



The College Board National Office for School  
Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA)

# School Counseling in California

A College Board 2011 National  
Survey of School Counselors  
State Brief

**A Brief for the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center's  
National Office for School Counselor Advocacy  
by Civic Enterprises with Hart Research**

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## A College Board 2011 National Survey of School Counselors State Brief

America is facing a high school and college completion crisis. The most recent data reveal the important linkage of a strong college and career readiness agenda in secondary school to later college enrollment and completion. One in four public high school students and 65 percent of students of color fail to graduate from high school with their peers.<sup>1</sup> During high school, many students do not have the resources they need to succeed in college, including access to college-preparatory courses. This is particularly true in schools serving populations with traditionally low college enrollment rates: Less than one-third of high schools serving the most Hispanic and African American students offer calculus and only 40 percent offer physics.<sup>2</sup> Of all students who do complete high school, only a quarter (28 percent) complete an associate degree within three years and only half (57 percent) complete a bachelor's degree within six years.<sup>3</sup>

As a nation, we are falling far short of the College Board's goal of increasing the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds with an associate degree or higher to 55 percent by 2025, with less than half (41.1 percent) with such a degree as of 2009.<sup>4</sup> In order to support students in college and career success, and to regain our status as having the highest college attainment rates in the world, we must use all of the tools in our education toolkit — including our nation's counselors. School counselors are uniquely positioned to support student success because of their ability to understand the entire picture of individual students — family circumstances, social and emotional development, academic progress, and other issues related to their success in school.<sup>5</sup> They also have the ability to follow students over time, unlike teachers, who have them for just one year and are often focused only on their academic progress in a single subject.<sup>6</sup> Research indicates that a counselor's unique role coordinating expectations, academics and support systems across secondary and postsecondary programs helps to improve academic readiness and persistence for students.<sup>7</sup>

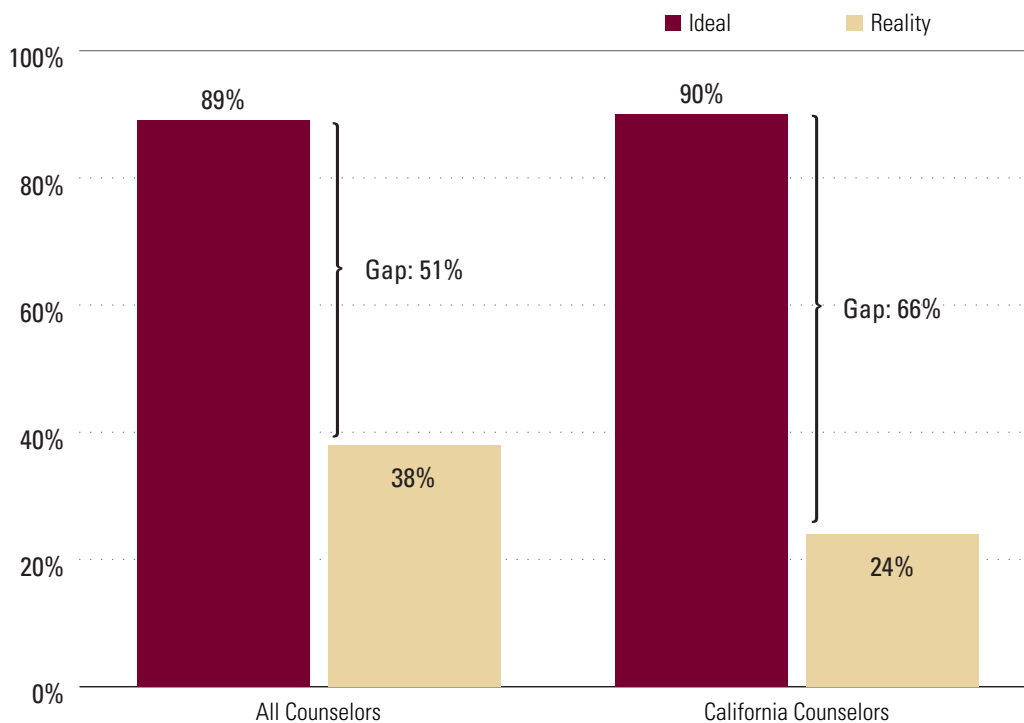
California, like the nation, is facing a high school and college completion crisis. This brief, *School Counseling in California*, focuses on the unique challenges and opportunities facing school counselors in the Golden State. It is a supplement to the *2011 National Survey of School Counselors: Counseling at a Crossroads* report commissioned by the College Board Advocacy & Policy Center's National Office for School Counselor Advocacy. The findings are based on one of the largest surveys of school counselors — a nationally representative sample of more than 5,300 middle school and high school counselors. The survey revealed deep concerns within the profession and shed light on opportunities to better utilize these valuable leaders in America's schools.

**Key Finding:** School counselors in California believe that the mission of schools should be preparing students for college and careers and ensuring equal access to a high-quality education, but few see this as a reality in their schools.

*Like their peers around the country, California counselors report a large gap between the ideal mission of schools and the reality.* Counselors in California and nationally do not see college completion and career readiness as the mission of their schools in reality (22 percent in California, compared to 30 percent nationally, rate their schools as a 9 or a 10 on a zero-to-10 scale). Nearly nine in 10 California counselors (87 percent) believe it should be the mission of their schools, resulting in a 65-point gap. This gap is significantly larger than the national trend, with a 55-point gap (85 percent ideal, compared to 30 percent reality).

*Compared to counselors across the nation, California counselors see even larger gaps between the ideal and the reality for their school’s mission to ensure equal access to education.* Nine in 10 (90 percent) counselors in California believe that their school’s mission should ideally be “to ensure that all students, regardless of background, have equal access to high-quality education,” compared to 89 percent nationally (Figure 1). When asked to reflect on the reality in their schools, only 24 percent of California counselors believe that their school’s mission is to ensure equal access, resulting in a 66-point gap. This gap is significantly larger than the national 51-point gap (89 percent ideal, compared to 38 percent reality).

**Figure 1:** Counselors in California See Greater Gaps in Ensuring Student Equity



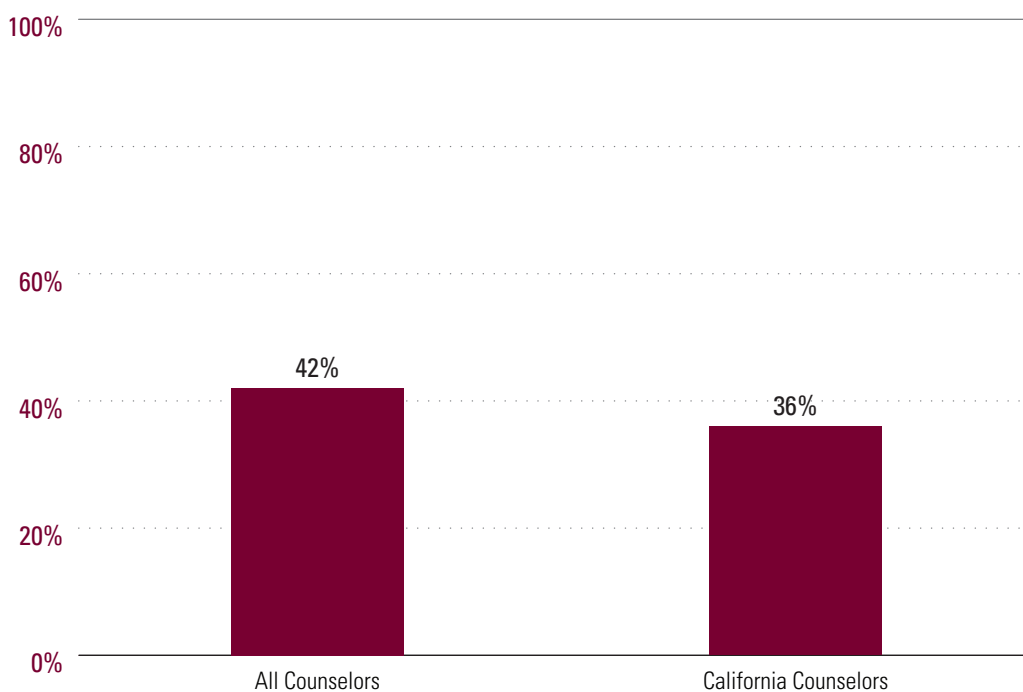
Counselors rating “To ensure that all students, regardless of background, have equal access to a high-quality education” as a “9” or “10” for their education system in the ideal and in reality.

*Counselors in California report a slightly larger gap than do counselors nationally between the ideal mission of the school counseling profession and its reality.* Like their peers across the nation, counselors in California agree that the ideal mission of school counselors should be “to ensure that all students reach the end of 12th grade and earn a high school diploma, ready to succeed in college and career” (84 percent nationally and 85 percent in California agree with this statement). A comparably lower proportion of California counselors say that this mission matches the reality of the profession, compared to counselors nationally (44 percent in California, compared to 46 percent nationally), resulting in a gap of 41 points in California and 38 points nationally.

**Key Finding:** School counselors in California are less likely to say that their schools take advantage of their ability to establish trust with students, to be student advocates and to support the whole student.

*Counselors in California are slightly more likely to believe that working proactively as a student advocate is important, but less likely to think that their school takes advantage of this ability.* Seventy-six percent of California counselors (compared to 74 percent nationally) believe that their ability to “work proactively as student advocates and actively intervene to create pathways and support to ensure that all students have opportunities to achieve their postsecondary goals” is important. However, only a minority of California counselors say that their schools take full advantage of this unique role (36 percent, compared to 42 percent nationally [Figure 2]).

**Figure 2:** Counselors Say that Their Schools Do Not Take Full Advantage of Their Role as Student Advocates



Counselors rating "Working proactively as student advocates to ensure student success" as a "9" or "10" for whether their schools take full advantage of this ability.

***California counselors are less likely to say that their schools take advantage of their ability to establish a relationship of trust with students.*** Unlike their peers across the country, fewer than half (46 percent in California, compared to 57 percent nationally) of counselors in California say that their schools take advantage of counselors' unique ability to establish a relationship of trust with students and to be another adult to talk to when they are in situations of conflict. The majority of school counselors in California and the nation value this special contribution (65 percent in both California and the nation).

**Key Finding:** School counselors in California enthusiastically embrace a college and career readiness agenda. They are also more likely to believe major education reform is needed and support certain accountability measures of counselor effectiveness.

***Similar to counselors across the country, counselors in California endorse a college and career readiness agenda.*** Counselors were asked to assess the College Board National Office for School Counselor Advocacy's "Eight Components of College and Career Readiness Counseling," a counseling system that focuses on ensuring that all students are college and career ready when they graduate from the 12th grade. A majority of counselors can see themselves committing to this approach (57 percent of all counselors and 59 percent of counselors in California rated this a 9 or a 10 on a zero-to-10 scale). A smaller percentage of California counselors than of their peers nationally say that they have the skills needed to successfully implement each of the components (43 percent, compared to 50 percent nationally) and have the administrative support and resources necessary to do so (21 percent, compared to 27 percent nationally).

***California counselors are more likely to embrace specific elements of the eight components but are less likely to think that their schools are successful in this regard or that they have the resources necessary to accomplish each component.*** Counselors in California rated "advance students' planning, preparation, participation and performance in a rigorous academic program that connects to the college and career aspirations and goals" as the most important (82 percent rating a 9 or a 10 on a zero-to-10 scale, compared to 71 percent nationally). Fewer counselors in California than in the nation believe that their schools are successful at accomplishing this component (29 percent, versus 34 nationally). More than three out of four (77 percent) California counselors value "building a college-going culture by nurturing in students the confidence to aspire to college," compared to 65 percent nationally. However, only 40 percent of California counselors and 38 percent of counselors nationally believe that their school is successful at accomplishing that goal.

***School counselors in California are more likely to support a major overhaul of the education system and support specific education reforms.*** In order to improve student success, 71 percent of California counselors and 55 percent of counselors nationally say that major changes or a complete overhaul of the education system is needed. More than seven in 10 counselors in California support specific reforms such as collecting and disseminating data on the success rates of high school graduates (71 percent, compared to 65 percent nationally).

***California counselors are far more likely to see certain measures of accountability as fair or appropriate.*** A larger percentage of counselors in California than of the nation support the creation of measures of accountability and incentives for counselors (70 percent in California, compared to 61 percent nationally). Counselors in California are the most likely to view transcript audits of graduation readiness as a fair and appropriate way to assess the effectiveness of school counselors. On a zero-to-10 scale on which a 10 means the measure is completely fair and appropriate, 77 percent of California counselors rate transcript audits of graduation readiness as a 6 or higher, compared to 62 percent nationally. California counselors are also more likely to support using the completion rate of a college-prep sequence of courses (70 percent, compared to 61 percent nationally) or students gaining access to advanced classes and tests (69 percent, compared to 60 percent nationally), which they rate as a 6 or higher.

## *Critical Investments for Critical Work*

For many students, especially those who are first-generation college students, a successful school-to-college transition is difficult without appropriate and effective counseling.<sup>8</sup> For example, in California, Latinos are estimated to constitute 48 percent of the state's college-age (18–24) population, but 16 percent met the requirements for admission into CSU and UC, and only half of those actually enrolled.<sup>9</sup> These are areas where school counselors could strategically work to promote student success in this traditionally underrepresented college-going population. In fact, research shows that counseling services are one of the strongest tools for improving access to college,<sup>10</sup> but in California (which has the highest student-to-counselor ratio in the nation<sup>11</sup>), too few students are receiving access to these critical services. As the work of school counselors is correlated with factors such as more productive course selection, higher graduation rates and increased college enrollment rates, the potential impact of their work may therefore be greatest for those students with the greatest need.<sup>12</sup>

In a state with a projected shortage of one million trained workers with baccalaureate degrees,<sup>13</sup> school counselors are uniquely positioned to address this need. Yet, counseling is often not available to those who need it the most,<sup>14</sup> exacerbated by high caseloads in underresourced schools. Drastic cutbacks in education spending have resulted in even more limited school counseling services to students, making it difficult for students to successfully negotiate the college decision-making process, to take appropriate college-preparatory classes, to learn about testing deadlines, to complete college applications accurately, to obtain letters of recommendation, and to apply for financial aid and scholarships.<sup>15</sup> Public expenditures for K–12 education are shrinking in California (between 2007–08 and 2010–11, the state's contribution to K–12 decreased by 13 percent<sup>16</sup>), but investing in school counselors could show a tremendous return on investment. Counselors can help their students receive the academic and nonacademic supports along the education pipeline so that they graduate from high school on time and are ready for college and careers. For example, the vast majority of California counselors report spending some time counseling students about college, with nine in 10 counselors in California (90 percent, versus 80 percent nationally) saying that college counseling is a part of their job. With many demands on their time, and their students' college-going rates persistently low, counselors in California desire to spend more time on this critical task (with 57 percent of counselors in California and 56 percent nationally reporting a desire to spend more time building a college-going culture). If the state increased its high school graduation rate to the 90 percent national goal (up from 69.9 percent in 2009, the most recent data available) with the help of counselors, the additional graduates could deliver an estimated \$1.2 billion in increased annual earnings, \$235 million in increased annual state tax revenues, and an increase in the gross state product of \$1.7 billion.<sup>17</sup> College degree attainment would provide even larger contributions to individuals, taxpayers, and the economy.



# Next Steps

The California high school and college completion crisis comes at tremendous costs to individuals, communities, and the nation. School counselors are supportive of a college and career readiness agenda, and they have indicated a desire to be leaders in supporting their students' success. School counselors are highly valuable professionals in California's education system, but they are also among the least strategically deployed. This is a loss, especially given the fact that school counselors are uniquely positioned, in ways that many educators are not, to have a complete picture of the dreams, hopes, life circumstances, challenges, and needs of their students. Counselors have both a holistic view of the students in their schools and the opportunity to provide targeted supports to keep these students on track for success, year after year.<sup>18</sup> Now is the time to support school counselors in their efforts to strengthen the California education system and secure its future.

## Notes

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### **About the College Board**

The College Board is a mission-driven not-for-profit organization that connects students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the College Board was created to expand access to higher education. Today, the membership association is made up of over 6,000 of the world's leading educational institutions and is dedicated to promoting excellence and equity in education. Each year, the College Board helps more than seven million students prepare for a successful transition to college through programs and services in college readiness and college success — including the SAT<sup>®</sup> and the Advanced Placement Program<sup>®</sup>. The organization also serves the education community through research and advocacy on behalf of students, educators and schools.

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