As educators and policy makers continue to seek ways to close the racial achievement gap, we must also ensure that all of the precursors to the gap (opportunity gap, access gap, information gap, etc.), do not compromise the ability of minority students to prepare for college, nor preclude them from participating in rigorous school programming, such as the Advanced Placement program where they are significantly underrepresented (College Board, 2009b).

As an educator who has worked in both urban and suburban school settings, one of the things that I quickly discovered about the achievement gap is that it is not limited to struggling learners in poor, under-resourced school districts, but rather, this phenomenon makes its presence known in middle class and affluent schools, also. Furthermore, as it pertains to Black students whose parents move to integrated school districts to increase their children’s opportunities, the achievement gap does not show evidence of narrowing simply because of a change in one’s zip code. In fact, Black students in diverse suburban towns almost always outperformed students in urban schools, but when compared with their White peers in their own district, gaps persisted in their grades, test scores, and course selections (Diamond, 2006).

With the genesis of NCLB and the disaggregation of school district data came a shining light on academic gaps in schools around the country, and educators, compelled to examine their data through a more discerning lens, made startling discoveries. The data revealed, in many instances, a gap that existed between White and minority students across grade levels, subject areas and school districts and in programs such as the Advanced Placement program where Black and Latino students are significantly underrepresented. And so, it became evident, that the issue of equity, opportunity, and access crossed academic ability and had seeped into the AP program populated by our highest achieving students. This is of great concern, in large part, because participation in the AP program prepares students for rigorous college level coursework and therefore, has implications for college access and success. Further, it has been determined that college completion is most likely when students participate in academically intense and high-quality coursework during high school (Barton & Coley, 2009).

Arguably, the guidance department is the hub and the heartbeat of schools, in particular high schools, and, as such, is the place where critical decisions are made regarding students’ secondary and post-secondary decisions (McDonough, 2003). As the personnel who are hired to promote academic achievement, school counselors play a central role in the academic achievement of students and are charged with preparing all students, beginning in the middle school years, for the world of work and college and guiding them on the appropriate trajectory. Thus, the question for many of us is, “How can school guidance counselors help to close the achievement gap?”

In the late 1970s, a new services approach to guidance was established, and school counselors were directed to anchor their guidance programs around clear goals and objectives. It was at this time that K-12 counseling programs became more systematic and moved away from the vocational guidance model (American School Counselor Association, 2003). However, even with the systems approach and the push toward building and sustaining a college-going culture, a gap persists in K-12 academic preparation and college participation between White students.
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and African American and Latino high school graduates (McDonough, 2003). There are two reasons for this: The first is related to a lack of knowledge on the part of parents of color who viewed college from a narrow, specific perspective. The other reason is connected to the limited training of counseling professionals assigned to advise these students and their parents. The troubling outcome, in too many cases, is that students of color, when compared to their White counterparts, are less likely to obtain this information by the eighth grade. Consequently, they fail to enroll in rigorous classes in middle school and high school leading to academic damage that is often irreparable.

To address this problem, the College Board has established eight components of College and Career Readiness Counseling to implement across grade levels beginning in elementary school and continuing through high school. It is expected that this system of accountability will ensure equity in both process and results. The eight components below are found in both elementary, middle and high school counseling programs.

• College Aspirations
• Academic Planning for College and Career Readiness
• Enrichment and Extra Curricular Engagement
• College and Career Exploration and Selection Process
• College and Career Assessments
• College Affordability Planning
• The College and Career Admission Processes and
• Transitions from High School to College Enrollment

The College Board also underscores the importance of context, cultural competence, multilevel interventions and the analysis of student data. What has also been determined is that too many guidance counselors lack knowledge about college programs, such as the Equal Opportunity Program and Upward Bound Program, as well as other avenues available to minority students which can help to defray college costs and prepare them for the rigors of college. The result of this lack of information is that many parents of color do not consider college as a viable option for their children, convinced that it is financially unattainable. However, when parents are provided with information about such programs, there is a significant bearing on college preparation and enrollment. Further, due to the fact that upper
middle class parents are more knowledgeable of college admissions requirements and the availability of scholarships and financial aid, they are more likely to procure private college counselors, thereby providing their children with a head start on the college track (McDonough, 2003). The proactive leadership of counseling professionals could bring together all stakeholders in the delivery of programs and services to ensure that all students are provided with the information needed to make informed decisions about their high school and post secondary plans. Further, to carry out their work effectively, school counselors should be aware of institutional barriers (discrimination, racism, and oppression, etc.) that may affect academic attainment. It is critical that they are trained in multiculturalism in order to work effectively with Black and Latino students, as this will aid in building a level of trust and understanding with racially and culturally diverse students.

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The strongest predictors of college acceptance and completion are academic preparation, social support, access to information, parental involvement, and knowledge about college, so clearly, the most significant ramifications for students who are not exposed to the rigors of higher level courses are connected to their life chances, career readiness, and employment opportunities. Therefore, college preparation and access for marginalized students must be embedded reform efforts aimed at increasing enrollment in rigorous courses. Without changes in school and district practices, however, the implications for Black and Latino students will be devastating, resulting in limited college access, deficient college readiness skills and low rates of college persistence (Ford, 1998).

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About the Author

Faye Lewis is currently in the dissertation phase of the educational leadership doctoral program at Rowan University. She began her career teaching elementary school in New Orleans, LA as a charter member of Teach for America. Over the years, she has taught elementary and middle school grades and has worked as an independent consultant as the director of an Alternate Route program. She has also served in the capacity of both principal and assistant principal and is currently an assistant principal at Columbia High School in Maplewood, NJ.