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## A Critical Policy Analysis of Texas' *Closing the Gaps 2015*

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**Abstract:** This critical policy analysis uses critical race theory to provide a counter narrative to the P-16 initiative in Texas known as *Closing the Gaps 2015*. Findings indicate that while these reforms aim to increase educational access and achievement for people of color, they fall short of addressing systemic inequities such as enduring segregation and unconstitutional school finance policy. Using Texas as a case study illuminates the ways the growing number of P-16 councils throughout the US might adapt and improve policy development and implementation to more adequately address educational inequities across racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups. The article closes with recommendations for Texas' reiteration of *Closing the Gaps 2015* titled, *60x30TX*, currently in revision to guide state education goals in 2016-2030.

**Keywords:** educational pipeline; P-20; P-16; critical policy analysis; social justice; critical race theory

### Un análisis crítico de la política de *Texas cerrando la brecha 2015*

**Resumen:** Este análisis de crítico de políticas utiliza la teoría racial-crítica para proporcionar una narrativa en contra de la iniciativa de P-16 en Texas conocida como

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*cerrando las brechas 2015*. Los resultados indican que, si bien estas reformas tienen como objetivo aumentar el acceso y logros educativos para minorías raciales y étnicas, no consiguen abordar las desigualdades sistémicas y duraderas como la segregación y la política inconstitucionales de financiamiento educativo. El uso de Texas como un caso de estudio ilumina los caminos del creciente número consejos escolares en todos los EE.UU. podría adaptar y mejorar el desarrollo y aplicación de políticas para abordar de manera más adecuada las desigualdades educativas entre los grupos raciales, étnicos y lingüísticos. El artículo concluye con recomendaciones para el nuevo programa en Texas *cerrar las brechas 2015* titulado, 60x30TX, actualmente en revisión para guiar a las metas educativas 2016-2030.

**Palabras clave:** recorridos educativos; P-20, P-16; análisis críticos de políticas; justicia social; teoría racial-crítica

### Uma análise crítica da política de *Texas fechando a brecha de 2015*

**Resumo:** Esta análise crítica de políticas usa teoria racial-crítica para fornecer uma narrativa contra a iniciativa P-16 no Texas conhecida como *fechando as brechas de 2015*. Os resultados indicam que, enquanto estas reformas visam aumentar o acesso e logros educativos para minorias raciais e étnicas, não conseguem resolver desigualdades sistêmicas e duráveis como segregação e políticas inconstitucionais de financiamento da educação. Usando Texas como um estudo de caso ilumina os caminhos que um grande número de escolas em todo os EUA poderia adaptar para melhorar o desenvolvimento e implementação de políticas para tratar de forma mais adequada as desigualdades educacionais entre os grupos raciais, étnicos e linguísticos. O artigo conclui com recomendações para o novo programa no Texas *fechando as brechas de 2015* intitulado, 60x30TX, atualmente em revisão para orientar os objetivos educacionais 2016-2030.

**Palavras-chave:** recorridos educativos; P-20, P-16; análise crítica das políticas; justiça social; teoria racial crítica

## Introduction

The relationship between high-quality education and a strong economy is emphasized at all levels of government in the United States. The White House stresses, "...a high quality education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a prerequisite for success" (White House, 2015). Despite the focus on college and career readiness over the past decade, not every citizen is receiving the high quality education deemed necessary, as indicated by measures such as high school dropout rates and college completion rates. Nationally, the high school dropout rate, measured by the number of 16-24 year olds who are not enrolled in school and do not have their diploma, was at 7% in 2013 (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015b). Only 59% of those students who do graduate high school then continue on to pursue their bachelor's degree full-time graduate within six years (NCES, 2015a). These national statistics are similar to Texas state statistics, which is one of the top five states with the largest K-12 public school enrollment (NCES, 2013). According to the Texas Educational Agency (TEA), the longitudinal dropout rate for 2013 graduates was 6.6% (TEA, 2015). The rate of college completion within six years is similar to the national trend with 51.7% of Texas students enrolled in 4-year public colleges and universities graduating in six years (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2015). While these statistics have been improving at both the state and national levels over the past decade, concerns remain due to a predicted workforce shortage of college graduates needed to fill jobs in the new economy (Knaggs, Sondergold, & Schardt, 2015; White House, 2014).

In response, the political discourse is centered on the need to identify viable strategies to bolster student performance, stem the high school dropout rate, and steer more students into college and/or career (Marshall & Oliva, 2010; McDonald, 2014; Smith, Crawley, Robinson, Cotman, Swaim, & Strand, 2011). For the past two decades, one such state-level educational reform, known as K-16, P-16, or P-20 (referred to here after as simply *P-16*), emphasizes vertical alignment across state and local educational systems, linking all years of schooling from preschool (P) to postsecondary graduation (16). The theory of action behind P-16 posits that achieving vertical alignment along the educational pipeline, and providing specific interventions at key points along the way, will bolster test scores. In addition, it is believed these targeted strategies will prevent *leaks* in the pipeline by encouraging students to stay in the system, as well as go on to advanced degrees after high school (Lawson, 2010).

Since P-16 policies, governance structures, and specific interventions vary across contexts, and usually only focus on one feature of that context's educational pipeline, evaluating P-16 reform has proven difficult, resulting in a shortage of usable knowledge (Durand, 2011; Kruegar, 2006; Rippner, 2014). There is a lack of evidence whether or not P-16 actually raises student achievement, increases high school graduation rates, and/or leads to increases in college access and persistence. Moreover, there is a troubling lack of critical scholarship that interrogates the discourses of P-16 initiatives to reveal whether the anticipated receivers of policy intent are represented during policy development and/or truly served throughout policy implementation.

This research begins to address these absences by conducting a critical policy analysis of *Closing the Gaps 2015*, a P-16 initiative passed by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB, 2000), which aims to increase achievement and educational attainment for all along the educational pipeline, especially students of color (SOC). Our analysis of the Texas' *Closing the Gaps 2015* provides a counter narrative to the focus on meritocracy and equal opportunity narratives the policy takes for granted. We show how this particular educational reform appeals to both the neoliberals' economic and individual interests, as well as the equal opportunity discourse employed by those affiliated with more liberal-leaning political agendas (Gildersleeve, Kuntz, Pasque, & Carducci, 2010). We demonstrate how *Closing the Gaps 2015* attempts to address achievement gaps on the one hand, while on the other hand, the policy is limited regarding larger systemic inequities, such as the racial and economic segregation of students that contribute to society's failure to meet the needs of minoritized students.

First, we describe the theoretical framework and methods employed to conduct this analysis. Then, we share findings from the first stage of analysis; that is, the emergent themes of the policy narrative. Thereafter, we share discoveries from the second stage of analysis: the counter narrative using critical race theory as a lens to critique the policy narrative. The article concludes with implications and lessons learned from the Texas P-16 policy, intending that findings from this critical policy analysis contribute to a more holistic, robust developmental process as policy and practice transfer to other states across the U.S. Moreover, we aim to inform current policy discourse as Texas develops and implements a reiteration of *Closing the Gaps 2015* titled, *60x30TX*, currently in revision to guide state education goals in 2016-2030.

## Theory and Methods

Public policy derives from government action or inaction by law, regulation, ruling, decision, or order and takes the form of material documents as well as verbal statements (Birkland, 2005). The study of policy making varies between traditional and critical methods. For example, the traditional approach may be described as a linear process focusing on measureable evidence and the scientific application of management skills, program design, and implementation (Birkland, 2005; Diem,

Young, Welton, Mansfield, & Lee, 2014; Fischer, 2003; Mansfield, Welton, & Grogan, 2014; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994). However, some scholars argue that the traditional approach ignores the contestable nature of problem definition, research findings, and arguments for solutions (Blackmore, 1995; Fischer, 2003; Marshall, 1999). Thus, other tools are necessary, drawing from many disciplines while considering the contributions of critical theory, post-structuralism, social constructionism, postmodernism, and discourse analysis to get at the heart of how policies that seem neutral on the surface, actually act to reify discriminatory practices for historically marginalized populations (Fischer, 2003; Mansfield, et al., 2014; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994).

In addition to examining power relationships, those who take a critical stance to policy analysis examine taken-for-granted assumptions about societal and sub-group values (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994). Fischer (2003) notes that critical policy analysts use interpretive methods to interrogate “the presuppositions that discursively structure social perceptions, organize ‘facticity’, and deem events as normal, expected, and natural” (p. 14). Moreover, according to Marshall (1999), critical policy analysts purposely contemplate whether a particular policy will “empower and democratize, and whether it will dispense goods to the ‘have-nots’ as much as they consider traditional questions such as whether a policy is efficient” (p. 69).

### Theoretical Framework

Following the principles of critical policy analysis noted above, we employed critical race theory (CRT) to provide a careful textual examination of *Closing the Gaps 2015*. In CRT, researchers place race at the center of their analyses, enabling a fuller understanding of whether educational policy adequately addresses the concerns of minoritized populations to bring about effectual change (López, 2003). According to Heilig, Brown, and Brown (2012), CRT challenges dominant ideologies and common sense notions that undergird educational policy; namely, modern liberalism and its claims that meritocracy and equal opportunity are not only real, but also attainable if the individual works hard enough.

While CRT scholars originate from diverse disciplines such as law, cultural studies, and education, there are core principles that many emphasize in their writings, such as: the intransience of racism, the faultiness of classic liberal thought, and the importance of interest conversion to affect any political change. In addition, the use of counter storytelling – an important component of CRT – is similarly used in many critical policy analyses by employing what is referred to as a counter narrative. While there are some variations of CRT amongst a variety of scholars, most CRT researchers agree on several key positions as outlined by Atwood and López (2014), Bell (2004), Chapman (2006), Dixson and Rousseau (2006), Hiraldo (2010), Ladson-Billings (1998), Ladson-Billings and Tate (2006), López (2003), Lynn and Parker (2006), Morris (2006), Parker and Villalpando (2007), Rousseau and Dixson (2006), Solorzano and Yosso (2001), and Villalpando (2003). These are discussed below.

**The permanence of racism.** CRT begins with the understanding that the world is not racially neutral; rather, race/racism are ubiquitous and apply to every social construct of our lives. That is, racism is so ingrained historically that it takes on a natural and ordinary quality in the present. Thus, while racism may be invisible to those of the dominant culture, most people of color experience racism regularly. Racism, therefore, is not something that can be measured or discovered empirically. “Rather, racism structures our very experiences and shapes our understanding of the world. It is within this particular space that the counter-story of the everyday emerges” (Atwood & López, 2014, p. 1145).

**The centrality of counter storytelling.** Counter storytelling, or counter narratives, play an important role in research that uses CRT. That is, the lived experiences of non-dominant populations

are legitimate and critical resources. However, dominant narratives usually do not include the interests of minoritized populations and often ignore issues of race. As Bertrand, Perez, and Rogers (2015) point out, “The role and function of policy discourse may appear straightforward, but actually entails mechanisms that are often obscured” (p. 4). Moreover, this commonplace murkiness points to the need for research that sheds light on the ways subtle policy language functions in upholding or challenging educational inequity (Bertrand, et al., 2015). It is not that counter narratives offer a perspective that is “truer;” rather, it offers a “more honest account of the world around us” (Atwood and López, 2014, p. 1145).

**The faultiness of classic liberal thought.** Another key position of CRT scholars is that racism requires sweeping changes. But liberalism has no mechanism for such change. Thus, the need for a critique of liberalism, which includes taken-for-granted notions concerning meritocracy, race neutrality, equal opportunity, and desegregation v. true integration. For example, CRT scholars aim to clarify that not all people in the U.S. are positioned for advantage in a society supposedly governed by meritocracy alone. Rather, other characteristics, like the color of their skin, are influential.

**The role of interest conversion.** Derrick Bell (2004) defines the concept of interest convergence with two major points: 1) The interests of Blacks will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of Whites (p. 69), and; 2) Any remedy will be repealed as soon as policy makers fear the remedial policy threatens Whites’ status. Bell was writing about the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that ruled that separate schools for Blacks and Whites were inherently unequal. Bell argues that this decision was primed by negative world attention on the mistreatment of the U.S. Black population. Moreover, the remedy, “forced busing,” was either not enforced or abandoned not long after implementation because Whites had to share neighborhood schools with Blacks. Their middle and upper class enclaves were no longer exclusive to them; consequently, White status was threatened. Hence, any movement toward racial justice is “allowed” inasmuch as dominant populations can benefit as well.

The coupling of critical policy analysis with the CRT framework enabled us to focus our analysis on the principles outlined above and guided the development of the following research questions:

1. Does the discourse around P-16 initiatives address classic liberal notions of meritocracy? If so, how?
2. Does the discourse around P-16 initiatives identify particular stakeholder groups? Are particular stakeholder groups’ interests detailed? Is there a coupling of political groups’ interests to garner political momentum?
3. How does policy language define “the problem,” describe policy intent, and acknowledge issues of race and other identity complexities, such as social class?
4. How are people of color represented/not represented on P-16 councils, which are charged with determining problem definition, policy development, and implementation?
5. How are resources utilized and distributed?

## Data Sources

According to Fischer (2003), critical policy analysts and interpretive policy analysts approach their work interpretively, seek similar data sources, and employ comparable collection tools. For example, both interpretive policy analysis (IPA) and critical policy analysis (CPA) scholars might use a variety of data sources in their work, from interviews to data sets, but they tend toward qualitative methods since they better align with the purposes of both IPA and CPA (Diem, et al., 2014; Fischer, 2003; Mansfield, et al., 2014; Yanow, 2000). For this project, data sources included policy artifacts; in other words, the objects, language, and acts that make up a policy, and the means by which the policy

is communicated to various publics, with a focus on language analysis of the original policy (Yanow, 2000).

Initially, a literature review was conducted to explore the current state of P-16 educational reform in the United States. From this comparative review of the states, Texas was identified as a national model in P-16 reform, especially with the movement's recent emphasis on college and career readiness (Achieve, 2009; Patterson, 2011), leading to the primary analysis of the policy document, *Closing the Gaps 2015* (THECB, 2000). Several close readings of *Closing the Gaps* (THECB, 2000) revealed additional primary sources to include in the analysis, such as documents from: Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), newspapers, P-16 websites, and academic studies such as evaluations and reports. Archival strategies, documents from websites and research studies generated from library search engines were collected. These additional documents provided context for the analysis since policies "...encapsulate the entire history and culture of the society that generated them" (Shore & Wright, 1997, p. 7).

### **Analytical Processes**

While both IPA and CPA use interpretive methods to analyze data, IPA scholars approach their work inductively, using a more iterative process whereby meaning-making "emerges" from the data sources (Yanow, 2000). Critical methods, on the other hand, take a deductive approach to interpreting data. That is, CPA scholars enter the research endeavor with a specific critical theory in mind (Fischer, 2003). In addition, some critical theories, like CRT, incorporate the use of counter storytelling in their analyses. This means that scholars using this framework approach their work both inductively and deductively, depending on which part of the analysis cycle they are in.

For this project, we first analyzed the primary sources inductively, producing the narrative, or the meaning-making that emerged from close readings of the policy discourse, without consideration of critical theory. Then, we took a deductive approach, using principles of the CRT framework as a lens to view the narrative more critically. From this critical analysis, we produced the counter narrative – or the meaning-making that places CRT at the forefront of critiquing the policy at hand. That is, the narrative was examined more closely to determine whether and how it addressed the concerns and principles associated with the CRT theoretical framework noted previously.

### **Literature Review**

The release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 brought to the fore the need to restructure the educational system in order to meet the demands of the changing global economy. The report set in motion a new era of reform at local, state, and federal levels aimed at excellence with the goal of increasing educational achievement and attainment (Patterson, 2011). One of the strengths of the P-16 reform is its attention to *situated contexts* as P-16 reform takes into account the multiple layers that interact to influence education and college access. These layers include individual beliefs, local school and community values, and social, historical and political contexts (Núñez & Oliva, 2009). P-16 leaders aim to address the situated contexts through collaboration with diverse council representation which often includes: "(1) K-12 leaders, (2) higher education leaders, (3) early childhood education leaders, (4) private sector leaders, and (5) local government leaders" (Lawson, 2010, p. 53). While specific policies vary from state to state and community to community depending on situational contexts, typically, P-16 initiatives draw attention to the need to improve student achievement (test

scores), align curriculum, establish longitudinal data systems, and create leadership councils that guide program development along the educational continuum (Durand, 2011; Pitre, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

The concept of linking the K-12 and higher education sectors is not new. Elementary and secondary schools have engaged with higher education institutions in partnerships since the late 1960s. However, the pipeline metaphor, which encourages education to be viewed on a continuum where stakeholders at each level work together, is a relatively recent development. Moreover, early partnerships usually targeted the local area surrounding individual colleges and universities, served relatively few students, lacked consistent funding, and were somewhat short in duration (Haycock, 1998; Núñez & Oliva, 2009). More recent efforts aim to expand their reach and lengthen their duration via emphasizing collaboration across political, educational, community, and business sectors. However, most states have clear divides between K-12 and higher education when it comes to leadership and funding, which makes the transformation from silos to pipeline challenging (Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, & Miller, 2007; Perna & Armijo, 2014; Streams, 2007).

Georgia was the first to address the leadership divide and formalize the more informal P-16 reform movement by establishing the P-16 council as a state government entity in 1995 (Kettlewell, Kaste, & Jones, 2000). Texas is also considered an early and consistent leader in P-16 reform with a voluntary P-16 council established in 1998, followed by formal statute in 2003 via Senate Bill 286 (Franklin, 2012; Hawkins, 2003). Following this formalization, Texas instituted several key initiatives (Domina, 2007; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003) such as adopting a longitudinal data system, establishing accountability standards, and developing new college and career readiness emphases in secondary schools (Achieve, 2009).

According to Lawson (2010), 46 of 50 states participate in some sort of P-16 reform. However, despite widespread growth, P-16 is still considered to be “in an embryonic stage of development” (Kirst & Usdan, 2007, p. 64) resulting in an incomplete theory of action (Lawson, 2010).

### **Objectives of P-16 Reform**

The underlying logic of P-16 reform is to address intertwined social justice, economic, and organizational rationales in order to change the collective system (Durand, 2011). This motivation results in shared P-16 objectives, which include improving student achievement and addressing transition difficulties, especially within underrepresented populations, and creating a more educated and career ready workforce (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). The conception is that change in the educational system through P-16 reform can have a far-reaching impact on the country's economy as a more educated workforce is tied to a more competitive economy, especially during periods of global recession (Phelps, Durham, & Wills, 2011). In addition, research has shown that increased educational attainment provides increased private benefits (e.g. higher salaries, stronger buying power) and has shown to have public returns including “better health, lower crime, tax contributions” (Phelps, Durham, & Wills, 2011, p. 4). Moreover, Engberg and Wolniak (2013) argue that as the international economy becomes more technological, more college graduates, especially in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields are needed. Thus, many P-16 initiatives include attention to the STEM pipeline specifically (Engberg & Wolniak, 2013; Maltese & Tai, 2011; Mansfield, et al., 2014; Lawson, 2010; Schultz et al., 2011).

A central goal of the P-16 reform is to smooth students' transitions during their time in the educational system. Reform initiatives often focus on the transitions from elementary to secondary

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<sup>1</sup> Kober (2001) defines the achievement gap as a difference in academic test scores between races due to a variety of factors, where White and Asian students tend to score significantly higher on average than African American and Hispanic students.



school and from high school to college (Chamberlin & Plucker, 2008). The argument is that communication problems at various points between elementary schools, secondary schools, and colleges most likely have resulted from the institutions developing as distinct and separate systems, resulting in conflicting messages to students and their families navigating these systems. Moreover, research shows that often there is curriculum misalignment between stages of transition, confusion over college admission requirements (which influence high school course offerings), and different emphases between the institutions in terms of instruction and testing (Kurlaender & Larsen, 2013; Walsh, 2009; Palmer, 2000; Venezia et al., 2003).

Enhancing communication between institutions and students is another goal of P-16 initiatives. By enhancing communication between systems and tracing students through a seamless system, educational leaders hope to improve overall student achievement, minimize achievement gaps between students of different racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, lessen the need for remediation, and lower drop-out rates of students, especially during the high school and college years (Walsh, 2009). Previous research has shown that partnerships across educational systems result in a reduction in the achievement gap, especially when these interventions occur as early as the preschool level before gaps usually widen (Chamberlin & Plucker, 2008; Pitre, 2011).

### **Obstacles to P-16 Reform**

While a large majority of states have adapted some variation of P-16 reform, most lack specificity and measurable outcomes. Add to this, the continued separation of leadership and funding between K-12 and higher education sectors, which creates difficulties to achieving objectives (Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, & Miller, 2007; Perna & Armijo, 2014; Streams, 2007).

Researchers recognize P-16 reforms as being heavily *leader-dependent* and often steered by councils or committees granted authority by executive order, legislation or charter (Data Quality Campaign, 2012; Rochford, 2007). P-16 councils usually serve as an advisory body working to set an agenda, encourage collaboration across institutions and stakeholders, and coordinate and evaluate P-16 initiatives (Business Higher Education Forum, 2005). However, these councils tend to lack direct authority. One reason: most state councils are established as merely advisory; only three P-16 councils (North Carolina, Oregon, and Tennessee) have the authority to initiate change (Education Commission of the States, 2014). The ability and method to grant authority is often a result of the way in which the council was established (Data Quality Campaign, 2012). For example, councils established by gubernatorial executive order might be seen as political and less sustainable through changes in leadership (Data Quality Campaign, 2012). Other obstacles include current education governance structures, such as separate governance and/or authority, leadership, and funding systems for K-12 and higher education (Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, & Miller, 2007; Rippner, 2015). Without authority, P-16 councils have been met by criticisms due to the councils' inability to affect change and shift from policy development to policy implementation (Data Quality Campaign, 2012; Rippner, 2015; Van de Water & Krueger, 2002; Venezia, Callan, Kirst, & Usdan, 2006).

Moreover, these leadership councils serve at a macro level seeking to address education reform of the system, rather than focusing on micro decision making that might instigate specific changes (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Oliva, 2004). The philosophy behind the leadership council is to create a central organization that establishes a culture of collaboration and coordination among diverse stakeholders and to ensure a shared vision and purpose with the objectives carried out at the local level (Bloom, 2010; Kania & Kramer, 2011; Rochford, 2007). In a case study of Georgia's P-16 councils, the first established council in the United States, the researchers point out the addition of local levels to the state council in 1997 proved vital: "When one considers the numerous examples of educational reform initiatives that have been attempted but produced little results, it is clear that

neither top-down nor bottom-up strategies are sufficient. Both are needed.” (Kettlewell, Kaste, & Jones, 2000, p. 85). By focusing on coordination of existing services, P-16 councils address shared issues and streamlined support for students (McLester, 2011).

### **Summary**

P-16 reform has continued to grow and expand across the United States as more students aspire to attend college and as more jobs require a postsecondary education (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). These shifts in the culture and purpose of education have required the historically distinct and separate entities of K-12, higher education, and the workforce to align. Evaluating the progress of P-16 reform policies has proven difficult to measure due to the broad objectives of these policies, as well as additional obstacles in measuring its success, including variation in policy in order to fit the state and local context (Blume & Zumeta, 2013; Nuñez & Oliva, 2009). Researchers have found positive findings for P-16 reforms, most often on a smaller and more localized scale, however less information is known about P-16 policies and their influence on creating an integrated educational system that is inclusive, sustainable and successful (Perna & Armijo, 2014; Rippner, 2015).

### **Findings**

We present the findings in two major sections: 1) The Policy Narrative, and 2) The Counter Narrative, followed by discussion, recommendations, and conclusions. But, first, we provide background on *Closing the Gaps 2015*, the policy we examined.

### **Policy Background**

In October 2000, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) adopted, *Closing the Gaps 2015*, a new plan for higher education with goals closely aligned to the economic and social goals of the P-16 movement (Blount & Rodriguez, 2015). A committee of 25 members, including higher education representatives and input from business and community leaders, looked at the critical issues facing higher education and developed the plan together (THECB, 2000). The final plan includes benchmarks set for every five years in order to monitor progress towards reaching the set goals by 2015.

Similar to P-16's focus on closing gaps in overall achievement and educational attainment, *Closing the Gaps 2015* aims to narrow these gaps both within the state and in comparison to other states. The theory is that this will be achieved by increasing high school completion rates, college matriculation rates, the number of nationally recognized programs or services at higher education institutions, and increasing funding to science and engineering institutions (THECB, 2000).

The plan was largely established in reaction to *The Texas Challenge*, a report by the Texas State Demographer, Steve Murdock, which emphasized the challenges Texas may face due to the state's changing demographics (Waller & Hase, 2004). These demographic changes include an increase in the Hispanic population resulting in a comparatively young, poor and less well-educated population compared to other states (Waller & Hase, 2004). According to Blount and Rodriguez (2015), Hispanics made up almost one-third of the Texas population in 2000. While the most recent census shows this upward trend continuing: Out of 25,146,104 people, less than half (43.5%) identify as White with well over one-third (38.6%) identifying as Hispanic or Latino, with 12.5% as Black or African American, and 5.4% as other (U.S. Census, 2010). An additional challenge Texas faces is its diverse landscape as it is one of the most expansive states with both large rural areas and major metropolitan cities (Perna & Finney, 2014). According to the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, 80% of the geographic area of Texas is considered rural (Combs, 2008). Within these designated rural

areas, the state of Texas has the largest rural population at 3.8 million in 2010 (Theodori & Hudec, 2013). In contrast, Texas is also home to four of the top fifteen most populous cities in the United States: Houston (2,195,914 residents), San Antonio (1,409,019 residents), Dallas (1,257,676 residents), and Austin (885,400 residents) (U.S. Census, 2014).

### The Policy Narrative

The purpose of this section is to report the patterns of discourse that emerged from a close textual analysis of the policy, *Closing the Gaps 2015*. Four distinct themes became apparent during analysis: 1) *Closing the Gaps 2015* will resuscitate Texas' stagnant economy; 2) *Closing the Gaps 2015* will ensure the acquisition of the *American Dream* for all Texans; 3) The inclusion of business leaders is essential to the development and success of *Closing the Gaps 2015*, and; 4) Additional resource allocation for research and development will strengthen *Closing the Gaps 2015* goal attainment.

**Saving the future of Texas.** The policy discourse focuses on the importance of saving the *future* of Texas, even the graphic design of the cover of the policy publication emphasizes the upcoming years with a timeline counting out every five years into the future from 2005 to 2030, with the year 2015 emphasized as the deadline for meeting the policy's goals. The problem is defined early in the policy's executive summary: "Texas is profiting from a diverse, vibrant and growing economy. Yet this prosperity could turn to crisis if steps are not taken quickly to ensure an educated population and workforce for the future" (THECB, 2000, p.1).

This focus on saving the future of Texas is carried over throughout the document. For example, in a section specifically labeled, *The Future of Texas*, the section opens with, "Texas stands at a crossroads" (THECB, 2000, p. 5) as the authors provide imagery of Texans choosing between two clear options. On the one hand, if Texans do not support the higher education plan, quality of life will suffer. On the other hand, if Texans choose to support the goals of *Closing the Gaps 2015*, the economy will grow and people's options will be expanded:

In one direction lies a future that follows the path of current courses of action... In the other direction lies a future that follows a new path. Texas accepts the challenge to support its people by providing opportunities for educational advancement through high quality programs. Enrollment and graduation rates increase. Institutions excel nationally through programs of excellence and advancements in research. The state's economy is advanced by a strong workforce and innovations created by research and development efforts. Individuals are challenged, their minds are expanded and they develop a growing interest in the changing world around them. The second path offers a far brighter future for Texas as it moves into the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a route that is shaped by the acknowledgement that the state can build prosperity only by educating its people (p. 5).

There are only two options presented and these options are portrayed as polar opposites. That is, following one pathway would result in a "reversal" (p. 5) unless "bold steps" are taken (p. 1).

These are the two pathways to solve the most pressing problem of a stagnant economy. Action in the four areas presented in the policy document are "...most critical to overcome for the future well-being of our state" (p. 1) and to meet "pressing regional and statewide needs" (p. 5). The changing demography "sweeping the state" (p. 7) is the issue that must be dealt with immediately unless Texans want to bear the consequences, which include lower quality of life, fewer personal choices, decreased income to name a few presented in the document.

The recurring message is that the purpose of the plan is economical due to a dire need to continue strengthening the engines that drive Texas' economic growth, such as an educated work

force. Thus, the goal of college education is workforce preparation as “There is a shortfall in the number of degrees and certificates earned. And, fewer degrees and certificates earned leads to a less-educated workforce. The state’s workers are not able to support a growing state economy, which is necessary for a higher quality of life for all Texans...” (p. 5). If Texans do not increase their educational attainment, consequences will occur for both the state and individual. Steve Murdock, the chief demographer in Texas, points out in a highlighted quote that the poverty rate will increase and household income will decrease.

**The American Dream.** In addition to being essential to saving the future economy, *Closing the Gaps 2015* makes clear that garnering an education is the path to achieving the *American Dream*.

Higher education is a great benefit to both individuals and society. People with a college education earn larger salaries and see greater financial benefits over their lifetimes. They also have greater job satisfaction and employment opportunities, and are more likely to give back to their communities. Their higher earnings contribute to the state’s economic base through taxes and they are less likely to require public assistance (THECB, 2000, p. 4).

Moreover, “every Texan” needs to be educated to the “level necessary to achieve his or her dreams...” (p. 6). The policy language also suggests that individual choice and freedom are closely linked with or a direct result of garnering an education: “Education, at its best, allows individuals to do what they want to do, rather than what they have to do and it opens their minds to better understand the world around them” (p. 4).

One factor influencing this choice concerns income, mentioned several times throughout the policy document. Within the introduction, salary is highlighted with an offset text box that includes a statistic from the National Center for Education Statistics, “College graduates will make \$1.2 million more in total salary over their lifetime than non-graduates” (p. 4). While students may have a choice in pursuing college, the policy makers plan to lead students to this pathway by requiring all students in high schools to complete a college-preparatory curriculum. At least some postsecondary education is expected; for example, the vision statement includes “Every Texan” (p. 6), while other areas of the document mention “increasing participation from every population group” (p. 9), “increase enrollment rates of all of its people” (p. 11), and “Ensure that all students and their parents understand the benefits” (p. 12).

In addition to increasing overall educational attainment of all Texans, the policy aims to boost the number of Hispanic and African American students that go on to college in order to further bolster the economy. “The state’s economy depends upon the wealth of its people and their contributions to the state... Reaching the goal will also require increasing participation from every population group, but especially Hispanics and Blacks” (THECB, 2000, p. 4-9). Race and the achievement gap are a central focus of the policy. The discourse mentions race not only in the specific targets set for each racial group, but as a purpose in the creation of the document. While the term “achievement gap” does not appear in the policy document, the policy discourse alludes to the connection between race and the achievement through the theme of “Closing the Gaps”:

At present, a large gap exists among racial/ethnic groups in both enrollment and graduation from the state’s colleges and universities. Groups with the lowest enrollment and graduation rates will constitute a larger proportion of the Texas population. If this gap is not closed, Texas will have proportionately fewer college graduates” (p. 4).

This iterates the problem facing Texas: a growing population that largely does not have a college education. No specific person or group is blamed for these gaps, as the document focuses on moving forward, even stating, “Although the Texas educational system is reasonably successful, there is room for improvement” (p. 6).

The policy discourse also highlights the importance of seamless transitions as a way to bolster the chances that students will progress throughout the pipeline: “Transitions between all levels of education need to be examined to make certain that every student wishing to continue his or her education is assisted from one level to the next” (THECB, 2000, p.13). Other strategies to meet the goals in participation include a statewide public awareness campaign “through television, radio, newspapers, Internet-based communications and other avenues” (p. 10) in order to reach out to families who may not have the experience, nor the information to access college. By marketing the value of college to students and their families, the state hopes to show access to college is both possible and affordable to all Texans.

*Closing the Gaps 2015* outlines different types of higher education participation, including community and technical colleges, public and independent colleges and universities, health-related institutions and private career colleges as viable pathways to achieving financial security and life satisfaction. While any area of study is desirable, “Of particular need are degrees in nursing, technology-related disciplines and disciplines leading to careers in teaching” (p. 11). Among the targets for goal 2: “closing the gaps in success” are, “Increase the number of students completing associate’s degrees from 23,000 to 26,000 by 2005; to 30,000 by 2010; and to 34,600 by 2015” (p. 11). These targets are further broken down by race: “Increase the number of Black students completing bachelor’s degrees, associate’s degrees and certificates from 9,000 to 11,000 by 2010; and to 16,000 by 2015” (p. 11).

**Market competition and the coupling of business and education.** In addition to education being positioned as a means to achieve the *American Dream*, the role of market competition and the inclusion of business owners as part of the educational enterprise are deemed as essential to meeting the goals of the policy. For example, in *Closing the Gaps 2015*, Texans are exhorted to be above average, or even *the best*, as comparisons are made at the national and state levels:

In comparison to California, New York, Florida and other large states, Texas falls short in higher education enrollment rates, degrees awarded, federal research funding and nationally recognized programs (THECB, 2000, p. 6).

The competition discourse carries over to within the state as the policy argues that each institution should have a differentiated mission and weak programs within institutions should be discarded. Also, benchmark institutions should be established for comparison to aid in the decision-making process concerning institutional effectiveness and program closure. The discourse also indicates that elements of competition should be enhanced through incentives with only successful organizations garnering recognition and resources.

The final goal of closing the gaps in research emphasizes this idea of competition between institutions and among the states.

Despite the success of many Texas health science centers, research universities and regional and specialized institutions in attracting more research funds over recent years, none of the state’s institutions ranks among the top 20 nationally in federal research and development grants. Overall, Texas ranks sixth among the states in the amount of federal research and development funding. Nationally, at least 10 institutions in other states individually receive more intellectual property income –

income generated by research discoveries and applications – than is received by all Texas higher education institutions combined (THECB, 2000, p. 16).

To further emphasize this point, the report highlights the success of California in an offset text box for their multiple schools receiving federal science and engineering grants compared to Texas. Moving forward, policymakers plan to continue this competition by motivating institutions with the following strategy: “The Coordinating Board will work with Texas colleges and universities to identify peer institutions and to establish benchmarks, building a foundation that will be used to make national comparisons” (p. 15). In order to be the best and gain national recognition, policymakers suggest the elimination of weaker programs:

Each Texas public higher education institution must identify its strengths and enhance programs critical to its mission, while at the same time phasing out programs that are not contributing to its mission. Institutions must not maintain weak programs that reduce resources available for building institutional excellence (THECB, 2000, p.15).

In addition to emphasizing competition and comparison, *Closing the Gaps 2015* also discusses the importance of including the business sector in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the policy and subsequent strategies. For example, an examination of the organizational website revealed that business stakeholders were included on the committee formulating the plan’s recommendations. In addition, throughout the plan, business professionals are positioned as educational stakeholders who *deserve* a voice in how schools are run, even being referred to as “constant partners in recruiting and preparing students and faculty” (p. 6).

Effective partnerships between business organizations and colleges and universities utilize the expertise of business professionals and other specialists who serve in teaching or team-teaching roles. These partnerships could also share laboratories or support academic laboratories. Academically, they could provide insights from businesses into curriculum decisions and foster class scheduling to accommodate the needs of working students... (THECB, 2000, p. 13).

It is clear that the plan elevates business professionals as experts, alongside teachers and other educators. This incorporation of businesses into the state’s P-16 education plan gives employers unprecedented influence over the roles education and business play in achieving the *American Dream*.

**Funding and resource allocation.** While the policy discourse notes the importance of financial resources to fulfill the goals of *Closing the Gaps 2015*, there is no clear plan for financial and other resource allocation. The only specific funding levels mentioned in the policy fall under Goal 4, which aims to close the gaps on research in science and engineering at the university level. For example, one of the targets for Goal 4 is to “Increase research expenditures by Texas public universities and health-related institutions from \$1.45 billion to \$3 billion by 2015 (approximate 5 percent increase per year)” (p. 16). Further, one of the state research strategies states:

An increase in funding to \$90 million per biennium will restore to these programs [Advanced Research Program/Advanced Technology Program] the purchasing power they had when created in 1987. Designating a portion (not to exceed 30 percent) of this increase to provide matching funds that will leverage the state dollars to attract even more external research funds. It will also help increase links between higher education and the business community (THECB, 2000, p. 17).

The need for financial resources is a consistent theme throughout the document, but only this final goal lists specific financial state and institutional targets.

While funding for research is explained in some detail, the funding language for other goals is vague. There is no mention of how much funding will be needed to implement programs that will improve test scores and support high school completion or to “recruit, prepare and retain additional well-qualified educators for elementary and secondary schools” (p. 10) in the STEM fields, for example. The policy acknowledges that in order to increase participation, postsecondary affordability must also be addressed. However, no entity is charged with establishing these policies and plans as *Closing the Gaps 2015* encourages, “Providing grants and scholarships to cover tuition, fees, and books for every student with financial need” (p. 10) and “Establishing incentives that increase affordability through academic and administrative efficiencies in the higher education system” (p. 10). By not defining incentives or funding levels, the policy remains open to interpretation and may result in varying levels of support throughout the state institutions.

Finally, “The success of Closing the Gaps will depend not only on financial resources but on institutional creativeness...” (THECB, 2000). This creativity seems to imply the common mantra of “doing more with less” as even faculty are given a charge: “Reaching the goal will require greater numbers of faculty – including minority faculty – creativity in utilizing resources and recognition of the need to reach every student” (p. 8). While institutions of higher education are charged with specific numbers for enrollment, (e.g. “Increase the number of students completing bachelor’s degrees from 57,000 to 72,000 by 2005; to 87,000 by 2010; and to 104,000 by 2015; p. 11), no specific numbers are given for funding that follows increased enrollment. This is especially problematic given that state and local funding of higher education is not disbursed on a ‘per student’ basis. Instead, institutions of higher education are supposed to meet these goals with only the possibility of incentives.

### The Counter Discourse

The purpose of this section is to reexamine the policy narrative through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Careful readings of the text with the CRT framework at the forefront revealed four distinct themes that push the narrative to examine taken-for-granted assumptions and alternative explanations: 1) The false choice between prosperity and calamity; 2) The assumption that the American Dream is available to all; 3) The assumption that the sole purpose of garnering an education is economic in nature, and; 4) The assumption that the theory of action behind the policy will be fulfilled without careful attention to resource allocation.

**False choice between prosperity and calamity.** The discourse continually alludes to the future, employing vivid descriptions to showcase extremes while tugging readers’ pathos in order to procure immediate support and action. Defining the problem in binary language – proposing a choice between either prosperity or calamity – restricts the public’s imagination. Consequently, this straw man argument presents *Closing the Gaps 2015* as the only legitimate and commonsense solution.

What is missing from the “saving the future of Texas” discourse is an acknowledgment of past policies and practices that have influenced present circumstances and can potentially disrupt future intentions. For example, the policy is limited regarding larger systemic inequities, such as the racial and economic segregation of students, which contribute to society’s failure to meet the needs of minoritized students. There is a lack of critique of historically constituted racisms or structural disparities such as racial segregation, socioeconomic isolation, unequal school finance, and academic tracking. While prior research clearly shows that achievement and opportunity gaps are far less severe for minoritized students who attend integrated schools that are relatively better resourced and detracked (Clark, 2014; Mansfield, 2015; Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009; Valencia, 2002), the

policy discourse is silent. Rather, the dialogue merely states that the gaps need to be closed, with occasional reference to the past by noting the growth of postsecondary institutions and enrollment since 1965.

There is no mention of perpetual segregation of Hispanic students well-past the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Valencia, Menchaca, & Donato, 2002; *Villarreal v. Mathis*, 1957) or discussion of the numerous school finance cases that have proclaimed Texas' funding of schools unconstitutional and in need of immediate remedy (*Edgewood v. Kirby*, 1984; *Neely v. West Orange-Cove* (2005); *TTSFC. v. Scott*, 2013) and subsequent disregard. This is a serious omission, which leads readers to wonder who is to blame for the achievement gaps and unfortunately leaves the door open for faulty conjecture that persistent achievement gaps are the fault of students and the leaks in the pipeline are a result of families who "just don't care" about education (Valencia, 2010). The use of CRT as a framework illumines the false choice between prosperity or calamity and turns our attention to additional considerations for the citizens of Texas: Whether to continue to ignore the courts or to remedy the school funding fiasco as a viable means to close the gaps.

**Dream deferred?** *Closing the Gaps 2015* makes clear that garnering an education is what every Texan needs to achieve the *American Dream*. However, similar to the discourse in the prior section, the policy language fails to take into account how "the problem" is affecting not only individual students' life chances, but how specific racial/ethnic groups are positioned (or not) to achieve the *American Dream*.

The perceived option of choice in the plan, along with the emphasis on individual benefits, leads to the belief that all can succeed if they try. Meanwhile, the discourse lacks recognition of prior research explaining that not all Texas students started off on equal footing; thus, forwarding a false meritocracy that disregards the unequal and competitive nature of what it takes to truly achieve the *American Dream*. In addition, Hispanics, the majority-minority population of Texas, are positioned in "either/or" terms as an opportunity or a risk to the state's overall economy, the responsibility of which falls squarely on the shoulders of Hispanics in the state: "The state's economy depends upon the wealth of its people and their contributions to the state... Reaching the goal will also require increasing participation from every population group, but especially Hispanics and Blacks" (THECB, 2000, p. 4-9). While this quote could indicate policymakers' recognition to open up learning opportunities for historically underrepresented groups, the language fails to provide concrete recommendations on how to actually increase participation from each group. Moreover, the words such as: *require*, *every*, and *especially* could be interpreted as placing the blame for under participation of Hispanic and Black students on communities, families, and/or the individuals themselves.

The policy discourse emphasizes the importance of seamless transitions, but the responsibility of realizing progress through the education pipeline solely depends on whether an individual student *desires* progress: "Transitions between all levels of education need to be examined to make certain that every student wishing to continue his or her education is assisted from one level to the next" (THECB, 2000, p.13). The loaded term, *wishing*, places responsibility on the student. While on the one hand, the policy examines the need to get more students to the next grade level, the discourse fails to explore why some students, especially Hispanic and Black youth in Texas, opt out of continuing their educations at the high school or college levels.

Commendably, *Closing the Gaps 2015* outlines different types of higher education participation, including community and technical colleges, public and independent colleges and universities, health-related institutions and private career colleges. However, the goals do not differentiate numerical targets for each type of university. By combining the different types of degrees in the target goals, the plan fails to acknowledge that a majority of Hispanic students enroll in community colleges and that the "concentration of Latinos in 2-year institutions will increase and further exacerbate the inequities



that already characterize higher education” (Vega & Martinez, 2008, p. 3) leading to *de facto* segregation at the tertiary level (Vega & Martinez, 2008). The loss of diversity in segregated systems comes at a steep price to minority students as they often attend under-resourced and high stress schools, colleges, and universities:

...with the concentration of Latinos at the lower end of the higher education stratification system one might go as far to say that an “apartheid-like” system exists – with the lower resourced institutions struggling to meet the educational needs of Latinos in the state (Vega & Martinez, 2008, p.4).

The policy discourse fails to recognize gaps in opportunity and funding, both at the secondary and postsecondary levels, which challenges notions of meritocracy in the quest for the *American Dream*. In contrast, what is impressive about *Closing the Gaps 2015* is policymakers’ intentional focus on students of color, despite a history of high profile cases impinging on race equity, such as *Hopwood v. State of Texas*, declaring the use of race/ethnicity unconstitutional in admissions (Blount & Rodriguez, 2015).

### **Education: For Whom, By Whom and For What Purposes?**

There is a subtle, but important, contradiction in the policy discourse. While the policy focuses on individualism in the “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality, this same focus on individualism is absent when considering how education might bolster individuals’ life chances or families’ financial security and strengthen communities. That is, more emphasis is given to how the education of all will save a faltering economy. On the one hand, this emphasis might be a politically savvy way of using the concept of interest convergence, or trying to appeal to a broader constituency with the reassurance that this policy is not only good for poor and minoritized others, but is equally good for all citizens of Texas. In other words, the elite can support the P-16 movement because the dominant populations stand to benefit, as well.

Another potentially positive message concerns increasing diversity in higher education and the workforce: “Carrying out this plan will provide greater diversity in Texas institutions of higher education. As these students graduate and take on professional positions, they will increase diversity in all areas of the workforce and serve as role models for future students.” (p. 13) However, this view is directly tied to the importance of strengthening Texas’ economic engines, rather than concerns for individual students or communities. Thus, it remains unclear whether those at the policy table view diversity as a state interest (*vis-à-vis Grutter. v. Bollinger*).

In addition, throughout the plan, business professionals are positioned as educational stakeholders who ought to have a voice in how schools are run, even being referred to as “constant partners in recruiting and preparing students and faculty” (p. 6). It is clear that the plan elevates business professionals as experts, alongside teachers and other educators. This incorporation of businesses into the state’s P-16 education plan gives employers unprecedented influence over the roles education and business play in achieving the *American Dream*. Meanwhile, there is a curious lack of representation of parents, students, teachers, and K-12 school administrators involved in the development of the policy. CRT demands critical policy analysts determine whether policy discourse includes the voices of those the policy is meant to serve; in this case, a lack of local stakeholders, who are street level policy actors (Goldstein, 2008; Mansfield, 2013). The lack of local policy actors at the political table is not only a snub to those who know, work with, and/or care for students, but a serious policy development blunder, as it is questionable whether those who were at the table understand what it takes to implement education policy with fidelity.

**Put your money where your mouth is.** While the policy discourse notes the importance of financial resources to fulfill the goals of *Closing the Gaps 2015*, the burden of making the policy work

without funding falls on the imaginativeness of educators: “The success of Closing the Gaps will depend not only on financial resources but on institutional creativeness...” (THECB, 2000). While the coupling of business with education, as noted above, resulted in unprecedented influence over the roles education and business play in achieving the *American Dream*, in terms of financially supporting the people and projects to see these dreams to fruition, the policy falls short. Thus, leaders’ ability at educational institutions to adequately address goals in the plan are seriously hampered. These stakeholders are left on their own as *Closing the Gaps 2015* instructs them to again use “creativity in utilizing resources and recognition of the need to reach every student” (THECB, 2000, p.8). In an editorial, Dahlberg (2005) addresses how the lack of funding influences the other goals stating, “Between our enrollment and our funding levels, however, there is a curious gap, which impairs our ability to carry out the mission and serve our students with programming that facilitates retention and graduation” (p. 22). Similar to the silence around the first theme, there is no mention of historical injustices in terms of funding.

An additional risk of not including specific levels of funding in the educational plan is that some goals end up taking priority over others. This seems to be the case regarding routine progress updates on *Closing the Gaps 2015*, “...the state is simultaneously focusing available resources on achieving the excellence and resource goals, and this is at the potential expense of educational attainment goals, given finite fiscal resources” (Perna & Finney, 2014, p. 146). Indeed, the financial support for improving the excellence and resource goals of Texas institutions benefits everyone. However, the disbursements do not address the racial disproportion in higher education. Financial support for the research goal has come at the cost of the other two goals that address this inequity: closing the gaps in participation and closing the gaps in success. This has resulted in stasis in critical areas: African American male participation rates, Hispanic participation rates, African American success rates, technology success, and teacher certification rates (Perna & Finney, 2014).

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

Using a critical approach to this policy analysis illuminated the contestable nature of problem definition and arguments for solutions and enabled us to see how a specific policy that seems neutral may actually overlook the historically marginalized populations it means to serve. Since the policy discourse fails to adequately identify the problem (for example, by ignoring segregation and unconstitutional school funding), the policy’s theory of action is at least partially constrained. Moreover, it is questionable whether the policymakers, who initially conceptualized the policy, or the stakeholders responsible for implementation, can truly empower underserved students and democratize the transitions between elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions. For example, research shows that:

Deficit descriptors – “failure,” “special needs,” and “at risk” are attached to many students of color and historically, these labels are rarely disregarded and often predetermine student of color’s ability to achieve at a relatively higher level...race is the elephant in the room and few are willing to examine how it shapes the educational landscape of students of color (Jean-Marie & Mansfield, 2013, p. 20).

Further, the lack of specific and consistent funding utterly constrains the efficiency aspects of policy implementation (Springer, Houck, & Guthrie, 2008) and seriously dampens this particular policy’s ability to dispense goods to the “have-nots” (Marshall, 1999, p. 69). While the policy does do an adequate job of recognizing the importance of reaching out to Hispanic and Black students to shepherd them through the Texas educational pipeline, the policy lacks specificity, while the coupling of rhetorical tropes around failing schools and a crumbling economy show the importance of interest

convergence to affect any political change, as the use of CRT demonstrates. In other words, rather than the policy discourse focusing on remedying past discrimination, the focus is on urging Blacks and Hispanics to stay in school, thus benefitting all by strengthening the economy.

The policy discourse also fails to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about American values (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994) such as meritocracy (Bell, 2004), and fails to question what is deemed typical, average, normal, or expected (Fischer, 2003). This discourse contrasts with what actually *is* in terms of whether and/or how a college-going culture is instilled in students earlier in the educational pipeline: such as with adequate funding to provide a variety of course offerings, identification of students for regular and/or special programs, access to school personnel to assist students and families with college and financial aid applications, and so on (Harvill, Maynard, Nguyen, Robertson-Kraft, & Tognatta, 2012; Knaggs, Sondergold, & Schardt, 2015; ; Ormsmith & Mansfield, 2014; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Research unequivocally shows that the above, and more, bolster students' chances to graduate high school and matriculate college as well as highlight these types of services as normal and expected in adequately resourced schools that serve mostly higher SES and white populations (Mansfield, 2015; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013). Moreover, *Closing the Gaps 2015* employs rhetoric emphasizing individual freedom and choice in order to build a common sense argument that compels *everyone* to support this policy despite the absence of social justice ideals (Kumashiro, 2008).

Perhaps, most importantly – especially in the case of Texas – is the silence on immigrant students (Blount & Rodriguez, 2015) considering Texas has the second largest immigrant population in the United States (Flores, 2010; Heilig, Rodriguez, & Somers, 2011). In 2013, the Texas state workforce included 21.3% identifying as immigrants, with 8.9% identifying as unauthorized immigrants (American Immigration Council, 2015).

While *Closing the Gaps 2015* does place a large focus on Hispanic populations, there is no direct mention of immigration, especially undocumented immigrants. This is troubling as Blount and Rodriguez (2015) point out:

Social issues unique to Hispanic students were generally ignored by the Closing the Gaps strategies... These issues overlap with the fact that most Hispanic college students (or potential college students) are first-generation. But there is also a potential language-gap in communication between institutions of higher education and Hispanic parents of potential first-generation students (p. 207).

In addition, these students face unique barriers to higher education, which include financial barriers, such as access to federal and state aid, and structural barriers such as access to information. While the policy does suggest a public awareness campaign for academic and financial preparedness for college, there are no specific strategies for addressing the language barrier. Undocumented immigrants may also fail to pursue postsecondary education due to a fear of deportation for themselves or their families due to their status (Pérez, 2014). In order to truly have higher education “enrollment and graduation reflect the population of Texas” (p. 2), then policymakers should include mention of this significant population.

In a December 2014 media conference call, Texas Higher Education Commissioner, Raymund Paredes announced that policy makers were currently working on the next iteration of *Closing the Gaps 2015*, entitled *60x30TX*. One significant change under discussion was an increased focus on student success (Hamilton, 2014). Based on the current study, additional recommendations are offered that might improve policy development and future implementation efforts to more adequately address both concerns about bolstering the economy and increasing educational access

and achievement of people of color. While encouraging this attempt at specificity, we also urge stakeholders to consider additional recommendations to strengthen *60x30TX*.

### **Acknowledge History**

Conversations about the racial justice implications should be discussed as, “policy should not be approached as an unproblematic given, without reference to the socio-cultural contexts in which it is embedded and understood” (Campbell, 2013, p. 1). During policy formation, policy makers should investigate the root causes that led to the problem Texas is facing today in order to formulate strategies and interventions that address the origin of the problem. Acknowledging the historical and structural inequities of the past will strengthen understanding of the current and future needs of the state, assist defining more accurate problem definitions, and promote crafting more adequate policy solutions with greater specificity. The next version of *Closing the Gaps 2015* should go beyond stating target goals for marginalized populations by offering strategies to overcome the barriers that have contributed to, and continue to result in, opportunity and achievement gaps for minoritized students – especially lack of integration and adequate funding.

### **Integrate P-16 Discussions with Broader Public Policy**

While P-16 is a vertical reform that links all years of schooling and acknowledges that need for shared responsibility across education levels, its silence on macro-societal issues that also influence educational outcomes, such as health, housing and social services, weakens its potential. As Edmondson & Zimpher point out in their book, *Striving Together: Early Lessons in Achieving Collective Impact in Education*, “...teachers cannot be viewed as solely responsible for students’ poor performance because in so many cases, and especially in poor schools and districts, teachers don’t have the resources or the training they need to be effective in overcoming the obstacles that accompany poverty” (2014, p. 9). While the policy does include stakeholders outside of education, such as businesses and communities, the policy could benefit by including teachers, principals, parents and students, as well as social services, houses of worship, and political action committees. Including local perspectives holds promise to strengthen the development and implementation of the reiteration of *Closing the Gaps 2015*.

### **Finance the Policy**

While sources indicate that, initially, policy makers planned to include more funding with the policy, the economic downturn resulted in the policy becoming similar to other unfunded mandates (Groves & Helmcamp, 2015; Perez, 2008; Ramirez, 2007). It is also disheartening that the policy discourse relied on some of the current rhetoric in pop culture that insists educators just need to learn how to do more with less. The reality is additional financial resources are essential to creating the type of schools that will adequately serve all students in the state. Educator creativity cannot replace out-dated textbooks, fix broken windows, or provide food for needy families. It takes money and a commitment from society to treat education as a public, rather than private, good. Providing funding would help ensure participation and incentivize progress.

The need for additional funding should become readily apparent as history is acknowledged and P-16 discussions are integrated with public policy sectors. The Texas Association of School Boards, while discussing policy funding generally, summed it up best: “...revenue and its effect on the state budget drives policy – not the other way around” (p. 31, 2012). Policymakers should take into account how money or other forms of support and resources influence policy outcomes.

Financial support could also help encourage empirical research to evaluate policy implementation, monitor goals and outcomes, and provide much-needed information to enable the replication of successful interventions across the state.

### **Strengthen the Pipeline via the DREAM Act**

The DREAM Act (acronym for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) is an American legislative proposal for a multi-phase process for undocumented immigrants in the United States. The plan would first grant conditional residency and upon meeting further qualifications, permanent residency. Texas was the first state to create its own version of the DREAM Act in 2001 (Flores, 2010). By addressing residency of undocumented immigrants, the DREAM Act works toward tackling the issue of college affordability by allowing more students to qualify for in-state tuition and access state financial aid (The University of Texas at Austin International Office, 2015). Research has shown that reducing college tuition for Hispanic families increases the number of students enrolling and completing college (Flores, 2010; Heilig, Rodriguez, & Somers, 2011; The University of Texas at Austin International Office, 2015). In fact, there is an increase in students enrolling and completing college in states with a version of the DREAM act, compared to states without a similar policy (Heilig, Rodriguez, & Somers, 2011).

The DREAM Act could help increase the number of students going to college as undocumented immigrant populations and English language learner populations have lower educational attainment rates compared to legal residents (Flores, 2010; Heilig, Rodriguez, & Somers, 2011). Under the DREAM Act, it is estimated 12% of the population could benefit from the policy (American Immigration Council, 2015). The American Immigration Council estimates, "...only between 5 and 10 percent of undocumented high school graduates go on to college" (2015). The new iteration of the policy, *60x30TX*, should address immigration as almost half of Texas' population growth from 2000-2013 was from migration, with the majority – 9.35 of 11.3 million – coming from Latin America (Flores, 2010; White, Potter, You, Valencia, Jordan, & Pecotte, 2015).

### **Future Research and Conclusions**

The current study focused on a state-wide analysis of the *Closing the Gaps 2015* policy, but analysis at the local and regional levels may provide a more comprehensive picture of the reform policy. For example, policy makers included limited strategies in *Closing the Gaps 2015* that were to be implemented at the state level. As a result, there was inadequate attention to the ways local and regional stakeholders might contribute to state goals. As P-16 reform includes numerous states and a wide spectrum of local contexts, future research might include cross-case analyses of two or more states and/or local strategies within states. Best practices may be eventually established that may inform interventions and programs in other locations.

A limitation of this study was its focus on written discourse. While examining the literature and policy documents is essential to any policy analysis, it is difficult to conclude policy intent and implementation fidelity without also talking directly with stakeholders. Thus, future work includes conducting interviews with policy actors to gauge stakeholder perceptions and realities. It may be that lack of specificity in the policy language is taken as a positive and that regional and local efforts are much more efficient and effective than state-level research would suggest. In addition, following the call of the critical approach, future research should fully examine power relationships. Future research should ask who is at the table and who is not? How do the depth, breadth, and level of stakeholder voice influence problem definition, solution development, and implementation adequacy, equity, efficiency, and effectiveness? Moreover, a longitudinal approach following the development and

implementation of the second iteration of *Closing the Gaps 2015*, as well as documenting the establishment of P-16 reform efforts across the United States, holds promise to add to our understanding of a number of issues including how: policies are transferred from one geographical area to others; contextual complexities influence policy development and implementation; policy is symbolic or effectively serves the public good.

In addition to a need to expand methods and data collected, a critique of this policy could also benefit from expanding its theoretical perspective. Since the policy discourse magnifies the economical nature of the plan, it may also be insightful to utilize a Marxist critique or an analysis of the role neoliberalism continues to play in current policy making. For example, the reason given for “Texas to develop its higher education system” is to fuel “continued growth of the state’s economic prosperity” (THECB, 2000, p. 6). While the policy discourse recognizes that the number of students admitted to tertiary education has increased, it also urges that “much more work” needs to be done and reiterates the need for the “continued growth of the state’s economic prosperity” (p.8).

On the one hand, policymakers can view P-16 projects, such as *Closing the Gaps 2015*, positively as a viable way to close the achievement gap between racial groups in order to meet important economic goals during a time of dramatic demographic shift. Or, P-16 efforts can be viewed critically as a remnant of a postcolonial project that fails to acknowledge “structure[s] of inequity...articulated alongside other economic, social, cultural and historical factors...” (Lomba, 1998, p. 19) with *race* and the resultant disparity in lifestyle and economic opportunity the most salient factors (Fanon, 1961). Either way, current P-16 efforts fail to address racial justice concerns. Fanon’s warning remains pertinent today: “I see...a parody of education, the hasty manufacture of a few thousand subordinate functionaries...necessary for the smooth operation of business” (p. 42). While progress has been made, a disparity still exists in Texas higher education between racial/ethnic groups. Attention to the critiques raised in this policy analysis hold promise for fully achieving Texas’ vision for *Closing the Gaps 2015*, hopefully better manifested in the new *60x30TX*, currently in revision to guide state education goals in 2016-2030.

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