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*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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AN EXAMINATION OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE LOUISIANA ACT  
MANDATE ON THEIR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION DECISIONS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Education

by

Thelma Carol Purnell

B.S. Mississippi State University, 1978

M.S. Louisiana State University, 1980

May 2016

This work is dedicated to my mother, Mrs. Carolyn Carson Purnell, my son Carson and my sister Marcia. I want to thank my mother for her encouragement and for grounding me when this process became very difficult, but most of all I want to thank her for her prayers and the constant reminder—no matter what the obstacle — I should pray. I want to thank my son for his encouragement and understanding of what I was experiencing—especially since he graduated from LSU a few years ago—and the exhibition of his sense of pride in knowing that his mother—a divorcée—at this juncture in life, had the stamina to endure such an arduous process. I want to thank my sister for all of her support in this endeavor and being attuned to things that were in the media about standardized testing as well as her willingness to be a sounding board for me. I also want to acknowledge my deceased father Mr. Isaiah Purnell, my grandparents—maternal grandparents, Rev. C. J. and Thelma Carson and paternal grandparents, Mr. Peter and Eliza Purnell. My maternal grandparents recognized the importance of a postsecondary education decades ago by obtaining college degrees in the early 1930's, and I am appreciative to them for paving the way for me to become a third generation college graduate.

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## ABSTRACT

In the United States, the American College Test (ACT) is a standardized test that is used primarily as an indicator of college readiness and as a gauge for college admission. The governing bodies for Louisiana's public schools—The Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)—made the ACT a requirement—effective spring 2013—for Louisiana's public high school 11<sup>th</sup> grade students regardless of their postsecondary intentions. The primary purpose of this study was to ascertain from Louisiana high school seniors' whether the Louisiana Department of Education's ACT mandate is perceived as a factor influencing their postsecondary decisions or affecting their postsecondary trajectory.

A qualitative case study was used for this research. The cases were two Louisiana schools which were designated by the Louisiana Department of Education as economically disadvantaged<sup>1</sup>. One economically disadvantaged school from two different school districts was included in this research. The study participants were seniors who participated in the mandatory ACT in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and were at least 18 years of age. Six seniors from each school—for a total of twelve participants—were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted at the school site during normal school operation hours.

Participants in this study indicated that the ACT mandate was not a determinant in their postsecondary decisions, in relation to what they wanted to do after high school. The participants, however, did indicate that their ACT outcomes were affecting their postsecondary

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<sup>1</sup> Economically disadvantaged schools, in this instance, are defined as schools that have 65% or more of its students' eligible for free or reduced price lunch (Louisiana Department of education, louisianabelieves.com, 2015).

education route or choices. All of the participants, except one indicated that they were planning to attend college, regardless of the ACT mandate. The participants perceived the attainment of a specific ACT score as an admission requirement—to the institutions of their choice—as the factor affecting their postsecondary trajectories.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Sometimes, the most brilliant and intelligent minds do not shine in standardized tests because they do not have standardized minds.”

Diane Ravitch

The American College Test (ACT) is one of the two primary standardized tests used in the United States to indicate college readiness —the other test is the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). An area of educational concern is the American College Test (ACT) mandate, which was introduced into Louisiana public high schools, in the spring of 2013, as a required test for high school students. The primary purpose of this study is to ascertain from Louisiana high school seniors’ whether the State Department of Education’s ACT mandate is perceived as a factor influencing their postsecondary trajectory or affecting their postsecondary decisions.

The ACT is touted by American College Test, Incorporated (2015) as a tool for assessing college readiness and is considered the capstone for measuring college and career readiness. The test contains four subject areas: science, mathematics, English and reading with an optional writing test. It is asserted by the ACT organization that the test provides feedback related to high school curricula. The ACT results include a composite score and subscores for applicable subject areas (ACT org, 2015; Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves.com, 2015).

On the other hand, the College Board’s redesigned SAT is touted by the organization as a globally recognized college admission test. The SAT asserts that it provides feedback on general verbal and quantitative reasoning. The test provides score results in critical reading, mathematics, and writing (SAT, 2015). The results from these standardized tests are used by a substantial number of four-year postsecondary institutions as a criteria for admission (American College Test, 2012, 2015; SAT, 2015). Some four-year postsecondary institutions; however,

have migrated towards a “test optional” policy in which the production of an ACT or SAT score has been removed as an admission requirement (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 2015). The focus of this research, however, is on the ACT and its mandated use in Louisiana’s public high schools.

The impetus for examining the American College Test (ACT) mandate emanated from the requirement by the State of Louisiana, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), and the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) to make the ACT mandatory for all<sup>2</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> grade public high school students and subsequently including the composite score results in the school’s performance score. The LDOE and BESE are the entities that serve as the governing bodies for elementary and secondary education in Louisiana. As a former employee of the Department of Education, the researcher has an appreciation for the concerns regarding the implementation of the aforementioned policy from a state agency perspective—etic—as well as a local district perspective—emic (Creswell, 2013; Daly, 2007).

### **Problem Statement**

Public secondary schools—with a grade 12, that are a part of the accountability system in the State of Louisiana—are required by the governing bodies of K-12 education to make 11<sup>th</sup> grade students take the American College Test (ACT), regardless of their postsecondary intentions or aspirations (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves.com, BESE, *Bulletin 111*, 2015). In the spring of 2013, the 2012-2013 school year—the seminal year of the mandate—the first group of 11<sup>th</sup> grade public high school students in the State of Louisiana participated in the statewide administration of the ACT. The 2012-2013 school year was also the first year in which the ACT was included as a component of the School Performance Score

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<sup>2</sup> Exceptions are made for students with severe cognitive issues as identified by their IEP (Individualized Education Program).

(SPS)—which generates the letter grade for Louisiana high schools with a grade 12. A school's letter grade or SPS, is an evaluation tool and indicator to parents, students, administrators and other stakeholders of how well or poorly a school is performing in the academic world. The SPS is comprised of four components: the graduation index (quality of diploma), the graduation rate/index, end-of-course (EOC) index and the ACT index (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves.com, *Bulletin 111*, Title 28, §301, 2015).

As a part of the statewide ACT mandate in public schools, the State of Louisiana incurs the cost of at least one administration of the ACT for public high school students. Districts, however, may pay for additional administrations of the test for its students and/or the students in the district may pay to take the test additional times themselves, if deemed necessary. If the test is taken multiple times, the State Department of Education makes every attempt to include the highest score obtained by the student in the school's ACT index (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves.com, *Bulletin 111*, 2015). This is an effort to avert the possibility of lowering of a school's letter grade or School Performance Score (SPS) by including an unfavorable ACT score, if applicable<sup>3</sup>.

An underlying assumption of the state imposed mandate is that it will foster an increase in the number of students entering the postsecondary education pipeline (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves.com, 2015). Mertons (1936; 1996) indicated that, in society, unanticipated or unintended consequences can be created when changes are made in general—this has applicability to this policy change. He infers that unintended consequences can be categorized as: unintended benefits; unexpected drawbacks and perverse results. According to the premise of unintended consequences, for every problem that is solved, you either create or

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<sup>3</sup> If a student's highest composite ACT score is 17 or below, the school receives a zero for the student in the ACT Index of the SPS (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves.com. 2015, *Bulletin 111*, Title 28, Section 409).

initiate another problem. In tandem with the underlying assumption and problem solving premise, a perceived positive result of the incorporation of the ACT is that it exposes more high school students to a postsecondary opportunity. Also, it has the potential to influence more students to change or rethink their career path—nonprofessional to professional—by pursuing a postsecondary education. An added benefit to students, according to personal communications by H. E. Richard, April 14, 2015 and M. H. Smith, April 15, 2015, is that some schools are instituting ACT preparation classes in an effort to improve ACT outcomes. Of course, some schools consider the incorporation of the ACT preparation classes as a consumption of their limited instructional time and resources, but the classes may serve as an avenue to improve the school's performance score.

A perceived problem with the mandate is that it affects students with college aspirations as well as those without college aspirations. In other words, students who do not have an interest in taking the ACT and who do not plan to attend college are exposed to and required to participate in the test. Also, under this policy high schools are being rated/graded using ACT results for students who do not have an interest in their ACT outcomes. Louisiana is already ranked among the worst states for K-12 education based upon a number of school related factors, one of which is test scores. Also, according to a gold and silver awards ranking in schools, which shows how states are doing in preparing high school students using college based tests, Louisiana is ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> in the United States (Morse, 2015; Williams, 2015, January 8).

However, the results of students who are concerned about their ACT outcomes, and try to perform well, are also included in the school performance score. Different high schools have different student populations participating in the mandatory ACT and outcomes can be significantly different, for example, the comparison of ACT outcomes for an academic magnet

school versus a school with a high concentration of academically challenged students and regular education students. This makes the performance score/letter grade platform uneven from the beginning according to a personal communication (M. H. Smith, April 15, 2015). Therefore, in an effort to ameliorate negative score results, some schools have been prompted to devote more time to test preparation or *teaching to the test* rather than focusing on particular subject matters (Hamilton & Koretz, 2002; M. H. Smith, personal communication, April 15, 2015).

The introduction of a test—such as the ACT—in high schools by some states, is presumed to be a response to partially fulfilling a segment of the federal requirements outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act<sup>4</sup> (NCLB, 2002). The NCLB Act—the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, is a federal policy with an accountability and assessment component. The policy, in part, requires states to test public school students in grades 3 through 8 and high school. Therefore, the use of the ACT, by some states, is an effort to fulfill this federal requirement (United States, Department of Education, Ed.gov, 2015; Office of Public Affairs, 2003; Anderson, 2014). Klein and Ujifusa (2015) indicate that some states have increased the use of college entrance exams for accountability purposes as an attempt to reduce the number of tests that high school juniors must take. In *Louisiana's ESEA Flexibility Plan Request* 2012 (Ed.gov, 2015) submitted to the federal government, it is documented that the ACT is a part of the state's effort to meet the requirements of NCLB. The 2012 approved plan indicates that “as an additional indicator of college and career readiness and a measurement of

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<sup>4</sup> The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act is what was formerly known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson who had educational Opportunity as a national goal. In 2002, under President George W. Bush, the ESEA was reauthorized and given the name of No Child Left Behind. The act put in measures which exposed achievement gaps among certain groups. In 2012, under President Barack H. Obama, the NCLB Act permitted flexibility for states in their efforts to close the achievement gaps among certain groups of people (Ed.gov, 2015).

the quality of Louisiana high schools, the LDOE will administer the ACT series (i.e., EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT) statewide beginning in 2013” (p. 37).

The mandate and funding of the ACT for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students is not unique to the State of Louisiana (American College Test, 2015; Anderson, 2014; Ed.gov, 2015; Hyman, 2014; NCES, 2015), it appears to be a practice or phenomena that is trending in several states. As an example of the pervasiveness of this policy, its use is exemplified in states such as Delaware, Maine, Michigan, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Wyoming. However, Colorado and Illinois, were among the first states to implement the state-funded mandated testing in 2001 (Hyman, 2014; Sultan, 2001). When Louisiana implemented the policy, there were about thirteen states funding the ACT and making it a requirement for their 11<sup>th</sup> grade students (American College Test, 2015; Anderson, 2014). Since Louisiana implemented the statewide mandate policy in 2013, the number of states participating in the statewide mandate has been fluid. As additional states are joining, some states are discontinuing the practice and some are changing to the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) by the College Board—another college readiness indicator and admission factor (Ed.gov, 2015; Higgins, 2015; NCES, 2015; SAT, 2015).

The State of Illinois was one of the states that included every 11<sup>th</sup> grade student in ACT testing. The test was a part of Illinois’ Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE). The state discontinued the practice of requiring every 11<sup>th</sup> grader to participate in the ACT with the graduating class of 2015. The Illinois Department of Education and ACT, Inc. reported that from 2014 to 2015, Illinois’ composite score remained unchanged at 20.7. If applicable, changes in the ACT composite results, because of the new state policy, probably will not be realized until the graduating class of 2016. However, according to ACT, Inc., *Condition of*

*College and Career Readiness 2015* (American College Test, 2015), research shows that the inclusion of students who are not college bound in ACT testing, has a tendency to lower the overall ACT composite score (American College Test, 2012; 2015; Illinois Department of Education, 2015).

The Michigan Department of Education (2015) reported that during 2009-2014, of its students enrolling in postsecondary education within six months of graduating from high school, more students enrolled in four-year institutions than in community colleges. This is not necessarily linked to mandatory ACT testing for high school students. The overall composite ACT score for Michigan students from 2014 to 2015 has remained unchanged at 20.1. However, effective spring 2016, the Michigan Department of Education plans to discontinue the use of the ACT in its assessment program and incorporate another college readiness test—the SAT. Reportedly (Higgins, 2015, January 8), the change was initiated in part because the SAT was the lower bid between the two college readiness assessments. According to the State Superintendent, it was better aligned with state education standards (American College Test, 2015; Michigan Department of Education, 2015).

This mandate not only impacts high schools, but has implications for the postsecondary education pipeline as well, since the ACT is generally one of the standardized tests used as an indicator of college readiness and often a criterion for admission into four-year postsecondary institutions. However, it is noteworthy that as states are mandating the participation in the ACT or SAT for high school students, some postsecondary institutions are removing the tests as a criteria for admission (American College Test, 2015; Hoover; 2009; Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves.com, 2015; Michigan Department of Education, 2015; Wake Forest University, 2015). As an example, Wake Forest University in

North Carolina has decided to make the SAT and ACT an optional admission criterion. The university included this information on their website in reference to admission into their University.

In 2008 Wake Forest made the move to make standardized tests like the SAT and the ACT optional elements of our admissions process. We're very glad we did. In the years since our undergraduate diversity has increased 30%, and 40% of the Class of 2013 graduated with academic distinction. Again, numbers cannot tell the whole story, but they have provided hard evidence to what our instincts originally told us: making test scores optional would not compromise the academic quality of our institution, but rather make our university more diverse and intellectually stimulating.

Although the State of North Carolina has a “test optional” institution such as Wake Forest, the ACT organization reports North Carolina as being one of the states with the ACT statewide mandate in its’ high schools (American College Test, 2014, 2015; Wake Forest University, 2015).

In regards to changes, Louisiana has plans to make changes in the ACT index of the School Performance Score (SPS). The change does not involve the exclusion of the ACT as a requirement; but, involves the inclusion of another kind of standardized test. Effective in accountability for the 2015-2016 school year, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) have approved a measure which will allow the recognition of WorkKeys<sup>5</sup> as a part of the ACT index. WorkKeys is a test provided by ACT that the organization indicates helps students and employers assess work skills for probable job success (American College Test, 2015; Louisiana Department of Education, [louisianabelieves.com](http://louisianabelieves.com), 2015). The score outcomes on WorkKeys or the ACT, whichever is higher, is expected to be included in the ACT index of

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<sup>5</sup> The 2015 amended *ESEA Flexibility Plan Request* submitted by Louisiana and approved by the federal government, includes the ACT Series (with the addition of WorkKeys (Ed.gov, 2015).

the School Performance Score (SPS) for state high schools. This proposed change is presumed to be in recognition of the fact that there are high school students participating in the ACT assessment who don't have college aspirations. Although, WorkKeys is to be one of the two assessments comprising the ACT index for high school students in the spring of 2016, it is an assessment which a student does not have to pass to meet graduation requirements, but it is to be taken regardless of the student's postsecondary intentions. In essence, like the ACT, this component of the performance score has the potential to lower, raise, or have minimal to no effect on the school's performance results. This calls into question whether the mandate is affecting postsecondary decisions of high school students and ultimately the postsecondary education pipeline (Ed.gov, 2015; Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves.com, 2015).

According to Anderson (2014), some state officials indicate that the requirement for 11<sup>th</sup> graders to take the ACT may be a springboard for students—who were not planning to pursue college—to consider postsecondary education as an option. The ACT organization (2015) states that the ACT requirement, in theory, helps to identify a school's performance as well as serves as a mechanism to catapult students into college. A number of the factors leading to and through the postsecondary pipeline depend on the ambition of the student and how serious the student is about participating in a test which—currently in this state—does not help them meet graduation requirements. For those students who are serious and concerned about a postsecondary education, the mandate possibly provides them with the opportunity to be admitted to a four-year postsecondary institution.

An example of how postsecondary decisions are affected, depending on the mindset of the student, was recently exemplified in a district in the southern part of the state. A student,

from a school identified by the Louisiana Department of Education (louisianabelieves, 2015) as an economically disadvantaged school—a label applied to schools having 65% or more of its students eligible for free and reduced price lunch—scored at the top of the range for the ACT. Perhaps, this student took advantage of the state funded mandated ACT and scored 34 on the ACT—the highest score being 36 (American College Test, 2015)—and plans to attend a four-year postsecondary institution on a scholarship (Dixon, 2015). In regards to the state-funded mandate, would financial resources have had an impact on this student’s ACT participation and the postsecondary education pipeline flow? Would the student have succeeded anyway, or was the state-funded test a factor which contributed to this achievement? With success such as this, does this mean that the ACT mandate is encouraging schools to do more to prepare its students and catapult them into postsecondary education or is this an indication of something else?

Also, there are high school students with other agendas and mindsets. For example, in a conversation with a school administrator (H. E. Richard, personal communication, April 14, 2015), it was ascertained that some students at the school planned to be absent from school during the times in which the ACT was being administered. In another instance, ACT school test monitors observed students just marking random answers when taking this test. This is just a demonstration that the mandate and its effect on the postsecondary pipeline rely on the actions, ambition and the mindset of the high school students. However, the student is the best source to obtain information regarding factors contributing to their postsecondary decisions.

Adams (2014) purports that, by instituting the ACT or SAT at no cost to students, is an effort for students to see how prepared they are for college as well as to encourage more students to apply for college. Anderson, (2014, p.1), indicated that a Colorado State Department of Education official stated that the ACT requirement is “getting kids on the radar of colleges that

may not have considered them” and “it’s getting college on the radar for kids who may not have consider it.”

However, on the other hand, in other states, the statewide mandate has been indicated as a factor contributing to lower performance scores for high schools. The standardized testing critics for college admission test such as ACT and SAT, say that the test does not predict college success.

Chun (2012, July 23) shared some comments from Hart regarding the ACT and SAT in her blog:

I am both a mother and a teacher. I have observed my daughter, who is 17 yrs [sic] old and an A student - yes, with a few Bs [sic] on her transcript, struggling with self-esteem issues as she takes the SATs. I finally told her that SAT scores do not make the student. It is her focus, determination, and commitment to her studies that makes the difference. I reminded her that when we visited schools like Brown and Yale and Harvard, that she really didn't like the atmosphere - which had an elitist feel to them. That, in fact, she was more comfortable in a university setting. Her grades were great, and that a grade average of 3.85 overall was a wonderful grade average. So? She's not a test taker. That doesn't mean that she is not college material.

I have now taken one more stand against public education - the amount of money we waste on assessment in this country is astounding. Rather, why not put that money directing [sic] into the students themselves - tutoring, counseling, projects. How about a portfolio assessment? Or, why not extend the hours for the SAT - some of us do not believe in this kind of competitive, high speed nonsense that does not translate into much in real life.

Then I noticed that many colleges are not requiring the SATs or the ACT anymore. They simply look at the student's high school grades, activities, and commitment. I, for one, am glad to see it. Having taught those students with high SAT scores (2100, 2200, etc.), they annoy me to no end. Description: A bit arrogant, self satisfied [sic] individuals who think their memory and middle class status will save them from the test of life. Nope, my friends, it does not and never will.

Other considerations in the examination of the ACT mandate are, does the mandate imply that we are advocating the use of the ACT as the primary instrument to gain access to postsecondary education by making it a requirement for high school students? Also, what kind

of signal or message are we sending to students in this state, especially when we are hearing more and more about four-year institutions such as Wake Forest and Sarah Lawrence, that are becoming a part of the “test optional” community (Sarah Lawrence, 2015; Wake Forest, 2015) which removes the ACT or SAT as a requirement for college admissions? Additionally, some students are not planning to pursue any type of postsecondary education—four-year institution, two-year institution nor trade school—does the mandate convince them to glance in the direction of the postsecondary pipeline? It is understood that some students appreciate the opportunity to be able to take the ACT in a school setting with the State of Louisiana incurring the cost for at least one administration for them (Louisiana Department of Education, *louisianabelieves*; 2015). This perhaps is an opportunity which some students might not have due to their socioeconomic status. In this particular instance, if the student does well on the test, the mandate may be a postsecondary education pipeline flow contributor.

Another potential problem is that there may be two policies related to postsecondary education with competing effects on the postsecondary pipeline. The ACT mandate potentially provides an opportunity to expose more high school students to a postsecondary education while the Louisiana Board of Regents, on the other hand, is increasing the requirements for students to access a four-year postsecondary education. The potential existence of mutually exclusive state policies is exemplified with the Louisiana Board of Regents (*Minimum Admission Standards for First-Time-Freshman*) policy—which became effective fall of 2014. The policy requires a minimum score of 18 on the ACT in English ( $\text{ACT English} \geq 18$ ) and 19 in math ( $\text{ACT Math} \geq 19$ ), thereby affecting the composite score. In essence, if a substantial number of Louisiana students are not able to achieve the new ACT standards established by the Louisiana Board of Regents, are we increasing the postsecondary pipeline flow for other states (Louisiana Board of

Regents.org, 2015; Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015)? Or, will more students achieve the new standards with the ACT mandate in place?

In June of 2015, the Board of Regents revised the *Minimum Admission Standards for First-Time Freshmen*, 2014 fall policy. Perhaps, this was in recognition of unintended consequences of the policy. The policy was revised to allow  $\leq 1$  developmental course for regional institutions such as Southeastern and Nicholls, but not for statewide institutions such as the University of Louisiana at Lafayette or Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge—a flagship institution. The admission requirements include a high school core GPA of 3.0 or an ACT composite of 25 for a flagship institution or GPA of 2.5 for a statewide institution and an ACT composite of 23 for a statewide institution or 2.0 GPA for a regional institution and ACT composite of 20 for a regional institution. The math and English requirements remained the same, only the developmental course acceptance at the regional institution was adjusted—the fall 2014 policy had removed developmental courses (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2015).

Another consideration regarding the ACT mandate and the postsecondary pipeline, is that as the state is cutting funding for higher education, should it do as the State of Illinois has done, and make the ACT voluntary at state expense (Crisp, 2015, March 6; Illinois Department of Education, 2015; Rado, 2014). This practice may help provide students with postsecondary potential to have an institution to attend. Otherwise, we may have a pool of students ready to go through the pipeline from the mandate, but have no place—institution—for them to attend.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to ascertain how Louisiana high school seniors perceive the ACT mandate as a factor affecting their postsecondary decisions and trajectories. This was accomplished by obtaining a firsthand account from a purposeful sample of students—meeting

certain inclusion criteria. The research is intended to apprise educators and governing authorities of the pipeline effect from a humanistic perspective and not just from the aggregation of data resulting from a compilation of specific information on standardized college entrance examinations (Creswell, 2013; Sarah Lawrence, 2015; Wake Forest, 2015). Additionally, it is surmised that this work will stimulate or create the contemplation of and subsequent reaction to issues such as: are we creating an influx of postsecondary students who are not entering the workforce, and if so, are we prepared to accommodate such an influx? Another question that could be answered through this research is whether we are reaching groups—such as economically disadvantaged students or underrepresented students—who may have traditionally been excluded from postsecondary matriculation? Or is the impact of the mandate minimal or non-existent?

This study sought to obtain information from a population whose decisions are often overlooked in the decision-making process—the students. Also, it sought to have dialogue with a group—economically disadvantaged school students—to ascertain firsthand what their experiences of this process has been (Creswell, 2013). This study will examine the influences of the ACT mandate on the postsecondary trajectory and/or decisions of public high school students in the State of Louisiana. The decisions that are made at this juncture in the lives of high school students can ultimately impact the postsecondary education pipeline.

### **Significance of the Study**

A study of this nature is significant because there is a paucity of research, in this state, which investigates the perceived effect of state imposed ACT policy as expressed by students directly affected. Generally, research related to the ACT mandate, in this state and others, is quantitative. While quantitative research provides valuable statistical research information, it

does not serve as a means to provide a detailed account of student experiences as they undergo the mandate process and make postsecondary decisions. Qualitative research can add depth of understanding about the students' experiences. Research indicates that experiences and results from state imposed policies are different because state implementation and access to resources varies (Daly, 2007; Goodman, 2012; Perna & Titus, 2004). This research is intended to focus on students and to possibly apprise educators, policymakers, governing authorities, and stakeholders of the viability of the state imposed ACT policy from a consequential and fiscal standpoint. The study is meant to be informative to secondary and postsecondary personnel and their respective institutions.

Additionally, a study of this nature is significant for public relation reasons. The public trust of reports and other information disseminated from state governing bodies about strides in education and the benefits of certain policies and practices has been waning during recent times. An example of this is illustrated by Aswell (2014, May 17) in a *Louisiana Voice* blog post.

It would be to the advantage of White<sup>6</sup>, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and Gov. Bobby Jindal if the test scores reflected significant gains by students but word received by *Louisiana Voice* indicates that all is not well in the RSD<sup>7</sup> and that White would prefer a rosier picture in the trouble-plagued district—if only those stubborn civil servants would cooperate.

But the obvious question here is: why would we expect good scores from the RSD anyway? RSD has been a stink hole of inefficiency, poor performance, overpaid administrators, missing equipment and waste since day one. Mediocrity is a goal to which the RSD can only aspire.

Word coming out of the department is that LDOE employees were asked to cook the RSD books but LDOE staff members have refused to become a part of yet another cheating scandal. And given what has already transpired in Philadelphia, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Nevada, and other states, who could blame them:

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<sup>6</sup> John White is the current—2015—Superintendent of Education for the State of Louisiana and former RSD (Recovery School District) Superintendent.

<sup>7</sup> RSD is the recovery school district established by the Department of Education to take over failing Schools. A public school determined to be academically unacceptable shall be designated as a failed school and may be transferred to the RSD subject to approval by BESE

A study of this nature is needed to obtain information directly from students about their perceptions of the influence and effect of the ACT policy on their postsecondary trajectory and/or decisions. Also, a study such as this may contribute to assisting with the restoral of public trust for some entities, since the information was obtained from students—who are considered information rich sources and supposedly devoid of political agendas (Daly, 2007; Aswell, *Louisiana Voice Blog*, 2015).

The study was structured to provide background information on secondary education policies and practices and ultimately the ramifications of those practices and processes on postsecondary education. Potential obstacles and benefits of the ACT policy are presented and experiences of other states are discussed. The state’s implementation of this mandate and the perceptions of the effect on Louisiana students and their postsecondary trajectories are elements that are of primary concern in this study.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The ACT mandate and its perceived effect from the student perspective is charting different territory. A critical theory perspective was the lens used to guide this case study. This interpretative lens allowed the researcher to examine how students in economically disadvantaged environments respond to educational forces and regulations that dominate them. It fostered an exploration of how individuals can be empowered to overcome and transcend some of the barriers they traditionally encounter. The use of a critical lens was a way to understand how the ACT mandate has affected students in the two schools—cases—that were the focus of this study. It lends itself to focusing on providing a voice or platform to those who generally do not possess power (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

The ACT process in the State of Louisiana is a phenomenon that we lack knowledge on from the student's perspective.

During the interviews with participants, it was evident through expression that they were seeking a platform to voice their opinions about ACT policies and practices. It was ascertained that although students in economically disadvantaged schools were empowered to participate in a process that potentially provided an opportunity for them to ascend to a higher educational level, other regulations existed to impede their progress.

Looking at the mandate from a pragmatic point of view, the ACT has the potential to be a panacea for the state, districts, and postsecondary education. This is because the state can meet part of the requirements for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act by using the ACT as a part of the accountability component (Anderson, 2014, August 20; Ed.gov, 2015). Some states even use the ACT as a graduation requirement component. On the district level, the ACT potentially prepares or provides an opportunity to more secondary students for postsecondary institutions. Therefore, the postsecondary institutions would have more students coming through the pipeline to their institutions thereby, creating a more viable workforce.

According to Anfara and Mertz (2006), reality is different depending on your view. They stated that "Schooled in the idea that no reality is the same for all people; the only reality I can claim is that of my own personal interpretation" (p. 13). This being said, the information rich source, regarding the mandate, is data obtained from the high school students—seniors who have reached the age of 18 in particular. These students were consulted to ascertain their perception of the mandatory inclusion of a college readiness indicator in high school for them and determine whether this inclusion affected their postsecondary decisions and/or trajectories.

## **Definitions of Terms**

Postsecondary institution- in this research, postsecondary refers to colleges and universities that are four-year institutions.

School Performance Score (SPS) - for schools with grade 12, the school performance score is comprised of four indicators weighted equally. The indicators are: the graduation index (25%), End-of-course index (25%), graduation rate index (25%) and the ACT index (25%). The four indices are combined to comprise the SPS.

High School- schools with grade 12. In this research high schools are schools with a 9-12 grade configuration.

Test optional- a policy adopted by some colleges and universities which gives the student the option of submitting an ACT or SAT score to the postsecondary institution for admission consideration.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Introduction

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, standardized testing in education has been a practice in the United States as a means of assessing intellectual capacity (Franklin, 2007; Goodard, 1910, 1911; Odum, 1913). In the State of Louisiana, the evaluative standardized testing system for public school students began in 1999, with the Louisiana Education Assessment Program (LEAP) in grades 4 and 8. In 2001, the state introduced the Graduate Exit Exam (GEE) for public high school students. The passage of the GEE was a requirement for public high school students to be eligible to receive a standard high school diploma. The LEAP assessment program was designed to assess whether students had grasped the skills necessary to advance to the next grade level or exit high school. Public high school students in Louisiana are now required to pass End-of-Course (EOC) exams with a score of *fair* or above in certain subject categories—for example, Algebra 1 or Geometry in order to earn a standard high school diploma. This is what is required instead of passing the GEE to obtain a standard high school diploma (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015; The Louisiana Educational Assessment Program, LEAP/GEE 2006-2007 Annual Report).

In the spring of 2013, state policy dictated that the American College Test (ACT)—another standardized test—be incorporated into the assessment equation for Louisiana’s high school students—but, not as a high school graduation determinant (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015). Kipp, Price, and Wohlford (2002) in connection with the Lumina Foundation reported that empirically testing state public policies using multilevel modeling, revealed that state policies influence the type of postsecondary experience that

students will be able to access after high school. Perna and Titus (2004), also indicated that state public policies play a role in college enrollment. In *Focus* by the Lumina Foundation, Allan (2015) reports that the higher education system with its policies have failed students on multiple fronts and this needs to be rectified. Along these lines, the addition of the state imposed ACT policy—and other policies—presumably will affect postsecondary trajectories for Louisiana high school students. The ramifications of the policy are somewhat ambiguous.

Policy requirements such as this, precipitates dialogue and an examination of the effect of this requirement on the postsecondary education pipeline. The ACT mandate policy is not germane to the State of Louisiana. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2014) and the ACT organization, there are seventeen states with ACT policies for their high school students. Previously, Macintosh (2011) indicated that there were about 11 states requiring the ACT or SAT for their high school students and in most instances, the test is not a requirement for graduation. However, the consensus is that the number of states participating in the mandate is fluid (American College Test, 2015; Ed.gov, 2015; McIntosh, 2011; NCES, 2015).

In a study by Jaschik (2014), of over 123,000 students and 33 colleges and universities, it was reported that for these students who did not submit ACT or SAT score, their postsecondary performance was basically no different from those students who submitted such scores. The study contends that high school grades were better predictors of college success than ACT or SAT scores. The study was led by William Hiss—who has conducted test-optional studies previously—and released by the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC). The NACAC organization has encouraged postsecondary institutions to review their admission policies in this regard. The Lumina Foundation (Hiss, 2014) also has proposed that

there is a need to find other successful paths to postsecondary education other than SAT and ACT test scores. They cite “test optional” as one of the means to increase higher education access for groups such as minorities and first generation students. The foundation mentions that test scores add to college guidebook rankings. In other words, what is of more importance, a student’s education or the guidebook ranking? Of course, as with most policies, there are advocates for the use of standardized college readiness exams, such as the ACT and SAT, as one of the college and university admission criteria and there are those against their use.

However, there is still a need to explore the factors that influence postsecondary trajectories, especially since Louisiana’s K-12 public school education consistently ranks near the bottom along the education continuum according to *2015 Quality Counts Report* (Education Week Research Center, 2015, January 8) Some research (Jaschik, 2014) attribute postsecondary matriculation to academic success in high school, some research link postsecondary outcomes to ACT success while others attribute postsecondary success to economic status. In a 2014 report by ACT, it was indicated that a number of low-income students are not meeting the college readiness benchmarks (American College Test, 2014).

The literature review provides insight about the early development and forms of standardized testing and it provides background information on the primary standardized college entrance examinations in use in the United States. Also, policies and practices that secondary schools have introduced in various states to expose students to college readiness standardized examinations and the experiences encountered with the implementations is addressed (American College Test, 2015). It is plausible that the implementation, execution and experiences in states are different and that the effects on the postsecondary education pipeline differ as well. Additionally, the literature will explore what some of the research

studies have indicated about standardized testing. Also, of vital importance is the inclusion of literature which incorporates responses from individuals and institutions that have had first-hand experience with standardized college admission test mandates and admission policies. The students will be the source to ascertain the impact or perceived impact of the ACT mandate.

### **Standardized Testing—A Historical Perspective**

The first “intelligence test” as it was called, originated in France in 1905, using children in the French public schools. This testing movement was started by Alfred Binet and Theophile Simon to identify “mentally deficient” children. Testing of this type was introduced into the United States in 1910 by Henry Goodard and given to “so-called” feeble minded children in New Jersey. The tests were later given to normal White children. After the White students were tested, Goodard suggested that the intelligence test indicated how much a child was capable of learning at a particular age. He produced a range of scores based on the “normal” white children (Franklin, 2007, p. 217) and started using this to make comparisons of others given the test. His suggestion was taken as factual information, because he was recognized as one of the first mental testers in this country and considered as an authority in the area. Howard Odum, a sociologist, later decided to use Goodard’s “Binet Intelligence Test” on Black children in Philadelphia’s public school system. He compared the results from the Black children in Philadelphia to that of the White children in New Jersey and found significant differences between the two races in areas such as environment, physical and mental manifestations. The performance of the Black children—as indicated by this instrument—was subpar when the comparison was made. As a result of the differences in performance, the recommendation of a special curriculum and separate school facilities was made (Franklin, 2007; Goddard, 1910; 1911; Odum, 1913).

When evaluations of the Black children in Philadelphia were done later using the Binet–Simon test, results similar to those of Odum were revealed. The Binet-Simon test was later revised and standardized by a psychologist from Stanford University and given to a diverse group of students. The test at this point had evolved into the “Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test.”

In the 1920’s, the “Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test” was widely used in public schools around the country to classify children for educational programs. The test, its use and what it really measured was questioned and criticized. Some suggested that the test was a measure of the social environment (Franklin, 1980; Long, 1923). According to Franklin (2007), intelligence tests by their very nature incorporate certain “cultural biases” in favor of certain individuals over others. In an article by Fleming (2000), he cites Hirsh (1981) as one who indicated that standardized testing has a racist history in both the United States and Europe. Gould (1996) states (p. 28), standardized test have been used to impede the social progress of African Americans for at least two centuries. They indicate that standardized college admissions tests such as the SAT are culturally biased against African Americans because the test require a working knowledge of the White-middle class experience (Fleming, 2000; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; SAT, College Entrance Examination Board, 1983).

Ford and Helms (2012), share that the use of standardized tests—for a plethora of things—is pervasive in the United States. The tests are used for things such as (a) grade promotions (b) high school graduation determinants (c) eligibility for gifted or special education services and (d) admission to postsecondary institutions. These are just some of the things that the test are used for, but these test are indicated as problematic for certain racial/ethnic group because of the existence of biases. There is also an awareness that some groups are able to prevail, in spite of certain biases.

Hamilton and Koretz (2002) provides an account of the genesis of the large scale standardized test and indicates that large scale external standardized testing in America dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is stated that the standardized Stanford Achievement Test battery was published in 1923 and has been a part of elementary and secondary education ever since this time. Initially, the test were used to assess individual students and curricula (Goslin, 1963; Goslin, Epstein, & Hallock, 1965) and not to monitor educational systems or hold schools accountable for student progress (Hamilton & Koretz, 2002; Hamilton, Stecher & Klein, 2002). However, the dynamics of standardized testing have changed over the years.

The transformation of testing to a large scale assessment began in the 1960's with the National Assessment of Educational Progress<sup>8</sup> (NAEP) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act<sup>9</sup>—currently known as No Child Left Behind Act. Standardized testing accelerated through testing program movements such as the minimum-competency movement and the education reform movement. Another reform wave in the standardized movement was the testing higher order skills movement. This movement was introduced in the 1990's after there were unfavorable outcomes—such as “teaching to the test” rather than making improvements in teaching—which were a part of the first wave. Standardized testing has grown to providing rewards for success and sanctions for undesirable performance. Some of these things are a part of the testing and accountability systems that states now have in place (Hamilton & Koretz, 2002).

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<sup>8</sup> A recurring assessment of a nationally representative sample of youth used to monitor aggregate academic Achievement (Hamilton, 2002; NAEP, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> This established the federal Title 1 compensatory education program and standardized achievement tests became a central means of evaluating these programs.

## **Standardized Testing Agendas**

The use of standardized tests is not always solely focused on measuring progress and mastery of certain subject matters for elementary and secondary students. Likewise, the tests are not always devoted to gauging eligibility for admission to postsecondary institutions. In the elementary and secondary arena, the tests are used to meet federal requirements and make certain factions—teachers, students, policymakers—accountable for school progress. The standardized test are also used for political purposes to show strides or failures in certain arears (McDonnell, 2002). In the postsecondary arena, Crosso’s (2015, August 11) blog post states that the use of standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT have become more of a financial status indictor rather than a college readiness or predictor of college success indicator. He advocates that more universities should join the “test optional” movement like George Washington University.

## **Standardized College Admission Examinations**

In the United States, the American College Test (ACT) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) are the primary standardized admission examinations used by most four-year colleges and universities. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)—also referred to as the Scholastic Assessment Test—is an examination that tests a student’s skills in reading, writing and math. The SAT grew out of concern for a universal way to assess students’ preparedness for college. Therefore, a group of American universities got together and formed the College Entrance Examination Board and developed and administered the first standardized exam in 1901. The establishment of this standardized test provided a tool for applicants to apply to several universities instead of one. The SAT organization indicates that the exam provides students with the opportunity to exhibit their problem solving and critical thinking skills which are needed for success in college (SAT, College Entrance Examination Board, 2015; Chun, 2012, July 23).

Hambrick (2014) reported, that SAT has redesigned its standardized test and it is expected to debut the product in the spring of 2016. This redesign is perhaps in response to fear of its competitor—ACT—as well as the concern that more colleges will adopt policies similar to Wake Forest, Brandeis, and Sarah Lawrence that are a part of the “test optional” admissions movement. As with most standardized test products, there are critics of the SAT and there are proponents of the test. The critics, of course, say that the test does not predict college success. Whereas, the proponents say that the test is a good indicator of college success. The SAT organization shared their research on the relationship between the SAT scores and college grades to substantiate their claim of the test as a predicting factor.

The American College Test (ACT) organization, on the other hand, touts the ACT as the most widely used tool by postsecondary institutions in the United States for admission and purports that its’ test is a good indicator of college success. The ACT, according to the ACT organization, was established by a University of Iowa professor—E. F. Lindquist. He is credited with establishing the ACT program in 1959. It was that same year the students participated in the first administration of the test. The ACT, in a nutshell, is a national college admission test which tests students in four general areas: English, Math, Science and Reading. The students may also test in writing, but this is optional. According to ACT, this admissions test is accepted by all four-year institutions in the United States (American College Test, 2006, 2015). In a report, *The Benefits of Statewide Use of the ACT® Test* (2006), it was indicated that state governments have been increasingly interested in the use of statewide testing of high school students. The ACT organization acknowledges that the interest and reasons vary by state, but one of the reasons for the interest in statewide testing emanates from the desire to improve postsecondary expectations.

Information and opinions regarding the use of standardized test such as the ACT vary from state to state and vary from year to year. The focus of this study is on the student's perspective of the ACT—a standardized examination in which students in Louisiana Public high schools are required to take in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. It is surmised that just as environment was a factor among those participating in the Stanford-Binet test, there will be differences in ACT outcomes and decisions among students from schools identified by the state as economically disadvantaged—which is 65% or more of the student population at the school qualifies for free and reduced price lunch—but who are from different regions of the state.

### **States with ACT Mandates**

On the ACT mandate front—or statewide adoption program, Colorado and Illinois are considered the pioneer states. These two states adopted the ACT mandate program in 2001 and have been considered leaders in the statewide assessment program for the past five years according to a 2006 report. Colorado used the ACT in the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) and Illinois used the ACT as part of its Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) for their eleventh grade public school students as an academic progress measure. In the 2007-2008 school year, Michigan replaced its Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) with the ACT for high school students. A case study, *Statewide Administration of the ACT: A Key Component in Improving Student Access to College and Work* (2009), which focused on Illinois and Colorado, indicates that since they implemented statewide testing they have realized: improvements in the number of students considering college, student academic achievement, student readiness for college and college enrollment and retention. At the time of this study, three other states in addition to Colorado and Illinois were participating in statewide administration of the ACT. The other three states were, Michigan, Wyoming, and Kentucky.

Illinois and Colorado were selected for the case study because of their long standing participation (American College Test, 2006, 2009; Sultan, 25 April, 2001).

In a report (American College Test, 2015), *Non-college bound students: A closer look* (2013), it is noted that public high school students, who are non-college bound, are less likely to take the steps necessary to participate in postsecondary education. As an example, the report shows that in 2004, 82% of the college bound graduates took the ACT or SAT, whereas, only 33% of the non-college bound students took the ACT or SAT. Again, the report examined outcomes for public high school students in Colorado and Illinois where all students took the ACT regardless of their post-high school plans. The report suggests that participation in a college entrance examination can help students with the college entrance process as well as identify areas of weakness, if applicable. Participation in the examination process can open doors of opportunity for students identified as noncollege-bound (Chen, Wu, Tasoff, & Weko, 2010b).

A longitudinal study (American College Test, 2015) of noncollege bound students who enrolled in college was conducted and a report was generated on their postsecondary outcomes. The study shows that between 2002 and 2004, about 453,000 Colorado and Illinois 11<sup>th</sup> grade students took the ACT, of this number, 4% (15,986) did not have plans to attend a postsecondary institution. However, 16% (2,605) of the noncollege-bound students eventually enrolled in a postsecondary institution.

In states with statewide adoption—or mandates—of the college entrance exam, it is noted that this allows a comparison of college readiness and outcomes for those students considered college bound to those identified as noncollege bound. The report showed that of those students who were considered noncollege bound and had average ACT composite score of 15.2, over 300

of them did not enroll in a postsecondary institution. Additionally, 2,047 of those with an average ACT composite score of 16.3 did enroll in a postsecondary institution, but did not complete a degree. However, 558 of the students with an average composite score of 18.4 did complete a postsecondary degree.

On the college readiness benchmarks, the study showed that of the noncollege bound group, 73% of the students did not meet any of the benchmarks. Of those students not meeting the benchmarks, but who enrolled in a postsecondary institution, only 2% completed a degree. This provides a glimmer of hope to students in this category to understand that it is possible to enroll in postsecondary education and realize some success. The study also points out that for some noncollege-bound student's, participation in the college entrance examination may be helpful in that it identifies academic weakness and strengths, which permits students to make adjustments in their academic plans (American College Test, 2008, 2015).

The state mandate to test public high school 11<sup>th</sup> graders is a phenomena that is trending in several states. In ACT's 2014 report for the graduating class of 2014, the following states has an estimated 100% of their graduates take the ACT: Colorado, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Tennessee, Utah and Wyoming. The ACT organization (2015) reported that in the spring of 2013, all public high school 11<sup>th</sup> graders in the states of Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Tennessee, and Wyoming were tested with the ACT as required. The states of Mississippi and Utah were not included with this group (American College Test, 2014). The Mississippi Department of Education's website ([mde.k12.ms.us](http://mde.k12.ms.us), 2015) shows that students classified as juniors will be administered the ACT starting with the 2014-15 school year. Utah State Office of Education's website (2015) indicates, in a press release, that Utah was among the

states that had all high school juniors take the ACT college entrance exam. The number of states participating in the statewide ACT mandate is fluid.

The ACT organization indicates that for the 2014–2015 school year, the following 18 states participated in statewide administration of the ACT to all of its public school eleventh grade students: Alabama, Colorado, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Wisconsin and Wyoming. It also indicated that the states of Alaska, Arkansas and Illinois— provide the ACT on an optional basis. (American College Test, 2015).

It is ironic that during a time when the public and certain lawmaking constituents are decrying that we are testing too much, the State of Louisiana has as a requirement for a test which may not be significant to a vast majority of students in this state. According to *The Condition of College and Career Readiness, Louisiana, 2014* (American College Test, 2014), in the State of Louisiana, 49,178 students took the ACT. The report indicates that this translates into approximately 100% of the 2014 graduating class being tested. This included students who were not necessarily a part of the college-bound population. Research at ACT has shown this to be a factor contributing to lower academic achievement in high schools. Especially, when a population that is not necessarily college-bound is included in test results. The report indicates that in the 2013 graduating class 85% of the students aspired to enroll in postsecondary education, but reportedly only 61% enrolled. The 2014 figure shows that the percent of those aspiring to enroll in postsecondary was around the same percent as the one in 2013. Average ACT composite scores for all racial/ethnic groups in the state, for the 2014 graduating class, indicate that over 40% or 21,242 students aspired to attain a bachelor's degree (American College Test, 2014).

Also, data from the *Five Year Trend* (2011-2015) table in this report, indicates that in the State of Louisiana, in 2013—the seminal year of the mandate, the ACT composite score was 19.5 as opposed to 20.3 the previous year (2012) and 20.2 in 2011. This was the introductory year of testing students with and without college aspirations. The data also indicates that nationwide in 2013, the ACT composite was 20.9 as opposed to 21.1 in 2012. It is reasonable to expect that if the average score in one or more states declined, that the overall average composite would decline. In 2014, the average composite score for Louisiana declined to 19.2, however, for the 2015 year, the average score for the state improved slightly to 19.4 (American College Test, 2015; Louisiana Department of Education, *louisianabelieves*, 2015).

The ACT organization extols that it provides an “equal-opportunity assessment” in that it prepares all students regardless of whether they plan to enroll in a postsecondary institution or enter the workforce. This, however, appears to be somewhat contradictory since the primary identifier for the ACT is generally that of being an indicator of college readiness and a tool for college admission (American College Test, 2015). However, it is realized that ACT produces other tests designed to measure other things.

Another Louisiana ACT issue surfaced on a blog post. A post on Diane Ravitch’s blog (2015) by Mercedes Schneider reveals that the ACT numbers for the “reformed” schools in New Orleans leave a lot to be desired. The data shows that with the implementation of a new Louisiana Board of Regents (*Minimum Admission Standards for First-Time-Freshman*) policy—which became effective fall of 2014 and requires a minimum score of 18 on the ACT in English (ACT English  $\geq$  18) and 19 in math (ACT Math  $\geq$  19)—the schools in the “reformed” Recovery District in New Orleans had less than stellar performance. Reportedly of 1,151 test takers in the 2014 ACT class, only 141 or 12.3%, met the new Board of Regents requirements for entrance

into Louisiana's four-year public institutions. The blog post further shows that, 89% of those 141 testers attended one particular high school in the district. Also of note is that the average ACT composite score for the schools in the district totaled less than 18. It is interesting that the ACT mandate was implemented in 2013—which for high schools, includes ACT composite outcomes from students with varying postsecondary intentions in their performance results and the Regents new standards became effective with the 2014 high school class. Could it be that as a state we are trying to increase college enrollment by including the ACT mandate factor—while on the other hand, are we affecting student's attainment of entrance into a four-year public institution with the Louisiana Board of Regents new elevated standards? In essence, there is still much work to be done.

A study conducted by Hyman (2014), with students in Michigan, examines the effect of the mandatory ACT on college enrollment, persistence and choice. According to Hyman, Michigan implemented the mandatory ACT requirement for its public high school juniors in 2007. Hyman's (2014) study revealed that of the students who are mandated to take the ACT, some of the students who are considered disadvantaged, do well on college entrance exams while others do not. He found that the place in which disadvantaged students are oftentimes lost in the shuffle, is in the college application process. He did not find a great disparity when comparing the number of students who are low to mid-level income taking the test in the absence of the policy. However, Hyman noticed an observable difference when he made a comparison of males, high poverty schools and poor students. In Hyman's calculations, he sees the mandate as being more cost effective when looking at the postsecondary effect of the mandate.

## College Enrollment Trends in Louisiana

Data from the Louisiana Department of Education's website (louisianabelieves, 2015), *2013- 2014 College Enrollment Report* shows high school graduation and postsecondary institution enrollment trends, since the implementation of the ACT policy statewide for public high schools have changed slightly compared to previous years. The college going enrollment data shows that in 2011-2012—prior to the mandate—of the 36,705 graduates, 29% enrolled in a 2 year institution the first fall after graduation and 71% enrolled in four-year colleges/universities. *The 2012-2013 College Enrollment Report* revealed that during the seminal year of the ACT mandate policy, 37,655 public high school students graduated statewide. Of this number, 58% of the graduates enrolled in college the first fall after graduation—2013. Thirty-two percent of these students enrolled in 2-year institutions and 68% enrolled in 4-year postsecondary institutions. In 2013-2014, of the 38, 785 high school graduates, 59% of the graduates enrolled in college the first fall after graduation—fall of 2014. Statewide, 34% of these graduates enrolled in 2-year institutions in the fall of 2014 and 66% of the graduates enrolled in 4-year institutions. In the capital city—Baton Rouge, East Baton Rouge Parish School District, for 2011-2012, 2012-2013, and 2013-2014, the data showed that the one identified academic magnet <sup>10</sup>high school in the district had the highest percent of students enrolling in 4-year institution in comparison to the non-academic magnet high schools in the district. There were six other high schools in the district in 2011-2012, 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 with greater percentage of its students enrolling in 4-year institutions rather than two year institutions during this time period (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015).

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<sup>10</sup> In 2012, there was a high school with magnet in the title; however, the Department of Education's designation for this school was—alternative school and not a selective admissions magnet.

### **States with ACT Policy Changes**

Changes are being made with the standardized testing procedure in the states of Illinois and Michigan. These two states have been ACT mandate states since 2001 and 2007, respectively, nonetheless, they are making ACT operational changes in different manners. The ACT has been a requirement for over a decade in the State of Illinois. However, in a January 2014, article in the *Chicago Tribune—Education Officials consider flunking ACT* (Rado, August 2014), it was indicated, that Illinois education officials were making preparation to discontinue their ACT mandate. Instead, Illinois plans to make the test voluntary. The indication was made that the state would provide the test at no charge to students who were economically disadvantaged. The State of Illinois has been one of ACT's largest and longstanding clients. Illinois will be exiting the group of states that provide the ACT free of cost to public high school 11<sup>th</sup> grade students. Illinois noted that some parents and students voiced appreciation for this policy because they benefited from making application to colleges without incurring the ACT cost. Regardless of this, the State of Illinois indicated that they would be discontinuing this practice. For the first time in over a decade—spring of 2015, Illinois will make the ACT for school districts voluntary (Rado, August 2014).

The State of Michigan—another mandate state since 2007— announced that beginning in the spring of 2016, it will be administering the SAT to its juniors rather than the ACT. It was noted that the bid from SAT was lower than the one from ACT. The state indicated that it would keep ACT's WorkKeys—which assesses workplace readiness skills. There were some in favor of the change and some who were not. One high school principal in Michigan stated that, "I've invested a lot of money and training into getting students ready to take the ACT." Another person commented that "The ACT was the one thing that was going to be a consistent

accountability piece for high schools.” The state superintendent, on the other hand, indicated that “The College Board’s SAT is respected and used around the country.” Another comment from an executive director shared that, the SAT was a better alignment to Common Core since Michigan is one of the states that have adopted Common Core (Higgins, 2015, January 8, p. 1). It is interesting that—although Louisiana has been a participant since 2013—as Louisiana joins the ACT mandate states, Illinois is making participation in the ACT voluntary and Michigan is switching to the SAT.

It was reported in 2016, that there is a controversy between the State of Illinois and the ACT organization. The dispute stems from a plan by the State of Illinois to institute the SAT instead of the ACT as the test for its 11<sup>th</sup> grade students. The State of Illinois recently changed from offering the ACT to all of its 11<sup>th</sup> graders to making it optional. Now Illinois is planning on offering the SAT to 11<sup>th</sup> grade students instead of the ACT. This has become an area of contention for the two entities (Rado, February 2016).

### **Testing Concerns and Ethics**

In Atlanta, it is reported that school officials resorted to changing answers on standardized test in an elementary school in an attempt to improve the school’s performance standing. These officials were recently convicted of felonies and accused of putting job protection first and not the children who they are charged with educating (*Chicago Tribune*, April 15, 2015; Ford, 2015). In the State of Nevada—spring of 2012—a teacher was accused of changing student answers on a standardized test in a low performing school to show an increase in school performance (Rindels, 2014, April 17, *US News Online*).

Prior to ACT being administered in Louisiana high schools, a cheating scandal was uncovered with college admission exams (Eltman, 2012, March 27, *US News Online*). It was

discovered that Long Island students were paying people to take the college entrance exams for them; therefore, ACT and SAT were prompted to make changes in the way they operate. The two companies agreed that in addition to having students submit photos of themselves when they arrived at the test, they would be required to submit a photo when they sign up for the test.

In Louisiana, the *Times Picayune* reported (Williams, 2015, February 20) that according to information obtained from the Louisiana Department of Education, during the 2013-2014 school year, cheating or potential cheating by students and administrator's was revealed in at least six schools. One of the incidences included a student taking a picture of a section of the test with their phone and posting it on Instagram for other students. Scandals such as these are just examples of what people will resort to doing when the performance stakes are perceived as high, because outcomes impact schools, districts, college entrance and in some instances employees. The existence of cheating scandals is nothing new. However, with the addition of test that are high stakes, the problem is exacerbated. Therefore, to think that Louisiana Department of Education officials might be encouraging standardized test result adjustments, as indicated in the *Louisiana Voice* blog, is a cause for concern:

Word coming out of the department is that LDOE employees were asked to cook the RSD books but LDOE staff members have refused to become a part of yet another cheating scandal. And given what has already transpired in Philadelphia, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Nevada, and other states, who could blame them:

In an article by Stringfield (2007), it was indicated that the way things are structured in the world, that practically everything is tied to a test score, to include whether a student is eligible for a magnet program or whether the student can attend a prestigious college or university. Aggregate test scores are also used for or against certain state and federal policies. Stringfield (2007) goes on to say that it is an assumption that test scores themselves are neither "good or "bad," but it is what's done to or with the data by individuals or groups with varying

agendas that determines the outcomes. Ultimately, each entity is expected to decide what works best for them and their stakeholders. To that end, in the State of Louisiana, there is a public outcry that data adjustments are being made or restructured to show different results for certain segments of the population, primarily to show different groups in different lights. In some instances, the portrayal is positive and in some instances not so positive. This information was part of what was reported in the Crazycrawfish<sup>11</sup> blog in 2013 and 2015.

*Are the RSD (Recovery School District) and LDOE (Louisiana Department of Education) actively covering up school wide test cheating that bolsters their performance?*

Posted on December 20, 2013

No matter how many statistics come from the Louisiana Department of Education showing the substantial gains in student achievement in New Orleans schools since 2005, there's a stubborn knot of naysayers who insist that the stats are the result of a conspiracy by a dishonest government and power-hungry reformers.

They seem to mourn the chaotic, inept, even corrupt system of schools that existed before Katrina finally gave state officials an excuse to seize most of them.

Posted on August 29, 2015

People take John White and LDOE at their word that RSD is doing outstanding. Independent analysis continues to show otherwise. RSD is not a separate agency from LDOE, it is a part of it.

We would never consider taking a teacher's word, alone, as proof they were the best teacher in the state. We don't let principals evaluate their schools for us and tell us how great they are or if they are struggling. We don't let any other districts in the state evaluate themselves except RSD, which is always self-evaluated as outstanding and revolutionary, every year. Yet even with all these "vast improvements" it still ranks at the bottom of our state by just about any positive metric you can find. And that, my friends, is before we even touch on all the scams they pull like exiting 10% more of their 9th grade cohorts out of the country than the sister, parish run district, located in New Orleans. That means that their grade rates, which are worst in the state, are a minimum of 10% lower than they've claimed. If a 50% graduation rate is what you are looking for, then RSD might be for you. It will cost you though. In the first years after the storm per pupil amounts were more than 4 times the average per pupil amount in the state.

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<sup>11</sup> Crazycrawfish-I am a former Louisiana Department of Education employee. I was one of the principal student data folks for the better part of a decade.

One of the primary problems with Louisiana's state-run, all-charter Recovery School District (RSD) is that the same state that is in control of data (and the official word on its data) is also committed to representing its state-run district in the best light. For this reason, independent analysis of data on Louisiana's schools is particularly valuable, especially when the researchers are able to procure data independently of the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE).

Such is the case of an analysis of student-level eighth-grade 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data by two researchers from the University of Arizona, Francesca Lopez and Amy Olson. The Lopez-Olson analysis is featured in this Network for Public Education (NPE) policy brief. Specifically, Lopez and Olson compared traditional public schools to see what notable differences there might be between charters and traditional schools on eighth-grade 2011 NAEP outcomes.

These are some of the things that generate concern from the general public and stakeholders about testing and governing bodies.

### **College and Universities with Test Optional Policies**

There are reports of a trend by four-year postsecondary institutions that they are gravitating towards the "test optional" policy in regards to using the ACT or SAT. This policy gives the student the option of submitting a standardized test score—which is a snapshot of the student's academic capabilities, or using a four year academic high school record for admission consideration (Wake Forest University, 2015; Temple University, 2015, & National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 2015). On The National Center for Fair and Open Testing blog (7 October, 2015), Public Education Director of the center—Bob Schaeffer stated that:

Proponents of 'No Child Left Behind,' 'Race to the Top,' and similar state-level programs promised that a focus on testing would boost college readiness while narrowing gaps between ethnic groups. SAT score trends show a total failure, according to their own measures. Scores have declined since 2006 for every group except Asians. Doubling down on unsuccessful policies with more high-stakes K-12 testing, as Common Core exam proponents propose, is an exercise in futility, not meaningful school improvement. Nor will revising the SAT, as currently planned, address the nation's underlying educational issues.

Schaeffer further states, that as states are focusing on standardized test such as ACT and SAT, a number of four-year postsecondary institutions are dropping the SAT or ACT exam as an entrance requirement. He added that institutions such as Wesleyan, Beloit, Temple, and Montclair State are joining the list of postsecondary institutions implementing the “test optional” policy.

An executive summary by this same organization in 2007 showed that in this country, over 800 four-year colleges and universities do not use the SAT or ACT to make admission decisions. This report is in tandem with a report by Hambrick (2014) which indicates a concern or fear by SAT that more and more colleges might become a part of the “test optional” movement like Wake Forest, Brandeis and Sarah Lawrence.

Temple University—a public institution in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and one of the “test optional” universities—had this information posted on its website regarding admission.

#### Introducing the “Temple Option”

Temple University is offering a new admissions path for talented students whose potential for academic success is not accurately captured by standardized test scores.

Students can continue to submit SAT or ACT scores as they have in the past; or, they can choose the Temple Option and submit self-reflective short-answers to a few specially designed, open-ended questions. The Temple Option gives them the opportunity to present their strengths in a different way.

Creating the Temple Option is part of our commitment to providing talented and motivated students of all backgrounds the opportunity for a high-quality college experience.

The university has instituted an interview process as a part of admission because they consider the student’s potential and intelligence to be based upon a myriad of things, work ethic being one. The institution indicates that numbers seldom provide a complete picture.

Also, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), students admitted to colleges and universities without the presentation of ACT or SAT scores, do just as well academically as those who submit scores. The organization further states that this

option—test optional—is especially valuable to students who are minority, first-generation, immigrants, learning disabled students and rural students (Wake Forest, 2015; NACAC, 2015).

In a report by the Lumina Foundation—*Race, Class, and Gender*—Espinosa, Gaertner and Orfield (2015), reveal that Baron and Norman (1992) indicate that according to research there is a weak link between standardized test performance and college success. On the other hand, Sackett et al (2012) indicate that this is not necessarily applicable in all situations. According to some entities, the use of “test optional” policy helps to enhance diversity in the college and university setting. Most admission professionals agree that postsecondary institutions should do what is best for the institution. While the use of standardized admission tests might be a good predictor of college success for some students and institutions, it may not be a good predictor for others.

### **Deficiencies/Limitations in the Literature**

There appears to be a significant gap in both the research conducted and in scholarly literature published addressing how students are affected or change their postsecondary trajectory, if applicable, based on mandated standardized college admission tests—as told by the students (Creswell, 2013; Daly, 2007). This is especially true for the students in the State of Louisiana. The accounts from students in schools with ACT mandates are generally reported in news articles. Most literature regarding states with mandates and the implications of the mandate is quantitative. However, some of the results present the mandate as being a positive factor—especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Goodman’s research (2012), initially, students from disadvantaged backgrounds had eligibility concerns relating to selective college enrollment admission. The study found that there were little numerical differences between disadvantaged students and other students and their capabilities when the

competitiveness factor was examined. The study indicated that there was an increase in selective college enrollment, but not an increase in overall college enrollment. In most of the literature reviewed, there are positive reports about minimal gaps between students who do well in high school—academically—and well on the ACT. The converse is also true in a lot of instances. However, student interest—or lack of interest—in postsecondary testing participation, their confidence about participating in postsecondary testing and the effect of mandated postsecondary tests on their postsecondary trajectories, are areas that needs to be explored (Goodman, 2012). Issues such as these precipitate qualitative research to seek answers.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

A qualitative case study was the selected methodological approach to explore the students' perception of the ACT mandate on their postsecondary decisions and/or trajectories. According to Johnson and Christensen (2014), a case is a bounded system and is the type of research which focuses on detailed accounts of one or more cases and usually relies on qualitative data. The case can be an event, process, a program or people and is one of the five methodological approaches in the qualitative paradigm. It is considered as a strategy of inquiry or a research strategy (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). The case study approach according to Stake (1995), lends itself to an exploration of the human experience. Scholar's viewpoints on case study research vary. Stake (1995; 2005), for instance, does not perceive case study research as one of the qualitative methodologies, but a choice of what is to be studied which is bounded by time and place. On the other hand, Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Merriam (1998) and Yin (2009) view case study research as a qualitative methodology that explores real-life situations and can be one bounded system—a case—or multiple bounded systems—cases, with detailed information collected from multiple sources. It can encompass a process, an organization, an individual or small group (Creswell, 2013). Johnson and Christensen (2014) indicate that case studies are seen as holistic entities that tell or relay a particular story. A case study approach was used because these two sites, in this study are inclusive of elements expressed by these scholars as being germane to case study research and it is a logical means to study and have input from those undergoing the process. The cases were two Louisiana Public high schools that were required to comply with a state regulation which became effective for Louisiana's public high schools, during testing in the spring of 2013

(Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2012; 2013;2014;2015). The regulation involved the mandatory participation of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students<sup>12</sup> in the American College Test (ACT) and the subsequent inclusion of the students' ACT results in the computation of the school performance-score (SPS)/letter grade—an indicator of a school's academic performance. Scores of students with college aspirations and without college aspirations are a part of the computation. The SPS/letter grade, for high schools that are comprised of grades below 9<sup>th</sup>, is calculated differently from a high school with grades 9-12. This is primarily because the components or indicators differ based on the school's grade configuration. In these two cases, the school's grade configuration was 9-12. Therefore, the performance score/letter grade—for these high schools<sup>13</sup> with grades 9-12—was calculated using these four indicators: graduation index (quality of diploma), the graduation rate/index, end-of-course (EOC) index and the ACT index (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, *Bulletin 111*, Title 28, §301, 2015).

The intent of this qualitative case study is to go beyond what is reported in data that is aggregated which shows the number of students tested and statistics such as, the number of students with college aspirations versus those who enroll (American College Test, 2015; NCES, 2015). This research sought to obtain information from those actually affected by the mandate to ascertain what actually affects their postsecondary decisions/trajectories and ultimately the postsecondary pipeline. In this particular instance, the most information rich source for this inquiry are the students themselves and a qualitative case study to examine this issue in at least

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<sup>12</sup> Exceptions are made for students identified with severe cognitive issues.

<sup>13</sup> According to the Louisiana Department of Education's website, the letter grade for high schools is determined using these components: "High schools (9-12): Half of the school grade is based on student achievement (25 percent on the ACT and 25 percent on End-of-Course assessments). Half of the school grade is based on graduation (25 percent on the graduation index, and 25 percent on the cohort graduation."

two different schools in different regions of the state—multisite case study—was a means to ascertain this information (Creswell, 2013; Daly, 2007).

Qualitative researchers tend to rely on the inductive mode of the scientific method, and the major objective of this type of research is exploration or discovery. This means that qualitative researchers generally study a phenomenon in an open-ended way, without prior expectations, and they develop hypotheses and theoretical explanations that are based on their interpretations of what they observed (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

The researcher used a critical theory lens to analyze and report the data. Qualitative research, in general, focuses on the perspective of the participant and their subjective (inductive) views. Scholars agree that this research paradigm goes between inductive (subjective) and deductive (objective) reasoning (Creswell, 2013; Daly, 2007; Hatch; 2002; Lecompte & Schensul, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). A qualitative case study was used for this study. The cases in this research were two economically disadvantaged schools and the participants were high school seniors who had participated in the ACT mandate process in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

Permission for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Louisiana State University prior to conducting the research. The researcher obtained parish/district contact information from the district's website. The website information was used to identify the district gatekeeper(s)—such as the district accountability contact/test coordinator. The research focused on seniors in two economically disadvantaged<sup>14</sup> schools in Louisiana in two different school districts who participated in the ACT mandate process. The schools and

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<sup>14</sup> Economically disadvantaged in this instance refers to a school with a population of 65% or more of its student's qualifying for free or reduced price lunch.

participants were solicited by contacting the district gatekeepers through email and via the telephone (Daily, 2007). After obtaining permission to access a school in each district, the school administrators—principal, guidance counselor, test coordinator or designee—were contacted through email and via the telephone to access the student participants. The guidance counselor (or designee) for the seniors was asked to announce the research opportunity to students with varying postsecondary intentions—such as plan not to attend college, undecided and plan to attend.

Student volunteers were obtained by the school counselor or the counselor's designee. Students who volunteered to participate in the research were asked to sign a consent form prior to being interviewed. The participants were also asked to complete a *Demographic Information Form* (Appendix C). The interviews were conducted with participants at the school site during normal school operation hours in a location designated by school personnel. The researcher used a seven question semi-structured questionnaire to interview each participant. The questionnaire was piloted prior to the interviews. Each participant's interview lasted no longer than 30 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded—with permission from the participants—and later transcribed. Each participant who volunteered was entered into a drawing for the opportunity to win a \$30.00 gift card.

A purposeful sample—meeting certain inclusion criteria—was used for this case study. A total of twelve high school seniors were interviewed—six from each of the two volunteering schools identified as economically disadvantaged. The high school seniors were considered to be information rich sources to provide an overall picture of how their postsecondary decisions were being influenced by the mandate. The participants were at least 18 years of age or older and had participated in the ACT in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. The two schools—cases—that were examined

were economically disadvantaged as determined by the Louisiana Department of Education using the standard of 65% or more of the student population in the school is eligible for free or reduced price meals. According to a post by The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2015) blog—*Free or reduced price lunch: A proxy for poverty?*—it is indicated that many of the free and reduced price students fall above the federal poverty threshold. The blog states that NCES characterizes a school as high poverty when more than 75% of its students are eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

Data from the Department of Education, Library-Data Center Enrollment Counts, Excel spreadsheet file—*Multiple Statistics by Site for Total Public Students—October 1, 2015*, captures the schools designated as economically disadvantaged and was used for the economically disadvantaged school determination. Although students from economically disadvantaged schools were targeted for this research, this did not mean that the participants who volunteered were economically disadvantaged—since the targeted schools were not 100% economically disadvantaged. It is realized that the mandate affects students from various socio-economic backgrounds, but the focus of the study was on students in economically disadvantaged schools. The economically disadvantaged schools were targeted primarily because the trajectory of most studies lead to students who are economically disadvantaged or of a lower socio-economic status as being one of the most vulnerable populations for postsecondary education entry and success. The postsecondary success expectation for this population generally is not favorable (American College Test, 2015; Espinosa, Gaertner, & Orfield, 2015; Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015). This may or may not always be the case, but an exploration of different sectors of economically disadvantaged schools may reveal different outcomes.

Research suggests (Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2001) that the chances of low-income and first-generation students attending a four-year institution, often depends on the rigor of their high school curriculum. Engle, Bermeo, and O' Brien (2006) found that in general, expectations, aspirations, and resources had an impact on students who were first-generation and students with limited financial resources. A study by Hanushek, Kain, and Markman (2012), in Australia indicates that the existence of a social hierarchy can be a contributor to postsecondary options. The research indicated that the success of students who are more privileged often comes at the cost of students from low socio-economic/economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Although this is not the only group that experiences hurdles in accessing postsecondary education, it is one of the most vulnerable groups. It is of interest to ascertain whether the ACT mandate provides a postsecondary education pipeline benefit for this group.

A multiple-case design—the same phenomena or issue explored in different high schools within the state—was used for this case study research (Daly, 2007; Yin, 2009). The framework that was used for this research is critical theory, this lens allows a look at how students in economically disadvantaged environments respond to educational forces and regulations that dominate them. The data collected in this case study allows the researcher to look for the emergence of themes, along with *a priori* themes related to these particular cases—two schools. A pragmatic lens was also used for this research (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This view lends itself to “what works” (Patton, 1990) and it is evident from the literature that what works in one state does not work in the other (Illinois Department of Education, 2015; Michigan Department of Education, 2015; Rado, 2014). Also, Creswell (2013) indicates that from a pragmatic view, in the sense of the education implications, this lens looks at intended consequences. The intended incorporation of the ACT

may be a factor contributing to influencing more students to pursue postsecondary education. On the other hand, as an unintended consequence, it may be a factor contributing to the production of lower or fluctuating school performance scores/letter grades for high schools.

To identify my role as researcher, according to the categories identified by Stake (1995), I identify as an evaluator and interpreter for these particular case studies. The intent is to look at more than one angle of the mandate process that has been implemented by the state. It should be noted that with most research, the researcher is not a tabula rasa because there are some preconceived notions about the perception of the mandate on students who have college aspirations versus those who do not (Anafar, 2006; Slife & Williams, 1995). However, when all facts are gathered, an evaluation as to whether the positives—such as massive postsecondary education participation—outweigh the negatives—such as lower school performance scores—may be made. Or, it may be determined that the change is minimal, nonexistent, or inconsequential. An interpretation and evaluation will be made based on the outcome, of the findings and what emerges from the interviews, as participants share information regarding the process and their experiences.

### **Population and Sample**

Two cases were examined in this study. The cases were two economically disadvantaged high schools in the State of Louisiana located in different geographical locations. In this study, the terms senior, student, and participant were used interchangeably. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling—meeting certain inclusion criteria. Specifically targeted as participants, for this research were twelve seniors—six from two different schools—with varying postsecondary intentions—college bound, not college bound, and undecided. The sample size was six student per site—case. The participants were students who were at least 18 years of age

and attended a high school<sup>15</sup> in the State of Louisiana identified as economically disadvantaged. The identification of seniors who are 18 or older was accomplished using school personnel verification and/or demographic information provided by the students. The sample included seniors who participated in the mandated ACT during the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Participation in the study was totally voluntary.

Access to the high school students was obtained through the school district's accountability contact/test coordinator or similar title. This person was considered the gatekeeper of the targeted population of study participants. The district gatekeeper provided the researcher with the connection to the guidance counselor at each school. The high school counselor or the counselor's designee made students aware of the research and the opportunity to become a volunteer participant. The counselor or designee provided the researcher with the volunteers—which helped to reduce biases during the participant selection process. Although, the target group was seniors with varying postsecondary intentions, the procurement of the various student types (college bound, not college bound and undecided) was not guaranteed, since research participation was voluntary. As an outcome of this procurement process, all of the participants in both cases, indicated that they had college aspirations, except one, who indicated that she did not plan to pursue a postsecondary education.

The researcher understands the tasks that districts have to incentivize students who do not have postsecondary aspirations to perform their best on the ACT, especially, since they do not have to achieve a particular score to satisfy graduation requirements. However, the score that the student achieves is computed as a part of the school performance score/letter grade for the school. If the student's composite score is below 18, a zero is included in the computation for the student. On the other hand, if the student scores 18 or better on a scale of 1- 36, the school

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<sup>15</sup> High school in this instance refers to schools with a grade configuration that includes only grades 9 – 12.

receives points ranging from 100.0 to 125.2 for the student in the computation of the ACT portion of the school performance score (H. E. Richard, personal communication, April 14, 2015; Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015). The researcher also has an appreciation of the effort on the part of the Louisiana Department of Education to provide an opportunity for students to possibly access postsecondary education as a result of their performance on the ACT along with meeting other admission criteria.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred in two high schools identified by the Louisiana Department of Education as economically disadvantaged using the measure of 65% or more of the student population being eligible for free or reduced price meals (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015). In order to obtain the ACT perception data, individual interviews were conducted with participants. The researcher used a seven question semi-structured interview protocol to collect data for the study from each participant.

The interviews were conducted during the school day, in the spring of 2016, at the volunteering schools. The study was conducted prior to spring 2016 testing. The students' identified as seniors for the 2015-2016, school year at these two schools were considered to be information rich sources for ascertaining the effect of the ACT mandate on them and their postsecondary decisions. Also, these student participants have participated in the mandated ACT administration and could provide information on the possibility of or the need for subsequent participation in another administration of the test (Daly, 2007; Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Each of the twelve students— six from each school—were asked questions during a one on one interview using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B) This provided feedback and a better understanding of the research questions and the mandate process effect.

The students were also asked to complete a *Demographic Form* (Appendix C) to enhance the information provided from the interview. Pseudonyms were used for the names of the schools as well as the names of the participants in the study.

These questions were used to help guide the research

#### Research Questions

1. How do students who do not have college aspirations perceive the ACT mandate?
2. How do students who do have college aspirations perceive the mandate?
3. What do students in economically disadvantaged schools think of the ACT mandate? Do they perceive the mandate as being a factor in their postsecondary enrollment decision?

It is hoped that the information obtained from those affected by the policy will provide the necessary evidence to guide secondary and postsecondary education governing bodies to do what's best for Louisiana students, citizens and the state as a whole.

#### Data Analysis

Written consent and permission to record the interviews was obtained from each participant prior to the interview. Upon obtaining permission from the participant, the recorded interviews were self-transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings and the information on the *Demographic Information Form* (Appendix C) was analyzed. Each interview lasted no longer than thirty minutes. The self-transcribed interviews and responses were analyzed to detect themes and patterns from the information obtained. The researcher used field notes and memoing during the data analysis phase of the study. The transcripts were coded based on the themes identified, those that emerged and *a priori* themes. Pseudonyms were assigned for the names of the research participants and the names of the schools in both of the cases. The validity

and reliability of the data was established using transferability and referential adequacy. Data reported by the State of Louisiana—Louisiana Department of Education—was also used and incorporated into the document analysis phase of this research (Anfara, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Daly, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

During data analysis, all aspects of the mandate and its implementation was not perceived as negative—such as the use of school time and resources to prepare students and incentivize them to participate in a test which is not a graduation determinant. Nor were all of the experiences and perceptions of the mandate positive—such as the inclusions of all 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in the ACT testing process. It was ascertained via personal communications (H. E. Richard, April 14, 2015; M. H. Smith, April 15, 2015), that in addition to students participating in the state funded ACT, some districts provide additional ACT opportunities and ACT preparation classes for students at no expense to them. This depends on the district and the resources available.

The ACT preparation courses and the provision of additional test taking opportunities can be beneficial to both the student and the high school, especially if the student obtains a higher ACT score on a subsequent administration. A higher score, depending on the score, could translate into additional points in the ACT index and a better school performance score/grade. For the student, a higher ACT score—depending on what the score is—could translate into the student qualifying for admission into a four-year postsecondary institution (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2015; Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015). Another factor that will probably impact ACT outcomes and the postsecondary pipeline is the seriousness of the student about the ACT process and their seriousness about postsecondary education. For example H. E. Richard, personal communication, April 14, 2015, indicated that some students

were intentionally absent during ACT testing. A school administrator expressed that because something works in one state does not necessarily indicate that it is a good practice for the schools in the State of Louisiana (M. H. Smith, personal communication, April 15, 2015). This research through interviews with students is intended to provide insight on what is working and affecting their decisions and what is not.

### **Limitations**

Some of the obstacles or limitations of this study were obtaining volunteers with varying postsecondary intentions—college bound, those who are not college bound, as well as those who are undecided. Also, because of certain regulations, such as FERPA<sup>16</sup>—Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (Ed.gov, 2015), it is difficult to know whether a particular student is economically disadvantaged and it can be challenging to obtain other student specific information. Even though a student is in a school which is identified as economically disadvantaged, the disclosure of their economic status and other information may be prohibited. The *Demographic Information Form* (Appendix C) assisted with providing more in-depth information about the student participants. The opportunity to examine the effect of the mandate on postsecondary education on a cohort is not an option at this point. This is due to the fact that not enough time has lapsed since the state initiated participation for the cohort to complete a four-year postsecondary education program.

### **Biases**

The researcher acknowledges that there are some biases on the part of the researcher in that the researcher formerly worked with the state agency which serves as the governing and policy making body for local school districts. The researcher also worked with district personnel

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<sup>16</sup> FERPA protects student educational records. At the age of 18 the rights under FERPA transfer from the parents to the student.

throughout the state while in the state agency position. Therefore, the researcher can see the viewpoint of the mandate from the state agency standpoint as well as from a district point of view—emic and etic. The researcher has an appreciation of the potential effect of the ACT mandate on a school's performance score/letter grade as well as an appreciation for the efforts by the Louisiana Department of Education for including the ACT as a requirement for public high school students as a potential catalyst for postsecondary education (Creswell, 2013; Daly, 2007). The researcher bias was controlled as much as possible.

### **Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board Approval**

Permission for the study was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Louisiana State University. The approved application is included in Appendix A.

### **Summary**

A qualitative approach was the appropriate method for examining how students perceive—from their experiences—the effect of the ACT mandate on their postsecondary decisions. Creswell (2013) and Daly (2007) indicate that qualitative research aims for depth over breadth, which was the goal of this research, since the ACT mandate is a relatively new phenomenon in this-state.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Beginning in the spring of 2013, public high school 11<sup>th</sup> grade students were required by the State of Louisiana to participate in the American College Test (ACT) regardless of their postsecondary aspirations (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, *Bulletin 111*, 2013; 2014; 2015). The purpose of this study was to ascertain, from Louisiana high school seniors, the perceived effect of the State Department of Education's ACT mandate on their postsecondary trajectory or their postsecondary decisions. The research questions also guided the examination of how students with postsecondary and without postsecondary aspirations in economically disadvantaged environments perceived the mandate.

### Case One-Marson High School

#### Demographic Information

Marson High School is described as a suburban school located in a district identified by the Louisiana Department of Education as economically disadvantaged<sup>17</sup> according to the *Multiple Statistics by LEA, October 1, 2015, Report*. More than 65% of the district's students qualify for free or reduced price meals. Also, more than 75% of the students at Marson High School qualify for free or reduced price meals and according to the *Multiple Statistics by Site, October 1, 2015, Report*, the school has been identified as an economically disadvantaged school<sup>18</sup>. The student enrollment at the school is over 900 and is comprised of students from various racial ethnic backgrounds (Asian, African American/Black, Hispanic, White, Two or more races/multiple races, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and American Indian) according to the information reported by the Department of Education in the, *Multiple Statistics by Site for Total*

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<sup>17</sup> The percentage of economically disadvantaged is not reported exactly as shown by LDOE data--*Multiple Statistics by LEA, October 1, 2015, Report* to avoid identification of the district.

<sup>18</sup> This information is not reported exactly as shown on the report to avoid identification of the school.

*Public Students, October 1, 2015, Report.* In this data report, the Department of Education notes that, in an effort to comply with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) the numbers reported for some of the racial/ethnic category have been modified and/or suppressed for student data privacy reasons. At Marson High School, two of the racial/ethnic groups were reported as containing less than ten members. Also, according to the *Multiple Statistics by Site for Total Public Students, October 1, 2015, Report*, Marson High School has more than 50% female students and more than 45% male students (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015).

The study participants included two males and four females who had participated in the ACT in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. According to the information reported by the participants on the *Demographic Information Form* (Appendix C), they represented two racial/ethnic groups. One participant identified as being two or more races (multiple races) and the other participants identified themselves as being African American/Black. The participants in the study were all at least 18 years of age. Using the household size information (1-4, 5-8, and 9 or more) on the *Demographic Information Form*, the reported incomes, and the federal guidelines (Child Nutrition Program, Income Eligibility Guidelines for Free and Reduced Meals, 2014, 2015), three of the participants who reported this information, qualified for either free or reduced price meals. Two participants reported that the household income was unknown and one participant did not indicate household information. The household size for five of the participants was in the one to four household size range and the household size for one participant was in the five to eight range. None of the participants reported household sizes above eight.

The educational levels of the parent(s)/step parent(s)/ guardian(s) of the participants ranged from N/A<sup>19</sup> to graduate school. For the educational level of the mother, one participant reported N/A, one participant reported that her mother obtained a GED, one participant reported that her mother completed high school, but was currently attending a community college, another participant reported that her mother had completed some college and two participants reported that their mother's completed college. The educational level of the father ranged from unknown<sup>20</sup> to graduate school. One participant reported unknown, two participants reported elementary school as the highest educational level completed, one reported college as being the highest educational level and two other participants reported graduate school as the highest educational level their father's completed.

### **Marson High's—School Performance Score/Letter Grade**

The School Performance Score (SPS) for schools with grades 9-12 is comprised of four components—each represents 25% of the SPS/letter grade. The ACT index is derived from student ACT outcomes. Over the past four years, Marson High School's letter grade has ranged from a C to a B. According to the *School Report Card* on the Louisiana Department of Education's website (2015; 2016), the SPS/letter grade for Marson for the 2014-2015<sup>21</sup> school year was a B. The letter grade the previous school year—2013-2014—was a C and the letter grade for the seminal year of the mandate—the 2012-2013 school year was a C. The year prior to the ACT mandate, the letter grade for Marson High School was also a C (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, *Bulletin 111*, Title 28, §301, 2015; *School Report Cards*, 2015).

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<sup>19</sup> N/A indicates that the participant did not have information about that parent and/or the parent was absent from the household.

<sup>20</sup> Unknown indicates that the participant did not have information about that parent.

<sup>21</sup> School Performance Score or letter grade results are generally not compiled and released to the public until the fall semester succeeding the prior school year.

## **Students' Ideas of the Effect of ACT Scores on the High School's SPS/Letter Grade**

ACT composite score have implications for students' postsecondary enrollment in certain institutions<sup>22</sup> and the score has implications for a school's SPS/letter grade. Although the focus of this study was not on students' ACT outcomes and their effect on the school's performance score (SPS)/letter grade, the researcher inquired about the students' cognition of the effect of their performance on their high school's letter grade. Timothy said "It probably didn't impact it, because I didn't do well on it." Karen indicated that "I'm not quite sure if it really matters... I thought it was like our EOC<sup>23</sup> score, but I guess it does matter." She went on to say that "Ours is probably low because we score low, not too many of us make above a 20." Another student Bailey said, "I can't really answer that question...if you are smart, and pay attention, you should be able to get a good grade." Although the participants were not explicit in their description of the ACT and its implications to the performance score/letter grade for their school, five of them were cognizant of trying to attain scores of 18 or above.

The ACT composite score outcome of students is a factor contributing to the ACT index of the SPS/letter grade. If a student earns a composite score below 18, a zero is included in the ACT index for the school, if a student scores 18 or above, the points included in the ACT index range from 100 (composite score of 18) to 150.4 (composite score of 36). Based on the participant's responses, the effect of their ACT outcomes on the SPS/letter grade is not well-defined.

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<sup>22</sup> Some colleges and universities have adopted a test optional policy which gives the student the option of submitting an ACT or SAT score to the postsecondary institution for admission consideration.

<sup>23</sup> EOC refers to the End-of-Course exams that students take and have to score *fair* or above in certain subject categories to meet graduation requirements.

## ACT Performance Outcomes and Academic Test Preparation

According to the *2014-2015 School Report Card* for Marson High School, the average ACT score was 17.2<sup>24</sup>. Of the study participants—2015-2016 seniors—five of the participants reported ACT scores below 18 and one participant reported a score in the 18-24 composite range, as indicated by the ACT composite range selected on the *Demographic Information Form*. During the interview, the student who scored in 18-24 range, said that she had taken the ACT five times and that the highest composite score that she has been able to attain, to this point, is 20. The ACT outcomes and postsecondary intentions of the participants at Marson High are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Marson High's Participants ACT Outcomes and Postsecondary Intentions

Name of Participant	ACT Score Range	Postsecondary Intentions	
		Planning to attend college	Not Planning to attend college
Bailey	0-17	x	
Harriet	18-24	x	
Karen	0-17	x	
Timothy	0-17	x	
Tracey	0-17	x	
Warren	0-17	x	

*Note.* Pseudonyms are used for the school name and the participants. Harriet had already been accepted into a four-year postsecondary institution at the time of the study.

It was ascertained that all of the participants planned to retake the ACT in the spring. Marson High's students, who retake the ACT in the spring, have an opportunity to have their

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<sup>24</sup> This figure is based on all 12<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled. The students who graduated in 2014-2015, were 9<sup>th</sup> graders or entered the graduation cohort in the 2011-2012 school year.

highest ACT score included in the school's ACT index. The Department of Education policy indicates that it makes every effort practicable to include the student's highest ACT score. However, if the highest score is below 18, the school will get a zero in the ACT index for that student (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, *Bulletin 111*, 2015).

When participants were asked specifically about academic preparation for the ACT, based on their responses—all of the participants recognized that preparation was important and that there was a connection between academic preparation and performance. However, the participants' responses varied. All of the study participants indicated that Marson High School was offering ACT preparation during the day and after school for the current—2015-2016—school year. One participant indicated that the after school ACT tutoring just started during the 2015-2016 school year.

Timothy said that he was currently in an ACT preparation course, but he did not have access to a preparation class before he took the ACT in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>25</sup>. Bailey, who was attending another school her 11<sup>th</sup> grade/junior year indicated that her former school really did not have an ACT preparation course or anything to help them with the ACT. The school also did not place emphasis on the ACT until a couple of weeks prior to test. She emphasized “I don't want to put them down,” but she did not think that two weeks prior to the test was adequate preparation time. She also said that there is an ACT preparation class at Marson High, but she was not able to attend it, because it was full. Karen said “I don't feel like I was prepared right or taught the materials that was supposed to be on the ACT. I feel like they focused more on the material that was on the EOC more than the ACT.” She also indicated that she thought Marson High School had an ACT preparation class her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, but she was not enrolled in it. She also said that she thought the school didn't stress the importance the ACT until her 11<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> grade is the grade in which students are required to take the ACT.

grade year and she did not feel that was enough time for her to comprehend what she needed or as she said “Get what I was supposed to get.” Warren said “I took a course last year that kind of helped on certain parts of the test. I mean it mainly helped on the English part.” There was a discrepancy among participants about whether test preparation was offered during their 11<sup>th</sup> grade year, but there was a consensus that the school is offering ACT test preparation their 12<sup>th</sup> grade/senior year. Currently, ACT preparation classes are offered at the district’s/school’s discretion.

### **ACT Test Perceptions-Elation, Fear and/or Anxiety**

Feelings of anxiety and stress are not new to testing and they did not vanish in the Marson High case. The participants at Marson shared a range of emotions with the researcher when they were asked about their thoughts on the ACT requirement. In one participant’s description of her thoughts about the requirement, she said “I was kind of excited and a little bit worried.” Harriet said—when she learned of the ACT high school requirement—“I was scared because everybody said the test was hard.” Bailey said that a lot of students were upset when they learned of the requirement. She indicated that —although she makes good grades—she doesn’t have a lot of confidence in herself and she feared that she would not do well on the ACT. Warren said, “Ah, man, it’s too much to handle.” Research (Ryan, K., Ryan, A., Arbuthnot, & Samuels, 2007; Crocker, 1988; Hembree, 1988; Smith, Arnkoff & Wright, 1990) indicates that there is a relationship between test anxiety and lower achievement on tests. The research shows that negative perceptions of tests and fear, contribute to lower self-efficacy and can increase test anxiety. They say that there are two components of test anxiety, *worry* and *emotionality*. The former, *worry* is categorized as a cognitive reaction and the latter, *emotionality* is categorized as a physiological reaction. The participants in this case voiced experiencing reactions in both of

these categories. Although a range of emotions were verbalized, all of the participants expressed their determination to pursue a postsecondary education.

### **Student Voices on the ACT as a High School and Postsecondary Education Requirement**

The voices of the students at Marson High School, expressed their reaction and response to a process and policy that has been implemented by dominant forces—the governing authorities for K-12 public education—that requires them to conform (Louisiana Department of Education; louisianabelieves, *Bulletin 111*, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). All of the participants indicated that if the ACT was not a requirement for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students and it was not provided by the state/school free of charge<sup>26</sup> they were willing to incur the cost for taking the test, because attending a four-year postsecondary institution was their goal. Harriet indicated that she had already taken the ACT and absorbed the cost. The other five participants said they would not mind absorbing the cost, if necessary. One of the participants added, “I think it’s a smart investment.”

Tracey said that she learned about the ACT requirement from her teachers and the students her freshman year, which was the 2012-2013<sup>27</sup> school year. Some of the things that she heard from some of her peers were that “the ACT was hard and some of them said that it was easy.” She said, referring to the test, “It was like a different language.” “They don’t speak like the way that we speak on tests.” In reference to what’s the ACT encompasses and what they are taught at school, Warren said “It doesn’t fit the standards.” Timothy said, “The ACT shouldn’t determine whether you go to college or not.”

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<sup>26</sup> The state/school absorbs the cost for at least one administration of the mandated ACT for 11<sup>th</sup> graders.

<sup>27</sup> The participants in this study were a part of the cohort that entered 9<sup>th</sup> grade—High school—the seminal year of the mandate.

When questioned about the ACT being mandatory<sup>28</sup> for students who were not planning to a postsecondary education, the participants had different opinions. Some of them thought that students should be empowered to make their own choice, whereas, other participants perceived the mandate as an opportunity for the students to pursue another path (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Timothy said, “I think they should have a choice to take it. If they don’t want to go to college, they shouldn’t have to take it.” Warren echoed this sentiment, he indicated that students should be asked whether they want to go to college or not. If they are interested in going then, they should participate in the ACT otherwise, he says “Leave them be and let them do what they want to.” Bailey said she had more than one opinion about the ACT requirement “If they don’t want to take it, then don’t make them. They can start life the hard way or easy way, they are old enough to choose.” The other opinion she had was that if students have the opportunity to take the ACT at no cost to them, they should take it. She said “Give it a try, you never know what might happen.”

Tracey was another participant who vacillated between requiring students to take the ACT and not requiring them. She said “I think they shouldn’t make them if they don’t plan to attend college.” On the other hand, she thought, if they take the ACT and score well, she said, “The score may change their mind.” Karen didn’t think that students should take the ACT if they weren’t going to college, she said, “It’s useless for them to take the test if they are not going to use it.” Harriet thoughts encompassed a different direction when she suggested that those not interested in going to college should put anything on the test as a response. She said, “I think you should make everybody take it at school. I think those people who are not going to college, should take it anyway. But, if you don’t care, just put anything.”

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<sup>28</sup> In this study the reference to postsecondary education is to a four-year college.

Workkeys<sup>29</sup> will become a part of the ACT index beginning with the 2015-2016 accountability results. This assessment may address some of the issues for students who do not plan to pursue a four-year postsecondary education as well as for schools who administer the ACT to students who do not plan to attend college, but their test outcomes are included in the ACT index.

### **A Change in Plans or Proceed as Planned**

The researcher asked the participants about the effect of the ACT on their postsecondary decisions or trajectories. All six of the participants indicated that they planned to attend college after high school, regardless of the ACT mandate. It was ascertained from the participants that more than the mandatory ACT affecting their postsecondary decisions, was the ACT itself. Because of their ACT outcomes and the admission requirements for certain<sup>30</sup> four-year postsecondary institutions, participants indicated that postsecondary education alternatives are being explored, to include, retaking the test, community college or the military.

Tracey said that “The ACT is hurting my decision to go to college.” She said that she expected to achieve an ACT score of 18 or higher, but she did not. Consequently, she may have to enlist in the Air Force to achieve her educational goal. In the interview with Harriet, she divulged that her postsecondary education path or trajectory had changed. She had planned to attend a flagship institution and get scholarships. “I had to change my plans,” Harriet said. I am now accepted at New University—which is a four-year university, she said I went from Flagship University to New University because of an ACT score. Harriet did indicate that she is planning to take the ACT one more time.

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<sup>29</sup> Workkeys is designed to assess work skills and will become a part of the ACT index beginning in 2015-2016 with the spring test administration (ACT, 2015; Louisiana Department of Education; 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Some colleges and universities have adopted a test optional policy which gives the student the option of submitting an ACT or SAT score for admission consideration.

Warren said “I am not about to let a test get me down.” He said although he had planned to attend a four-year institution, he does not mind as he says, “starting at like a community college and then work my way up” provided his spring 2016 ACT score does not warrant admission to a four-year postsecondary institution. Exhibiting his determination, he added, “But, I’m going to go for this test again.” Bailey said that she makes good grades, but her ACT score does not reflect her grades. She said, “My first plan was to go to a four-year university.” Now, she is planning to attend a community college first and then transfer to another institution. Timothy was adamant about pursuing his postsecondary education at a four-year institution. He seemed to be determined. He said “I’m going to college even if I have to do community college first and then transfer.” Karen said that because of the ACT and her performance, she is not going to be able to attend the college of her choice, she said that I will “settle for somewhere else.”

All six of the participants were determined to get their college/postsecondary education. All of them had plans to retake the ACT in the spring, but at this point, four of them were pursuing the community college route, one the Air Force and one the four-year institution route, even though it was not the institution of choice.

Of the six participants interviewed, who had participated in the mandatory ACT, it was evident that their decisions regarding their plans after high school graduation were already made—regardless of the mandate. All of the participants planned to attend a four-year institution. However, the results from the ACT seem to have changed the trajectory for some students, but it did not alter their determination. This was evidenced by the participants indicating that they would enroll in a community college first and transfer to a four-year postsecondary institution or enlist in the military to fulfill the educational goals. Research by

Cox (2016) shows that postsecondary education plans are often changed for students from low socioeconomic (economically disadvantaged) backgrounds because of their life situations. Due to the fact that income information was not reported by all participants, it was not determined whether all of these participants in Case One were considered economically disadvantaged, but some of them were, based on the information reported.

## **Case Two-Cardy High School**

### **Demographic Information**

Cardy High School is described as a suburban school located in a district identified by the Louisiana Department of Education as economically disadvantaged,<sup>31</sup> since over 65% of the district's students qualify for free or reduced price meals, according to the *Multiple Statistics by LEA, October 1, 2015, Report*. Also, more than 78% of the students at Cardy High School qualify for free or reduced price meals; therefore, according to the *Multiple Statistics by Site, October 1, 2015, Report*; the school has been identified as an economically disadvantaged school<sup>32</sup>. The student enrollment at the school is over 475<sup>33</sup> and is comprised of students primarily from the African American/Black racial ethnic background. There are ten or less students from other racial ethnic backgrounds—Asian, Hispanic, Two or more races/multiple races, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and American Indian, except White. In the White racial/ethnic group, there were ten or more students enrolled from this racial/ethnic background. The numbers reported by the Department of Education have been modified and/or suppressed for student data privacy reasons as an effort to comply with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act

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<sup>31</sup> The percentage of economically disadvantaged is not reported exactly as shown by LDOE data to avoid identification of the district and school.

<sup>32</sup> This information was obtained from the library on the LDOE's website, data center-enrollment counts.

<sup>33</sup> This is according to the *2014-15 School Report Card* and the *Multiple Statistics by Site for Total Public Students, October 1, 2015, Report*.

(FERPA). Cardy High School has more than 50% male students and more than 44% female students (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015).

The study participants were five females and one male who had participated in the ACT in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade as mandated. According to the information reported on the *Demographic Information Form* (Appendix C), the participants in this study represented one racial/ethnic group. All of the study participants identified themselves as being African American/Black. The participants were all at least 18 years of age, it was ascertained that two of them were 19 years of age. Using the household size information (1-4, 5-8, and 9 or more) on the *Demographic Information Form*, the reported incomes, and the federal guidelines (Child Nutrition Program, Income Eligibility Guidelines for Free and Reduced Meals, 2014, 2015), two of the participants who reported this information, qualified for either free or reduced price meals. Three participants reported that the household income was unknown and one participant did not qualify for free or reduced price meals based on household size and reported household income. The household size for four of the participants was in the one to four household size range and the household size for one participant was in the five to eight range. One of the participants reported their household size in the nine or more range.

The educational levels of the parent(s)/step parent(s)/ guardian(s) of the participants ranged from unknown<sup>34</sup> to college. For the educational level of the mother, four participants reported the completion of high school, and two participants reported that their mother's had completed some college. The educational level of the father ranged from unknown to college. One participant reported unknown, two participants reported high school as the highest

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<sup>34</sup> Unknown or N/A means either that they did not have information about that parent and/or the parent was absent from the household.

educational level completed, one reported some college and two participants reported college as the highest educational level completed by their father's.

### **Cardy High's—School Performance Score/Letter Grade**

The ACT index represents 25% of Cardy High's School Performance Score (SPS)/letter grade and is derived from student ACT outcomes. Over the past four years, Cardy High School's letter grade has ranged from a D to a C. In 2011-2012, the year prior to the mandate, the school's letter grade was a D. In 2012-2013<sup>35</sup>, the seminal year of the mandate the school's letter grade was a D. In 2013-2014, the school's letter grade was a D and in 2014-2015, the school's letter grade was a C.

### **Students' Ideas of the Effect of ACT Scores on the High School's SPS/Letter Grade**

Since the ACT outcomes for students are included in the computation of the school's letter grade, the researcher inquired about student's cognition of the effect of their scores on the SPS. This, however, was not the focus of this study. Barbara said, in reference to the ACT and the impact on the school's letter grade, "having a C as our grade, it comes from ACT's, it comes from our graduation rate, it comes from overall with the EOC's, it comes from.....it's just overall. Like every part plays its aspect in getting that C." Ruth indicated that "by us making a better score on the ACT, it helps out." Annie said, "It impacts our school because the ACT is really about what you have learned and what we need to know." Constance said, "It is a certain percentage of the school's letter grade." Based on the responses, all six of the participants had an idea of how their ACT scores were incorporated into their school's performance score/letter grade and understood that there was a relationship between their ACT performance and the SPS/letter grade their school received.

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<sup>35</sup> The point scale for the letter grades also changed from a 200 point system to a 150 point system during The 2012-2013 school year

## ACT Performance Outcomes and Academic Test Preparation

According to the *2014-2015 School Report Card* for Cardy High School, the average ACT score was 17.6<sup>36</sup>. Five of the study participants— 2015-2016 seniors—reported ACT scores below 18 as indicated by the ACT composite range selected on the *Demographic Information Form*. One student scored in the 18 -24 ACT composite score range. During the interview, it was ascertained that the participant who scored in this range was planning to retake the ACT during the spring. Also, three other participants indicated that they were planning to retake the test and one participant had already taken it again.

The ACT outcomes and postsecondary intentions of the participants at Cardy High are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Cardy High's Participants ACT Outcomes and Postsecondary Intentions

Name of Participant	ACT Score Range	Postsecondary Intentions	
		Planning to attend college	Not Planning to attend college
Annie	0-17	x	
Barbara	0-17	x	
Charles	18-24	x	
Constance	0-17		x
Naomi	0-17	x	
Ruth	0-17	x	

*Note.* Pseudonyms are used for the school name and the participants. Charles had already been accepted into a four-year postsecondary institution at the time of the study.

The one participant, who indicated, during the interview, that they did not plan to attend college, did not indicate that they would re-test. This participant also indicated *undecided* on the

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<sup>36</sup> This figure is based on all 12<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled. The students who graduated in 2014-2015, were 9<sup>th</sup> graders or entered the graduation cohort in the 2011-2012 school year.

*Demographic Information Form* when asked about going to college after high school (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, *Report Cards*, 2015).

When participants were asked specifically about academic preparation for the ACT, all six of the participants indicated that Cardy High School provides assistance in helping them prepare for the ACT during the school day. Five of the participants mentioned that the school offers ACT preparation on Saturday. The Saturday classes are not mandatory, but the students can volunteer to attend. It was ascertained that five of the six participants attended ACT preparation classes on Saturday's.

Barbara indicated that the school includes ACT tips, practice and drills throughout her classes. She said that if you are not able to attend the ACT preparation class on Saturday, this does not mean that you don't get the ACT exposure. She said "They try to inform you just a little bit at school in the curriculum." Ruth mentioned that sometimes it's a challenge getting the academic preparation you need in certain subjects due to teachers quitting. She said that in her English class, they do tests that are timed, which helps to prepare her, she added, "I have to learn how to work with time." Based on responses from the participants from Cardy High School, they are getting ACT exposure by watching videos, practice tests, participation in an ACT Camp last year, ACT preparation classes on Saturday's and the provision of ACT tips.

### **ACT Test Perceptions—Elation, Fear and/or Anxiety**

Feelings of apprehension were expressed in the Cardy High School case. Test anxiety by test takers is not a new phenomenon and participants at Cardy High School were not exempt from these feelings. The study participants expressed a range of emotions about standardized tests. Research conducted by K. Ryan, Ryan, Arbuthnot, and Samuels (2007), shows that when students' have fears about their ability to perform on tests, this contributes to lower self-efficacy

and increased test anxiety. The research also showed that lower achievement on tests is related to high test anxiety which could account for some of the outcomes at Cardy High School.

Four of the participants expressed a general fear when they heard about the ACT requirement. They said that they were scared and stressed. On the other hand, Annie perceived the ACT in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade as an opportunity. She said “it was better because it gives us time to get our score up before 12<sup>th</sup> grade.” Barbara viewed the ACT as wreaking havoc for her, because it reminded her of the LEAP (Louisiana Educational Assessment Program) test which was a test that students had to pass to be promoted to the next grade. She said that the stakes are even higher since this was determining college admission. She said that it is hard and really stressful for any student that is trying to attend college. She added that she has good grades, but doesn’t do well on standardized test.

Ruth said “I was scared to take the test” she alluded to the fact that she did not have confidence in herself and doubted that she could do well. Naomi said “I get like really nervous when it’s time for mandatory or big tests.” She said “I just freeze.” She expressed that she did not have confidence in her ability to perform well on tests. Her expectation was that she would not do well. As she elaborated, she said “I don’t like tests.”

The fear and anxiousness experienced by participants may be attributed to what Steele (1997) refers to as *stereotype threat*. This is a social psychological theory which contends that performance on standardized test is linked to students’ perception of how they are judged as a group—stereotyped. This was found to be a factor contributing to poor standardized test performance—especially for Black students.

## **Student Voices on the ACT as a High School and Postsecondary Education Requirement**

The voices of the students at Cardy High School, expressed their reaction and response to a process and policy that has been implemented by dominant forces—the governing authorities for K-12 public education—that requires them to conform (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Ruth said that when she first heard about the ACT, she really didn't know what it was, but she said she started doing some research and got very familiar with the test. Five of the six participants indicated that they planned to attend a postsecondary institution, regardless of the ACT mandate. All of participants, except one, indicated that if the ACT was not a requirement for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students and it was not provided by the state/school free of charge,<sup>37</sup> they were willing to incur the cost for taking the test, because attending a four-year postsecondary institution was their goal. Three of the participants indicated that they had already taken the ACT on their own and paid for it. One participant said, “Why would I pay for something I don't want? And, it's making a decision on whether I do this or I do that.”

One participant was especially disgruntled about the ACT being a requirement for college admission, in general, and particularly as a requirement for admission into the colleges/universities that she was interested in attending. She said that college admission should not be based on this one test especially, when a student has a 4.0 grade point average like she does.

The participants were asked about the ACT for students who did not plan to attend college. In this case, there were differences in opinions. Some of the participants perceived the mandate as an opportunity for the students to pursue another career path, on the other hand, some of the participants thought students should be empowered to make their own decisions (Denzin &

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<sup>37</sup> The state/school absorbs the cost for at least one administration of the mandated ACT for 11<sup>th</sup> graders.

Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Three of the participants thought that students should take the ACT regardless of their intention not to attend a postsecondary institution and three of them thought they should not have to take the ACT. Of the participants who thought that the ACT should be the student's option. Charles said, "I don't see the point." Constance also thought that she should not be made to take the ACT if she didn't want to take it. She did not want to voice her opinion about other students who were not interested in attending college, she said "I don't know what everybody else wants to do with their life, I am just speaking for myself." Naomi did not think that the ACT should be required for students who were not planning to enroll in a postsecondary institution, she voiced "There is no need for an ACT, especially if you are going to a trade school that does not ask for ACT."

In reference to the ACT and college admission, Barbara said that she thought colleges and universities should administer their own test for class placement instead of using the ACT. She said "To get into someone's college based off that one test, I feel like that's ridiculous. When I look at the fact that I have a 4.0 grade point average and a 15 on the ACT, I feel like the odds don't add up."

### **A Change in Plans or Proceed as Planned**

The researcher asked participants about the effect of the ACT on their postsecondary decisions or trajectories. All of the participants in this study indicated that their postsecondary decisions were made independent of the ACT mandate. Five of the participants initially planned to attend a four-year postsecondary institutions and one of the participants did not plan to attend a postsecondary institution. The postsecondary paths of the five participants have been altered as a result of the ACT outcomes. Two of them are considering community college or trade school and two are planning to attend a four-year institution and one has been accepted to a four-year

institution. However, they do plan to retake the ACT. According to research by Cox (2016), the trajectories of students in low socioeconomic or economically disadvantaged environments are often changed or interrupted due to circumstances that they encounter in their everyday lives.

Three of the participants indicated that they were in Honors classes. Only one of them achieved an ACT composite score above 17. The participant who has already been accepted into a four-year postsecondary institution, revealed that, it was not the first institution of choice. Barbara, a student who has a 4.0 grade point average, plans to attend a community college unless she gets the score she needs for admission into the four-year institution when she retakes the ACT in the spring. Ruth also shared that she has a 4.0 grade point average and, as an option, she is considering trade school, if she does not achieve the ACT score needed by the institution she is applying to for admission. In the meantime, until she retests in the spring, she says that she is “praying for a higher score.” In spite of the trajectory changes, all of the participants—except one—plan to continue their pursuit of a four-year postsecondary education. The participants indicated that as alternatives to their initial pursuit of specific four-year postsecondary institution, they are considering colleges or universities with lower ACT requirement, community college or trade school.

### **Comparison of Cases**

In both of the cases the achievement of the ACT score for the institutions of the participant’s choice, was perceived as a postsecondary education barrier. The ACT mandate was not perceived as a factor influencing students’ postsecondary decisions in either case. The participants indicated that their decisions regarding their postsecondary paths were determined independent of the ACT mandate. The results from the ACT changed the trajectory for some participants, but did not alter their determination to attain a postsecondary education. Research

by Cox (2016) and Kurlaender (2006) indicate that regardless of race/ethnicity, the postsecondary trajectory for low-income (economically disadvantaged) students is more than likely to be that they start their four-year postsecondary education pursuit at a two-year college. All of the participants, except one in Case two, had postsecondary aspirations and planned to pursue their educational goal.

Participants in both cases thought that students who were not planning to pursue a postsecondary education should participate in the ACT because it was perceived as an opportunity for the students to pursue another career path. On the other hand, some of the participants thought that students should be empowered to make their own choices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Five of the 12 participants in both cases thought that students who were not planning to attend college should not be required to take the ACT. The other seven participants, in the cases, thought that students might change their decision about postsecondary education if ACT outcomes were favorable

In regards to the availability of academic preparation for the ACT, academic preparation was evident in Case Two—Cardy High School, but was not clearly delineated in Case One—Marston High. In both cases, two students—one student in each case—scored above 17 in the 18-24 ACT composite range, the other 10 students scored 17 or below. In both cases, there was at least one student who shared that they had good grades, but their academic performance in school was not reflected in their ACT score. One participant in Case One, expressed that there was a difference in standards when what was being taught was compared to the ACT. A participant in Case Two echoed similar sentiments in that, the participant indicted that if her academic performance in the required subject area was great, why didn't that translate to an ACT score worthy of admission into the state four-year institution that was desired.

All of the participants, except one in Case Two, described stress related emotions in association with the test. It is ironic that the two participants in the pilot, made a special effort to bring awareness of how the test made them feel—one student in the pilot said it made her nervous and the other student said that the test was intimidating.

All of the participants with postsecondary aspirations, except one, plan to pursue their postsecondary goals as exhibited by their plans to retake the ACT in the spring and their consideration of alternate educational routes, such as community college. Their decisions to pursue a postsecondary education were made independent of the ACT mandate

## **CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Summary**

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the perceived influence of the American College Test (ACT) mandate on postsecondary education decisions of public high school students in the State of Louisiana. Decisions that are made by students, at this juncture in their lives, ultimately affects the postsecondary education pipeline. In the spring of 2013, state policy dictated that another standardized test, the ACT, be incorporated into the assessment equation for 11<sup>th</sup> grade students. This study sought to ascertain the effect of this ACT policy, on the pipeline to postsecondary education, from students who were actually participating in the mandatory process (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, 2015).

The targeted population, for this study, was high school seniors in economically disadvantaged schools who had participated in the mandatory ACT during 11<sup>th</sup> grade. A case study was the methodological approach used in this study. The cases were two schools in two geographical locations in the state. Specifically targeted as participants, for this research were twelve seniors—six from two different schools—with varying postsecondary intentions—college bound, not college bound, and undecided. Access to the high school students was obtained through the school district's accountability contact/test coordinator or similar title. This person was considered the gatekeeper of the targeted population of study participants. The district gatekeeper provided the researcher with the connection to the guidance counselor at each school. The high school counselor or the counselor's designee made students aware of the research and the opportunity to become a volunteer participant. The counselor or designee provided the researcher with the volunteers—which helped to reduce biases during the participant selection process. Although, the target group was seniors with varying postsecondary intentions, the

procurement of the various student types (college bound, not college bound and undecided) was not guaranteed, since research participation was voluntary. As an outcome of this procurement process, all of the participants in both cases, indicated that they had college aspirations, except one, who indicated that she did not plan to pursue a postsecondary education.

All of the participants in both cases—two schools—were at least 18 years of age and had taken the ACT in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. There were six students in each case— four females and two males from Marson High School in Case One and six students—five females and one male from Cardy High School in Case Two

In addition to examining the effect of the mandate on students' postsecondary education matriculation decisions, the study examined the availability of ACT academic preparation to students in the two cases, the effect of the provision of the ACT at no cost to students in their postsecondary education pursuit, and the ACT as a requirement for students without college aspirations. Information for the study was obtained through audio recorded, one on one interviews with the study participants, and from the information reported on the participant's *Demographic Information Form*. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and the data obtained from the transcripts and the *Demographic Information Form* were analyzed.

It was found that the ACT, in general, as a requirement for admission into certain four-year postsecondary institutions was a factor affecting students' postsecondary decisions and trajectories. Although mandating the ACT dictated who had to take the test and when they had to take the ACT, the ACT mandate in school was not found to be factor affecting the participants' postsecondary decisions. All of the participants indicated that they had already decided the postsecondary paths they wanted to pursue.

## **Conclusions**

It was concluded that the requirement for all 11<sup>th</sup> grade students to take the ACT was not perceived by the study participants' as a postsecondary education determinant. Student's indicated that their postsecondary decisions were already established and that the mandate was inconsequential to their decisions. This was applicable to the students with college aspirations as well as for the student in the study without college aspirations. The ACT mandate did, however, require participation in a test that one participant—who did not have college aspirations—did not want to take. It also dictated when the students took the ACT, which may have been before the students considered themselves adequately prepared. This was evidenced by the number of student indicating their plans to retake the test and according to participants who addressed the unavailability of adequate academic test preparation prior to the 11<sup>th</sup> grade test administration. It was found that although 11 of the participants had made the decision to attend a four-year postsecondary education institution—independent of the mandate, their ACT outcomes were influencing them to reconsider their decision or redirect their educational path pursuit.

It was also concluded that, all of participants did not view the ACT mandate as an inconvenience to students who were not planning to pursue postsecondary education. This was corroborated by the participants as they articulated that the ACT should be taken by students who were not planning to pursue college, because students needed to be cognizant of their academic standings and have that assessment in the event they decided to pursue a postsecondary education after they graduated from high school. Additionally, they relayed that the student's outcome on the ACT may produce better results than the student anticipates and may enable them to meet the requirements for admission into a postsecondary institution. Also, the ACT mandate was perceived as an opportunity to potentially be a part of the dominating society instead of being dominated (Creswell, 2013; Morrow & Brown; 1994).

On the other hand, there were those student participants who considered the participation in the ACT as an effort in futility. Especially, for students who were not anticipating enrolling in a postsecondary institution after high school. Those participants articulated that the decision to participate in the ACT should be the individual student's decision and not a requirement for them. In other words, those students thought rather than power coming from the top down to the students, students should be empowered to make their own decisions about their postsecondary education future (Creswell, 2013; Johnson & Christensen; 2014).

It was also established that students who were determined to pursue a postsecondary education, did not perceive or allow the cost of taking the ACT to serve as a deterrent to achieving their educational goals. This was exhibited by the fact that some of the students had already paid to take the ACT themselves, since ACT test participation payments are limited by the state/district. Information obtained regarding family size, educational background of the parents and/or guardians, and family economic status revealed that students from various educational backgrounds, single parent or two parent households, as well as those from households economically disadvantaged to those who were not, still had made the decision to pursue a postsecondary education, with the exception of one participant.

### **Recommendations**

If the ACT continues to be a requirement in Louisiana's public high schools, it is recommended that district and school administrators consider making ACT academic preparation readily available in all high schools. American College Test (ACT) preparation should be instituted in advance of two weeks—as indicated by some of the participant's—or a month prior to the mandatory ACT in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade to give students an opportunity to grasp the concepts that are necessary for success. Currently, the institution or implementation of ACT preparation is optional and is left to the district's/school's discretion. Students and schools can benefit from

better student outcomes resulting from rigorous ACT preparation. Public high schools, with grades 9-12, are currently rated, in part, on the ACT performance of its high school students. If students don't perform well, their performance is reflected in the school's performance score/letter grade, as the ACT comprises 25% of the score. For ACT scores below 18, the school gets a zero in its ACT index. If students get low ACT scores, as a consequence for them, their four-year postsecondary enrollment opportunities are diminished, particularly, if they are seeking enrollment in institutions requiring the submission of an ACT and are not "test optional" institutions<sup>38</sup>.

Participants referenced a perceived disconnect between academic course work performance and their ACT performance. There was an indication that stellar academic performance was not translating into stellar performance on the ACT. Schools' and districts' should examine their curriculums and address those gaps to ensure that students don't have these disconnect experiences. Research by Cox (2016) states that students from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds and a lower socioeconomic status (economically disadvantaged) are less likely to have access to a curriculum that is robust and prepares them for a four-year postsecondary education. Schools and school districts should work to eradicate these stereotypes.

In consideration of looming budget cuts and revenue shortfalls in the State of Louisiana, the requirement that all students in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade take the ACT at state/school expense, may need to be reevaluated by the state. Especially, since the inclusion of the ACT as an assessment in public high schools, is optional for states. However, if the state wants to promote or stimulate

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<sup>38</sup> Some colleges and universities have adopted a test optional policy which gives the student the option of submitting an ACT or SAT score for admission consideration.

the postsecondary education pipeline, the ACT could be offered at state/school expense to students meeting certain economically disadvantaged criteria or to those who plan to attend a four-year postsecondary education institution. This is opposed to the state paying for those who are not interested in taking the test and who are not planning to attend college. If the ACT became optional, this however, would mean that the state would need to make other provisions to meet the requirements of NCLB (No Child Left Behind). This is not an insurmountable task. There are other states that satisfy these requirements without the use of the ACT as an assessment for all 11<sup>th</sup> grade students.

According to state policy, beginning with the spring 2016<sup>39</sup> test administration, WorkKeys will be included in the ACT index. WorkKeys is designed primarily for students who are not anticipating enrolling in college. A consideration is that there be an assessment choice between ACT and WorkKeys for students. As the policy is currently described, policy implementation will require students to participate in both ACT and Workkeys. The higher score of the two scores, as identified in a concordance table, will be included in the school's ACT index (Louisiana Department of Education, louisianabelieves, *Bulletin 111*; 2015).

An evaluation of the benefits of the ACT mandate versus the cost and outcomes should be explored. Some states have changed from the use of the ACT to the SAT. In other states, they use neither the ACT nor the SAT as a high school requirement. States should examine and evaluate what is best for the state, what's best for those providing the education, and what is best for those being educated. In theory, certain policies can appear as a panacea to address pervasive issues, when in reality, there are unforeseen ramifications of the policy. Therefore, it is

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<sup>39</sup> Louisiana Department of Education, *Bulletin 111*—policy. Beginning in 2015-16, the ACT index shall also recognize WorkKeys. A concordance table comparing ACT to WorkKeys will be produced after the Spring 2015 administration

recommend that policymakers and administrators confer with those who are recipients of policies and processes—at the district and school levels—to ascertain the ramifications of such policies.

When you communicate with those directly affected by processes, policies or both, a different perspective or appreciation for the ebbs and flows of the process is garnered or gleaned. It was ascertained from these participant's voices that although they encountered challenges, they were determined to ascend to a higher level—four-year postsecondary education. The students vowed not to let their ACT score deter them. They are seeking other avenues—community college, trade school, alternate four-year institution or the military—to accomplish their goals.

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## APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

### ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST



TO: Thelma Purnell  
Human Sciences and Education

FROM: Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: November 30, 2015

RE: IRB# E9686

TITLE: An Examination of Students Perceptions of the Louisiana ACT Mandate on their  
Postsecondary Education Decisions

Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair  
130 David Boyd Hall  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.5983  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu) | [lsu.edu/irb](http://lsu.edu/irb)

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: New Protocol

Review Date: 11/25/2015

Approved X Disapproved \_\_\_\_\_

Approval Date: 11/25/2015 Approval Expiration Date: 11/24/2018

Exemption Category/Paragraph: 1; 2a

Signed Consent Waived?: No

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable)

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman 

#### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –

##### Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE:**

*\*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

### Questions for student participants

1. What were your thoughts when you learned that you were required to take the ACT (American College Test) in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade?
2. Tell me about how the results of your ACT score impacts your high school performance score/letter grade.
3. What do you think your school's expectation was for your ACT performance and what was your expectation?
4. What decisions have you made about your education plans or other plans after you graduate and have those plans been influenced by the ACT mandate?
5. What are some of the things that your school has done to help prepare you for the ACT (i.e. ACT prep course)?
6. What do you think about schools making students who do not plan to attend college take the ACT?
7. How would you feel about taking the ACT if you had to pay for it?

## APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

### Student Demographic Information

Answers to these questions are appreciated. The information provided will be kept confidential.

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?  
☐ Yes   ☐ No
2. Did you participate in the mandatory American College Test (ACT) in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade at your school during the spring of 2015?  
☐ Yes   ☐ No
3. Was a test preparation course for the ACT or SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) offered by your school prior to the spring 2015 test?  
☐ Yes   ☐ No
4. Did you participate in an ACT or SAT test preparation course at your school?  
☐ Yes   ☐ No
5. Did you participate in an ACT or SAT test preparation course on your own?  
☐ Yes   ☐ No
6. Please indicate the composite score range category for your ACT composite score.  
☐ 0-17   ☐ 18-24   ☐ 25-29   ☐ 30-36
7. What is the highest level of education completed by your mother?  
☐ Elementary School   ☐ High School   ☐ Some College   ☐ College  
☐ Graduate School   ☐ Unknown   ☐ Not Applicable
8. What is the highest level of education completed by your father?  
☐ Elementary School   ☐ High School   ☐ Some College   ☐ College  
☐ Graduate School   ☐ Unknown   ☐ Not Applicable
9. Do you plan to attend college after high school?  
☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Interested   ☐ Not Interested   ☐ Undecided
10. What is the size of your household?  
☐ 1-4   ☐ 5-8   ☐ 9 or more
11. What is the yearly income for your household?

- ☐ \$25,000 or less    ☐ \$26,000 – \$40,000    ☐ \$41,000 –\$55,000  
☐ More than \$55,000    ☐ Unknown

12. Which category best describes your racial/ethnic background?

- ☐ African American/Black    ☐ American Indian/Native Alaskan    ☐ Asian  
☐ Hispanic/Latino    ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander  
☐ White    ☐ Two or more races

## APPENDIX D: INITIAL CONTACT EMAIL TO DISTRICTS

Date

Dear District Accountability Contact/District Test Coordinator:

I am a Ph.D. Candidate in the Educational Leadership, Higher Education Program at Louisiana State University. As a part of the research for my dissertation, I am seeking to examine the effect of the American College Test (ACT) mandate on the postsecondary trajectories and or decisions of high school students. Permission to conduct this research has been obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Louisiana State University. This research seeks to ascertain the student's perspective regarding the ACT mandate. I welcome the opportunity to interview six seniors—with varying postsecondary intentions (college bound, not college bound and undecided)—from one of your high schools. The seniors should be attending a school that the Louisiana Department of Education has identified as economically disadvantaged—65% or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch—and the grade configuration of the school should be 9 through 12. Participation in this research is voluntary and students who participate should be 18 years of age or older. There are no known risks to students who participate in this research. The research involves the use of a qualitative approach to ascertain this information from students through the use of semi-structured interviews. Pseudonyms will be used for the names of the students interviewed as well as the name of the school. Students who volunteer to participate, will have an opportunity to win a \$30.00 gift card.

The information obtained from this research will be useful in identifying benefits of the mandate, if applicable, and possible unintended consequences. It is hoped that this information will inform policymakers of what works or does not work for secondary and postsecondary students and institutions. Participation in this research from one of the schools in your district will be greatly appreciated. You may indicate your willingness to participate by responding to this email on or before (date). If you have additional questions or concerns, you may contact me at [tpurnel@lsu.edu](mailto:tpurnel@lsu.edu) or via the telephone at (225) 505-6444. My doctoral chairman, Dr. Roland W. Mitchell, may be contacted at [rwmitch@lsu.edu](mailto:rwmitch@lsu.edu). Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Thelma C. Purnell  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Louisiana State University

c Roland W. Mitchell, Ph.D.  
Associate Dean  
School of Education  
Louisiana State University

District Superintendent

## APPENDIX E: INITIAL CONTACT EMAIL TO SCHOOLS

Date

Dear School Administrator:

I am a Ph.D. Candidate in the Educational Leadership, Higher Education Program at Louisiana State University. As a part of the research for my dissertation, I am seeking to examine the effect of the American College Test (ACT) mandate on the postsecondary trajectories and/or decisions of high school students. Permission to conduct this research has been obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Louisiana State University. This research seeks to ascertain the student's perspective regarding the ACT mandate. I welcome the opportunity to interview six seniors—with varying postsecondary intentions (college bound, not college bound and undecided)—from your high school. The schools targeted in this research are schools identified as economically disadvantaged, by the Louisiana Department of Education —65% or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch and have a 9 through 12 grade configuration. Your school has been identified as meeting this criteria. Participation in this research is voluntary and students who participate should be 18 years of age or older. There are no known risks to students as a result of participating in this research. The research involves the use of a qualitative approach to ascertain this information from students through the use of semi-structured interviews. Pseudonyms will be used for the names of the students interviewed as well as the name of the school. Students who volunteer to participate, will have an opportunity to win a \$30.00 gift card.

The information obtained from this research will be useful in identifying benefits of the mandate, if applicable, and possible unintended consequences. It is hoped that this information will inform policymakers of what works or does not work for secondary and postsecondary students and institutions. Participation in this research by your school is greatly appreciated. Please contact me by email or via the telephone at (225)505-6444 by (date) to schedule the interviews. Or, if you have additional questions or concerns, please contact me at [tpurnel@lsu.edu](mailto:tpurnel@lsu.edu) or at (225) 505-6444. My doctoral chairman, Dr. Roland W. Mitchell, may be contacted at [rwmitch@lsu.edu](mailto:rwmitch@lsu.edu). Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Thelma C. Purnell  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Louisiana State University

c Roland W. Mitchell, Ph.D.  
Associate Dean  
School of Education  
Louisiana State University

District Accountability Contact/Test Coordinator

## APPENDIX F: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Date

Dear Student:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this ACT mandate research. It is of vital importance to this research to obtain a first-hand account of the impact of the mandate on you, the student. The research seeks to ascertain whether the mandate is affecting your postsecondary decisions. The information obtained from this interview can be used to inform policymakers, secondary and postsecondary personnel and institutions of the benefits, if applicable or adverse consequences of the mandate to you and fellow students.

As a Ph.D. candidate conducting research for my dissertation on an area that affects you, I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you regarding this matter to obtain your viewpoints. Participation in this research is totally voluntary and there are no known risks to you as a participant. You may withdraw from participation at any time. Student volunteers are to be 18 years of age or older and will have an opportunity to win a \$30.00 gift certificate for participating. Pseudonyms will be used for the names of participants and the name of the school. If you have questions, you may contact me at [tpurnel@lsu.edu](mailto:tpurnel@lsu.edu) or via telephone at (225) 505-6444. Thank you for agreeing to participate!

Sincerely,

Thelma C. Purnell  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Louisiana State University

c Roland W. Mitchell, Ph.D.  
Associate Dean  
School of Education  
Louisiana State University

## **VITA**

Thelma C. Purnell was born in Tuskegee, Alabama. She completed her undergraduate education at Mississippi State University and completed the requirements for a Master of Science Degree at Louisiana State University. Ms. Purnell returned to Louisiana State University to complete the requirements for her Ph.D. She formerly worked for the Louisiana Department of Education and is currently a graduate student and business owner.