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## Y'all Ready for This: Examining Racial Gaps in Postsecondary Readiness Opportunities in P-12 Education

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### Executive Summary

- Latino and Black students graduate high school and enroll in college both at lower rates than their White classmates. In-school postsecondary preparation is proven to be impactful at decreasing these attainment gaps. Many preparation practices are highly effective for students of color, including early access to advanced coursework, strong relationships with guidance counselors, and engagement in preparation programs.
- Due to systemic issues impacting P-16 education, including misaligned curriculum, poor information sharing, and lack of in-school support, students of color are not able to equitably access these opportunities.
- To address this issue, policymakers and educational leaders must make cohesive changes across the P-16 education pipeline while taking into consideration their unique political landscape.

### Background

Throughout the last half-century, college access has significantly increased to include a wider range of participants. Today, 68 percent

of students enroll in some form of postsecondary education immediately after graduating high school.<sup>1</sup> Now more than ever, first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color have aspirations for a postsecondary education. However, these students are not enrolling in college at the same rates as the overall population of college-going students.<sup>2</sup> Due to systemic barriers within P-12 education, these students also significantly lack adequate postsecondary preparation.<sup>3</sup> To better understand this problem, it is necessary to (1) understand the current state of college readiness and (2) examine specific barriers to college readiness tools for Latino and Black students.

### Defining Terms

**College access** is a student's ability to gain entry into an institution of higher education. There are a myriad of individual and systemic factors that impact college access, including affordability, academic preparation, and social capital (i.e. intangible resources that catapult student success). The term often refers to any efforts pursuing enrollment at a 2- or 4-year institution of higher education.

**College readiness** is more narrow. It is the demonstration of knowledge and skills needed to successfully complete introductory-level college coursework,<sup>4</sup> as well as the skills needed to successfully navigate non-academic components of postsecondary transition.<sup>5</sup> Four key elements of being college-ready are:<sup>6</sup>

1. Core academic skills
2. Content knowledge
3. Non-cognitive skills
4. College knowledge

**Educational attainment** refers to the highest education level a student has completed.<sup>7</sup> Analyzing attainment data helps understand education trends for the U.S. population by race, income, and other factors.<sup>8</sup>

The **P-16 education** pipeline encompasses all education from preschool to postsecondary degree attainment. A P-16 approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of all education systems and stakeholders.<sup>9</sup>

### *The State of Postsecondary Preparation: Effective Practices for Students of Color*

Postsecondary preparation is essential for students to achieve each ele-

ment of readiness. Although there are generally accepted readiness indicators, such as GPA and test scores, there is no holistic set of indicators states consistently utilize to evaluate readiness across middle and high school students.

- **Advanced Coursework**  
Success in college-level coursework is a strong indicator of college readiness and subsequent success.<sup>10</sup> The road to college-level coursework begins early, and acquired skills build upon each other over time. Advanced coursework available throughout the P-16 system include<sup>11</sup>:
  - Elementary school: gifted and talented programs
  - Middle school: high school-level courses, such as Algebra I
  - High school: college-level work, such as Advanced Placement, dual enrollment, and early college.

Each of these are steps towards postsecondary readiness, helping students enhance their toolkit of high-level critical thinking skills.

- **School Counselor Support**  
Counselors play a significant role in Black and Latino students' journey to college readiness.<sup>12</sup> They promote academic development, socio-emotional growth, and college readiness skills<sup>13</sup> and are often a primary resource for students navigating postsecondary planning and the accompanying stress. Not only do counselors provide information about college, but they also influence how students think about higher education<sup>14</sup> through crafting a college-going culture.<sup>15</sup>
- **Postsecondary Preparation Programs**  
There are several federal-state partnerships that target postsecondary preparation to low-income, first-generation, and minority students that have positive outcomes.<sup>16</sup> GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and

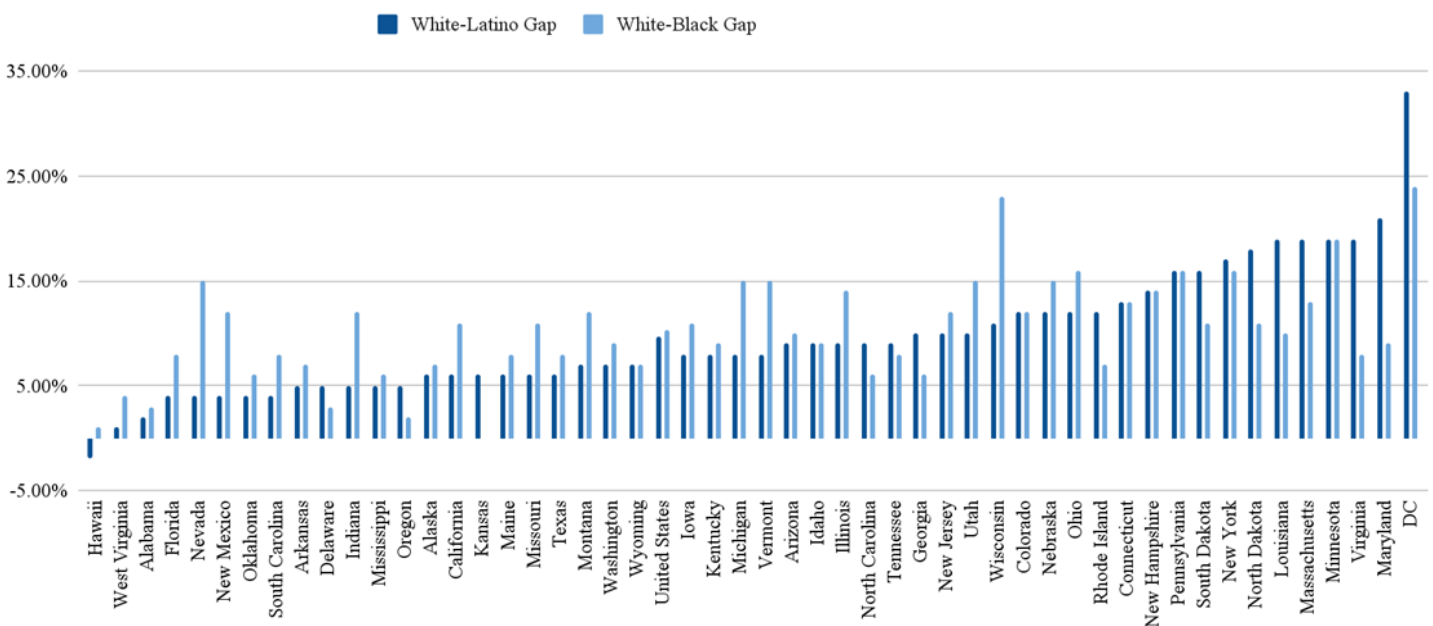
Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), for example, is a competitive discretionary grant program that provides academic, social, and financial support in preparation for college to roughly half a million middle and high school students across the country.<sup>17</sup> It focuses on enhancing academic development and information about college through partnerships between under-resourced schools and public colleges.<sup>18</sup> This is an opt-in, out-of-school program targeting students who exhibit a drive for education, but it is not accessible to all high-need students, in part due to limited federal funding. Since GEAR UP competes for resources with other programs funded through the U.S. Department of Education, it is not an attainable opportunity for most students.

### Problem Analysis

#### National Landscape of Educational Attainments Gaps

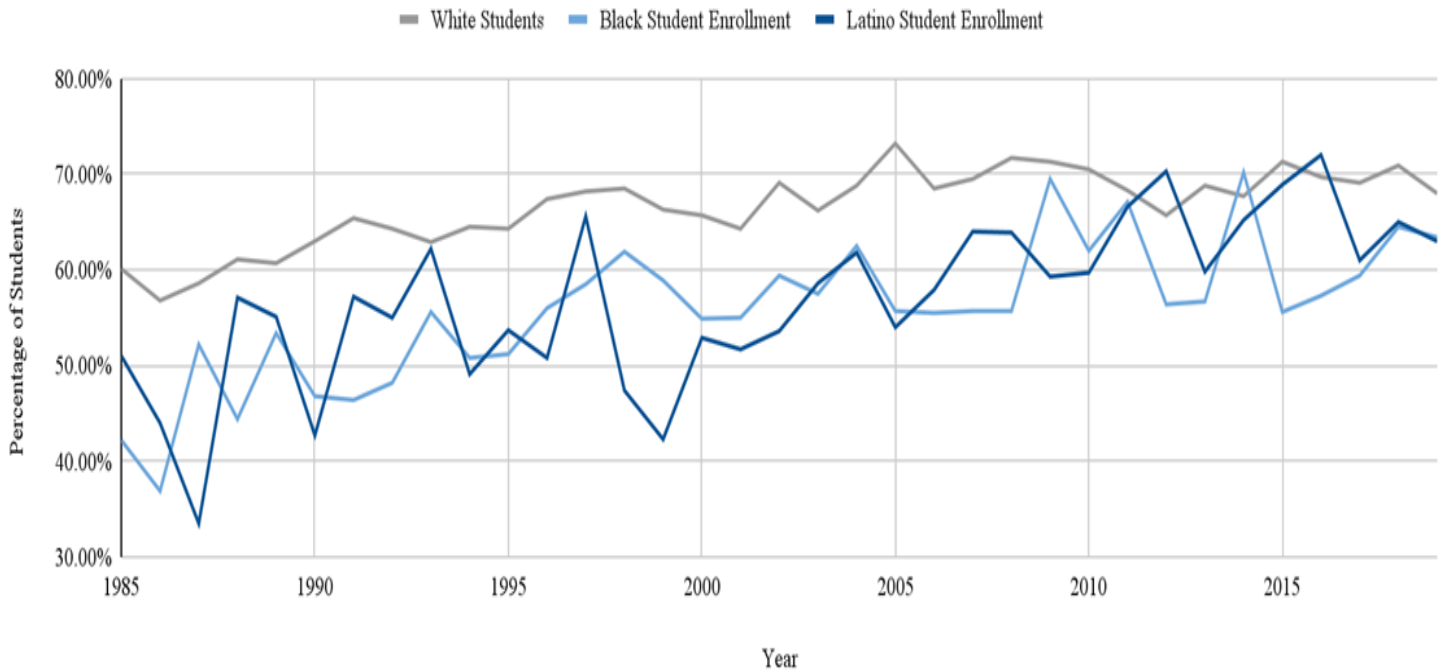
Latino and Black students graduate high school at lower rates than

Racial Gaps in High School Graduation Rates, 2018-19



Graph 1: High School Graduation Rate Racial Gaps<sup>20</sup>

## Immediate College Enrollment Over Time, by Race



Graph 2: Immediate College Enrollment, by Race<sup>25</sup>

White students across the country (see Graph 1). Nationally, there is a 9% graduation rate gap between Black and White students and a 7% gap between Latino and White students. In the most inequitable states, these gaps increase to over 15%.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the last five decades, Latino and Black students have also immediately enrolled in college at lower rates (see Graph 2).<sup>21</sup> Students who enroll in college immediately after high school are more likely to persist and graduate.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, these students tend to enroll in 2-year colleges disproportionately more than White students.<sup>23</sup> Students who enroll in 4-year institutions are more likely to graduate and have increased economic earnings than those at 2-year institutions.<sup>24</sup>

### Consequences for Latino and Black Students

High school graduation and college enrollment gaps highlight an educational attainment issue with detrimental consequences. Attainment outcomes are consistently lower for Latino and Black students than White students.<sup>26</sup> The effects of this expand beyond college enrollment. Increased debt avoidance<sup>27</sup>, developmental coursework requirements<sup>28</sup>, and college drop out rates all tie back to poor postsecondary preparation.

Colleges cannot and should not be the primary stakeholder responsible

for providing information for needs like financial aid.<sup>29</sup>

College readiness is the launchpad for educational attainment (see Figure 1). If states continue to ignore the serious gaps in readiness, they will set up students of color for failure in their postsecondary attainment endeavors.

### Context of Readiness Gaps

The issue of college readiness extends beyond traditional curricular variables. When strategizing how to close readiness gaps, it is essential to understand all contributing contextual factors (see Figure 2).



Figure 1: Student Success Flowchart<sup>30</sup>

for supporting college readiness prior to enrollment. Institutions - particularly community colleges - often lack the financial and administrative resources to adequately bring students up to par academically or provide necessary

**Individual context.** The social capital, academic success, and aspirations

of a student impact their desire to engage in readiness programs. Self-efficacy, self-motivation and mental wellness positively shape student effort and thus academic performance.<sup>31</sup>

*These interconnected contexts must be considered holistically to comprehensively address equity gaps in readiness.*

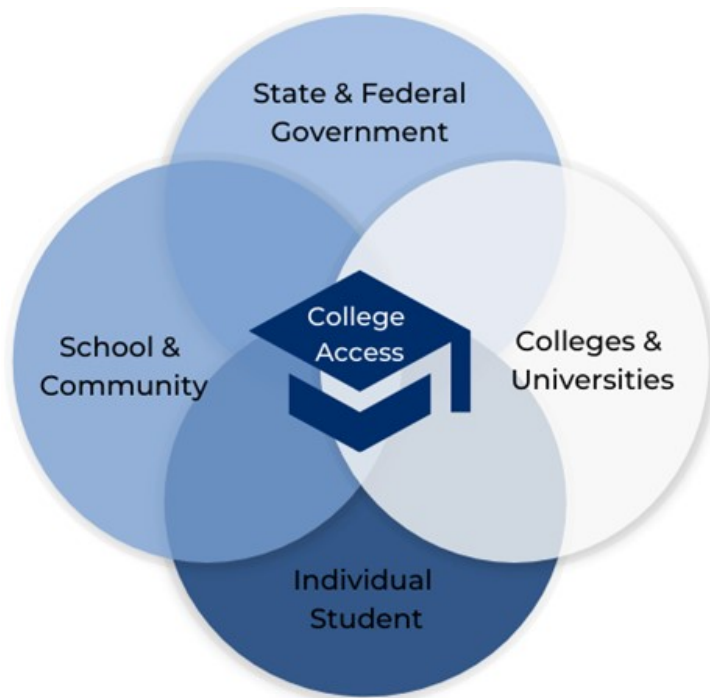


Figure 2: Contexts of Closing Attainment Gaps<sup>37</sup>

**School and community context:** Resources and information accessible to students within their community contribute to overall understanding of the postsecondary preparation process. This context is often impacted by factors beyond students' control, including their family's income, education levels, and ability to support students. It also includes the structure, demography, and philosophies of a school.<sup>32</sup>

**Higher education context:** Resources and information institutions offer to prospective students impact their ability to attend that institution. Students often "lack sufficient support and structure to navigate burdensome processes and institutional bureaucracy."<sup>33</sup>

**Sociopolitical context:** Local, state, and federal policies and practices create a unique educational landscape. The policymak-

ing process serves as a lever of communication between the actors in each context and directly affects the oversight and economics of college readiness activities.<sup>34</sup> These interconnected contexts must be considered holistically to comprehensively address equity gaps in readiness.<sup>35</sup> When policy only addresses one context, the implementation process is distorted. For example, if a state passed legislation to fund a college "promise" program,<sup>36</sup> but students do not have resources to meet the necessary academic requirements at their school, or there is no administrative funding earmarked for implementation, this legislation does little to help students who could benefit from the program.

**Misalignment of Curriculum**  
Curriculum misalignment between P-16 and higher education is a primary factor of poor postsecondary readiness.<sup>38</sup> Students are completing high school without mastery of concepts needed to be academically successful in entry-level collegiate coursework. This forces students to take developmental education courses, which can negatively impact their post-

secondary trajectory through delaying credit-bearing coursework and increasing tuition costs. Currently, nearly 40% of undergraduates enroll in at least one developmental course, and Black and Latino students are disproportionately represented in this population.<sup>39</sup> This is concerning because Latino and Black students who take developmental courses graduate at lower rates than their White classmates in developmental courses.<sup>40</sup> There is an increasing need to better align the curriculum of high schools with the academic requirements of colleges.

Efforts to address this misalignment at the secondary level (i.e. college counseling, course requirements) have historically little cohesion with efforts at the postsecondary level (i.e. developmental education).<sup>41</sup> Although addressing the same problem, these solutions often exacerbate issues of equity. As a solution, states began taking a P-16 approach to education by establishing P-16 initiatives, coalitions, and committees in the late 20th century. Through this approach, states hoped to ensure smooth transitions from early childhood through higher education.<sup>42</sup> By the early 2000s, a movement towards formalized alignment was created, and thirty states developed some form of P-16 coordinating board.<sup>43</sup>

One primary purpose of this approach is to align the academic requirements and expectations of P-12 and higher education.<sup>44</sup> It serves as a mechanism to effectively collaborate across sectors to increase college readiness, align P-16 curricula, reduce the need for

*When students and families have access to information and individualized support, they are better equipped to navigate the college process.*

developmental education, and promote educational equity.<sup>45</sup> Across states, these efforts have made relatively little impact on state policy and thus curricula alignment, due to their structural and implementation complexities and the absence of sustained policies.<sup>46</sup> This leaves students at risk for not persisting through college.

### *Systemic Factors Impacting Readiness for Latino and Black Students*

- *Lack of Access to Advanced Coursework*  
Latino and Black students excel at advanced coursework<sup>47</sup> - when they can access it. Unfortunately, they are underrepresented in this coursework across P-12 education. Schools serving Black and Latino students do not enroll as many students in advanced courses as schools with predominantly White students.<sup>48</sup> At racially-diverse schools that do offer significant advanced courses, Latino and Black students are denied access to these classes at higher rates than White students.<sup>49</sup> Educator bias, assessment bias, resource inequities, and childhood education inequities are all systemic factors that work to create this racial disparity.<sup>50</sup> Since advanced coursework leads to stronger college readiness,<sup>51</sup> students are losing critical opportunities for postsecondary preparation. These issues cannot solely be fixed at the school or district level, so states have slowly begun to develop frameworks and in-

centives to mitigate them, but more holistic work must be done.<sup>52</sup>

- *Information Gaps*  
Students who have access to information about college planning are more likely to apply and enroll in college.<sup>53</sup> Understanding the application and financial aid processes help students take ownership of their college and career path. However, there is a serious information gap between Latino/Black, low-income, and first-generation students and their peers. Family background (i.e. socioeconomic status, race, education levels) impacts a student's at-home access to information about college.<sup>54</sup> While many local institutions and non-profit organizations supplement this, many students are missed in these organizations' outreach and engagement due to limited time, money, and personnel.<sup>55</sup> There is little capacity for administrators to implement formalized in-school systems of robust information-sharing.<sup>56</sup> This creates a disparity where many low-income students of color are less likely to have access to information, which is a serious barrier to college access.<sup>57</sup>  
Lack of information is detrimental for students. For example, a recent report found Latino students are more loan averse than their peers, in part due to lack of understanding of how college financing works and impacts families.<sup>58</sup> That could be mitigated through

proper information on financial aid. When low-income students receive both financial aid information and assistance completing aid forms, they are more likely to apply for, attend, and persist in college.<sup>59</sup> It is evident that when students and families have access to information and individualized support, they are better equipped to navigate the college process.

- *School Counselors Shortages*  
Although school counselors can enhance a student's post-secondary readiness, their effectiveness is stifled by a myriad of concerning factors. The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 students per school counselor.<sup>60</sup> High-poverty schools meeting this threshold are linked to better academic outcomes and higher graduation rates.<sup>61</sup> However, the national average ratio is 430 to one,<sup>62</sup> and students of color disproportionately lack access to counselors.<sup>63</sup>

When schools do have an adequate number of counselors, their time and energy are stretched thin. Over 50% of school counselors report managing a high caseload/number of students as an extreme challenge, and 51% report closing opportunity and achievement gaps as an extreme challenge.<sup>64</sup> Because counselors provide Black and Latino students significant social capital,<sup>65</sup> these data are alarming. Over half of all counselors are not appropriately

equipped to support students as they plan for post-high school.<sup>66</sup> The lack of counselors and presence of high caseloads creates a landscape where students are systematically losing one of their primary sources of information about postsecondary planning.

## Moving Forward

State policy is consequential in improving the current state of college readiness within P-12 systems.<sup>67</sup> Since each state has a unique education landscape, there is no single solution to rectify readiness equity gaps. The following questions will help jumpstart state policymakers in their quest towards implementing equitable readiness initiatives.

### P-16 Alignment

- What statewide goals should be developed to evaluate and improve the impact of your P-16 coordination efforts? Which stakeholders need to be better incorporated into these efforts?
- How can the state adopt readiness indicators and implement evidence-based best standards for students to achieve these indicators? What assessment should be conducted?
- Are Latino and Black students academically prepared to take credit-bearing courses in college? What longitudinal data can be collected in conjunction with institutions of higher education to identify gaps in student knowledge?

### In-School Information Sharing

- Does state or district postsecondary planning in middle and high school include targeted outreach to Latino and Black families? Is outreach accessible in multiple languages?

- Are schools with large populations of Latino and Black students adequately staffed to support postsecondary planning? How can states improve educator and counselor pipeline programs to enhance support?
- What community partnerships might improve communication channels for students preparing to graduate high school? How can local government, colleges, non-profit organizations, and the private sector work together to support readiness?

## Endnotes

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<sup>6</sup> David Conley, “Toward a More Comprehensive Conception of College

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<sup>7</sup> “Educational Attainment,” U.S. Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/topics/education/educational-attainment.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Perna & Joni Finney, *The Attainment Agenda: State Policy Leadership in Higher Education*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Laura Perna & Michael Armijo, “The persistence of unaligned K–12 and higher education systems: Why have statewide alignment efforts been ineffective?” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 655, 16–35.

<sup>10</sup> Kayla Patrick, Allison Socol, & Ivy Morgan, *Inequities in Advanced Coursework: What’s Driving Them and What Leaders Can Do*, The Education Trust, 2020, 7. <https://edtrust.org/resource/inequities-in-advanced-coursework/>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>12</sup> Blaire Cholewa, Christina Burkhardt, & Michael Hull, *Are School Counselors Impacting Underrepresented Students’ Thinking About Postsecondary Education? A Nationally Representative Study*. (American School Counselor Association), 150. <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/53d27d2a-1686-49eb-9ed2-54a6260772b0/Underrepresented-Students.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> American School Counselor Association, *The Essential Role of High School Counselors* (2019). <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/2a38ea99-5595-4e6d-b9af-2ac3a00fa8c3/Why-High-School.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 150

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Committee on Education Funding, *Education Matters: Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Analysis*, 2021, 158. [https://cef.org/wp-content/uploads/FY-2022-Budget-Book\\_FINAL.pdf](https://cef.org/wp-content/uploads/FY-2022-Budget-Book_FINAL.pdf).

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- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.; Julia Duncheon & William Tierney, *The Problem of College Readiness*, 5; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 6.
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- <sup>35</sup> Núñez & Oliva, 324.
- <sup>36</sup> To learn about the benefits of college "promise" programs, see Page & Scott-Clayton, 8-9.
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- <sup>38</sup> Perna & Armijo, 16-35.
- <sup>39</sup> Ganga, Mazzariello, & Edgecombe, 3.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>41</sup> Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio; Perna & Thomas.
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- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 32; Núñez & Oliva, 330.
- <sup>46</sup> Perna & Armijo, 23; Perna & Finney, 69.
- <sup>47</sup> Patrick, Socol, & Morgan, 7.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 3.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 19.
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