDER STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN PRESCHOOL
- # OF CHILDREN BORN IN KERN COUNTY AT A LOW BIRTH WEIGHT

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS WORK?

- Inform instruction and monitor growth over time
- Inform parent community and other stakeholders to increase student participation
- Develop baseline for use in future Pledge goals & objectives

DEVELOPING A COMMON ASSESSMENT

- Consult research literature linking early childhood and K-8 education
- Examine a comprehensive landscape of existing assessments
- Gather input from teacher focus groups

IMPLEMENTATION

- 2018-19: Pilot assessment in 2 Kern County districts
- 2019-20: Roll out assessment to 13 Kern County districts (more than 100 elementary schools)
- Develop a system of support for implementation