

# PLANNING FOR OPPORTUNITY: APPLYING ORGANIZATIONAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORIES TO PROMOTE COLLEGE-GOING CULTURES

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## ABSTRACT

*Preparing high school graduates for entry to and success in postsecondary education has become a cornerstone of U.S. society. For many middle- and upper-class students, familial expectations and support influence their college-going behavior and postsecondary outcomes; however, for low-income and first-generation students, secondary schools carry much of this responsibility. The literature on college access and success calls for new strategies to ensure equal access to a college degree for all students. One approach is for schools to foster a college-going culture, ensuring all students are exposed to the expectations, knowledge, and informational support necessary for postsecondary success. In doing so, schools fulfill their role as an opportunity structure. This promising, systemic practice requires deliberate school planning and structuring. In this article, we apply conceptual frameworks from social capital and organizational theories to the literature on college access and success to present a framework for school-planning efforts that foster a college-going culture. The paper concludes with specific recommendations for practice and future research.*

## INTRODUCTION

An opportunity gap exists in the United States. Some groups of students are more likely to enroll in and complete college than other groups of students. While colleges and universities have seen an overall increase in college attendance, those students least likely to enroll and succeed in higher education are overwhelmingly from low-income, minority, or first-generation college student backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). In fact, research has shown that the highest achieving students from low-income schools are enrolling in higher education at the same rate as the lowest achieving students in high-income schools (Haycock, 2006). When comparing students of comparable scholastic achievement levels, low-income students enroll in four-year colleges at half the rate of their high-income peers (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2001). These trends carry significant implications for the economic and social well being of our high school graduates and our society as a whole.

Efforts to reduce this opportunity gap include pre-collegiate outreach and mentoring programs, tutoring services, and media campaigns, among others (Gullatt & Wendy, 2003). These strategies provide much needed visibility and support for promoting college access and success for underserved students. However, because such initiatives serve a limited number of students, the impact of these services has been questioned (McDonough, 2004; Swail & Perna, 2002). To identify more systemic strategies, some researchers have examined the role that school structures play in preparing students for college success. These researchers have paid particular attention to the organization of a school's social relationships, practices, and policies (McClafferty, McDonough & Nuñez, 2002; McDonough, 1997). By examining the ways that a school's organizational structure affects the social relationships among community members in a school, and then shaping institutions to facilitate the transmission of social capital between members, school leaders can foster a college-going culture. When a school's culture is permeated with postsecondary expectations, language, and activities, this increases the probability that all students, not just those enrolled in special programs, will have the support they need for future success.

- This paper offers suggestions for educational planning. We argue that by carefully establishing the practices, policies and relationships necessary to cultivating a college-going culture, high schools have the potential to reduce the opportunity gap that exists between students from high-income schools and those from low-income schools. The first section provides an overview of the college access and success literature, with special attention to the role that a college-going culture can play in preparing disadvantaged students for college. In the second section of this paper, social capital and organizational

theories are applied to conceptual frameworks found in the literature and research on college access. The application of these conceptual frameworks to the college access literature and research support schools' ability to foster a strong college-going culture, and therefore increase students' likelihood for postsecondary success. The paper concludes with recommendations for district and school administrators, counselors, teachers, and future researchers interested in building college-going cultures as a strategy to promote their students' postsecondary behavior and outcomes.

### A POSTSECONDARY OPPORTUNITY GAP

The individual and societal benefits of attaining a postsecondary education have been widely documented. Individual benefits of attending higher education include improved health outcomes, increased earning potential, and even greater life satisfaction (Baum & Ma, 2007). On a broader systemic level, the societal benefits accrued by having higher levels of education present in our workforce include low unemployment rates, increased tax revenues, greater civic and volunteer participation, and lessened dependency on social services (Baum & Ma, 2007). Despite knowledge of these significant benefits, students' preparation for college enrollment and completion is unevenly distributed in the U.S. at best.

In 2005, 81% of high school graduates from the top income quintile entered college directly following high school compared to only 54% of students from the bottom income quintile. Similarly, 73% of white secondary school graduates immediately enrolled in college while only 56% of African American students and 54% of Hispanic students matriculated following high school. And, 89% of those whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher entered higher education immediately following high school in contrast to 62% of students whose parents held a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).

The disparities in college completion reveal a widening gap in opportunity. More than half, 61.9%, of white students who entered four-year postsecondary institutions in 1995 and 1996 had earned bachelor's degrees by 2001. Comparatively, during the same time period, 43.4% of entering black students graduated with a bachelor's degree, and 44% of Hispanic students graduated with a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Of the students whose parents were in the top quartile income group, 73.8% graduated with a bachelor's degree within 6 years of postsecondary enrollment, compared to just 50.3% of students whose parents were in the lowest quartile income group. Similarly, 66.3% and 73.9% of students whose parents had a bachelor's or master's degree, respectively, completed their postsecondary education by 2001, compared to 43.1% of students whose parents had either a high school diploma or less (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

These statistics reflect a wide gap in postsecondary enrollment and completion, suggesting that access to college does not necessarily translate into a college degree. Schools as social institutions play a key role in closing this gap. However, the challenge facing educators across K-16 is how to prepare students for college enrollment *and* completion.

### DEFINING A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE

Growing awareness of the existing opportunity gaps and advanced knowledge about what factors promote college access and success has called attention to systemic strategies that are effective at reaching all students, rather than a select few. College outreach programs are important sources of information and support for students at risk of not enrolling in higher education; however, these programs may not be reaching the students who need their services most. While these programs, along with exceptional counselors, teachers, family members, and peers may be enough to help some students obtain a college degree, they are insufficient to closing the overall demographic gap in college enrollment and success. Rather than focusing efforts on influencing the behavior of individuals as a way to change short term outcomes for some, researchers suggest an approach that treats schools as opportunity structures (McClafferty, et al., 2002; McDonough, 1997) emphasizing that systematic, school-wide change can impact the long term future of students. The most promising and well-documented model of a school as an opportunity structure is the establishment of a college-going culture (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; McClafferty, et al., 2002; McDonough, 1997, 2005). When a school establishes a college-going culture, it

conveys a commitment to ensuring that all students have access to adults who hold high expectations and support for postsecondary success. Building such a culture requires consciously designing, structuring, and organizing the institution so that it promotes successful outcomes for all students.

As organizations, schools embody unique cultures determined and influenced by its various members. The school's culture is one of the most important features of the enterprise and influences everything that goes on in the school (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Administrators, teachers, counselors, and students receive messages about what is valued and expected of them. Depending on the pervasiveness of the school culture, these messages influence, to varying degrees, how administrators, teachers, counselors, and students think, feel, and act (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Inculcating postsecondary expectations and college-going behaviors of all students in a school community requires the presence of a strong college-going culture, one that is both tangible and pervasive (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). When schools are intentionally restructured to create a cohesive community that shares the value and responsibility of preparing students for postsecondary education, the number of students enrolling and succeeding in four year colleges will increase (Ramsey, 2008; Roderick et al., 2008).

Recent studies have found that building a college-going culture increases the number of students who attend college from a given school. While high quality teaching and learning may exist in schools, a reliable college-going culture transforms students' college-going behaviors, ultimately leading to postsecondary enrollment and success (Roderick, et. al., 2008). McClafferty, et al. (2002) suggested that the following key conditions must be met in order for a college-going culture to be established. First, school leadership must be committed to building a college culture and understand the ways this can be operationalized. Second, all school personnel should be expected to convey a consistent message that they actively support students' college aspirations and preparation. And finally, all counselors serving as college counselors must be required to work with teachers and parents to support college preparation and readiness (McClafferty, et al., 2002).

With the necessary conditions in place, a school is well positioned to reinforce a college-going culture by implementing and adhering to the following nine principles (McClafferty, et al., 2002): college talk, clear expectations, information and resources, a comprehensive counseling model, testing and curriculum readiness, faculty involvement, family involvement, k-16 partnerships, and articulation. *College talk* is the verbal and nonverbal communication in schools and homes about postsecondary terminology and culture. *Clear expectations* refer to the messages and expectations sent from parents and faculty to students. These explicit messages should challenge students to reach their highest potential. *Information and resources* about college applications, college life, and the skills one needs to succeed in college must be available, accurate, and up-to-date. A *comprehensive counseling model* reflects a plan for how counselors will provide college counseling and use all interactions as opportunities to reinforce the college-going culture. *Testing and curriculum* must be structured such that students understand the logistics and importance of college entrance tests and have access to the preparatory coursework necessary for college eligibility. *Faculty and family involvement* stresses the importance of these individuals being both active and informed about the college-going process. *Partnerships* between high schools and colleges directly expose high school students to college students, faculty, and the campus experience. Most importantly, partnerships with colleges ground k-12 students' postsecondary aspirations in real experiences and images, rather than on abstract ideas. Finally *articulation* refers to the ongoing communication and collaboration along the k-12 continuum. Collaboration among principals, counselors, and teachers is evidenced by consistency in school cultures and messages; a kindergarten classroom will articulate high expectations for students, just as an 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher does. Combined, these principles ensure that students will not only pursue and enroll in postsecondary institutions, but also succeed once there. Furthermore, these nine principles reflect a broad assumption that postsecondary expectations and preparation is a shared responsibility among all members of the organization, including administrators, counselors, teachers, and students (McClafferty, et al., 2002).

Across the U.S., secondary schools and even some middle and elementary schools have implemented strategies designed to build a college-going culture. Common among many of these schools is a shared sense of responsibility for promoting college enrollment and readiness, and practices and policies that are aligned with college-going behaviors. These features, sometimes socially inherited in high-income

communities, must be deliberately planned and executed in low-income schools to combat years of low expectations and limited familial and communal experience with postsecondary education. Creating such a culture follows careful planning and an examination of the physical and social structures that may inadvertently present barriers to creating a college-going culture. To examine how schools can organize themselves so the goal of a college-going culture can be realized, we turn to social capital and organizational theory.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The first step in building or improving upon a college-going culture is an examination of the practices and policies that shape the school's culture, especially as they relate to postsecondary aspirations, information, knowledge, and skills. This section draws on properties of social capital and organizational theories to provide school leaders with a framework for examining and building a college-going culture. While these theories are interrelated, each possesses unique properties that provide windows into how a college-going culture can be enhanced. Social capital theory provides a lens through which school leaders can examine students' social networks and relationships, particularly as they contribute to a college-going culture. Organizational theory offers another useful context to consider how school practices, policies, and relationships cultivate the conditions of a college-going culture. Knowledge of these theories provides a "pathway for practitioners to use as they make important local decisions" (Pianta, 1999, p. 10). By paying careful attention to the role of structures and the organization of resources, schools will be positioned to establish and reinforce postsecondary expectations and success.

### *Social Capital Theory*

Social capital theory, a theoretical framework that emphasizes the benefits of social networks, has been used by several researchers to illustrate the importance of relational support in preparing underserved students for college access and success (McDonough, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). Although definitions of social capital vary, this paper draws on Nahapiet & Ghoshal's definition (1998), based on early writings by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, to define social capital as "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit" (p. 243). Social networks represent interpersonal ties to people committed to and capable of transmitting vital, diversified resources (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Schools constitute a social unit that is made up of multiple social networks, which collectively have the potential to foster social mobility, and in this case, a college-going culture.

Relationships between members of a school community make up a school's social networks. These networks of social relationships consequently make up a school's social structure and shapes behavior. Although schools themselves are also nested within larger organizing structures and larger social networks (districts, cities, communities, etc.), this paper looks specifically at the social networks active within schools. Members of a school's social networks include students, teachers, parents, administrators, counselors, other school staff, and district leaders. As we explore ways to organize social structures that benefit all students, we must consider the relationships between and among each of these important network members. In Nahapiet & Ghoshal's definition, social capital, as transmitted through social networks, can be understood through three interrelated dimensions: the structural dimension, the relational dimension, and the cognitive dimension (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 243).

Social capital theorists define the *structural dimension* of social capital as the "impersonal . . . linkages between people or units" within organizations and "use measures such as density, connectivity, hierarchy" and transferability to describe "patterns of the linkages" in social networks (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 244). When designing a college-going culture, schools need to consider the structural dimension of their social networks. Individual relationships students have with adults and their peers influence their educational aspirations and expectations; however, the actual "density" of those relationships is especially relevant, particularly when the goal is to enhance a school's social network. For example, school counselors influence the college-going behaviors of students (McClafferty, et. al, 2002; McDonough, 2004). The density of that relationship is strengthened in the presence of

additional supportive relationships between the school counselor and the school's administration. Because "counseling programs are molded by the emphasis placed on advisement and college-oriented culture at each particular school" (Corwin, et. al., 2004, p. 445), school administrators who emphasize postsecondary readiness through policies and practices will influence the counselors' college counseling practice.

Social capital is dynamic in nature. It is accumulated and transmitted through a structure of relationships, rather than situated within one individual. The quality of relationships in social networks determines the *relational dimension* of social capital. This dimension focuses on the level of respect, friendship, and trust developed among members of an organization. Identification with the organization is a function of the level of trust members of the organization have for one another (Coleman, 1988; Merton, 1968; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). The relational dimension of social capital is relevant to establishing a pervasive college-going culture. Students who experience trusting relationships with their teachers and counselors will be more inclined to internalize high expectations and benefit from postsecondary support than those in instances where trust is lacking.

The *cognitive dimension* of social capital refers to the systems of meaning and interpretations shared by members of organizations and networks (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). A shared language facilitates individuals' ability to exchange ideas and information about classroom practices and administrative values. The lack of a common language can keep people apart and restrict access to important human capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In the school context, developing and adopting a common language to discuss college preparation and readiness will result in clear messages about what students need to succeed in college. Freely disseminating this language and educating everyone at a school about the meaning of college oriented vocabulary will encourage all members of its social networks to use this language. Schools that encourage the use of a specific, shared vocabulary to develop a college-going culture will be ineffective if teachers and administrators are not familiar with college vocabulary, interpret it in different ways, use it with only some students, or use it with all students but do not define the words and terms. For example, schools must be clear about the use of "postsecondary" to convey Associate or Bachelor degree aspirations versus general future planning. Common words, phrases, and codes should be used throughout the day, applied to different contexts, and communicated by all staff, resulting in students' familiarity, comfort and ease with the language and its meaning.

The importance of relationships is a familiar concept among the educational reform literature; however, the emphasis on the role that schools and school leaders play in structuring and regulating these relationships is widely discussed. In accordance with these three social capital dimensions, a network's structures and rules, trust among members, and shared language and norms specifically promote the transmission of social capital and the development of strong social networks. Social capital and presence of strong social networks within a school will facilitate a school-wide culture of college-going beliefs, expectations, and behaviors, all of which are elements correlated with increased college access and success.

### *Organizational Theory*

Examining the quality and depth of social networks to ensure the accumulation and transmission of social capital requires the availability of human capital and resources. Organizational theory describes how school structures and policies shape the availability and value of such relationships. The three dimensions of social capital previously discussed enable school leaders to examine their social networks. Leadership teams can use the results about the extent to which social capital is transmitted to guide the development of their college-going culture in their school. We now turn our attention to organizational theory, which describes how institutions are designed and structured. This theoretical framework provides a lens through which we can examine a school's potential to transmit social capital. With intentional planning of school practices, policies, and structures, school leaders can marshal all available resources and deploy them in such a way that all students have equal access to postsecondary expectations, information, and support.

Planning and structuring school environments to encourage the transmission of social capital requires an examination of the organizational structure. The following describe elements most relevant

to this discussion: the extent to which goals and norms are aligned; the degree to which an organization embodies openness or closure; and, the number and quality of ties within the school's social networks. Although as an organization, a school has the potential to foster high levels of social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), trusting relationships and solidarity can be undermined by a school's structure (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Potential organizational constraints include the noncommittal and transitory nature of relations between teachers and students, scheduling limitations, and the short time students spend with caring and competent teachers (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Surveying the aspects of organizational theory described below, including organizational objectives, ties, and degree of openness or closure, can help schools move from a situation in which they are passive agents that limit information and resources to those students who seek it out, to a model in which schools proactively seek out solutions for the problems they know will arise. The analysis made possible with organizational theory can help schools avoid inadvertently perpetuating social inequality.

According to organizational theory, organizational structures maintain specified goals and purposes, as well as institutionalized norms that regulate how these goals are reached (Merton, 1968). To create a pervasive college-going culture, goals and norms should be *aligned* as well as *shared* by all members of the school community. Certainly, expecting everyone in the community to share the same philosophies is a difficult task; however, we have seen such a shift through the educational reform movement in the use of high standards to raise expectations. Both the specified goals and institutionalized norms must take current school processes into account, ensuring the day-to-day activities (the norms of the organization) also reflect organizational goals. The goals and norms should be integrated, existing in relation to one another, to encourage goal achievement and discourage deviance from specified goals (Merton, 1968). In a school context, school leaders must ensure that students have the appropriate resources and support to achieve school-wide goals. For example, establishing a policy that requires all high school juniors to take the SAT is the first step toward achieving an explicit goal. Yet, establishing the policy will not necessarily turn the goal into a reality. A school with aligned goals and practices would take additional steps toward accomplishing this goal by establishing itself as an SAT test location, distributing necessary fee waivers for students who cannot afford the test, discussing the purpose and implications of tests, and offering test preparation materials and classes to ensure that students understand the purpose of the test and feel confident about their ability to score well. Organization-wide consensus about organizational norms and goals enables people to develop trust, thereby encouraging the transmission of social capital, and ultimately, the acquisition of meaningful information (Coleman, 1968).

Another organizational property that applies to a college-going culture is the extent to which an organization is "open" or "closed." By definition, organizations are delimited by boundaries (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Scott, 1987). There is variation in the extent to which these boundaries are permeable. In an open system, the organization relies on its exchange with the environment to restore its energy (Scott, 1987). Its members are loosely connected and fairly autonomous, and the system is capable of self-maintenance (Scott, 1987; Weick, 1976). Conversely, a closed structure develops connectivity and interdependence among the members within, rather than between the system and its surrounding environment. As such, a closed organizational structure enhances the social networks within the organization. Establishing this configuration is exceptionally conducive to the transmission of social capital. Furthermore, closed social structures facilitate social capital by holding all members accountable for subscribing to and promoting the embedded norms within the organization, integrating rather than differentiating its members (Coleman, 1998; Katz & Kahn, 1966). When an organization has a high degree of closure, and expectations and norms are overtly stated, members can monitor and guide each other's behavior to ensure goal achievement.

Increasing the degree of closure in a school can aid the development of a college-going culture. The nine principles of a college-going culture emphasize school-wide responsibility for achieving goals and setting consistent expectations among students. Closed social structures help establish these norms among administrators, teachers, and school counselors and reinforce the expectation that the entire school community is responsible for implementing and reaching goals. In addition, closed social structures increase the connectivity between school members and ultimately lead to high quality relationships. Increased connectivity and high quality relationships, both of which lead to the transmission of social

capital between all in the network, simultaneously accelerate the development of a sustainable college-going culture. One criticism of social closure is that access to learning opportunities outside of the organization may be limited (Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999), which certainly applies in the context of schools; however, schools seeking to transform their internal school cultures can benefit from closing their networks to ensure that members espouse and practice the values of the system.

Finally, the nature of the *links* between members of an organization influences the extent to which social capital is developed. Organizational theory suggests that all members of an organization are linked to each other in some way by functional requirements (Katz & Kahn, 1966). When members of an organization maintain “simplex ties” with one another, individuals relate to each other through one dimension of activity (Richards & Roberts, 1998). When members possess “multiplex ties” with each other, their interactions take place in several spheres of activity (Richards & Roberts, 1998). In the case of social capital transmission, we believe the presence of “multiplex ties” is most beneficial. In a school context, “multiplex ties” are achieved when school leaders create formal pathways and structures that encourage staff and students to interact through multiple roles. For example, rather than school counselors assuming sole responsibility for helping students explore possible career interests, teachers may incorporate this developmental task into their curriculum. Likewise, teacher-student relationships are deepened when teachers and students share experiences beyond formal instructional activities. These shared experiences ensure that a teacher’s concern will not be perceived as superficial, non-committal, and transitory, but as dedicated and sustaining. When a student has multiple opportunities for student-teacher relationships, there is an increased likelihood of social capital transmission. In this case, the social capital takes the form of connections between class performance and college readiness.

Intentional planning of organizational constructs such as aligned goals and norms, “closed” social structures, and “multiplex ties,” prepares schools to promote a college-going culture. A closed, tightly-knit community of teachers, administrators, counselors, students, and staff who share a vision of each student going to college will communicate postsecondary expectations and availability of support to each student. In a school that has a closed structure, all adults in the school understand that the articulation and promotion of these norms and expectations is central to his/her role within the school’s structure and necessary for the culture to be reinforced. Examples include communicating information, making resources available, and instituting rigorous testing and curriculum. However, without established social capital, these strategies may not carry the same meaning to students. Thoughtful planning and consideration of a school’s structural design will enable educators to influence the relationships among individual members of a school’s social network such that they facilitate the accumulation and transmission of social capital.

Aspects of both social capital theory and organizational theory provide useful lenses through which we can view the principles associated with building a college-going culture. Together, these theories provide a guide to school leaders as they make decisions about resources, policies, and school efforts that collectively will shape a school’s college-going culture. Accordingly, secondary schools can fulfill their goal of preparing their students for postsecondary access and success.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

In high and most middle-income communities, college-going cultures are socially inherited by a school’s social and academic culture. This is often not the case for schools located in low-income communities. Low-income school communities typically educate high concentrations of first-generation, low-income, and minority student populations, who often hold low educational expectations shaped by poor educational experiences, low societal expectations, or previous foreclosure on postsecondary goals. Educators in these schools are charged with providing expectations and information about postsecondary opportunities to students with limited postsecondary knowledge and experience. School leaders serving this population of students must be intentional and explicit when planning to prepare students for postsecondary enrollment and completion.

This paper argues schools must be physically and socially organized to facilitate the transmission of social capital, thereby developing and maintaining a college-going culture. The following recommendations link organizational and social capital frameworks in an effort to promote postsecondary

aspirations and goals among students. Specifically, using closed social structures, which embody features from organizational and social capital theory, specific practices, structures, and policies are recommended. This approach goes beyond aligning goals and norms to creating multiplex ties to further strengthen the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital. It is our hope these recommendations will guide school leaders as they plan their organizations and make decisions about resources, policies, and school efforts to build a college-going culture, and thus realize the school's potential as an opportunity structure.

*Implement clear expectations and standards about postsecondary education as part of your school mission statement.* School leaders must articulate clear goals that demand shared responsibility for promoting a college-going culture. School leaders should define and practice the norms expected of all school members in this regard. When possible, school leaders should communicate this intention through mission statements, job descriptions, evaluations and other school documents. By integrating some of the nine principles such as college talk, clear expectations, and comprehensive counseling models into curricular decisions and teacher/counselor job descriptions, schools standardize these norms and can hold members accountable for subscribing to them and practicing them. Ultimately, college-going norms will become embedded within the organization; however, in the initial stages, each member of the school must be proactive in portraying behaviors that are aligned with the specified goal. In order to solidify the structure, school leaders must design a system to hold all members accountable for espousing these social capital dimensions in their practice, thus accelerating the development of a sustainable college-going culture.

*Identify strategies to strengthen the relationships among students and staff.* Deliberately organizing school structures and initiatives will enhance the structural, relational and cognitive dimensions of relationships. School leaders can use curricular, programmatic, and policy decisions to regulate relationships among staff and students. These strategies include establishing shared classrooms, co-teaching opportunities, and student social spaces in the school. Small learning communities and advisory programs also create opportunities for relationships to be built between students, counselors, and teachers, reinforcing the relational dimension of social capital. Class size, counselor-to-student ratios, and stable contact between teachers and students can also foster relationship development and communication. Finally, establishing a single language code through defining, using, and enforcing “college talk” ensures the presence of the cognitive dimension of social capital.

*Ensure that schools and districts place visible value on postsecondary readiness through space, leadership, timing, and resources.* A college-going culture flourishes when schools dedicate visible space and time to express expectations and disseminate information about postsecondary opportunities, along with important college and financial deadlines. This information and planning can also be integrated into curriculum that focuses on preparing students for their future. School districts should provide leadership through specific personnel and/or offices dedicated to postsecondary development and ensure that these district-wide positions/plans transfer to individual school practices.

*Encourage “multiplex ties” among school staff.* A pervasive college-going culture rests on a sense of shared responsibility among staff, and a clear process for teachers, counselors, and administrators to be interconnected and interdependent of one another. By integrating each member of a student's social network to achieve a shared goal, student–adult relationships will extend beyond a particular class or discipline, further allowing them to connect on more than one level. Accomplishing this requires that all staff recognize their important role in the development of a college-going culture and subsequently, their students' postsecondary success. Such an approach calls for a redefinition of roles of all school members so that they are not just associated with and responsible for their specific content area or expertise, but also involved in achieving the college-going culture goals. Increased collaboration and shared responsibility may be achieved by using in-school meetings, school-wide programming, and staff retreats to reinforce these new roles. Holding school staff accountable for their contributions to the college-going culture can be addressed through job descriptions, performance evaluations, and classroom visitations. Such a change, however, must be accompanied by the availability of professional development, training, and information for teachers and other staff to increase their knowledge, skills, and confidence integrating college-going behaviors into their curriculum and daily practice. School leaders might utilize learning



communities to highlight the expertise of teachers and counselors and share best practices for reaching the school-wide goal.

*Build school counselor capacity through professional development and role design.* While multiplex ties and the participation of all school members in promoting college access is essential, schools must actively work to capitalize on the experience and expertise of the school counselor. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends that all school counselors act as leaders and consultants in schools to promote educational equity. As such, school leaders should craft counselor roles that emphasize time and energy dedicated to sharing their skills and knowledge gathered from their professional training and experience as college counselors. In this context, it is critical that school counselors remain up to date on accurate information and changes in the field of college access and success. Participation in professional development will position the counselor to serve in a consultant role, further reinforcing the multiplex ties. This shift in roles carries the added benefit of freeing up counselor time to engage in other college-going activities such as building college partnerships, aligning support services with academic achievement, and monitoring the college-going culture.

*Modify current professional development for teachers.* Any redefinition of roles calls for added professional development. In addition to providing teachers with up-to-date and accurate “college knowledge,” professional development should be used to build tighter k-16 curricular alignment. By drawing on research about college readiness, schools might use partnerships with higher education to facilitate communication about students’ academic readiness for college. Additional professional development opportunities may be used to discuss best practices in building strong teacher-student relationships and personalized learning environments.

*Develop university and community partnerships that enhance a college-going culture.* A college-going culture relies on the articulation of college expectations from kindergarten through grade 12. Schools should not work with students in isolation, but rather build sustainable relationships with possible partners. When elementary, secondary, and higher education institutions regularly collaborate and communicate, all partners understand student needs and are working towards college access and success together. Moreover, school/university/community partnerships provide the mechanism for pre-college outreach programs and other school-wide activities that reinforce the college-going culture. Relationships across the K-16 continuum will create bridges that link the knowledge and expertise of all involved, facilitating both students’ and professionals’ development.

## ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

In addition to practical strategies, educational researchers are uniquely positioned to advance individual school and district capacity to cultivate a college-going culture by expanding research and knowledge in this area. Specific research agendas might consider the following:

- The practical implications of closed social structures currently in existence. Education reform models such as small-schools, Early College High Schools, and advisory programs promote strong relationships between students and school staff. Yet, the evidence-based research on these strategies is mixed and new research is needed to understand the open or closed structure of these models and how effectively they are promoting social capital. High quality program evaluation provides insight into practices that are especially effective in changing school cultures.
- Teachers’ and counselors’ perceptions of their roles. Additional information regarding how teachers and counselors see their role in preparing students for postsecondary opportunities will clarify strategies to expand role descriptions in ways that *change* professional practice, rather than adding on to what those professionals already do. This research may also reveal what knowledge and skills must be learned before teachers and counselors can fully participate in the building of a college-going culture.
- The extent to which students perceive college-going cultures in schools. Many schools may believe themselves to be successful in building a culture that emphasizes high expectations; however, it is irresponsible to assume that students experience this as such. This is especially critical to ensuring that such practices truly reach all students rather than those with high

levels of academic motivation and initiative.

- The degree to which college access and success includes social and emotional support. The majority of large-scale studies assess the extent to which informational or procedural help influence college-going behavior. Very few studies have examined the role of personal and social support in influencing college-going behavior. Interdisciplinary research is needed to also identify how adolescent development is linked to the development of postsecondary aspirations and college-going behaviors.

## CONCLUSION

In today's globalized world where "openness" has become the trend, we argue for school "closure" as a strategy to increase the number of students who enroll and complete postsecondary education. By applying concepts derived from social capital and organizational theories, this paper suggests that schools advance the postsecondary opportunities of students by intentionally establishing a pervasive college-going culture. This systemic approach is especially critical in schools that serve students currently underrepresented in higher education and who may not receive support from existing individual and programmatic efforts. Practically, structurally, and symbolically, promoting a shared responsibility for college access and success through closed social structures will embed associated values and norms within a school's physical and social networks. As such, opportunities for social capital built on trust and strong information pathways can be generated, providing the foundation necessary to create a college-going culture. With this culture in place, schools may effectively provide the expectations, knowledge, and skills necessary for postsecondary degree attainment. Above all, planning a school's organizational structure and practices to advance the educational opportunities of all its students ensures a school's ability to act as an opportunity structure.

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