RUNNING HEAD: Unrealized Educational Expectations

When “College for All” Results in Students’ Unrealized Expectations: Analysis for K-16 Policy and Practice

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When “College for All” Results in Students’ Unrealized Expectations: Analysis and Suggestions for K-16 Policy and Practice

College for All (CFA) is a perspective that sees increased college attendance as a desired outcome for individuals and society. The specifics of what is meant by CFA are varied and even contentious, but it is fairly clear that a pervasive CFA attitude has gone hand-in-hand with very high educational expectations among high school students (Rosenbaum, 2001; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). While positive in some ways, high expectations are only one part of what needs to occur for degree attainment to become a reality. Students must also take action to realize those expectations. Such action consists of applying to, enrolling in and then persisting through to degree attainment. Unfortunately, a substantial percentage of high school graduates fail to realize their expectations.

The idea of CFA suggests an education continuum that spans from high school to postsecondary education and thus would seem to be a natural fit with the notion of K-16 practice and policy. Yet, much of the literature and current practice are largely siloed and not on a continuum at all. K-12 literature tends to focuses on expectation formation and the postsecondary literature tends to focus on expectation realization, and neither seems particularly aware of or acknowledges some level of responsibility for what occurs in the other arena.

College for All, the perspective that encourages all students to go to college and develop expectations to go to college, has made a useful, meaningful K-16 framework even more important. The purpose of this paper is to investigate re-framing K-16 research and policy in a way that recognizes the reality of a CFA ideology. To do so we detail CFA as a dominant educational perspective in the United States and demonstrate its impact on educational
expectations and their realization in postsecondary education. We then review current literature on realizing college expectations in order to understand the extent of the problem and how it may be particularly salient for disadvantaged groups in society. We conclude with a suggestion to re-conceptualize K-16 in light of CFA, using Bourdieu’s concept of field as a guide. Such an approach could help lead to a higher rate of realized expectations and in turn to improved degree completion, which is a current primary concern in postsecondary education.

College for All

The idea of encouraging people to go to college is not new, but has taken on new immediacy and relevance in the last decade or so, most recently with President Obama (2009) invoking CFA:

And so tonight, I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma (Obama, 2009).

In his address, President Obama evoked multiple meanings of CFA: from vocational training to attending a community college to attending a four-year college or university. CFA seems to mean various things to various people. Regardless of the President’s exact wording, or scholars’ parsing of what may be meant by CFA, “college” is commonly interpreted to mean a 4-year degree (Goyette, 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). CFA may even be viewed as an ideology that is more accurately described as “BA for all” (Rosenbaum, Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2010). Some also seem to interpret CFA as a call to require all people to go to college, and specifically to a four-year college. These sorts of interpretations have led to interesting debates and backlash in the presidential campaigns, with Rick Santorum calling such views snobbery.
Perhaps a more accurate interpretation, even if not what the public CFA discourse reflects, is that all students should have the opportunity to pursue some form of postsecondary education, and that additional education benefits not only individuals’ interests but also the country’s. Even this definition does not sit well with everyone, however. From a philosophical standpoint, CFA may imply that only certain kinds of work are valued in society, undermining our democracy (Noddings, 2011). From an equity perspective, CFA may reinforce existing social stratification by offering abstract and concrete benefits that are not, in fact, equally available or attainable to everyone that desires them (Goyette, 2008; Glass & Nygreen, 2011). This is a theme which we also address.

The CFA perspective continues as strongly as ever and if anything has gained ground in the national discourse. Those who advocate for it, often invoke public benefits such as an increased global competitiveness, a regaining of our status as the most educated country in the world, and/or a solution to high unemployment (Merisotis, 2012; Obama, 2009). There are a number of critiques of these arguments (e.g., Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2010) that we will not address in detail, instead focusing on the individual level benefits.

For individuals, it is often assumed that more education will lead to better labor market outcomes. While it is well-established that more educated people make more money on average, the assumption that some additional education will improve any particular individual’s social status is not so clear. Education as a panacea for unemployment or bad jobs depends on many factors and is not a foregone conclusion (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2010; Carnevale, Rose & Cheah, 2011; Marsh, 2011) and the mechanisms through which education and employment are related are varied and contested (Bills, 2003).
It has also been posited that CFA will lead high school students to be more motivated, though the implications of research on this topic are contested (Domina, Conley & Farkas, 2011a; 2011b; Rosenbaum, 2011). What is less controversial, however, is that the CFA perspective has grown in tandem with high school students’ educational expectations. This led to students studied in the 90s to be termed *The Ambitious Generation* (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Educational expectations and ambitions have only continued to rise, to the point that might be considered unrealistic or even “absurd” (Baird, Burge & Reynolds, 2008).

In his seminal work *Beyond College for All*, Rosenbaum’s (2001) main critique of CFA is that it boosts students’ expectations and ambitions without providing them information necessary to make good decisions concerning the payoffs, barriers, and likelihood of success. Additionally, the CFA ideology focuses perniciously on four-year postsecondary education at the expense of helping students understand less-than-four-year college alternatives. This situation, whereby students form expectations based on a pervasive ideology rather than accurate and useful information, likely leads to unrealized educational expectations.

Although Reynolds and Baird (2010) found no association between symptoms of depression and failing to realize expectations for a bachelor’s degree, life course scholars stress the importance of early experiences for subsequent trajectories (see Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003). Thus, it would seem plausible that failing to realize educational expectations formulated during high school affects students social mobility and future prospects. In this way, unrealized expectations--as a consequence of the CFA ideology that has been reticent to modify its definition--may be an example of symbolic violence.

Here, we employ the Bourdieuan concept of symbolic violence to address how the CFA ideology (and, in some ways, practice) operates in the context of educational expectations. This
particular concept in Bourdieu’s theory of practice highlights not a means of studying society and social phenomena, but rather as a reason to study them. Fundamentally, Bourdieu’s work on societies focused on the seemingly natural tendency for processes of classification and domination to occur without powerful resistance from members of society. More specifically, “categorizations make up and order the world and...constitute and order the people within it....violence results when we misrecognize, as natural, those systems of classification that are actually culturally arbitrary and historical” (Schubert, 2008, 184).

A clearer implication to educational expectations emerges as Schubert (2008) further explains a perceived (and real) relationship between the significance of domination and the implications to thought and action, “hierarchies and systems of domination are then reproduced to the extent that the dominant and the dominated perceive these systems to be legitimate, and thus think and act in their own best interests within the context of the system itself” (p. 184). Succinctly, Wacquant (2006) writes, “[symbolic violence is] the imposition of systems of meaning that legitimize and thus solidify structures of inequality” (217). The CFA paradigm is one in which expecting to attend “college” and realizing such expectations can be considered a “system of meaning” that legitimizes particular thoughts and actions. Within this dominant orientation to educational expectations, those students who do not actualize their expectation experience symbolic violence in the context of educational achievement. Recognizing the real threat of symbolic violence, we offer a significant re-conceptualization of K-16 with a particular focus on Bourdieu’s concept of field.

**College for All in a Siloed K-16 Context**

K-16, as an emerging body of research and literature, must interrogate some of the assumptions embedded in our understandings of and approaches to educational issues. One such
assumption within prior research concerning issues that are germane to both K-12 and postsecondary education is that educational expectations are created and realized in a series of linear and discrete phases: students develop educational aspirations in middle school, refine those aspirations into expectations in high school, and realize those expectations by enrolling in a postsecondary institution. To a large extent, understanding education in this way is natural; students physically move from one school to another during these transitions and are then “out of sight” of the teachers and schools that played a role in their previous formation. Additionally, for teachers or counselors working in any discrete phase, it is often difficult to imagine how they can meaningfully impact different phases of the process, and may quite reasonably move away from any perceived responsibility over the success of students once they leave his or her classroom. When understood in this way, however, each phase becomes an end unto itself--students are educated in the primary school silo, passed on to the middle school silo, handed off to the high school silo, and may bridge across to the postsecondary silo. Yet, it is these distinct “ends” that divorce the entire process from the ultimate goal of college completion (given the increasing dominance of the “college for all” idea).

This understanding has extremely important implications for K-16 research, as it can (and is) the case that the first two segments of the process are often successful but result in an unsatisfactory outcome. Students develop aspirations in middle school, suggesting the middle school is successful in their segment of the process, refine those aspirations to more meaningful expectations in high school, suggesting the high school was successful in their aspect of the process, graduate from high school, and yet do not enroll in a postsecondary institution. In the 2006 ELS cohort, nearly 71% of high school graduates expected to earn a bachelor’s degree and yet only 37% of these students enrolled in a four-year institution two years after high school
(Wells et al., in press). How can the first two aspects of the process be successful when more than half of those who expected a four-year degree failed to act in a way to realize those expectations?

This is likely due in part to CFA attitudes on each side of the current K-16 divide. Students are encouraged to expect college from a very young age. Encouragement may manifest in the home, at school, as well as through participation in federal programs such as GEAR UP. In high school, such encouragement continues, and may be most exemplified in the practice of guidance counselors. Although the guidance counselor as a college-admissions counselor may be a misdirected notion given that the average counselor-to-student ratio in 2002 was 315:1 (NCES, 2003), even for counselors who see fewer students, they are not likely to counsel anyone away from college. The prevalence of open admissions institutions, most prominently community colleges, means that even low-achieving students who might have been discouraged from college years ago are now not discouraged, and likely encouraged to plan for college (Rosenbaum, Miller & Krei, 1996; Rosenbaum, Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2010). This is a positive development given that in years past, gatekeeping counselors may have counseled out students for discriminatory reasons and/or not allowed a second chance at formal education to those that wanted it (see Smith, 2011, for a discussion of the dominant views of high school counselors over time).

However, counselors, and high schools more broadly, are not equipping students with the information about what college entails, what the costs and benefits are, and what success requires (Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003). In a sense, this process gives students the illusion of an open college pathway (raising their expectations) without any concrete understanding of what that actually means. Those who are disadvantaged in some way (e.g., first generation students, those
attending poor quality high schools, students of color, etc.) are the least likely to have the information necessary. This has led some to refer to this phenomenon as “the inadvertent bigotry of inappropriate expectations” (Asch, 2010, p.9), which are more likely to be expectations that are not realized.

In a K-12 context that is not well connected in form or in spirit to the 13-16 portion of K-16, high expectations are seen as a success, and as an end rather than a means. If these students actually enroll in college, that is icing on the cake. However, many students who expect college do not enroll within two years (Wells et al., in press; Seifert et al., 2010). Even for those that do enroll, completion rates are dismal, especially at community colleges (NCES, 2011). The gap between those who aspire to completing a four-year degree and those who actually do so has grown over the last 30 years (Reynolds, Stewart, Macdonald, & Sischo, 2006). All of these examples represent unrealized expectations.

Similar to K-12, postsecondary institutions seem content with nearly all high school students having high expectations for college. After all, this means a higher demand for the education that postsecondary institutions offer, leads to a greater number of applications, lower yields, greater revenues – all the things for which colleges and universities are rewarded. In other words, there is little apparent incentive to try to lessen or better align high school students’ expectations.

However, those touting the current completion agenda (e.g., Obama, 2009; Lumina Foundation, 2012) are putting pressure on institutions to improve their completion rate. It is surprising that more attention has not been paid to the process by which students are educated to be well-informed in setting aggressive but realistic expectations, then making choices all along the educational path that align with their goals, as a way to increase completion. In other words,
reducing the number of students who fail to realize their expectations seems to be in postsecondary education’s interest, though it does not seem apparent in practice.

It is important to acknowledge that we are not the first to raise this issue, and many practitioners and researchers have been addressing this issue for years (see Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Tierney et al., 2009; St. John, 2006). However, while a number of "bridge" programs have been developed through collaborations between colleges/universities and K-12 institutions, and many have had a meaningful and important impact on students, the siloed, linear, and discrete understanding of the college going process still remains and is most apparent in the literature.

Past research has examined the steps to enrollment (see Klasik, 2012, for a thorough discussion). But again, this literature focuses on bringing students to the postsecondary threshold; it does not examine the challenges and opportunities students face and the support systems they use while in college—that is a separate body of literature. The bifurcated nature of the literature likely results from the fact that most of the researchers addressing unrealized expectations and other challenges related to the degree attainment dilemma tend to identity with either the K-12 or PSE “camp” and not with K-16 specifically. Despite research from both perspectives that has identified successes to minimize the unrealized expectations gap in some jurisdictions, the percentage of high school graduates with unrealized educational expectations remains an issue. This implies that a broader re-conceptualization of the efforts to improve students’ realization of their educational goals is needed rather than continuing to try individual efforts, even when they are locally successful.

In this line of thought, it is important for us to also acknowledge our identities as higher education researchers and how our positionality may bias and/or impact this work. From that perspective, we recognize the challenge of aligning high school graduation requirements with
college entrance requirements. We engage with the opportunities and challenges that students present to the postsecondary system in terms of support needed for them to be successful and the barriers students face in receiving assistance to support their success. We may have less experience navigating the political landscape of K-12 schools, complete with statewide assessment, high stakes testing, and the need for schools to “do well” in terms of these accountability mechanisms. How these factors contribute the K-16 policy and practice with respect to the expectation formation and realization continuum is one we look forward to engaging with our fellow researchers.

**Unrealized Postsecondary Expectations**

As discussed above, CFA and the current divided K-16 context may combine to create a situation that is conducive to unrealized expectations. In this section, we review recent research that examines unrealized expectations to demonstrate empirically the real and inequitable nature of the phenomenon. Although any student may fail to realize her educational expectations, the literature shows that failing to realizing one’s expectations is associated with a host of social origin characteristics. The evidence makes clear that the current situation, despite valuable individual and local efforts, needs to be improved and that a one-size-fits-all K-16 policy solution likely will not be adequate.

The CFA ethos appears to have permeated into the expectations of U.S. high school students, with the percentage of high school graduates who expect a four year degree increasing by 25% from the 1970s (where 44% expected to attend a bachelor’s degree) to the 2000s (where 71% expected a bachelor’s degree) (Seifert et al., 2010). However, the increased percentage of high school graduates expecting a bachelor’s degree has unfortunately not been met with an equal increase in enrolling in a four-year institution, degree attainment notwithstanding. The
persistent discrepancy between expectations for a bachelor’s degree and failing to enroll in a four-year institution, effectively students’ unrealized “college” expectations, has ranged between 31-39% since the early 1970s.

Although some researchers have suggested that some students choose to begin their postsecondary career at a two-year institution and then transfer to complete their four-year degree (see Leigh & Gill, 2003), counter-evidence has found the associate’s degree as a route to a four-year degree has weakened (Grubb, 1991) and attending a community college significantly reduces the probability that a student will attain a bachelor’s degree (Alfonso, 2006; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Rouse, 1995). Considering all of the evidence, Seifert and colleagues (2010) defined expectations for a four-year degree but failing to enroll in a four-year institution two years after high school to be an unrealized expectations outcome. It seems that something must be amiss in the connection between CFA ideology and K-16 policy and practice when approximately one-third or more of students who expect to pursue a four-year degree fail to act in a way that aligns with their educational expectations.

It is important to recognize not all students fail to realize their expectations at a similar rate. Student background characteristics play a role in the degree to which students experience unrealized expectations. Racial minority students and students from lower social classes appear more likely than White students or students of higher social class to have unrealized educational expectations (Hauser & Anderson, 1991; King, 2000; 2006; 2010; Lopez, 2003; MacLeod, 1995; Qin-Hilliard, 2003; Reynolds & Johnson, 2011; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003), although recent trend research has found the role of socio-economic status on students’ expectations has levelled out in recent decades (Goyette, 2008). Past research is inconsistent with respect to the role of gender in students failing to realize their expectations. Some have found men may be
more likely in failing to realize their educational expectations than women (Hanson, 1994; Wells et al., in press) whereas others find women may be more likely than men to have unrealized expectations (Reynolds & Johnson, 2011; Surette, 2001). Together, this body of research suggests social origin characteristics are likely to be associated with unrealized expectations, potentially leading to inequitable levels of educational attainment.

Social origin characteristics do not exist separately but intersect and it is at these points of intersection where the differences in failing to realize educational expectations becomes the most stark. Seifert and colleagues (2010) examined how the gender gap in four-year degree unrealized expectations differed by race/ethnicity and social class across four cohorts of high school graduates. Since the 1970s, the four-year degree unrealized expectations gender gap steadily decreased from 5% to near parity in the 2002-2004 cohort. However, the notion of near parity becomes much more nuanced when race/ethnicity is taken into account. Asian and Native American men failed to enroll in a manner aligned with their expectations 7% and 25% more often than their female peers, respectively. In terms of social class, the unrealized expectations gender gap in the 2002-2004 cohort was at a 35 year low across the five SES quintiles but has, on average, been larger in the middle SES quintiles than in the lowest SES quintile. These findings support past research which has found racial minority students and students from lower social class backgrounds experience even larger gender gaps in various educational outcomes than their White or higher socioeconomic status peers (Chang, Chen, Greenberger, Dooley & Heckhausen 2006; King, 2010; NCES, 2005).

Rather than looking at unrealized expectations, Wells, Seifert & Saunders (in press) used four cohorts of nationally-representative data to examine how men and women differ in realizing their expectations, defined as enrolling in a four-year institution when expecting a four-year
degree. Part of Wells and colleagues’ analysis examined to what extent the gender gap resulted from men and women simply having differential “amounts” of resources like parental expectations for a postsecondary education, peer expectations, etc. In the aggregate, they found social class indicators, significant others’ influence, and race associated with a slight narrowing of the gender gap in realized expectations, rather than exacerbating it. Thus, past gender gaps in students realizing their expectations for a four-year degree were not due to differences in “how much” of these characteristics they had, but were more likely due to the differential effects these characteristics had on the likelihood that men and women realized their expectations.

Unlike other descriptive studies that have examined the gender gap in unrealized expectations by different racial/ethnic groups, Wells, Seifert & Saunders (in press) found controlling for other factors in the models, students of color generally had greater odds of realizing their four-year expectations and this effect appeared stronger for women than men, and more so for Black students than other students of color, compared to White students. Although race/ethnicity had differential effects on men and women’s likelihood of realizing their expectations, one of the most important findings from Wells and colleagues’ study was that positive peer influences have been highly related to male and female students realizing their educational expectations for the last 35 years.

The available evidence on unrealized expectations makes clear that it is a persistent issue affecting all students, although the magnitude of the effect is greater for some students more than others. The differential realization of unrealized expectations by gender across race/ethnicity and social class results in differential experiences of symbolic violence. Importantly, students of colour and students from lower social class, particularly men, experience symbolic violence when they do not realize expectations to attend college due to the CFA ideology as a “system of
meaning” that defines what students should strive for. Given this evidence, we turn to a potential way to re-orient K-16 that might be more conducive to fluid efforts across all of K-16 and thereby improve educational outcomes such as the realization of expectations. This re-orientation is rooted in Bourdieu’s concept of field.

**Bourdieu’s Concept of Field**

Noted sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990), developed a theory of practice that utilized the tools (what he referred to as thinking tools) of habitus, capital and field. We briefly define habitus and capital (which have been more commonly used to study K-16 transitions and outcomes research), and then delineate the specifics of his concept of field (which has been used less often in educational literature). We then articulate the implications of his theory of practice, and field specifically, to the existing literature and discussion of CFA and K-16 policy and practice.

Habitus results from family and peer group early socialization experiences in which beliefs, values, and preferences are developed that reinforce particular actions as more appropriate or desirable in particular contexts (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus assists individuals to acquire various capitals, and to value certain things over other things. The position of any individual or group in social space can be accounted for, in part, by the amount and nature of accumulated capitals (Wacquant, 2006). Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes the interaction of three types of capital which can be converted into one another: economic, cultural and social.

Habitus and capital operate in social spaces or fields. There are contexts or spaces where people feel more comfortable and Bourdieu called this tendency as a “fish in water”, which signifies the connection between habitus and field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Also, different capitals exist and possess value based, in many ways, on the nature of field. A central analogy to
understanding Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of field is to the idea of “rules of the game” that assist in setting standards. More specifically, Wacquant (2006) reveals, “the various spheres of life, art, science, religion, the economy…tend to form distinct microcosms endowed with their own rules, regularities and forms of authority – what Bourdieu called field” (p. 221). There are three aspects to field that are critical to understand. First, field can be understood as a space with particular structured positions that requires and imposes specific dynamics onto participants. As such, every field possesses specific rules that dictate particular positions for individuals or groups to occupy that serve to reinforce the nature and presence of such field. Second, field is a space of struggle where participants “seek to preserve or overturn the existing distribution of capital” (Wacquant, 2006, p. 222). Here, there exists the constant contestation between actors to determine not only who possesses what, but also the conditions of value that underscore such struggle. Finally, the third element to field concerns the ability to regulate itself and protect itself from external pressures and dynamics. Importantly, fields grow, change, or diminish over time and much of this reorientation resides in the degrees of autonomy inherent to fields (Wacquant, 2006).

Of particular relevance to our K-16 focus, capitals (economic, cultural, and social) are only meaningful to the extent that the “rules of the game” imbue them with value (Lareau 2001). As such, the relationship between capital and field must be recognized in order to fully utilize the saliency of Bourdieu’s theory of practice. This connection between field and capital has been the missing link in many of the studies employing cultural and social capital as explanatory mechanisms (see Lareau, 2001). More specifically, Lareau writes, “[I]t is not possible to understand truly what is given currency, what is highly valued and what is not highly valued unless you understand field. Capital only has meaning in light of field” (p. 82).
Given that K-16 appears to remain as individualized siloes, despite significant efforts by scholars and practitioners, we use Bourdieu’s conceptualization of field as an entry point to reconceptualize K-16 policy, practice and research. Considering the historical trend of separating research and policy about student growth, development and achievement into separate K-12 and higher education contexts, this tendency has entrenched these two educational contexts as distinct fields, each of which operate with particular rules and systems of evaluation that serve to maintain the continued divide between them. As such, we continue with an articulation of K-16 as a field, with a particular interest in the CFA discussion.

**From Two Silos to a Single Field: K-16 Discourse, Policy and Practice**

As discussed earlier in this paper, educational researchers and practitioners appear to be faced with a dilemma in which each aspect of the K-16 pipeline is successful in their particular role of the college going process, yet a substantial number of students fail to realize their educational expectations. When this is combined with the pervasive idea that all students should go to college, it becomes clear that the “rules of the game” that inform our work fall short in providing an adequate understanding of this important educational issue and completely miss the mark of proffering meaningful solutions. We feel that through understandings K-16 as a field (in the Bourdieuan sense), teachers, educational researchers and policy makers will be better positioned to make substantive changes within America’s schools.

To begin, we must determine if K-16 fits Bourdieu’s understanding of a field. Recalling the three elements of a field, it is clear that education meets the first aspect as it is a space with particular structured positions that require particular actions by those involved in the educational process. K-16 most definitely expresses the second element of field, as scholars ranging from the extreme left (i.e. Bowles & Gintis, 1976) to the extreme right (i.e. Horowitz, 2004) have
discussed the struggle occurring within our schools in which participants are seeking to preserve or overturn the existing distribution of capital. Unlike the first two elements that are clearly met by K-16, the third element of field, the ability to regulate itself and protect itself from external pressures and dynamics, is not as easily met. Scholars for over thirty years have discussed the ways in which educators all across the K-16 arena consistently have lost aspects of their autonomy (Giroux, 1986, Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), and it seems as if the process of removing educators from educational decisions is increasing in its speed and force. However, it is around this notion of autonomy where K-16 may gain the greatest benefits of re-conceptualizing itself as a field. While academic freedom and shared governance are still values articulated in most postsecondary institutions’ guiding documents, the potential exists for a unified K-16 continuum to reclaim a substantial stake in educational space. As such, we assert that K-16 can be understood as a field.

Just because K-16 may meet the three elements of field that Bourdieu outlined does not necessarily mean we should necessarily treat it as such. Instead, we need to demonstrate that understanding K-16 as a field will provide some meaningful benefits for educational researchers, practitioners, and policy makers. Possibly the most important benefit of treating K-16 as a field is the requirement that we unearth and acknowledge the current “rules of the game.” Such rules are often embedded within a particular structure or descriptive understanding, and as such go largely unchallenged. We believe this has been the case regarding the way we understand the college going process. Traditionally, scholars have discussed this process as a linear series of discrete steps, and each step has been reinforced by specific literature and particular policies that aim to remedy problems within that step. However, such an understanding of the educational process provides no explanation for the substantial number of students with unrealized
educational expectations and no direction for those interested in trying to help remedy the issue. K-16 immediately challenges the understanding of education as a series of discrete steps, as it inherently expresses the educational process along one continuum which begins in kindergarten and ends with graduation from a four-year institution. Here, we can work to restructure the particular positions imposed by the siloed approach to education and work to alter the specific requirements places on those who work within K-16 institutions. Importantly, as we treat K-16 as a field, we will be more explicit concerning the ways in which we structure our work and our positions, and be attentive to how these structures relate to the rules of the game. With regard to unrealized expectations, this may mean creating new positions in our colleges and universities that work more directly with K-12, join professional associations and publish in journals that specifically speak to a seamless educational experience, or a variety of other actions which will reinforce a new understanding of the college going process. Additionally, through understanding K-16 as a field, we will help expose the struggle occurring within our educational institutions between those who seek to preserve the existing distribution of various capitals and those working to overturn them. Our research examining the extent to which different demographic groups disproportionately fail to realize their educational expectations partially speaks to this struggle.

Fundamentally, the emergence of the “College for All” ideology has changed one of the more important rules of the game within the world of education. In a siloed system in which students progressing from one phase to the next is viewed as “success” and where students who fail to act in ways aligned with their expectations may be seen as exerting their own “choice” or “preference,” unrealized expectations are commonplace and may be even acceptable. However, the substantial number of students who do not realize their educational expectations presents a
meaningful problem within a CFA culture. Our analysis, which follows closely Bourdieu’s understanding of field, articulated the current rules of the game (as linear and discrete), exposed how these rules fail to accomplish a widely held social goal (college for all), and challenges educators to provide alternate understandings to the college-going process. We feel that future K-16 research should follow a similar approach and treat K-16 as a field. This is not to say that by approaching K-16 as a field the various challenges within our schools will immediately be fixed, but only to suggest that understanding K-16 as a field will better enable researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to understand these challenges, which is a necessary step in creating meaningful solutions.

**Conclusion**

This paper explores unrealized education expectations in a climate of CFA and in a formative K-16 arena. Our analysis has shown that unrealized educational expectations present a meaningful problem for all educators, and its solution is not solely located in one phase of education. Colleges and universities could (and do) say that unrealized expectations are not their problem, as they cannot do much to help students within whom they do not interact. Similarly, high schools could assert that once students have developed their expectations and have been academically prepared to attend a postsecondary institution, they cannot do much more to help realize those expectations. As a result of each “camp” only looking at their discrete phase of the process, it appears that no one within the K-16 world has any responsibility over the 34% of U.S. high school graduates who participated in the Education Longitudinal Survey with unrealized expectations. We reject this idea. While we recognize that there are limits to our ability to help students succeed educationally and that some students may make the personal choice to not act in ways that align with their previously articulated expectations, the substantially large number
of students with unrealized educational expectations, and the meaningful differences by race, indicators of social class, and gender, appear to demonstrate that unrealized educational expectations presents a failure in the K-16 educational process which we all have a responsibility to help address.

Instead, solutions appear to lie in the spaces between the discrete areas of the process; in the transitions between phases and in the ways in which social, cultural, and economic forces influence students as they engage in their education. Thus, we call researchers to re-imagine the aspiration/expectation process in a less discrete and linear way. The emergence of K-16 as a Bourdieuan field may help in examining the spaces between the discrete phases of education, as it forces educational researchers to break the silos that often dominate our fields. It may help to realize that while we may operate in discrete spaces, the responsibility to aid in the success of our students does not. For example, the demonstrated differential nature of unrealized expectations by gender, race, and class may be related to notions of “rules of the game” and the struggles for legitimacy that inform notions of success and achievement in relation to postsecondary education.

Although Bourdieuan concepts have been applied to various educational outcomes and processes, the use of field and its application to reconsider K-16 are novel contexts to explore. While we highlighted some concern about how K-16 as a field would address issues of autonomy, we further emphasize the need to re-conceptualize K-16 as a field due to these very issues of autonomy. The historical divide between K-12 and higher education contexts, in some ways, enabled a decline in autonomy and our resultant difficulty of articulating how K-16 as a field satisfies the three elements of field; however, this notion of K-16 as a field encourages a re-claiming of autonomy amongst various educational stakeholders. We envision the possibility
(and need) for educators and affiliated stakeholders to explore K-16 as a continuum of education that has important implications to policy and to practice.

A K-16 field could also have policies and practices that do not need to over-emphasize the artificial but lasting boundaries within K-16. Currently practices that have shown success at blurring the current boundaries could have more relevance and success in a true K-16 field—things such as dual enrollment programs, early college high schools, stackable credentials, or degree ladders. Such practices, while changing the conception of K-16, could also help to redefine CFA in a way to better align with the new K-16 perspective. CFA could perhaps come closer to including seamless information about all levels of education, leading to more aligned ambitions and more appropriate yet ambitious expectations, therefore making their realization more likely. This might also reduce the over-emphasis on the bachelor’s degree and re-vitalize a value on credentials and sub-baccalaureate programs that have good returns on investment and may have greater chances for success in some cases.

Re-conceptualizing K-16 education as a field provides educators, educational policy makers, and other stakeholders with an opportunity to make the “rules of the game” known as opposed to remaining tacit. It problematizes how these “rules” disproportionately affect some students’ expectation realization more than others. And in a time where the “new managerialism” appears to be the norm irrespective of educational sector (K-12 or postsecondary) (Bess & Goldman, 2001; Deem, 1998), viewing education as a true continuum may present educators (K-12 teachers and postsecondary faculty) with the opportunity to see each other as allies in a way that they had not seen in each other previously.
References


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