

Interview with Dr. Laurie Scolari

Dr. Laurie Scolari has been named Director of the California Community College Linked Learning Initiative (CCCLLI) led by CLP with funding from the James Irvine Foundation. Her academic and administrative experience is ideally matched to the initiative's goal of post-secondary success for students who have completed a Linked Learning high school diploma in a career pathway. Dr. Scolari has worked throughout her career to increase the number of first generation college students who complete a college certificate or degree. Her areas of expertise include post-secondary education policy reform, K-12/university partnerships and multimillion dollar grant management. Prior to joining the Career Ladders Project team, she served as the Dean of Counseling and Student Support Services as well as the Associate Dean of Outreach and Recruitment Services at City College of San Francisco (CCSF). In that capacity, Dr. Scolari spearheaded several successful data-driven initiatives aimed at improving the transition of high school students of color into community college with sustainable results. This included Bridge to Success, a partnership among the City of San Francisco, CCSF and the San Francisco Unified School District – funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as part of the national Communities Learning In Partnership (CLIP) initiative. Previously, Dr. Scolari served as the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP) Director, Gaining Early Awareness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP) Director and Associate Director of the Educational Partnership Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz for nearly ten years.

Dr. Scolari holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership from San Francisco State University, an M.A. in Nonprofit Administration from University of San Francisco and a B.A. in Communications from San Jose State University.

For more information on the California Community College Linked Learning Initiative [click here](#).

The following is an interview with Dr. Laurie Scolari conducted by Dr. Gary Yee:

Q: What attracted you to the position of Initiative Director for the California Community College Linked Learning Initiative (CCCLLI)?

A: I have enjoyed working in various local communities aimed at improving the transition of high school students into postsecondary education. However, I was excited at the opportunity to continue this work on a statewide level, allowing me to influence policy on a larger scale. The Career Ladders Project's (CLP) statewide influence will afford me the opportunity to take my work on transition to the next level.

Q: You've worked in both community colleges and four-year colleges. Do you think that high school students understand that community colleges are a legitimate and viable option for them in their initial career planning?

A: I believe there is a stigma that high school students (and sometimes their parents) have towards community college in general. Many see it as an extension of high school and therefore many not pursue community college at all, or at least initially, because it doesn't interest them. However, they do not understand that the high school diploma is losing value in our economy and the consequent critical need for postsecondary education.

There is also a lack of understanding of the value of certificates that community colleges offer. Generally, high school counselors do not understand the significance of certificates and how they can lead to a viable job — therefore rarely promote them. Additionally, high school counselors are often bogged down with assisting four-year bound students in applying to college and do not have the time to assist community college bound students with career exploration and post secondary decision-making.

As educators, we have lots of work to do to change the perception and image of community colleges in order to convince students, parents and high school teachers and counselors that the community college is not only the most affordable postsecondary option but also offers an array of opportunities including certificates and transfer options.

Q. You've recently completed your doctorate in Educational Leadership from San Francisco State University, and your dissertation. What led you to the topic you chose? Please share a brief summary of that work, and the findings that are particularly relevant for community college practitioners, researchers, and policy planners, as Linked Learning becomes more widely accepted as one of the key elements of high school transformation in California.

A: The title of my dissertation is: [Easing The Transition of First-Generation Students of Color into Community College](#). The reason I chose this topic has to do with my observations as an educator. For nearly ten years, I oversaw early college readiness programs for first-generation students of color at University of California, Santa Cruz. Through that experience, I found that the community college option was often the only option for the students we were serving because many were not meeting the rigorous eligibility requirements the UC. Consequently, I became a dean at City College of San Francisco with the intention of promoting the community college as a viable option for more students. In my work, I noticed some inherent issues around perceptions of the community college and a general lack of understanding of its true value, especially

among first-generation students. This eventually led to the pursuit of my doctorate to understand the issue more deeply.

My study aimed to explore how high schools and community colleges can work together to improve the transition of underrepresented first-generation (first-gen) high school students to the community college. The study investigated first-gen students' lack of access to social capital at home regarding the college enrollment process and the consequent need to rely on school-based social capital. The study was conducted among 107 students in both high school and community college living in San Francisco.

My study revealed that underrepresented first-gen students have limited home-based social capital when applying to college. Their parents, peers, extended family members, and siblings did not offer significant support when applying to college either before or after their transition to college, except among Asian students. Findings also revealed that Asian students had the *highest* levels of support from all sources — parents, teachers, after school service providers, and counselors — above Latino and African-American groups. It was also revealed that high school counselors *overwhelmingly* prioritized support to four-year bound students over community college students in the college application process. Overall, the four-year institution pathway is *disproportionately* being promoted over the community college pathway, and in some instances, community college is being discouraged, despite the fact that it is the only post-secondary option — by reasons of eligibility and cost — for the largest majority of San Francisco youth.

The study aimed to shed light on inequities in school-based social capital and offers recommendations for how high schools can better support *all* students through a transition to post-secondary education. Recommendations include:

- Form strategic high school to community college partnerships grounded in data-informed decision making;
- Engage every high school senior in the college application process, a universal approach by:
 - Make college enrollment a mandatory part of the high school curriculum
 - Increase access to pivotal adults through a system of triage (caseload every senior using high school counselors, community college counselors and after-school program providers strategically)
 - Priority enrollment for local high school graduates in community college.

A link to my entire dissertation can be found [here](#).

Q. Your study and previous work was of a district that was not a Linked Learning District. Despite this, do you think there are any important lessons for

community colleges in general, and CCCLLI, as it moves forward with three demonstration sites this year, and potentially six more next year?

A: Though my study was not within a Linked Learning district, I learned that transitional barriers from high school to community college exist, even in Linked Learning Districts, according to the recent case study conducted by the Career Ladders Project.

Through CCCLLI, Linked Learning High school districts have a unique opportunity to form strategic partnerships with their local community colleges by understanding postsecondary data to address key questions such as: What happens to our students after the leave high school? Are they being successful in college? Are they landing a job after college?

CCCLLI encourages high school to college partnerships where educators can review the data and intently remove local transitional barriers such as alternative assessments methods, revising the test re-take policy and ensuring access to key math and English classes through priority registration.

Additionally, the concept of contextualized learning across disciplines makes Linked Learning unique. The community college system generally lacks a rigorous professional development component. CCCLLI provides an opportunity for joint professional development across systems to further explore the critical issue of college readiness so when the high school student exits one system they are better prepared for the next.

Q. What are your plans for the first 100 days as the initiative director? What do you see as the potential for community colleges as a whole from the CCCLLI, especially for community colleges near Linked Learning Districts? How about for those without nearby Linked Learning academies?

A: In my first 100 days as the initiative director, I plan to first observe, listen and understand the early successes and challenges of each hub site. I also plan to encourage an understanding how we can use local baseline data to drive future decision-making. Through our first CCCLLI conference, to be held on Jan. 31, 2012, the CLP team hopes to offer each site the opportunity to troubleshoot how they can further foster strategic K-12/community college partnerships.

If we are able to demonstrate improved student success among Linked Learning graduates, CCCLLI has the potential to encourage policy change for linked learning students statewide and also has implications for non-linked learning high school graduates. For example, if a CCCLLI site implements an alternative measure such as transcript analysis and is able to demonstrate improved student success, the college as

a whole may consider this as a policy change for all incoming high school students. CCCLI also has the potential to shift how students learn through contextualized learning in community college classrooms.