

# College Affordability in Every Corner of California: Perspectives from the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier Poll

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California voters ranked college affordability as the second most important education policy issue in the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier poll,<sup>1</sup> a concern reflected in Governor Gavin Newsom's first budget proposal and in a number of bills currently progressing through the state legislature. Though desire for making college affordable is high among the average voter, California's geographic and socio-economic diversity demand that lawmakers consider local contexts when designing and implementing new reforms. We discuss variation in concern over college costs at the county level and by racial/ethnic and income groups, and suggest proper evaluation and implementation of college promise programs and equity initiatives as particularly fruitful avenues for addressing college affordability throughout the state.

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From Lassen County in the northwest corner of the state, where slightly over 12 percent of residents hold a bachelor's degree,<sup>2</sup> to San Francisco County, where over a third of all residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher,<sup>3</sup> the price of attending college is a top education priority for Californians. Voters in the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier poll ranked reducing gun violence in schools and making higher education affordable the first and second most significant education issues in the state, respectively.<sup>4</sup> Nationally, surveys show similar concerns over student debt and rising college costs.<sup>5</sup> Alarm over record levels of student loan debt, which has reached \$1.6 trillion,<sup>6</sup> has launched a movement for solutions, such as increasing Pell grant eligibility and awards, providing free college tuition, and increasing aid beyond tuition to cover other essential college fees.

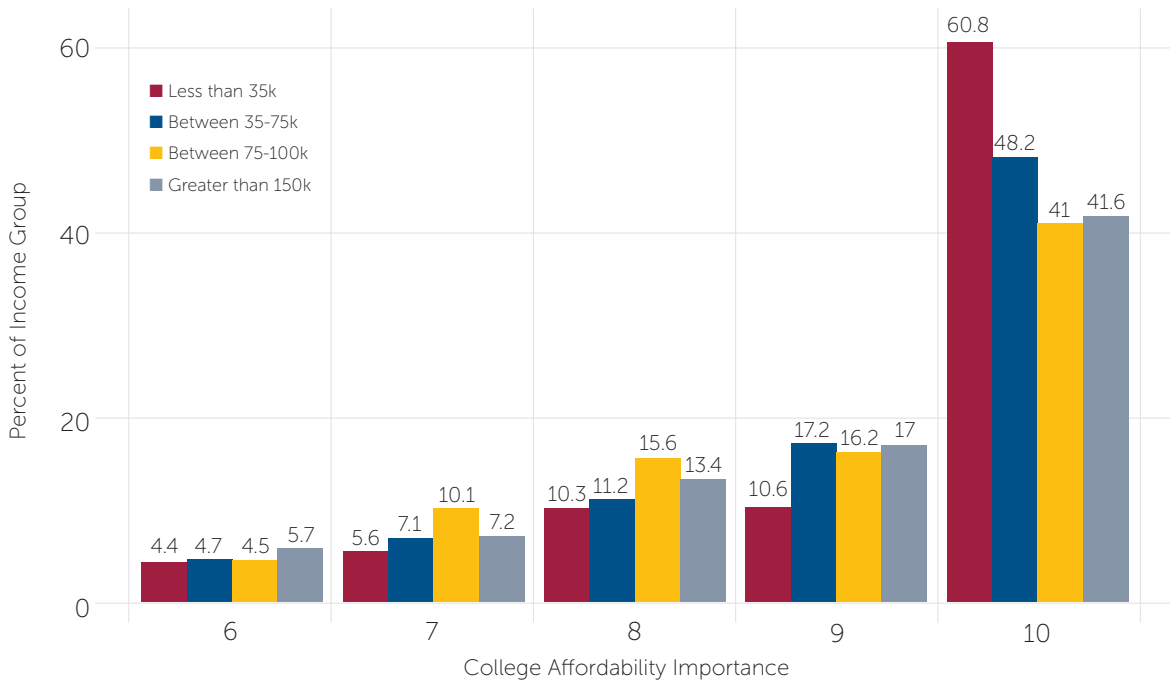
In this policy brief we describe how California voters view college affordability and how public opinion varies across the state's most visible indicator—geography. We enumerate differences in public opinion about college affordability by county and disaggregate county-level differences by income and race/ethnicity. We find that support for making college more affordable is more complex than aggregated statistics may indicate, and provide recommendations for how policymakers and higher education administrators might support a broader effort to ensure college access and affordability with attention to those geographic differences.

## County-Level Analyses

Figure 1 shows mean county-level public opinion on the importance of making college affordable. Red counties on the map indicate that poll respondents tend to place a high importance on making college affordable, while blue and white counties show a lower importance on making college affordable. While respondents in all counties indicate concern over college affordability, there is clear variability by geography. Residents in Siskiyou, Sierra, Tehama, Trinity, Mono, Madera, and Calaveras counties—predominantly rural areas of the state—rated college affordability the most important educational priority in the state, compared to residents in larger urban/suburban areas, such as San Diego, Orange, San Bernardino, and Santa Clara counties, where respondents rated college affordability below the statewide mean of 8.43. Respondents in other urban counties, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Alameda, rated the importance of college affordability at or near the state mean. Those regional differences are important to consider because access to California's state colleges and universities varies by location, and investment in higher education may be competing with other local priorities in some counties.

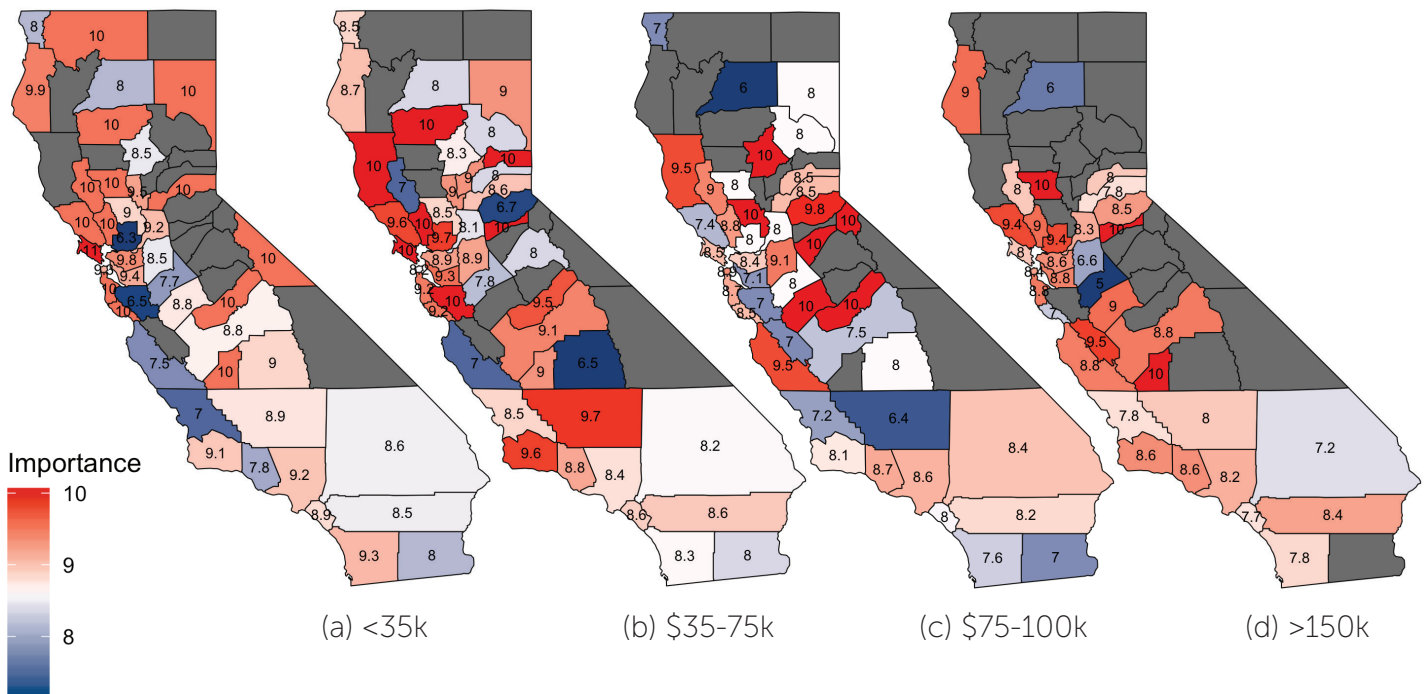


**Figure 2.** Importance of Making College Affordable, Percent of Income Group (Statewide)



Note: Figures show average ranking of college affordability by income group

**Figure 3.** Importance of Making College Affordable by County and By Income Group

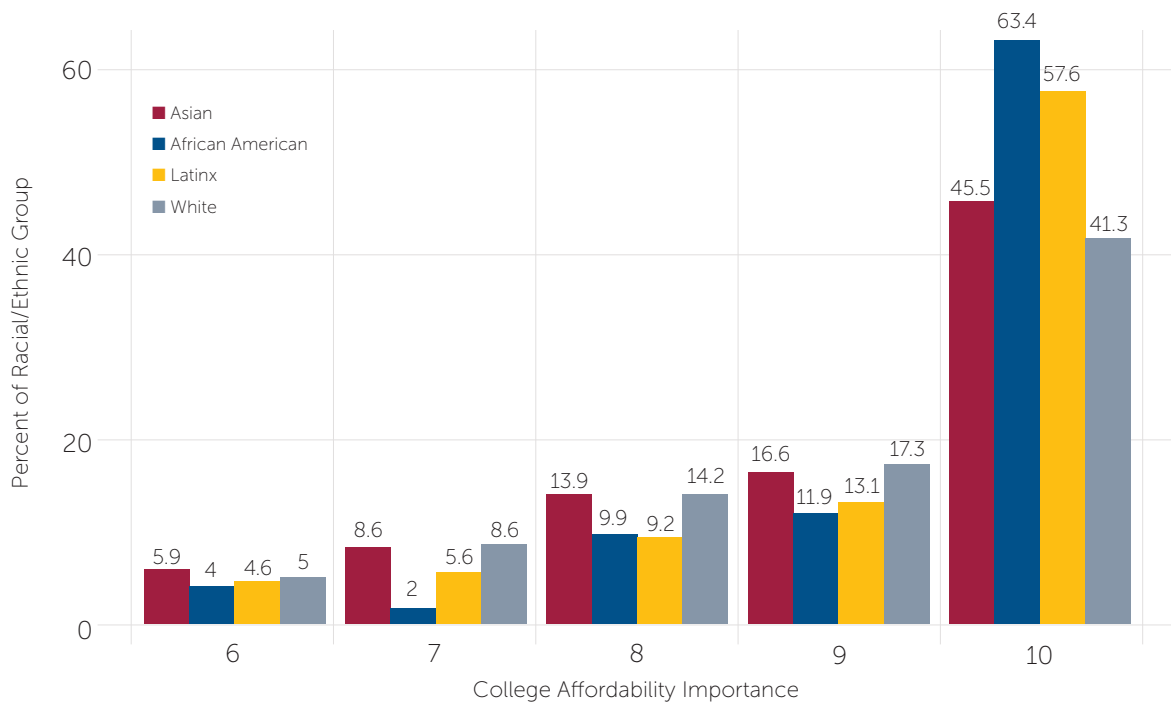


Scale: 1=low importance to  
10=high importance

## Differences by Race/Ethnicity

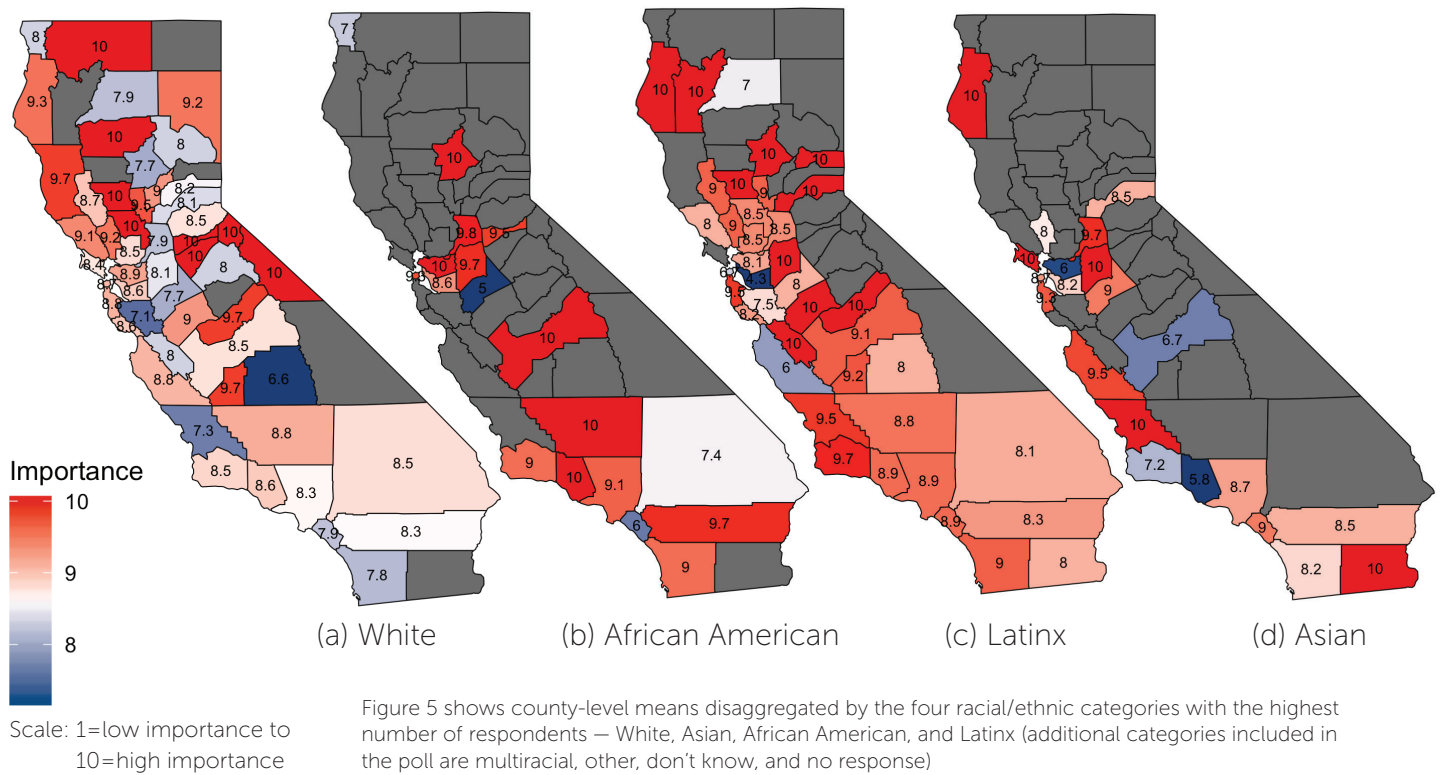
Across the state, respondents' concern over college affordability varies little by race/ ethnicity (see Figure 4). However, when looking at poll data within counties, we note some important patterns (see Figure 5, following page). Overall, Latinx respondents rank college affordability lower than voters from other racial/ethnic groups with some specific differences. For example, the mean ranking for respondents identifying as Latinx in Alameda County is 4.33 compared to 8.61 for White and 8.57 for African American respondents. Results are higher in San Diego County with a mean of 9.03 compared to 7.83 for Latinx and White respondents, respectively. In Los Angeles County, where we noted less variability in prioritization of college affordability by income, we find some differences by race/ethnicity. African American respondents put a higher priority on college affordability than Latinx, Asian, and White residents—9.13 compared to 8.87, 8.65, and 8.32, respectively. In Orange County, home to nine California Community Colleges, one California State University, and one University of California campus, respondents identifying as Asian placed a noticeably higher importance on making college affordable compared to White respondents—9.00 compared to 7.90.

**Figure 4.** Importance of Making College Affordable, Percent of Racial/Ethnic Group (Statewide)



Note: Rankings reflect percent of race/ethnicity group that ranked college affordability in a given position.

**Figure 5.** Importance of Making College Affordable by County and By Income Group



## Policy Recommendations

The desire to see the state's new governor and education leaders prioritize quality education from pre-kindergarten through college<sup>7</sup> and to keep college affordable rank as key concerns for California voters. The degree of importance voters place on college affordability relates to where they live, how much they earn, and with which racial/ethnic group they identify. This has important implications for local policymakers and higher education leaders seeking to implement policies that improve college degree goals for the nearly 2 million college students and 6 million public K-12 students in the state.

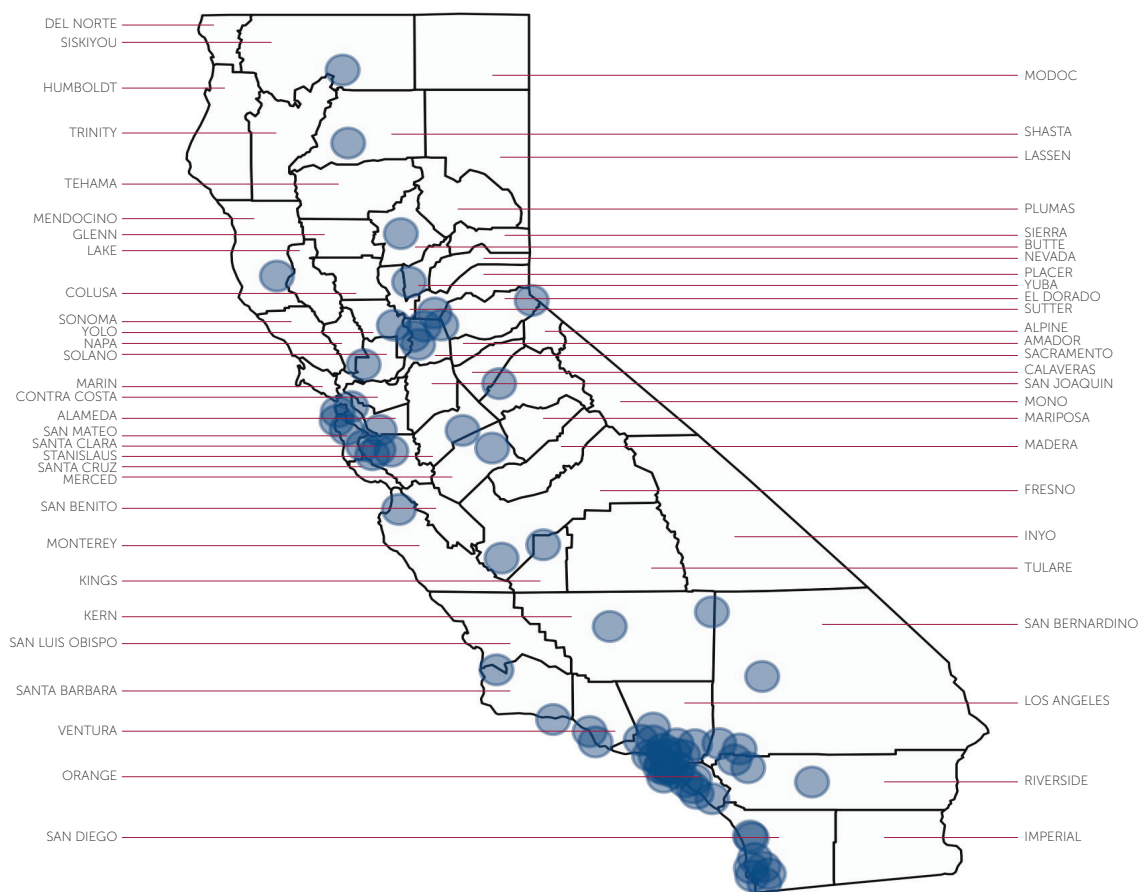
### Promote the Implementation and Evaluation of Promise Programs

California can do more to make its public colleges and universities affordable for state residents. One step already taken through the community college system is to support College Promise programs. They cover tuition for low-income students based on where they live or attend school, and provide community colleges with additional funding for academic support and guidance designed to increase enrollment, reduce equity gaps, and keep students on track to graduate. The popular programs are increasing so rapidly that

it's hard to keep up with them. The California College Promise Project at WestEd estimates there are more than 85 programs in the state, nearly four times more than in 2016.<sup>8</sup>

Even though these programs are an important step in the right direction to promote college access and success, more work needs to be done to better understand these models and their impact. For example, only ten of the state's promise programs provide "first-dollar" or "middle-dollar" funding—allowing students to receive funding independent of other aid—and only two of those are in urban districts (Long Beach College Promise and San Francisco Promise). That means that for the majority of students and families across the state, the promise of tuition-free college still requires exhausting all other available state and federal funding. By expanding first-dollar promise programs, California could meet a greater share of financial need for a larger number of students. Such an effort would likely require reforms of state and institutional financial aid practices. An increasing body of research documents the onerous process for receiving financial aid,<sup>9</sup> such as Pell verification, resulting in a substantial amount of federal dollars left on the table by many college students.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 6.** Location of College Promise Programs in California





In addition to examining the landscape and the “geography of opportunity”<sup>11</sup>— the theory that where individuals live affects their opportunities and life outcomes—of college promise programs, it is necessary to examine the impact of these programs. We know very little about their effectiveness. Therefore, as California continues to implement these programs, we need to pay close attention to the effects they have on college enrollment and completion rates across the state. Furthermore, we encourage state policymakers to find other ways to make college more affordable to Californians. This includes investing more in our public higher education systems and ensuring minimal increase in college costs, and only if necessary. Governor Newsom has signaled the need for greater investment in community colleges and proposed funding to address “near completers”— the estimated 60,000 students who started at CSU and UC since 2000, but dropped out before earning their degrees.<sup>12</sup>

The state should also consider policies regarding college costs beyond tuition, including a greater focus on subsidizing child care for college students. Approximately 26 percent of undergraduate students are parents;<sup>13</sup> students with children are less likely to complete a certificate or degree within six years of enrollment than students without children.<sup>14</sup> Students with children face many challenges, such as significant time demands and the additional financial burden of infant and child care costs, particularly those from low-income families, who make up a significant portion of community college enrollment. California ranks 11th nationwide for the costliest child care; infant care cost \$2,914 more per year than the annual cost of tuition at a four-year public college.<sup>15</sup> Access to affordable and reliable infant and child care can help student parents with college enrollment, persistence, and graduation, which has broader benefits for their children, families, and communities.<sup>16</sup> In addition, expanding aid to address the real costs of college—housing, transportation, and food—is a key part of the college affordability discussion.

## Focus on Equity

Greater investment in college affordability can help reduce the shortfall in college degrees needed to meet the state’s economic and employment needs<sup>17</sup> and attenuate the well- established inequalities in college access based on socioeconomic status (income) and race/ethnicity. Low-income students enroll in college at significantly lower rates than their more advantaged peers and are less likely to enroll in bachelor’s degree-granting institutions.<sup>18</sup> Although California has one of the lowest average student debt loads compared to other states, there are large disparities in the groups of students that rely on college loans and then struggle to repay them.<sup>19</sup> Low-income students and students of color disproportionately rely on loans to finance their education.<sup>20</sup> And, dependence on student loans makes attending college riskier for low-income, underrepresented students.<sup>21</sup> Student graduates from lower income families are five times as likely to default on their loans compared to their higher income peers, and 21 percent of African



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American college graduates defaulted within 12 years of entering college.<sup>22</sup> Making college affordable would reduce the financial burden of college debt, which will ultimately contribute to closing gaps in college accessibility and degree completion for low-income students.<sup>23</sup>

College affordability remains a key barrier to postsecondary education for many students. In this policy brief we document the great concern among California voters on this issue. We note that while this concern is not felt evenly across the state by region, race/ethnicity, and income, it nevertheless rises to the top (second only to gun violence) as one the most salient issues voters considered. As the state contends with an impending shortage of college graduates, it must address the rising costs of college for students and their families. It cannot afford to do otherwise; the price is too great—to both individuals and to our economy.

## Endnotes

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## Author Biographies

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## Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE)

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

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- Publishes policy briefs, research reports, and working papers that address key policy issues in California's education system.
- Convenes seminars and briefings that make current research accessible to policy audiences throughout California.
- Provides expert testimony on educational issues to legislative committees and other policy audiences.
- Works with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use, and rigorous evaluation.

### Related Publications

Morgan S. Polikoff, Heather Hough, Julie A. Marsh, David N. Plank. **Californians and Public Education: Views from the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier Poll.** Policy Analysis for California Education. February 2019.

Sherrie Reed, Patrick Lee, Michal Kurlaender, Ambar Hernandez. **Intersegmental Partnerships and Data Sharing: Promising Practices from the Field.** Policy Analysis for California Education. July 2018..

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Michal Kurlaender, Sherrie Reed, Kramer Cohen, Briana Ballis. **Getting Down to Facts II: College Readiness in the Era of Common Core.** Policy Analysis for California Education. September 2018.



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