Increasing College Readiness and Creating a College Culture at Texas High Schools
Serving Low-income Students and Students of Color: Preliminary Findings

Melissa A. Martinez
Texas State University
Increasing College Readiness and Creating a College Culture at Texas High Schools Serving Low-Income Students and Students of Color: Preliminary Findings

More than ever, secondary schools are responsible for preparing and graduating students deemed “college and career ready.” The increased focus on college and career readiness nationwide is articulated in the U.S. Department of Education’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Blueprint for Reform (2010): “The goal for America’s educational system is clear: Every student should graduate from high school ready for college and a career” (p. 7). President Obama confirmed this goal as a “national priority” in the document’s opening remarks, citing the need to raise our educational expectations so that the U.S. may “once again lead the world in college completion” by 2020 (p. 1) since ten countries currently have higher college completion rates than the U.S. While this goal helps ensure the U.S. remains a viable competitor in the global market, most would also agree with President Obama when he insists that providing a “world-class education” is also a “moral imperative — the key to securing a more equal, fair, and just society” (p. 1).

The ability to reach this “college and career ready” goal is dependent on a number of factors that begin with states developing and adopting college and career readiness standards and accountability measures to monitor progress and success. Other incumbent factors include schools retaining high quality teachers and leaders who can provide students with a complete and rigorous curriculum. These leaders should also be able to meet the specific needs of English Learners and other diverse student populations, as well as to provide multiple pathways to college for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Preparing college and career ready students requires a comprehensive, long-term, multi-pronged approach in which all school community members are invested. Furthermore, to achieve this objective at high need, high
INCREASING COLLEGE READINESS

poverty, and racially diverse schools is critical to close the historic and persistent gaps in college enrollment and completion rates among low-income students, English learners, as well as students of color and their counterparts.

This white paper shares preliminary results from a case study that examines the college going culture\(^1\) and college readiness efforts at three comparably sized (approximately 2,600 students) public high schools in various regions in the state of Texas. These high schools serve a majority of students of color (65% or more) and at least 45% of students from low-income backgrounds; moreover, these high schools and are finding success in graduating approximately 50% or more of all students “college ready” in language arts, mathematics, and in both combined subjects. As this case study is a three-year long project, this paper draws solely on the first year’s worth of data collected in the spring of 2014 to briefly emphasize a few of the key themes emerging that relate to the establishment of the schools’ college going cultures and to consider potential contributions to scholarship and practice.

Supporting Literature and Rationale

Students of color, particularly Latina/os, are a growing demographic in U.S. public schools. The National Center for Education Statistics indicates that from 1990 to 2010 the Latina/o student population rose from 5.1 million (12% of the student population) to 12.1 million (23% of the student population), while the White student population decreased from 29.0 million (67% of the student population) to 27.7 million (57% of the student population) (Aud et al., 2012). During this same period, the Black student population only fluctuated slightly from 17% to 15% and Asians, Pacific Islanders, and American Indians/Alaska Natives “each represented 1 percent or less of student enrollment in all regions of the United States” (Aud et al., 2012, p. 26).

\(^{1}\) The terms college going culture and college culture are used interchangeably in this paper.
Yet, while America’s schools are becoming increasingly diverse, they are also more segregated than ever, based on race and poverty (Orfield & Lee, 2005; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). This leaves Black and Latina/o students, or students of color, along with students from low-income backgrounds, impacted by the educational inequities in today’s schools, ultimately obstructing their readiness for and access to college (Oakes, 2005; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014).

In Texas, where Latina/os are a rapidly increasing demographic, the college readiness of and educational outcomes for students of color have been equally concerning (You & Potter, 2014). The most recent state level data based on the graduating class of 2011 indicated that 80.9% of African American and 81.8% of Hispanic students graduated with a high school diploma, compared to 92% of Whites, 95% of Asians, and 88% of Pacific Islanders (Texas Education Agency, 2011). In this same year, 10.9% of African Americans and 8.7% of Hispanics dropped out of high school, compared to 3.4% of Whites, 1.4% of Asians, and 5.0% of Pacific Islanders. Of the Hispanic students in the state who graduated in 2011, only 42% were considered college ready in language arts and mathematics, compared to 36% of African Americans (Texas Education Agency, 2011). Conversely, 65% of White, 75% of Asian, and 55% of Pacific Islander high school graduates in 2011 were deemed college ready in both subjects. These data substantiate the increased efforts aimed at providing an equitable education for Latina/o and African American students in the state since they continue to rank last on multiple college readiness measures and educational outcomes as compared to their White, Asian, and Pacific Islander counterparts (Texas Education Agency, 2011).

Thus, the state of Texas has taken steps to specifically help address inequities in college readiness for almost a decade. In 2006, the state sought the expertise of David T. Conley at the Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) in Oregon. Conley and his associates embarked
on various studies as a part of the Texas College and Career Readiness Initiative (Conley et al., 2010). The intent of this initiative was to “develop and implement college and career readiness standards and activities to improve alignment between secondary and postsecondary education, resulting in an increased number of students prepared for college and career success” (Conley, et al., 2010, p. 8). Through these efforts, Conley (2011) identified four key aspects believed to be essential to college readiness: key content strategies, key content knowledge, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness. However, this model has been critiqued for its one-size-fits-all nature as it does not address the contextual needs of schools and students (Welton & Martinez, 2014). Nonetheless, in partnership with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Education Agency, EPIC developed Texas’ College and Career Readiness Standards that were adopted in 2008.

Efforts to further understand the concept of college readiness and how to develop a college going culture in P-12 settings have evolved. At present there are numerous definitions and frameworks that exist for understanding both of these concepts and the relation between the two. For the purpose of this study, college readiness was understood as “the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate degree program” (Conley, 2011, p. 1). Alternatively, the description and framework for a college going culture was based on a combination of definitions and frameworks in the literature. However, a college going culture is considered to be one aspect that contributes to a student’s college readiness.

Corwin and Tierney (2007) provided a description of a college culture based on their own research and that of previous scholars:
College culture in a high school cultivates aspirations and behaviors conducive to preparing for, applying to and enrolling in college. A strong college culture is tangible, pervasive and beneficial to students. It may be developed in a specialized section of a school, such as within a magnet program or small learning community. However, the ideal college culture should be inclusive and accessible to all students. (p. 3)

With this definition in mind, this study also particularly relied on the nine guiding principles to develop a college going culture in schools offered by McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Nuñez (2009). These principles were developed after synthesizing and expanding previous literature to create a framework to develop a college going culture within the schools involved in the “Creating a College Culture” project. This action research project was supported through a university partnership with a non-profit agency and a local school district and aimed to create a college culture in a cluster of schools (18 elementary schools, 5 middle schools, and two high schools) in the Los Angeles area. The schools served approximately 25,000 students from racially and ethnically diverse and predominantly (more than 50%) low-income backgrounds. The project involved the creation of a new “college coach” position at each participating middle and high school, a role devoted to creating a college going culture on the campus. Therefore, the nine principles were developed in the early stages of the project to help guide the college coaches in their new roles.

The first principle was college talk, characterized by clear, ongoing communication among students, teachers, administrators, and families about what it takes to get to college. The second principle referred to clear expectations and how schools needed to provide explicit, clearly defined goals with regards to postsecondary education, communicated in ways that make these goals a part of the school culture. The third principle focused on providing comprehensive,
up-to-date, and easily accessible *information and resources* to all students, families, and school personnel. Next, a *comprehensive counseling model* ensured that all student interactions with counseling staff provided opportunities for college counseling. The fifth principle related to college-focused *testing and curricula*; students must have access to and information about college preparation and entrance exams (PSAT, SAT, etc.) and courses (e.g., algebra and advanced placement). The next three principles focused on the need to involve and develop relationships with key stakeholders in this process: *faculty involvement*, *family involvement*, and *college and university partnerships*. The final principle related to the ongoing *articulation* necessary between counselors and teachers among all schools in a feeder group.

Thus, while existing research contributes to current understandings of college readiness efforts and the development of a college going culture in secondary school settings, there remains a need to expand the literature, especially research that centers on schools that serve low-income students and students of color and that find success in ensuring these students are college ready. This study particularly contributes to existing research in this way, as most research about college going culture is based on reviews of the literature (Friedman MacDonald & Dorr, 2006; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Schneider, 2007) or developed based on previous literature and empirical research, in which studies focused on creating a college going culture at schools thus far lacking this culture (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; McClaffery Jarsky, et al., 2009). Conley’s (2009) work provided some insight into “programs and practices of [38] actual high schools that have demonstrated success in preparing underrepresented students in higher education” (p. 5). Data from this particular study included observations, interviews, focus groups, and school documents gathered through two-day site visits at various types of secondary schools across the country including comprehensive, alternative, and charter schools that had a
specific college-focused mission. Four of the 38 high schools in the study were in Texas, but only two of these were traditional; the other two were charter schools with a college prep focus. While this work emphasized “tangible examples of what successful student preparation for college encompasses” (p. 8), the study provided more breadth than depth and did not focus solely on comprehensive high schools, which make up the majority of schools in the U.S. and the state of Texas.

**Methodology**

The research design for this study was qualitative in nature, drawing on a descriptive, multi-site case study approach (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2013). Yin (2013) describes a case study approach in terms of two key aspects. The first defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). The second aspect relates to how a case study inquiry draws on multiple data points as sources of evidence, so that data “converge in a triangulating fashion” (p. 17). A case study design is also particularly useful when attempting to answer “how” and “why” questions as a means of understanding said phenomena within its context.

In this study, the unit of analysis, or phenomenon under investigation, was the process of developing a college going culture and maintaining college readiness among students at three traditional, public high schools. The research questions guiding the three-year project included: (a) How do three Texas high schools that primarily serve low-income students and students of color in the Gulf Coast, Central, and South Texas regions effectively create a college going culture? (b) What experiences are essential for low-income students and students of color to be college ready? (c) How do the experiences of these students and the college going culture of each
school compare? This white paper focused solely on the first research question based on one year of data and preliminary analysis, centered on some of the key organizational aspects that enabled the establishment of the schools’ college going cultures, as well as some of the shared and unique strategies utilized by the schools to create and sustain a college going culture.

Selection of Sites

Three traditional, public high schools were chosen for this case study in three regions of the state (Central, Gulf Coast, and South) that are experiencing increased population growth while also facing continued challenges in postsecondary outcomes. The criteria for identifying each high school site consisted of (a) being a traditional, comprehensive high school that serves a majority (more than 50%) of students of color and at least 45% of students who are considered low-income; and (b) having approximately 50% or more of students from all racial/ethnic and income backgrounds considered as college ready in mathematics and language arts.

The high schools for this study were chosen after examining archival data from the Texas Education Agency’s Academic Excellence Indicator System from 2009-2012 that provides the racial/ethnic composition of schools and the percentage of students enrolled at each school that qualify for free and/or reduced price lunch, the latter of which determines “economically disadvantaged” status. College readiness among students was determined based on the Texas Education Agency’s College Ready Graduates (CRG) Indicator, which is calculated for each high school in Texas based on SAT, ACT, or Texas’ state-mandated exit level exam scores. A CRG percentage is calculated for mathematics, language arts, and both combined subjects for students from each racial/ethnic category and for those identified as “economically disadvantaged.” School sites were chosen based on a pattern of consistency in the criteria for the
2009-2010 and 2010-2011 academic school years, the most recent data available prior to beginning the study in the 2013-2014 academic school year.

Locating schools that met the criteria for the study within the specified regions proved rather difficult. In all, only five schools in the Education Service Center Region 1 (South Texas), six schools in the combined Education Service Center Regions of 13 and 20 (Central Texas), and seven schools in the Education Service Center Region 4 (Gulf Coast) were found that mostly met the criteria for the study. At that point, only schools comparable in size serving about 2,500 students, but not more than 3,000, were considered. This excluded one high school in South Texas, one in Central Texas, and five schools in the Gulf Coast region. Thereafter, one top choice school and at least one alternative school were identified for each region. University Institutional Review Board permission was then acquired, as was permission at the school districts of the potential school sites.

**Enrollment and Demographic Site Information**

Enrollment and demographic site information is provided for each of the final school sites chosen for the study, referred to here as Central high school (Central Texas region), Coast high school (Gulf Coast region), and South high school (South Texas region). Table 1 provides student population enrollment data from the most recent two years available through the Texas Education Agency. As shown, all schools are comparable in size but do vary in racial ethnic composition and the percentage of students identified as “economically disadvantaged,” although they all meet the criteria for the study.
Table 1 Enrollment and Demographic Background of Students at each School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School and Year</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged (%)</th>
<th>Demographics of Student Population (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central 2011-12</td>
<td>2519</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2637</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coast 2011-12</td>
<td>2484</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>88.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2581</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South 2011-12</td>
<td>2751</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>95.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2753</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is also important to note some organizational school distinctions among the high schools. For instance, Central and South high schools are 9th-12th grade campuses, while Coast high school is a 10th-12th grade campus that also serves 9th graders through extracurricular courses. All high schools in the same district as Coast are organized this way, with each having their own feeder 9th grade campus. Coast high school’s 9th grade feeder campus is located across the street from the 10th-12th grade campus, enabling 9th graders in band, choir, and other extracurricular courses to attend Coast high school easily. South high school also has a small in-school health science magnet program in which students begin taking pre-AP core courses in the first two years of high school and AP core courses in the last two years, in addition to several health science-focused courses. These distinctions among school sites were not considered detrimental to the case study investigation.

Table 2 provides college ready graduates data for “economically disadvantaged” students at each school for the most recent four years available. There has been consistency at the schools with regards to this indicator, although data show higher CRG scores in the individual subjects when compared to the combined score, evidenced consistently at all schools.
Table 2 Economically Disadvantaged College Ready Graduates in English/Language Arts (ELA), Math, and Both Combined Subjects from 2009 to 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School and Year</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 also provides CRG data from 2009-2012 for each school based on racial/ethnic student populations. Again, there is a level of consistency at each school where about 50% or more of all students are graduating college ready in individual as well as both combined subjects; although there are a few years where it appears student percentages fell below 50%, and in some cases below 40%.
Table 3 College Ready Graduates in English/Language Arts (ELA), Math, and Both Combined Subjects from 2009 to 2012 by Ethnic Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School and Year</th>
<th>Latino ELA</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Black ELA</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>White ELA</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Asian ELA</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coast</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another aspect in understanding each school site and their college going culture relates to the composition and educational experience of their faculty and staff. The most recent data for the 2012-2013 academic school year indicates that each school has between 146 and 156 teachers, between 185 and 201 total staff; both Coast and South high schools have eight school leaders, while Central has six. The principal at Central was an African American male who first began his teaching career at the school before he moved to a middle school to become an assistant principal, and then finally returned to Central high school as its principal. He was in his fifth year at Central during the 2013-2014 school year. The principal at Coast high school was in her first year at the school, although she had previously been the principal at the feeder intermediate school (5th-6th grades) for four years, as well as an elementary school principal in the district for six years prior. Before this, she had also been a teacher at the feeder middle school (7th-8th). In the course of her career, the principal, a White female, had also earned her doctorate.
The principal at South high school was a Latina female who had been in the field of education for 33 years, ten of those as a middle school principal, and the most recent seven as the principal at South.

During the 2012-13 school year, the racial ethnic background of teachers at Central high school was predominantly White (65%), with over a quarter (27.3) being Hispanic, followed by 3.8% being African American, 2% Asian, and 1.9% identifying as bi- or multiracial. Approximately half (49.7%) of Coast high school’s teachers were White, with almost two-thirds (30.4%) were African American, followed by 16% Hispanic, 3.3% Asian, and 0.7% bi- or multiracial. South high school’s teachers were predominantly of color, specifically 90.1% Hispanic. The remaining teachers were 7.7% White, 0.9% bi- or multiracial, and African American and Asian teachers both comprised 0.6% of the teacher population.

Finally, Table 4 provides total years of experience for teachers at each school during the 2012-2013 school year. Teaching experience is often considered an indicator that contributes to teacher quality, which has been found to directly impact student academic success (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). Yet schools that predominantly serve students of color and low-income students often have teachers with less experience, teachers with less education and training, and more teachers in subject areas in which they lack certification or are outside their expertise (Jerald, Haycock, & Wilkins, 2009). However, this did not seem to be the case at the three school sites where at least half of all teachers had at least six or more years of experience: 67% at Central high school, 50.9% at Coast high school, and 77.4% at South high school.
Table 4 Total years of experience for teachers for 2012-2013 by percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>&lt;1</th>
<th>1-5</th>
<th>6-10</th>
<th>11-20</th>
<th>Over 20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coast</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Sources and Analysis**

In keeping with a case study approach, data was collected through various means and from multiple stakeholders in each school community in a systematic manner to ensure rigor and triangulation of data (Yin, 2013). The first year’s data drew upon structured interviews and focus groups conducted over the course of three to five days in the spring of 2014 at each school with teachers, staff, administrators, and students. Structured interview data were collected from a total of 25 participants at Central high school, 29 participants at Coast high school, and 32 participants at South high school. Additional data included school documents (i.e., school newspapers, principal newsletters, college-related fliers, etc.), archival data (i.e., Texas Education Agency data), field notes, and approximately 30 hours of observations in classrooms, meetings; these observations also centered on student and teacher interactions in common areas including hallways, cafeterias, and libraries. Observations were collected in various formats, as well, including photographs (i.e., posters in hallways, murals on walls, pictures of student work, etc.), through written notes, and when possible classroom observations were audio recorded. All structured interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy.

First year data from the case study was preliminarily analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) with textual data as a means to identify emerging patterns based on line-by-line open coding. Additional archival data and school documents were also examined to begin to conceptualize a descriptive framework (Yin, 2013) for the case. Currently,
analysis for the project is still ongoing, as is data collection. Therefore, these preliminary findings are meant to provide a general understanding of the project’s current state and future potential contributions to scholarship and practice.

**Preliminary Findings**

Overall, preliminary findings aligned with previous college going culture literature. However, what results elucidate that previous literature has not necessarily made clear include the fact that building a college culture is much more of a process that requires concerted and sustained effort over time. Previous definitions of college culture often provide a more static description of college culture and identify aspects or principles of a college culture. Preliminary findings also expanded on particular strategies used to develop a college going culture at schools serving racially and economically diverse student populations.

To retain the notion that a college going culture is purposefully cultivated over time and representative of a process, there were four organizational aspects that emerged as integral to build the foundation for each school’s college going culture. The first aspect related to each school’s dedicated faculty and staff. In particular, a strong leadership team that set the precedent by maintaining high expectations for the entire school community, including administrators, teachers, and students, was necessary to building a robust foundation for a college culture. Moreover, authentic, caring teachers who made content relevant to students were also part of this aspect. Not every teacher at each campus was equally dedicated to building the college culture on their campus, though generally each school had a majority of teachers who were very devoted to this mission and such commitment was also made explicit to new teachers and staff. One seasoned teacher at Central high school shared her perspective on what has been vital in the
process of building the foundation for a college culture on her campus as it relates to dedicated faculty and staff that keep the needs of students as the main focus. She explained:

What’s hard is to figure out what a kid needs. That’s what’s hard. I think that comes down from leadership. What I think is that we need to have more administrative leadership that understands that focus, and so builds a team that also is focused on that, and builds a team in such a way where we’re encouraged, where we understand where we are, where we’re supported in it as much as possible, where we’re given the tools that we need, and they work as much with teachers as if we would work with students. In other words, they’re trying to help teachers to be successful with what they’re doing. That, I think that’s the key, is that leadership component.

A rigorous curriculum was another critical factor to build the foundation for a college going culture, particularly as it pertained to ensuring there were sufficient opportunities for students to take advanced courses, providing a multitude of academic supports, and embedding college rhetoric and college-level rigor in coursework throughout the school day. The rigor of curriculum had improved over time at all schools, in part due to increased focus on college going nationwide. An assistant principal at Coast high school was an alumnus of the school herself and spoke to how curricular choices and rigor had changed drastically over time:

There's a lot of change that has occurred. I mean, I, I graduated in 1979 from here and...when I was here we didn't offer anything, when I came as a teacher...in 1989 we offered one AP class, it was Calculus and there were eight students. And now we offer a plethora of AP classes...plus the Dual Credit.
She reiterated how “the rigor has definitely increased. I think we also spend a lot of time on staff development and we, as AP’s [assistant principals], we specifically look for rigor in the classroom…whether it's a Special Ed [education] class, whether it's a regular class.”

Each school also seemed to have established a long-term commitment to fostering students’ postsecondary pursuits. Faculty and staff at each school spoke to how their schools were well respected in their communities and districts, and this appeared to be related to their long-term commitment to supporting college ready students who became productive citizens in the community. Both Central and Coast high schools were among the first in their districts and therefore had the opportunity to establish themselves in this way, contributing to a legacy of high school and college graduates in their communities. South high school was one of the newer high schools in its district and community but quickly earned a solid reputation as an exceptional school where teachers wanted to work and students wanted to learn.

Ongoing partnerships with parents, community entities, and postsecondary institutions in the area were also an important part of laying the foundation for a college culture. Each school had at least one major partnership with a community college, often the community college that provided the school with dual enrollment opportunities. While each school worked to maintain positive, collaborative relationships with parents, all schools also admitted to wanting to improve their parent engagement to help improve postsecondary pursuits for all students. As the principal at South high school explained, in the simplest sense, “parents have got to feel welcome when they come in” and “the community has to embrace you” in order to establish a college culture on the campus. She elucidated a way she worked on this with parents: “I’m a big advocate when it comes to parent meetings…I have parent meetings all the time, because I want to keep them informed.”
Common and Distinct Strategies for Building a College Culture

There were a number of common strategies that schools used to foster and sustain a college culture. Overall, these strategies aligned with the nine principles outlined by McClafferty Jarsky, et al. (2009). The common strategies that emerged included:

1. Visually and verbally promoting college going in the school (i.e., posters of scholarships and universities, college pennants, signs by teachers’ doors indicating their college alma mater, recognizing scholarship recipients and students accepted to colleges on announcements, etc.)

2. Providing postsecondary information and guidance (i.e., through announcements, newsletters, pamphlets, University representative presentations, counselors, resources in college center and library, information on teachers’ bulletin boards, etc.)

3. Providing myriad advanced courses or programs and providing additional academic support (i.e., increasing AP and dual enrollment course options, increasing certifications, providing courses for college readiness, SAT/ACT prep, AP course prep sessions, providing tutoring or Saturday class for state exams, etc.).

4. Maintaining comprehensive counseling programs

5. Maintaining strong partnerships with local community colleges and/or regional universities, as well as families.

The leadership, funding, resources, and specific needs of the student body at each school also shaped unique strategies each school employed. A brief description is offered of some of the unique strategies that each school developed to foster its college culture.

Central high school. Central high school focused heavily on providing a strong academic base for their most academically disadvantaged freshman to ensure their secondary and
postsecondary success. The principal ensured this by creating a freshman academy within the school. The academy changed a bit in how it was organized over the years, due in part to budget cuts, but when it began “everybody was hand-picked” to teach the freshman, and the school remained “true to that to this day.” The initiative is now called a “freshman house” and as the principal explained, it is comprised of a team of four teachers:

Those four teachers share the exact same 130 kids a day. And they meet every Friday, and they don’t talk about curriculum. They just talk about kids. They take the workload that they have. If they have 20 kids failing within that house team, they split it up.

Instead of every teacher having to call 20 homes, they have to call 5. And they tell the whole story versus just their story. And my argument to the teachers in that was now you will always be able to say something good about a child. You’re not going to just call a parent and tell them that the kid is failing your class, but guess what? That kid is passing another class. Now you have some success you can talk about.

Key to the freshman house’s success involved was moving some of the strongest teachers that were teaching upper classman in advanced courses to work with the freshman. This effort was met with some resistance. As the principal mentioned, “There were people who felt entitled. ‘I’ve been here this long. I deserve to teach AP/Pre-AP.’” However, the principal’s argument was that “if you’re that great a teacher you need to work with the most at-risk kids.” When he began moving some teachers to work with other grade levels, there were a few teachers who resigned or retired. “So it was kind of like the realization that some people had a misconception about education as easy work, and it’s really hard work.”

Central high school also had the largest AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination) program in the district, and successful strategies utilized in this program were
purposefully integrated throughout the school. However, even this was done strategically as the AVID coordinator explained, “We don’t call them AVID strategies because teachers tend to say: ‘Another program? What do we have to do with it now?’ So we push those strategies and not call them AVID.” She reiterated how “if you go into some of the classrooms you’ll see most of the teachers using the Cornell Note System now, you know, and it was an initial AVID strategy that we kind of pushed through.” They were also “trying to get to where all of our freshman now are keeping a binder, agenda type thing” as other AVID students do to keep them organized.

In addition to a comprehensive counseling program, the school also had the advantage of having a College and Career Technician (CCT) specifically assigned to work with students on postsecondary options in a designated College and Career Center located inside the cafeteria. The CCT explained:

It is a program that the district has funded. It did start out originally by grant money. Then the district decided that they could see the benefit that the students were actually utilizing the resource and the information. We have time because I don’t have to deal with the academic piece and I don’t have to deal with the emotional piece. I get to deal with just this little piece of the high school environment…It’s something that even when the grant money dried up, the district made a commitment that this would continue—

To her knowledge, Central high school’s district was one of the few in the state “that has had a consistent career center on a campus for many, many years.” Observations of the Center indicated its usefulness to students and faculty alike, and how the CCT was a significant source of college information to all students and faculty on the campus.

To help ensure academic rigor within classrooms and help empower and support teachers in their craft, the principal and his administrative team also relied heavily on professional
learning communities (PLCs). The head of the math department described the strengths of utilizing PLCs at Central high school and how the principal in particular was able to provide feedback to teachers about academic focus through PLCs, as each PLC had to complete a form during their weekly meeting.

He has an expectation of form—what the PLCs will fill out. Question number one is what will your students be working on next week? That’s irrelevant to him, cuz [sic] that’s a lesson plan. It’s the next three or four questions. What does the data show about the kids, what are you doing to improve, and how—there’s a question in there about identify special populations, and what are you doing to enrich and push the ones who have already mastered the concept? Because those are the kids we leave behind in school. That PLC form is there to push and to guide ninth through twelfth grade instruction.

**Coast high school.** During the 2013-2014 school year, Coast high school transitioned, as per district mandate, to block scheduling in order to include a daily 45-minute enrichment period utilized for interventions and increased academic support. Courses offered during this period included study skills, college planning, AP course exam prep sessions, and SAT prep courses, among others. Although in its first year of existence at the time of data collection, the creation of the enrichment period indicated a unique strategy and clear commitment to postsecondary preparedness by the district. The effectiveness of this initiative will be more evident in years to come.

The district made another unique investment to support a college going culture by offering a designated “scholarship office” headed by a coordinator for student financial aid. According to the scholarship office website, the coordinator “assists high school students in finding financial aid to attend postsecondary institutions including college, university,
trade/technical schools, and community colleges. Assistance in obtaining both need-based aid and merit-based aid is available to seniors in the district.” The coordinator provided individual assistance to students at each high school on certain days of the week; the coordinator also created weekly scholarship listings for teachers and students called dollar grams that were highly visible on campus.

Coast high school also had two other unique programs that helped promote a college going culture. One was called “adopt a senior” in which every senior was chosen, or adopted, by a teacher or staff member on the campus to help guide them with their postsecondary plans. The head of the social studies department described it as “a really good program” that “definitely helps with encouraging the kids with what are they going to do next.” As an “adopted parent” a teacher makes “sure that they are on some kind of path.” A sophomore math teacher felt this strategy was particularly helpful as “a lot of them [students] are just misinformed. They just don’t know how to apply for FAFSA, how to do things like that. They’re not familiar with tax documents…There’s a lot for them to do and their parents don’t know, either.”

The other unique program at Coast high school was called “graduate alumni day.” “Former students that are currently in college come back and talk to them [students],” explained an English teacher. Graduate alumni visit individual classrooms and share their experiences as college students and answer questions the students have to help demystify the college experience. This day often occurred in December, when many alumni are in town after their fall semester has ended. The counselors work to coordinate this effort.

Like Central high school, Coast high school also had a college center but it was maintained by two individuals in grant-supported positions, including an Advise Texas College advisor and a Gear Up advisor. Since the first Advise Texas College advisor had been placed at
Central high school about five years ago, the advisor had also created and sponsored a club called “Dream Team” that helped promote a college going culture on the campus.

**South high school.** South high school also had three particularly distinct strategies to develop their college going culture. The first related to their comprehensive counseling program. As mandated by the district, the school had two counselors per grade level, which enabled each counselor to have a smaller caseload of about 250-300 students. This strategy was a critical investment in college readiness efforts, as counselors are often key sources of college information and are often overwhelmed with large caseloads and duties that are not counseling related. By having two counselors per grade level, providing students with individual guidance with their postsecondary planning would be possible.

South high school also had specific ACT and SAT courses for juniors not in the top 10% of their class. The SAT course was geared toward those in the top 11-40% of their class while the ACT course was geared toward juniors in the top 11-60% of their class. The SAT course began in the 2013-2014 school year. However, the ACT course had been operating in the district for the past seven years and had been designed by South high school’s own ACT College Readiness teacher. She explained how the district first initiated the course as “a pilot program” and that she, along with seven other teachers, were entrusted with the development of the program’s “scope and sequence.” However, she ultimately created the entire scope and sequence of the program on her own and eventually became “the overseer of all ACT College Readiness teachers” in the district and is now is “an ACT College Readiness/curriculum writer/consultant.” Students taking these courses found them useful, but there were still some suggestions for improvement for the newer SAT course.
Finally, South high school was also working to create a college culture that valued all types of postsecondary options. In coordination with the regional university in the city, the school and district had recently created new course offerings to provide for certifications based on local business market needs. This included a dual credit oil and gas program.

**Next Steps**

This three-year case study will yield large amounts of detailed data from the perspective of multiple stakeholders at each school that can potentially contribute to scholarship, practice, and policy in the area of college readiness and creating a college going culture. Thus, it will be necessary to identify the specific ways in which this study contributes to and fills gap in existing literature. This study is unique in that it focuses on racially and economically diverse schools that are already finding success in creating a college culture for their students. In contrast, most previous research in this area focuses on understanding how to create a college culture at racially and economically diverse schools struggling to graduate college ready students. Preliminary findings already provide additional unique strategies that have not been offered before.

Other areas that can be expanded relate to the challenges in creating a college culture, and ways to address such challenges. Additionally, this study can help provide a more in-depth understanding of creating a college going culture as a process, and from different stakeholder perspectives as most existing studies offer general school-wide perspectives, provide lists or action plans with some details that are often specific to certain locales (see Friedman MacDonald & Dorr, 2006). In-depth accounts of elements needed to create a college going culture from the perspective of school leaders or teachers have yet to be provided in the literature. The role that policies play in building a college culture can also be further explored, as can an organizational understanding of this process, not merely at the school level, but also at the district level.
References


