

# The South Orange County Educational Reality





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Orange County has repeatedly been recognized as one of the best counties in the state because of our educational performance and ability to get students to graduate high school. In fact, recently Orange County was the only county in California with at least 3,000 students to exceed a 90% graduation rate!<sup>1</sup> While this is a significant accomplishment for students, parents, and educators, high school graduation alone is not the end goal. We must pause and think about what happens to students after graduation day.

This brief will examine the reality of our current education system in South Orange County to determine: a) The proportion of students who graduate high school and enroll in college, b) How many complete a baccalaureate education, c) If immediately pursuing a 4-yr degree facilitates success for most students, and d) The number of students that receive commensurate employment after college graduation.

Although state and national figures are provided through this brief, attention will be placed on the following school districts in South Orange County: 1) Capistrano Unified School District (CUSD), 2) Saddleback Valley Unified School District (SVUSD), and 3) Laguna Beach Unified School District (LBUSD).

Unquestionably, students in South Orange County are performing exceptionally well. Looking back to track their success, these three districts combined enrolled nearly 27,000 high school students in 2012-13, and over 6,650 (25%) of these were freshmen.<sup>2</sup> The proportion of these students graduating from these three districts is higher than that of the county as a whole (90.8%), not to mention throughout the state (83.2%).<sup>3</sup> About 96% of 9<sup>th</sup> grade students who started high school in South Orange County in 2012-13 graduated in 2016.<sup>4</sup> The graduation rates in South Orange County are very high and should be celebrated. Many then logically assume that only 4% of our high school students are not graduating from high school and are thus also not enrolling into any form of post-secondary education. If this trend continues over the next ten years, there will be over 2,500 high school dropouts in South Orange County. But, that is not the end of the story...it is just the beginning.

For those students who successfully navigated the pressures and stresses of high school to experience graduation, national data shows that of these 3.1 million in 2016, only about 2.2 million (69.7%), were enrolled in college by that Fall.<sup>5</sup> Compare this figure to the latest state data indicating that only 60.9% of California's high school graduates went straight to any community college or university after graduation.<sup>6</sup> Latest national data also indicates that 44% of high school completers enroll in a 4-year university and 25% enroll in a 2-year college.<sup>7</sup> In Orange County specifically, only 53% of the population 18 to 24 years is enrolled in college or graduate school.<sup>8</sup>

1 Shultz, Craig. "Orange County graduation rate tops 90 percent; best in state for large counties." *Orange County Register*, Nov. 2017. Data: 2016. [www.ocregister.com/2017/04/11/californias-high-school-graduation-rate-keeps-rising-orange-county-tops-90/](http://www.ocregister.com/2017/04/11/californias-high-school-graduation-rate-keeps-rising-orange-county-tops-90/)

2 California Department of Education (CDE) through the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), [ed-data.org/](http://ed-data.org/)

3 Shultz, Craig. "Orange County graduation rate tops 90 percent; best in state for large counties." *The Orange County Register*, Nov. 2017, [ocregister.com/2017/04/11/californias-high-school-graduation-rate-keeps-rising-orange-county-tops-90/](http://www.ocregister.com/2017/04/11/californias-high-school-graduation-rate-keeps-rising-orange-county-tops-90/)

4 Gordon, Larry. "Graduation and Dropout Rates: Look up California Districts and High Schools." EdSource, Nov. 2017, [edsources.org/2017/graduation-and-dropout-rates-look-up-california-districts-and-high-schools/580171](http://edsources.org/2017/graduation-and-dropout-rates-look-up-california-districts-and-high-schools/580171)

5 Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *The Economics Daily*, 69.7 percent of 2016 high school graduates enrolled in college, [bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/69-point-7-percent-of-2016-high-school-graduates-enrolled-in-college-in-october-2016.htm](http://bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/69-point-7-percent-of-2016-high-school-graduates-enrolled-in-college-in-october-2016.htm)

6 NCES, IPEDS Enrollment Survey and WICHE, *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates, 2016*

7 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *The Condition of Education 2017* (2017-144), [Immediate College Enrollment Rate](http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/nceres/2017/condition-of-education-2017/)

8 U.S. Census Bureau, 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. According to the California Department of Education's Demographics Unit, Orange County high school graduates by ethnicity for 2015-16 were: 44.3% Hispanic or Latino of any race, 0.6% American Indian or Alaska Native, Not Hispanic, 15.5% Asian, 0.5% Pacific Islander, 2.3% Filipino, 1.7% African American, 32.1% White-not Hispanic, 2.7% Two of more races, 0.4% not reported.



In Orange County specifically, only 53% of the population 18 to 24 years is enrolled in college or graduate school.<sup>8</sup>

**47%**

of population is not enrolled in college or graduate school



**53%**

of population is enrolled in college or graduate school



If we do that math, of the 96% who graduate high school in the region, only 51% of ninth graders end up enrolling into any type of college/university (given that 53% of the county's traditional college-age population is enrolled in college). As shocking as this figure may be, let us dig deeper to understand why this is happening.

**Firstly, let's recall that higher education and "college" does not necessarily mean a traditional 4-year university degree.** Many of the fast-growing career fields actually require credentials other than a bachelor's degree.<sup>9</sup> As a result, a growing number of high school students are opting not to complete all requirements for University of California (UC) and/or California State University (CSU) systems.

In fact, just under 66% of 12<sup>th</sup> grade graduates in South Orange County completed all the courses required for UC and/or CSU entrance with a grade of "C" or better in the school year 2012-13; and this proportion decreased to 60% in 2014-15.<sup>10</sup> While this represents only a portion of the entrance requirements for UC or CSU, this metric does seem to indicate that more students are choosing to start at a community college, or seeking employment with whatever career-readiness skills they garnered in high school.

If the region's graduation rates are through the roof and students' future seems so promising, how could these numbers exist? Perhaps the decrease in class size, expansion of career-technical classes, and the suspension of the California High School Exit Exam (a graduation requirement since 2004), is contributing to graduation rate increases, thus masking students' decision not to pursue higher education immediately after completing high school.

Let us put this into perspective. Over half of South Orange County students are deemed college-ready, not dropping out of high school, and heading straight into the pursuit of a post-secondary education. But how many are actually successful once they complete their schooling?

Recent studies reveal a serious workforce gap for technically skilled workers. Changes in the economy, the automation of many current work processes, and local demographic issues, mean that jobs of the future may require more technically prepared workers.<sup>11</sup> Training at a two-year college and not necessarily a four-year or graduate degree may be the most lucrative initial decision for South Orange County's

9 Fleming, K. (2016) *ReDefining the Goal: The True Path to Career Readiness in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Press.

10 California Department of Education (CDE) through the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), [ed-data.org](https://www.ocbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Chase-Middle-Skills-report-for-web.pdf), South Orange County, Graduates Meeting UC/CSU Course Requirements

11 "Closing Orange County's Skills Gap: Preparing to Meet Employer Demand for Middle-Skill Occupations", Orange County Business Council, <https://www.ocbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Chase-Middle-Skills-report-for-web.pdf>; "L.A. and Orange Counties Community Colleges: Powering Economic Opportunity", Center for a Competitive Workforce. [www.competitiveworkforce.la](http://www.competitiveworkforce.la)

economic future.

The technical workforce gap in America is estimated at 1 million by a Bureau of Labor Statistics study published in 2015. “There is a skills gap...it is technical skills that aren’t so much four-year college skills...” Chris Tilly, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, told InsideSources. “They’re more hands-on skills that you might get through apprenticeships, or through community college training.”<sup>12</sup>

For every 100 students in the region, only 51 will graduate high school and will initially seek any form of higher education.



This aligns with a recent Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) survey that found half of Californians do not think college is necessary. The main reason? College affordability. Overall, 56 percent of the state’s residents think college affordability is a major problem. In other words, a significant number of Californians are not sure college is worth the investment.<sup>13</sup> Many students would like to pursue a post-secondary education, but with rising costs, significant student debt, and gut-wrenching underemployment rates, college is no longer perceived an option for many.

This forces us to turn our attention to the misalignment between awarded degrees, the available employment opportunities that someone qualifies for, and the lack of real-world job skills. Combined, these three factors force 43.7% of recent 2-year college and university graduates to be underemployed.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, this leads almost half of recent alumni to accept “gray-collar jobs” - taking positions that neither need nor require the education they received.

In California, available data shows that even once getting accepted and starting classes at the university, only 66% of those who attend a 4-year university actually graduate within six years.<sup>15</sup> Applied to the 51 local students who graduate high school and enroll in any form of higher education, we can accurately project that 34 students will graduate with their Bachelors, and of those students 15 will be underemployed.

A new PPIC publication confirms this report’s findings that only about 30 percent of California ninth graders are expected to earn a bachelor’s degree, with the vast majority falling off the path to a four-year degree in the last two years of high school or the first two years of college.<sup>16</sup>

12 Wolf, Connor D. “Fighting the Workforce Skills Gap.” *InsideSources*, 20 June 2017, [insidesources.com/fighting-workforce-skills-gap/](https://insidesources.com/fighting-workforce-skills-gap/)

13 DeRuy, Emily. “Deep Racial Divides among Californians on Whether College Is Necessary.” *Orange County Register*, Nov. 2017, [ocregister.com/2017/11/05/deep-racial-divides-among-californians-on-whether-college-is-necessary-2/](https://ocregister.com/2017/11/05/deep-racial-divides-among-californians-on-whether-college-is-necessary-2/)

14 U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (IPUMS); U.S. Department of Labor, O\*NET

15 NCES, IPEDS 2015 Graduation Rate Survey

16 Gao, Niu, and Hans Johnson. “Improving College Pathways in California.” Public Policy Institute of California, Nov. 2017, [www.ppic.org](https://www.ppic.org)

Given this reality of underwhelming college completion rates and high underemployment for university graduates, how can we help all our students be prepared for high-paying occupations in our region?

First, let us shift our thinking about preparing all students for the 4-year university. Most high school counselors, administrators, teachers, and school board members assert that all students will go to the university. Well-intentioned, they promote a “one size fits all” approach to college-prep high school curriculum. When in reality, many South Orange County graduates will immediately find themselves enrolling in high-quality community colleges immediately after high school.

Second, let us recognize that college-prep and career education are in fact complementary, not competing, goals. Providing both the academic rigor and employability preparation required for our students to be successful in the 21st century workplace means that all local students need to secure industry credentials and technical skills in tandem with a liberal arts education.

Third, we need to educate counselors, parents and students about the realities of a 4-year degree. Just getting into a higher education institution is not the goal; as only 66% of those enrolled will complete their degree.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, graduating with a bachelor’s degree is also not the end goal; as 43.7% of recent college graduates are underemployed.<sup>18</sup> Rather, we should be focused on ensuring that those who enroll in post-secondary education both graduate and secure commensurate employment. This requires earlier career exploration and aligning one’s initial career choice with both the individual student’s abilities/interests as well as directing students into high-paying fields that have projected openings.

Community colleges are in the ideal position to provide South Orange County’s future workforce with a general education combined with applied technical skills, industry driven credentials, and specific preparation for employment. Concerted efforts must be implemented now to fix the leaky funnel effect occurring in between high school graduation and college graduation rates.

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17 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *The Condition of Education 2017* (NCES 2017-144), [Graduate Retention and Graduation Rates](#).

18 U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey (IPUMS); U.S. Department of Labor, O\*NET. And: Fleming, K. (2016) *ReDefining the Goal: The True Path to Career Readiness in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Press.





# The Fate of 100 South Orange County 9th Graders Out of 100 Students...



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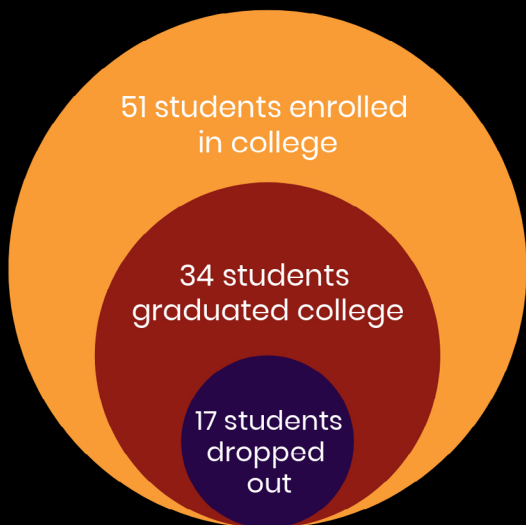
dropout of  
high school

51

graduate high  
school and  
immediately  
enroll in college

45

graduate high  
school and go  
straight to work



51 students enrolled  
in college

34 students  
graduated college

17 students  
dropped  
out



Of those

34

college graduates,

15

are underemployed

and only

19

secure commensurate  
employment after  
graduation.



