Beyond posters and pennants:

College-going messaging at three racially and economically diverse public schools

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Abstract

Context: It has been argued that high schools with a majority of students of color and from low-income backgrounds must be purposeful in fostering a college-going culture in order to address the challenges and inequities historically underserved students face in preparing for and accessing a higher education. However, what this looks and sounds like in practice is not always clear, leaving schools seeking common ground on how to create a college-going environment. **Purpose:** Through a symbolic and ecological model of college readiness framework, the messaging associated with the college-going culture at three racially and economically diverse Texas high schools that had consistently high college ready graduate rates was examined. The research questions that guided the study included: What types of college-going culture messages are conveyed at the schools, and how? How might such messaging impact students, school staff and leaders? **Research Design:** This study drew on data from a three-year, multi-site descriptive case study of three public high schools in different regions of Texas that all served approximately 50% or more of students with financial need and 72% to 97% students of color, specifically Latina/o and Black students. **Data Collection and Analysis:** Data was collected during week-long, yearly visits to the three schools and included: school and district documents, individual and group semi-structured interviews with 194 individuals including administrators, teachers, support staff, students, parents, and community members, observations of common areas and classrooms, archival data, and researcher-derived documents including field notes, memos, and photographs of the school grounds and school activities. This paper primarily drew on the pictures taken of the schools (in hallways, classrooms, and shared spaces like cafeterias and libraries), field notes, memos, and interview data that specifically speak to the visual and verbal messaging associated with the college-going culture. Analysis of data revealed six themes: college is a revered goal with many options; varying degrees of integration; support and resources are at your reach; think college *and* career; finding funding for college is vital; college is an individual and shared success. **Conclusions:** This study's findings suggest the need to: reconsider what a strong college-going culture entails, re-envision college-going cultures as dynamic, multi-layered, and responsive, reframe postsecondary opportunities so they are more expansive and varied, and re-evaluate inequities in college-going messaging and academic rigor.

Executive Summary

It has been argued that high schools with a majority of students of color and from low-income backgrounds must be purposeful in fostering a college-going culture in order to address the challenges and inequities historically underserved students face in preparing for and accessing a higher education. However, what this looks and sounds like in practice is not always clear, leaving schools seeking common ground on how to create a college-going environment. To guide schools in their efforts, several definitions and models for developing a college-going culture have been derived that focus on how schools should systematically and equitably be helping students develop college aspirations and acquire the requisite knowledge and skills they need to prepare for, apply to, and enroll in a postsecondary institution. This process is facilitated through various means, including visual and verbal messaging. University pennants, scholarship posters, as well as announcements about financial aid night or postsecondary expectations relayed in conversations with teachers, counselors, and school leaders are examples of such messaging, which stand in contrast to the metal detectors and security guards that are also often visible at some schools in the U.S. today.

This study examined the messaging associated with the college-going culture at three racially and economically diverse Texas high schools. The schools were located in different regions of Texas and all serve approximately 50% or more of students with financial need and 72% to 97% students of color, specifically Latina/o and Black students. These schools, one located in Central Texas, the Gulf Coast region, and South Texas, were specifically chosen

because of the racial and economic demographic they served while having high college ready graduate rates for students in English/Language Arts, Mathematics, and in both combined subjects when compared to other public, comparably-sized schools that served students from similar backgrounds in their respective regions. At the time of the study, the Texas Education Agency derived the college ready graduate rates for each high school graduating class based on SAT, ACT, and Texas' state-mandated exit level exam scores. A college ready graduate rate is calculated for students from all racial/ethnic categories and for those identified as "economically disadvantaged." School sites in these specific regions of the state were also chosen because they are areas experiencing increased population growth while also facing continued challenges in postsecondary outcomes. Therefore, the school sites in these specific regions were chosen based on their demographic diversity and the assumption that their high college ready graduate rates would reflect a strong college-going culture that could be examined.

Utilizing a three-year, multi-site descriptive case study design the study was guided by the following research questions: What types of college-going culture messages are conveyed at the schools, and how? How might such messaging impact students, school staff and leaders? The study drew on a symbolic and ecological model of college readiness framework, which provided a lens from which to specifically examine the visual and verbal messaging associated with the college-going culture at the three high school sites. More specifically, a symbolic framework assisted with exploring how the college-going messaging reinforced each school's vision, values and culture, and how school stakeholders interpreted such messaging in different ways. An ecological model of college readiness takes into account how students' college readiness is shaped and mitigated by the various multi-layered environments with which they interact and in which they are situated; from the most immediate (i.e., schools, family, neighborhood) to the more distant and indirect (i.e., systems, structures, organizations, ideologies, and cultures). Therefore, as a college-going culture and its associated messaging can be developed to foster college readiness within schools and their programs, curriculum, through educators, and extracurricular activities, this additional ecological model of college readiness lent itself to this study. The ecological perspective provided a means to consider whether college-going messaging at schools aligned with messaging that students received in their homes and neighborhoods, for instance, and whether schools were building on the cultural assets of students in developing their messaging. Organizational and structural forces, as well as dominant ideologies and culture outside the school setting that indirectly impact students could also be considered and help explain variations in educational opportunities for different demographic groups of students.

Data for the study was collected during week-long, yearly visits to the three schools between fall of 2013 and spring of 2016. Data collected included: school and district documents, individual and group semi-structured interviews with 194 individuals including administrators, teachers, support staff, students, parents, and community members, observations of common areas (library, hallways, cafeteria) and classrooms, archival data, and researcher-derived documents including field notes, memos, and photographs of the school grounds and school activities. This paper primarily drew on the pictures taken of the schools (in hallways, classrooms, and shared spaces like cafeterias and libraries), field notes, memos, and interview data that specifically speak to the visual and verbal messaging associated with the college-going culture.

A multi-level thematic analysis was utilized to derive the findings. The first level of analysis began with a review of all photographs taken on each school campus. The content and context of the subject matter in the photographs were considered, and an effort was made to group photos together that included similar content. Fourteen thematic groups were derived from the photos, and subsequent analysis focused on the messages that the content in each group of photos were trying to convey with regards to college-going; who seemed to be relaying these messages; and in what context within the schools. In this process, the theoretical framework, that accounted for the symbolism and ecological aspects of the college-going culture, became vital to consider the various possible interpretations of the messaging, the clarity of the messaging, and the type of cultural symbolism and larger ecological factors associated with the content. The 14 themes derived from the photos were then used as typologies to engage in a second level of analysis of interview transcripts. What resulted were six key themes: 1) college is a revered goal with many options, 2) varying degrees of integration, 3) support and resources are at your reach, 4) think college *and* career, 5) finding funding for college is vital, and 6) college is an individual and shared success.

This study's findings suggest the need to: reconsider what a strong college-going culture entails, re-envision college-going cultures as dynamic, multi-layered, and responsive, reframe postsecondary opportunities so they are more expansive and varied, and re-evaluate inequities in college-going messaging and academic rigor.

Beyond posters and pennants:

College-going messaging at three racially and economically diverse public schools

As you walk into the high school, you first pass through a set of double doors and a metal detector before entering an impressive hexagonal foyer with a large pewter statue of the school mascot and colorful pennants of prestigious universities hanging from the ceiling. In the halls, you see college-oriented posters, with occasional flyers displaying information on college scholarships and club meetings taking place after school. Most of the college posters are for the local community college and the four-year university in town. Increasingly saturated higher-education iconography decorates each poster: Elated students strolling across campus, anxious students worrying about money, or any myriad images denoting the potential financial reward of a college degree. Counselors' offices are situated in different parts of the building, and their doors are covered with many more flyers noting dates for SAT exams, FAFSA information, and the like. Every classroom door displays certificates with each teacher's name and the university they graduated from. By the end of second period, a voice comes over the school's intercom system announcing the latest news, including scores from last week's sports events, as well as reminders about college scholarships and the upcoming financial aid night.

These are just some of the visual and verbal messages communicated at one public high school to foster a college-going culture; the university pennants and scholarship posters stand in contrast to the metal detector and security guards that are visible at this school, as well as many other schools in the U.S. today. This particular high school is located along Texas' U.S.-Mexico border and is one of the school sites in a multi-site case study that was conducted between the fall of 2013 and spring of 2016 that examined the college-going culture at three large public high schools in different geographic regions of the state. All of the schools served a high proportion of students of color (between 72-97%) and approximately 50% or more of students from low-income backgrounds. Each school was chosen for the study because they had consistently high college ready graduate rates when analyzed with other comparable sized schools in their region that served students from similar demographic backgrounds.

It has been argued that high schools like these, that serve historically underserved students, must be purposeful in fostering a college-going culture to help address the challenges and inequities that underrepresented students face in preparing for and accessing a higher education (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Knight & Marciano, 2013; McClafferty, McDonough, & Nuñez, 2009; McKillip, Godfrey, & Rawls, 2012). However, what this means and specifically looks and sounds like in practice is not always clear, leaving school leaders, counselors, and teachers seeking common ground on how to create a college-going environment. Developing a college-going culture is critical as "students develop the aspirations and behaviors that affect their academic preparation in light of opportunities, resources, hazards, and options that originate beyond their immediate environments" (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012, p. 93). Underserved students, for instance, must contend with and act in response to forces that are out of their immediate control, such as residential segregation, poverty, immigration and financial aid policies, and devalued cultural capital; all of which shape their readiness and preparation for and access to college (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012).

To guide schools in their efforts, several definitions for developing a college-going culture have been developed. A school that fosters a college-going culture has been generally defined as one that ensures students develop "aspirations and behaviors conducive to preparing for, applying to and enrolling in college" (Corwin & Tierney, 2007, p. 3). This culture "should be inclusive and accessible to all students," while being tangible and embedded throughout all aspects of the school (Corwin & Tierney, 2007, p. 3). McClafferty, McDonough, and Nuñez's nine principles of a college-going culture provide additional insight into the types of messaging that contributes to such an environment, including: college talk, clearly communicated expectations, current and accessible college information and resources, and testing information and curricula. Additional principles that are less tangible but could be visible on a campus include: a comprehensive counseling program, faculty and parent involvement, university partnerships, and collaboration between schools in a feeder pattern.

With this existing literature in mind, this study sought to examine the college-going messaging at the three racially and economically diverse Texas high schools by asking: (1) What types of college-going messages are conveyed at the schools, and how? (2) How might such messaging impact students, school staff, and leaders? These questions were explored through a theoretical framework that took into account the symbolism associated with college-going messaging (Bolman & Deal, 2013) and the ecological perspective of college readiness offered by Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong (2012). In this way, the research questions and framework provided an opportunity to critically explore how visual and verbal messaging was used to build a strong college-going culture at racially and economically diverse high schools, while considering the complexities associated with this process and its impact on school stakeholders. Such an exploration could inform existing college-going culture models and guide school practitioners in similar school contexts.

Supporting Literature

A college-going culture creates, collects, and shares an aforementioned messaging in order to prepare students for any postsecondary pathway (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Corwin &

Tierney, 2007; Knight & Marciano, 2013; McClafferty, McDonough, & Nuñez, 2009). These pathways can lead to trade schools, community colleges, flagship universities, and many other postsecondary options. Secondary campuses have a unique opportunity to differentiate their preparation and messaging, in order for struggling students to not become demoralized if, say, a bachelor's degree may not be in their future (Rosenbaum, 2011). Part of the college-going culture discussion requires considering a question of college readiness, whereas students are not merely eligible for college after graduating high school, but proficient in key cognitive and behavioral elements (Conley, 2008). This question of readiness as driving a high school's cultural response requires that pre-college messaging and resources depict real options, and that the academic content is rigorous (Bosworth, Convertino, & Hurwitz, 2014).

Each secondary campus also engages in college-linking strategies, wherein the right postsecondary option becomes negotiated to some degree, but these strategies still call for further scrutiny with respect to variations in racial/ethnic outcomes. Hill (2008) shows how a traditional college linking strategy is shaped by limited high school resources and organizational norms that align students to their best postsecondary option, while a clearinghouse strategy has sufficient resources but limited norms. The most vulnerable students' best interests may often go unmet given the disparity of linking strategies with respect to whichever school they happen to attend, whereas their best interest calls for the strongest support. In that respect, a brokering college linking strategy is well-equipped and highly active in negotiating each student's postsecondary transition. Martinez and Deil-Amen (2015) utilized Hill's linking strategies to frame their examination of Latino college students' reflections of the messaging they received about postsecondary pursuits while in high school. Martinez and Deil-Amen focused heavily on interpreting the verbal messaging students received from high school personnel and found that

Latinos received differential messaging based on academic course taking and the socio-economic status of a student’s high school, where some were exposed to a college-for-all ideology and others experienced gatekeeping.

Schools that are sensitive to each student’s pathway will necessarily develop working structures, norms, and organizational partnerships that co-create a culture of postsecondary reality (Nuñez & Oliva, 2009). This type of deep sensitivity becomes challenging for high schools in the face of standardized test-score accountability, which lacks a clear indication of postsecondary preparation, and is void of social support (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009). A palpable social support on campus is evident in how the school leadership views social capital, and then how said capital is organized, informed, and aligned with high expectations and goals (Weinstein & Savitz-Romer, 2009). Supporting the cultural and social capital in secondary students becomes crucial when engaging students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, and a campus is keen to include – along with college options and logistics – messaging of the personal and socially transformative possibilities that come with postsecondary success (Athanases, Achinstein, Curry, & Ogawa, 2016; Knight & Marciano, 2013). A high school that can identify its underprepared students, and support them with authenticity, and care – along with Advanced Placement (AP) options, dual credit courses, writing and math support, and financial aid resources – is closer to realizing the students’ changed dispositions, behaviors, and outlooks (Collins, 2011; Horvat & Davis, 2011; Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Oakes, 2003; Reid & Moore III, 2008).

Inherent to a school that authentically cares about first-generation students in higher education, is messaging which challenges negative, low-status stereotypes, embedded within the overall college-going message on campus (Achinstein, Curry, & Ogawa, 2015; Knight &

Marciano, 2013). This authenticity comes, though, neither from material resources in a college center, nor from manufactured slogans and taglines, but from a type of relationship-drive, built on trust and respect with students and families (McKillip, Godfrey, & Rawls, 2012). First-generation students and families have been shown to become, at least, more knowledgeable and expectant of their postsecondary options when engaged with college-preparation programs and their agents (Watt, Huerta, & Lozano, 2007).

The academic and social supports within a school's physical building, its instructional practices, and its culture must be deliberate and experienced, if that campus is to truly create a system of college preparation and not, merely, one of exit-exam preparation (Farmer-Hinton, 2011; Welton & Williams, 2015). This culture can be seen to move off-campus and into homes, whereas when a student's aspirations of college-going increase, so do those of her friends and family (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

In thinking about the college-going messaging of the three campuses, this study drew on Bolman and Deal's (2013) symbolic framework for viewing organizations as well as Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong's (2012) ecological model of college readiness, which is based on Bronfenbrenner's human ecology theory. The symbolic frame is one of four frames that include the structural, human resource, and political. Several assumptions undergird the symbolic frame related to how meaning is the most significant aspect behind what happens in an organization; how symbols and messages have various interpretations, as do people of the same experience; how symbols provide clarity and guidance; how cultural symbolism can provide individuals a sense of purpose and instill or renew one's dedication for their craft/role; and how culture draws individuals in an organization together. Symbols serve to "embody and express an organization's culture" (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 243); in this way, symbols are the basic elements of every culture—where culture is considered to be about basic shared assumptions that groups use to solve problems. Although many organizations work to create and communicate strong values and vision, it is the lived values that count. Thus, a symbolic framework provided a means to explore whether and how the college-going messaging reinforced the school's vision, values and culture, and how school stakeholders might have interpreted such messaging in different ways.

In order to account for the complexities and inequities associated with obtaining a higher education at the individual student level, Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong (2012) posit an ecological model of college readiness. They suggest "college readiness is an umbrella term that refers to the multidimensional set of skills, traits, habits, and knowledge that students need to enter college with the capacity to success once they are enrolled" (p. 2). While college readiness is "embodied in individuals, college readiness is formed in microsystems, the immediate settings in which students experience everyday life in direct interaction with people, activities, roles, and objects" (p. viii). Thus, schools and its programs, curriculum, educators, and the extracurricular activities that students encounter on a daily basis are a part of this microsystem; where a college-going culture and its associated messaging can be developed to foster college readiness. Yet the model acknowledges how students are nested, shaped by, and act upon four environments which range from the most immediate to the student, to the most distant. The first and most immediate environmental layer includes the microsystem, as previously described includes a student's most immediate surroundings like school, family, neighborhood, programs, peers, and non-school related activities. It is possible that if a school lacks a college-going culture, there will be students whose microsystem does not include the necessary exposure to and interaction with postsecondary messaging, initiatives, programs, and guidance.

The next three environmental layers in the model include the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The mesosystem includes “the totality of students’ direct experiences, roles, and settings--the combined set of microsystem interactions” (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012, p. 47). In building a college-going culture, schools must be cognizant of this mesosystem as well, to consider whether the messaging schools are providing students about college are congruent with the messaging students are receiving from other familial and peer sources, for instance, within their microsystem, and whether such messaging builds upon students’ cultural attributes in positive ways. Students are not in physical proximity of the exosystem, or next layer in the model, yet are impacted indirectly by events in the exosystem because it includes what occurs in systems, organizations, and structures. For instance, policies and practices of K-12 school systems, local, state and federal governments, higher education institutions, and non-profit organizations fall into this category. In this sense, schools must be cognizant of changes in the exosystem in building a college-going culture, as changes can impact students’ individual college readiness both positively and negatively. A prime example of this are the increased accountability demands on public schools that often shift and limit a secondary school’s focus from providing a rigorous and relevant curriculum, which contributes to a strong college-going culture, to coursework that is prescriptive and focused on rote memorization in order to pass state-mandated exams (Welton & Williams, 2015).

Larger environmental factors are situated within the macrosystem and include the cultural and ideological belief systems that shape the “structure of schooling and the patterns of opportunities and perceived possibilities for different students” (Arnold, Lee, & Armstrong, 2012, p. viii). Dominant beliefs in capitalism, meritocracy, and rationalism fall into this sphere, as do racism and social stratification. It is important to note that “language, metaphors, and large concepts" within the macrosystem construct experience; minoritized communities "experience both the macrosystem of the dominant culture and that of their particular subculture" (p. 16). Finally, the ecological model also takes into account the passing of time through the chronosystem; time provides for change in ideologies, accounts for varying sociohistorical contexts, and "temporal elements of environmental change, such as sequential processes, chronological age, generational cohort, and developmental growth" (p. 83). High schools with strong college-going cultures are often very cognizant of the passing of time, relaying clear expectations to students about the types of college readiness activities they must engage in at different points in their academic careers between 9th and 12th grade.

The ecological model of college readiness was an ideal addition to this study's framework as it lent itself to examining the college-going messaging within the high school setting, in students' microsystems, and how such messaging aligned with messaging in students' mesosystem, and was shaped by organizational and structural forces, as well as dominant ideologies and culture outside the school setting in students' exosystem and macrosystem (i.e., district, state, and federal education policy, higher education institutions, economy, capitalism, etc.). By acknowledging how students interact with their environments and the messaging within them, "the theory provides a way of understanding contextual influences on the educational trajectories of different demographic groups while also explaining how individual agency operates to differentiate outcomes within groups" (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012, p. 93). Together the symbolic and ecological approach provided a lens from which to specifically examine the visual and verbal messaging associated with the college-going culture at the three high school sites.

Methodology

This study drew on data from a three-year, multi-site descriptive case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014) of three public high schools in different regions of Texas that all served approximately 50% or more of students with financial need and 72% to 97% students of color, specifically Latina/o and Black students. These schools, one located in Central Texas (School 1), the Gulf Coast region (School 2), and South Texas (School 3), were specifically chosen because of the racial and economic demographic they served while having high college ready graduate rates for students in English/Language Arts, Mathematics, and in both combined subjects when compared to other public, comparably-sized schools that served students from similar backgrounds in their respective regions. At the time of the study, the Texas Education Agency derived the college ready graduate rates for each high school graduating class based on SAT, ACT, and Texas' state-mandated exit level exam scores. A college ready graduate rate is calculated for students from all racial/ethnic categories and for those identified as "economically disadvantaged." School sites in these specific regions of the state were also chosen because they are areas experiencing increased population growth while also facing continued challenges in postsecondary outcomes. Therefore, the school sites in these specific regions were chosen based on their demographic diversity and the assumption that their high college ready graduate rates reflected a strong college-going culture that could be examined. Table 1 (in Appendix A) provides additional information about the enrollment and demographic information of students at all three schools during the study period (fall 2013 to spring 2016).

Data sources

Data for the study was collected by the lead author, a faculty member in the College of Education at a university in Texas, during week-long, yearly visits to each school. Data collected included: school and district documents collected at each site (artifacts), individual and group semi-structured interviews with 194 individuals including administrators, teachers, support staff, students, parents, and community members (59 at School 1, 61 at School 2, and 74 at School 3), observations of common areas (library, hallways, cafeteria) and classrooms, archival data, and researcher-derived documents including field notes, memos, and photographs of the school grounds and school activities. The number of individual and group interviews conducted at each school with each stakeholder group is provided in Table 2 in Appendix B.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature, utilizing a protocol that consisted of 19 key questions that focused on obtaining participants' perspectives of the school's college-going culture and college readiness efforts (see Appendix C for Interview protocol). Almost all interviews with participants were digitally audio-recorded, with a few exceptions in which interviews occurred in impromptu situations. In such cases, notes were taken during the interviews or immediately after. All audio-recorded interviews were later transcribed.

This paper primarily drew on the pictures taken of the schools (in hallways, classrooms, and shared spaces like cafeterias and libraries), field notes, memos, and interview data that specifically speak to the visual and verbal messaging associated with the college-going culture at each school to answer two guiding questions: 1) What types of college-going messages are conveyed at the schools, and how?; 2) How do students, school staff, and school leaders perceive such messaging and its impact?

Positionality of Research Team

As the researcher is the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis" in a qualitative study, the research team is transparent about their positionalities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 16). As previously noted, the first author is a faculty member in a university in Texas and designed and collected data for the study. The research team includes the second and third author, who were doctoral students while the study was being conducted. Together, the research team analyzed the data for this study. It is also important to note that the case study was grant funded, although findings reflect the research team's interpretations and do not necessarily reflect the views of the grant funder. None of the authors had any relationships with any of the school sites or stakeholders prior to conducting the study.

The faculty member identifies as a Latina/Mexican American/Chicana originally from the South Texas Border. Her gendered, classed, and racialized experiences, coupled with her being a former bilingual school teacher and counselor at schools that predominantly served students of color from low-income backgrounds, inform her interest in and understanding of college access, preparation, and readiness issues in general, and specifically for underserved students. However, the author believes her previous experience as an educator, being a Latina, and native Texan assisted with her ability to build rapport with participants and have a deeper and more critical understanding of the school contexts being studied.

The second author directs community-based initiatives within a collective impact framework for a non-profit organization in Texas. At the time of this study, the second author was a research assistant, and he is currently in the dissertation stage of doctoral studies in education. This author is a Chicano male who was raised in California and Oregon, and he also happens to be a former high-school dropout, and is the first in his family to go to college. His professional career has been in community-based, educational initiatives, and he has an intimate experience with the collective work of generating a college-going culture. This experience has informed a perspective that goes beyond the physical symbols (e.g. Pennants, college t-shirts), to see the urgency of real conversations and relationships as fundamental to said culture.

The third author is currently a faculty member in the Department of Education at a university in California but, at the time the study was conducted, was a doctoral student and research assistant for the first author. As a White woman who attended K-12 schools in the Deep South and then worked as a teacher, the third author's interest in understanding equity and access for underserved students stems from her own gendered and classed educational experiences, as well as her experiences teaching in schools that primarily served students from low-income backgrounds. Her interest in focusing on student voice and working toward equity-driven policies and practices supported the research team's efforts toward a deeper, critical understanding of college-going messaging.

Analysis

A multi-level thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011) was utilized to derive the findings (see Appendix D for Thematic Analysis Process used). The first level of analysis began with the research team first reviewing all the photographs taken on each school campus. Additional photos taken of the surrounding neighborhoods or in some cases college related booklets that were unable to be photocopied, were not included in the analysis. This resulted in 82 photographs at School 1, 85 photographs at School 2, and 54 photographs at School 3 being analyzed. The reduced number of photos taken at School 3 in comparison to the other school sites reflect fewer college-related materials posted in common areas. The content and context of the subject matter in the photographs were considered, and an effort was made to group photos together that included similar content. For instance, photos of posters that advertised colleges were grouped together, as were photos of student work that had been displayed in hallways that specifically emphasized or referred to postsecondary institutions. Fourteen thematic groups were derived from the photos, and the team subsequently reflected on the messages that the content in each group of photos were trying to convey with regards to college-going; who seemed to be relaying these messages; and in what context within the schools. In this process, the theoretical framework, that accounted for the symbolism and ecological aspects of the college-going culture, became vital to consider the various possible interpretations of the messaging, the clarity of the messaging, and the type of cultural symbolism and larger ecological factors associated with the content.

The team then utilized the 14 themes derived from the photos as "predetermined typologies" to engage in a second level of analysis of interview transcripts (Hatch, 2002, p. 152). In this process, the team identified participant responses that related to the 14 themes, or typologies. The research team first individually and then collectively identified pertinent quotes from participants that provided greater insight into the college-going messaging at the schools, whether explicitly or implicitly (as related to the visual and verbal messaging they were getting). What resulted were six key themes: 1) college is a revered goal with many options, 2) varying degrees of integration, 3) support and resources are at your reach, 4) think college *and* career, 5) finding funding for college is vital, and 6) college is an individual and shared success.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were utilized in the process of conducting this study to enhance trustworthiness. For one, a purposeful sampling strategy was utilized to identify the school sites, or cases, examined given the overarching goal of the larger research project to examine the three high school sites with the set criteria that have strong college-going cultures (based on high college ready graduate rates). Triangulation was also achieved through the collection of multiple sources of data from multiple stakeholders including students, teachers, and administrators. A database was also created to maintain and organize all data sources collected for easy retrieval and analysis. Utilizing a research team to analyze the data also contributed to the dependability of the study; research team members coded portions of data independently and then discussed emergent codes and derived final themes together.

Findings

Analysis of data revealed various types of explicit and implicit college-going messages that were relayed on the three campuses, and the means by which these messages were conveyed to students and staff. Photos and participant interviews provided for greater understanding of how such messaging potentially impacted students, school staff, and leaders.

College is a revered goal with many options

Overwhelmingly, the visual and verbal messaging at all three schools suggested that college, as opposed to joining the military or workforce after high school, was the most revered goal. At the same time, there was a clear message that there were many postsecondary options, whether it be to attend an Ivy league university, a four-year state university, or a local community college or even technical school. This message was relayed very evidently at School 3 where prestigious university pennants were prominently displayed in the front foyer, as previously noted in the introduction.

During the first year of data collection, the principal of School 3 reiterated her personal mantra about attending college as the main priority for students:

> Every child that walks the halls of School 3 will be going to college, in my eyes. I stress that every time I pull out the students as a group. Each grade level, we talk about: What are the expectations? Expectations here at this campus is that everybody has a right to the best education and it doesn’t stop here. This is a stepping stone. The stepping stone is college. That little piece of paper means a lot. Yes, some of us have to work and we

> do have part-time jobs but it can be done. That's a very high expectation here among all of us.

While this principal believed the possibility of attending college was in every student's reach, the majority of students and faculty at all three campuses described how the college-going messaging at the schools reflected the multitude of postsecondary options available for students; a perspective that was more reflective of students' realities. Multiple postsecondary options were relayed via posters. Numerous photos were taken of such posters that were displayed in hallways, classrooms, cafeterias, libraries, and on doors throughout the schools. One photo taken, for example, showed two posters at School 2. One was titled, "Where will your scores take you?" and listed different universities with their SAT and ACT cut off scores. Alongside was another poster titled, "SAT vs ACT What is the difference?".

The college-going messaging at all three schools reflected the multiple needs and varying postsecondary aspirations for and of students. For instance, the social studies department head at School 2 admitted:

> I think my expectations kind of fall in line with most teachers' expectations. I mean, I don't want to say that I expect them to go to college. I definitely encourage them to, but what I really expect is for students to leave with skills that allow them to make their own judgment and decision as to what's best for them. I encourage college. I encourage different types of furthering their education, but I think, for the most part, I help my students to understand that the traditional four-year brick-and-mortar university may not be for every single student.

In this case, the social studies teacher was sensitive to the financial realities, academic capabilities, and individual aspirations of students. He purposefully did not solely push a one type of college-for-all message that might discourage or disparage some students from considering some type of postsecondary education for themselves if they did not fit the mold for a four-year institution.

Two other English teachers at School 2 reiterated the social studies teacher’s statements, “My expectation is usually, I like to describe it with one word, called 'realistic.' Given the kinds of kids that I work with they come in with various levels of literacy so I have to be realistic and not have one fit all kind of attitude” shared one of the teachers. The other teacher shared how the messaging at School 2 had changed over the years, where previously a four-year, college-for-all sentiment was expressed, “then just last year, or the year before, they kind of started to change their perspective and we want as many kids as possible to go to [the local community college] and get some kind of skill or some kind of, you know, craft.” She explained how she “kind of disagreed with the whole four-year thing in the beginning and now I like that we're pushing anything, just get their foot in the door. Have them experience that college life. And then, who knows where they'll go from there, you know.” The first teacher chimed in again, explaining how the change in mindset came about, “Going back to the two-year college has a lot to do with the industry as well. Because there’s such a need for skilled workers so I think there was some sort of communication between the colleges, the schools and industry, the needs for industry.” The teacher felt this was “an excellent idea” to help provide an option for “those kids in the middle” who do not enter the workforce immediately and who may not attend a four-year college.

Students at all three schools generally agreed with this perspective, although some revealed more deficit views than others believing there were “students who have no aspirations” for college, without considering how systemic barriers or limited access to college information and support impacted students' postsecondary pursuits. At School 1, two seniors discussed this, with one revealing that a student's college aspirations varied based on "how you've been raised and what you've seen over your whole childhood," while also explaining how the principal, "wants everybody to go to college and have a good future, but that's not going to happen for everybody." The other student added, "Yeah, like some kids just aren't made for school. They're more hands-on, and they're not very much on authority and they like doing stuff on their own." A sophomore from School 1 further articulated how teachers then distinguished college culture messaging, "I think teachers do what they can for how the student is. If the student's an elite student, then they'll help them more [with college information]. If they see that the student slacks off, I see that the teacher won't help as much, because they know that—it might be really ignorant of me to say that—but they won't go far, so they don't give much effort." This student's perspective reveals the underlying assumption that"elite" students are worth the investment as opposed to a student that "slacks off"; disregarding why the latter student might be disengaged from school work or what makes a student "elite."

Students at School 2 and 3 made similar comments noting some means of improving the college-going messaging at their schools. For instance, one student said, "I think they encourage people to go—the students to go to college, but they know that not everybody will attend college. I think this school encourages mostly community college education. I think they should encourage more like universities…" While at School 3 another student replied, "They [school staff] do push us to go to college a lot, but I think they need to be more broad [sic], and understand that not everybody has the same opportunity." These last two comments reflect how sensitive students can be to college culture messaging, and how they want access to information on myriad of postsecondary options. However, there is a fine line when messaging focuses more on one type of institution over another.

Varying degrees of integration

The degree to which the topic of college was discussed, or college level work was incorporated into classes varied, and students and faculty were well aware of this. Despite the general consensus among stakeholders that a college-going culture existed on all three campuses, there were distinctions between the quality and quantity of college-going messaging in courses and curriculum. For instance, students in AP and dual credit courses and in college preparation programs (i.e., AVID at School 1 and, Gear Up at School 3) received the most messaging about going to college, particularly a four-year university, and the resources and support necessary to apply, while students in regular track courses often received the least. This finding is consistent with that of Martinez and Deil-Amen (2015). English teachers, and in some cases fine arts or career and technology teachers, also seemed to find more readily accessible means to integrate the exploration of postsecondary options or preparation in their courses. Examples of student work that promoted the development of college aspirations were displayed outside of two art classes at School 2. One piece of artwork depicted a drawing of the state of Texas with different college logos appropriately placed in their geographic locations within the state. On the bottom, left corner of the state was a drawing of a female student and on the bottom right corner was a male student, both seemingly thinking of these options, as depicted through a thought bubble with the title of the picture: “Where do we go from here?” Another photo taken was of a vividly colored rectangular collage that had a bright blue background in the middle that included hand-drawn and cut out pictures of university logos, mascots, and names. On each side of the blue center were yellow columns with the words “Future” on the left, and “Success” on the right prominently displayed in glitter and in vertical format. All around these words were students' names with their future major or career. Both pieces of artwork referenced two-year and four-year universities, and relayed an underlying expectation and understanding that attending college is the next necessary step in order to achieve "future success."

Teachers and students in particular seemed to think the distinction in messaging integrated in advanced courses and regular track courses reflected the reality of students' lives; the academic and/or financial distinctions among students and for some, the need to join the workforce immediately after high school. This understanding was evident among students, as those participating in AP and dual credit programs shared how their teachers in these courses talked to them "about college" and would prepare them for AP exams. One student pointed out how his Spanish IV teacher, "she's always constantly saying 'There's no excuse not to go to college, or you can't say that you can't do it.' Kind of like motivating us I guess to make sure we go through college [sic]." In contrast, students in regular courses spoke about how much less their teachers talked about college and did not expect students to engage in college-level work. A student at School 1 provided a prime example of this messaging in his "regulars history course" where he "felt like the teacher didn't care either, they didn't really enforce anything. They'd give us like a paper to memorize, and the next day we'd have a test on it...And he'd try to tell us the answers and stuff and it's like you really didn't have to try." A peer responded to this comment saying, "I feel like the regular teachers have really low expectations. They don't really expect anything, so the kids don't really do anything." Such drastic messaging of low expectations bodes poorly for teachers' efforts in creating a college-going culture; it leaves students underprepared for most postsecondary options and stifles their college aspirations.

The principal at School 2 spoke to the challenge of getting all teachers to maintain high expectations for all students and impart a rigorous curriculum, and saw this as an area in which, “I think that it is there, but I think we can do more.” She explained, “I see teachers being so focused on their content area that we want them to also see the bigger picture of what comes after their class, and to help give their students advice on what classes to take in the future. We’re always looking at rigor. When I go into classrooms, I see great things, but I also see many ways that we can improve…”

Despite the room for improvement among some teachers, there were others like the English IV teacher at School 1 who attempted to provide that big picture and rigorous coursework for all of his students in advanced and regular track courses, to prepare them for life. He mentioned trying to get students “to understand the importance of, you know, being able to think creatively so that when they’re in college, or out there voting and those types of things, that they’re actually people that think and contribute.” He noted how “my approach is not necessarily to talk to them every day about going to college, but about what you want to do, how you need to get there...being somebody that contributes something.” He focused on “trying to get them to really look into the future and trying to get them to take control of their lives.”

Similarly, there were teachers who worked with particularly vulnerable populations on campuses that were adamant about incorporating college talk and knowledge into their courses oftentimes because they felt no one else would provide such messaging. At the district in which School 2 was situated, there was a Pregnancy Center established on each campus to accommodate pregnant students. The Coordinator of the Pregnancy Center at School 2 was purposeful in displaying college information in her room and talking about postsecondary options as, “they do have aspirations to go to college.” Several photos taken in the Center revealed college pennants, posters, and admissions books that were prominently displayed and accessible to students who entered.

The Coordinator explained how she had “motivational speakers that come in and speak to the girls and let them know that they are not alone and that others have been in the same circumstances and despite any obstacles and challenges they have been able to obtain their college education.” She felt that having “former students come back” who had been in the program and had been able to obtain a postsecondary degree had really helped. Her efforts were to try “To show them that it is not impossible, that it is still attainable. It may require a little more work and of course it is a challenge because you know they have the baby to take care of and they know that if they put the effort forth they can obtain their goals.”

At School 3 the ESL newcomer teacher also expressed a strong commitment to develop the postsecondary aspirations of the students in her classroom, and impart college knowledge. “I'm always talking about college, and I'm always encouraging them, ‘Let's go talk to your counselors. Let's think about what we're going to do.’” Similar to the English IV teacher at School 1, the ESL newcomer teacher expressed the challenge in “trying to get them to see the big picture” after high school. Moreover, she felt that at the school level that “not much attention is given to the newcomers.” Instead, the message she received about her students from administrators, in particular, reflected the sole need to ensure the newcomers “pass the state exam because that's going to look bad on us." Thus, the ESL newcomer teacher took it upon herself to maintain high expectations for her students beyond the goal of passing the state exam, and instead broaden students’ horizons to include potential postsecondary options. This latter instance is a concern, and sheds light on how particularly vulnerable students within schools that serve a majority of students of color from low-income backgrounds can be further marginalized in schools that generally exhibit a college-going culture.

Supports and resources are at your reach

The many college related posters and flyers about available scholarships and college nights, for instance, that were splattered in hallways, classroom doors, and visible in the libraries and College Centers, the latter at School 1 and 2, were captured through photos and observations. These visuals relayed a clear message that there were resources and supports for college that were accessible to all students. In some cases, it seemed evident that the placement of the visual messages were very purposeful, as some were posted in bathrooms and above water fountains, where students would undoubtedly see them. College related information was also relayed via daily announcements at each school. Counselors, college advisors, and college access program staff and teachers on the campuses played a key role in disseminating more specific college information in relation to such things as college recruiter visits, financial aid, and college application requirements. The Latin teacher at School 1 spoke to this in particular, and how the College Center Coordinator was especially helpful:

> She's wonderful and she helps the kids with so much. I mean she knows everything. I mean she doesn't even have to look it up—she just knows. I was in there one day last week and one of my students had come in and she said "I got into Columbia" and she said "Do you know of any scholarships I can apply for that I can't already apply for?" And she [College Center Coordinator] just knew what scholarships she'd already applied for. It's just like I have to look at the out-of-state ones. But she's great, and the kids go in there a lot and use her.

Thus, students who utilized such resources, including available college access programs on a campus, received the most up-to-date and comprehensive college-going messaging and supports. However, it is important to note that the AVID program was solely at School 1 and only served approximately 325 students, while at School 3 there was a Gear Up program that provided services solely to students from the class of 2017. What was clear was that each school generally had multiple point persons to assist students with postsecondary pursuits, as well as multiple physical locations to access college-related materials. However, in speaking to different stakeholders what became clear was that not all teachers or students were knowledgeable about all of the college resources available on their own campuses, and not all students took advantage of such resources.

Administrators and counselors at all schools often had a bird’s eye view of all of the resources available on a campus and were able to speak to the plethora of resources available to students. Given their vantage point and accessibility to students, administrators and counselors at all schools were able to hold assemblies or meetings to disseminate college information that was available to the entire school or one grade level at a time. One assistant principal at School 2 spoke to the administrators’ efforts to disseminate college knowledge through “assemblies for the students” and the new student orientations, and “a senior update.” The “parents come with their students to [some of] these events and we try to explain, and we give them the information.” A counselor at School 2 also shared the following:

> We blow up the posters, the flyers and we post them around the school. Then we're assigned scholarships. Each counselor is assigned scholarships that they're responsible for. And so, we get this list, and then...we're responsible for making sure we have people to apply for those. So, we have a lot of, you know, a lot of different ways that we get

> information out to the students. But you will have students who will say, 'I didn't know.' We have students who've never logged on to the website to look up a scholarship...So it just varies. Sometimes you can lead a horse to water, but, you know.

Students in a focus group at School 1 shared similar sentiments to the counselor, in feeling as if there were many college resources available but they often went underutilized. The focus group in question was held in School 1's College Center and when asked about the additional college related resources that were available on the campus, one student responded, "One word to describe every resource of this campus: underappreciated, 'cuz you see—look around, no one in here." The other two students agreed, explaining why they thought this was the case: "I think people trust themselves too much," "They rely on themselves." "They think they can get it on themselves. They think they can just get into any college very easily or something, not any college, but they think it'll be easy."

Another teacher at School 2 reiterated the latter sentiments, indicating how college resources were "available to everyone but the kids like to wait until the last minute to figure out what they need to do. I mean, that's typical of a teenager." He added, "We do have a college center where we have a college advisor that will help them fill out their FAFSAs, letters of recommendation." and how "their English teachers work very closely with getting letters of recommendation." This teacher also spoke to "other resources to prepare them," including "Tons of tutoring that the kids can go to. We're open on Saturdays... They have the library resources. They have tons of different things that they can use." School 2 also has "a mentor program...where you adopt students, adopt seniors. You're supposed to guide them their senior year. That's another thing every teacher on the campus does." However, the teacher suggested that oftentimes a barrier to college for many students related to "a lot of them are just misinformed. They just don't know how to apply for FAFSA, how 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." This latter comment speaks to the need to have accurate messaging and support about college and financial aid application requirements available on campuses where there are high numbers of first-generation college students.

Think college *and* career

Visual messaging at all three schools supported the language of Texas' House Bill 5 (HB5; new high school graduation requirements passed in Texas legislature in 2013), encouraging students to consider interests and career aspirations when planning for postsecondary options (including enrolling in college degree programs). In line with HB5 requirements for the new Foundation High School Program, students now choose one of the following five endorsement options: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM); Business and Industry; Public Services; Arts and Humanities; or Multidisciplinary Studies. With the new HB5 requirements, students select an area of interest in eighth grade and begin pursuing one of these five endorsement paths as soon as they enter high school. School districts must offer coursework leading to at least one major endorsement area.

Posters displayed at all three campuses advertised specific courses related to endorsement areas, including, but not limited to, the following classes: Advanced Fashion Design, Culinary Arts, and Principles of Hospitality and Tourism. A large chart displayed at School 1 showed a wide variety of career clusters that fell under specific endorsement areas. Some of the advertised career clusters include: Agricultural, Food, and Natural resources, Architecture and Construction, Information Technology, Government and Public Administration, and Health Science, to name a few. This message relaying the importance of considering interests and future career options was echoed throughout interviews with both faculty and students across all three schools.

During faculty interviews, for example, the principal at School 1 reiterated the importance of guiding students in making career choices, stating, “I push these kids to say, you know, what choices do you have?” and explaining that students sometimes only see themselves in their parent’s careers or in the careers represented around them—

> So, I don’t have anyone that I can attach myself to that I can say, you know, this is a career choice. There are jobs and careers out there that I didn’t even know existed as an educated person. So, spending a little more time guiding kids in their career choices, and making sure that they have, that if they make the choice to go with McDonald's it’s not because we failed to give them information to choose a different path.

During student interviews, several students at School 3 said that many of their teachers talked about the different jobs available after finishing high school and after completing college. In another example of how the message “don’t just choose a college, consider your interests and future career” was interpreted by the school community, students at School 1 discussed the career-oriented options on campus. The following interview snippets describe two of these career-oriented opportunities:

> *Student 1:* “If you wanted to do something in the medical field, you have ISM (Independent Study and Mentorship) as an option or you have HOSA (Health Occupations Students of America). Those people actually go to hospitals and do certain things with actual doctors. They actually work on these people.”
>
> *Student 2:* “We have child guidance. They take you to daycares. I think they take you to one elementary school. You get to interact with the kids and just get the feel of it.”

Overall, the campus communities send the message that making plans post-high school involves more than simply choosing a college. Visual reminders about the importance of selecting a path based on interests and future career goals line the walls of these schools, as in the case of a poster hung from the rafters of the foyer at School 2 that was provided by one of the local community colleges titled, “What are you interested in?” The poster included pictures of various individuals from diverse backgrounds alongside listings of programmatic and course information. Faculty members reiterate this message by guiding students toward their career choices, talking to students about careers both post-high school and post-college, and offering a variety of field-specific programs that give students real-world experience across career clusters. This message about choosing interest areas and future careers seems to have a direct and strong impact on faculty, staff, and students across the three schools and this may be a direct result of implementing the recent House Bill 5 graduation requirements at these Texas high schools.

Finding funding for college is vital

The visual and verbal messaging at all three schools communicated the importance of locating funding for college as well. Messages advertising available scholarships and financial aid workshops were disseminated through posters, flyers, morning announcements, and even text messages. Each school featured an entire wall dedicated to advertising scholarship opportunities. At School 2, for example, over 15 purple fliers lined a wall titled, “Scholarships”. School 3 had a similar scholarship wall located in the front foyer. The wall included folders containing multiple copies of scholarship flyers and the cover of each folder listed pertinent info including the: scholarship name, where to submit forms, and deadlines. While not as prominent in one location, School 1’s visual messages about scholarship opportunities were displayed on several walls and bulletin boards throughout the school, particularly outside the counseling offices and in the

College Center. Flyers and announcements advertising financial aid workshops were showcased in several areas across all three campuses.

In addition to the visual messages related to funding college, verbal messages (through announcements made over the intercom system) reminded students about financial aid and scholarship opportunities. For example, in one of the morning announcements at School 1, the announcer stated, “Hey college bound people! [local college] will be holding an open house on the campus this Saturday from 9:30am-1:30pm. Financial aid assistance will be available there. For more information see [teacher] in the College Café.”

Faculty members across these campuses echoed the message that learning about funding opportunities was a vital component of a college-going culture. One of the counselors at School 2 described her role (in collaboration with the Advise Texas advisor who managed the College Center on campus) connecting students with information about applying for scholarships and financial aid:

> My role as far as the scholarships, I get tons and tons of lists, but I have to know specifically what you want. Once I know what you want then I can guide you to that. Over there with him [the Advise Texas advisor], it’s just hey, it’s a free for all. You come and get whatever you need, but we both work together on that. I think it’s a very positive role. It’s very impactful for our students because they need that information as far as scholarships and college awareness.

It seems that students had no difficulty interpreting the visual and verbal messages communicating the importance of finding funding for college. During student interviews, participants said things like, “they’re allowing us to know everything about financial aid,” “...in the morning announcements, [the principal] or someone else is always reminding us about scholarships," "we're having another financial aid night," and "they do encourage a lot of scholarship application. Actually, my counselor, she handed me a sheet with a whole list of them, so I think that helps." And one student from School 2 even shared that a counselor in the College Center "has a text messaging system—the Remind 101—and he'll text us about scholarships and he'll remind us."

It is clear that finding funding for college is a key component of college-going culture across these campuses. There are multiple modes of sharing this important message with all members of the campus community, from fliers to morning announcements to text messages. Students are aware of the many resources and opportunities available when seeking funding for college and faculty members regularly share messages about funding opportunities.

College is an individual and shared success

Another common message communicated to all members of these three school communities was that applying and being admitted to a college was both an individual and shared success. Students are recognized and celebrated, both visually and verbally, for applying and for being admitted to college. For example, School 2 featured an "I've Applied" wall with a stated purpose to "commemorate all the students who have taken the first step to applying for college!" The wall was prominently displayed near the College Center in the main foyer of the school near the front doors and the cafeteria. The flier tacked to the wall read:

> Please respect their hard work by not defiling or forging your name without permission. If you would like to sign this wall, you must have applied to that university and asked [Advise TX advisor] for permission. He will give you further instructions. Thank you, The College Center.

Another year, School 2 also displayed a large “Tree of Acceptance”. The tree was located in the same foyer, alongside the “I’ve Applied” wall. The accompanying note explained its purpose: “Seniors! In order to get a leaf on the tree of acceptance you must: 1. Apply to one or more colleges of your choice, 2. Once accepted, bring the copy of the acceptance letter to [Advise TX advisor] in the College Center. 3. Congratulations! You’re making the tree and your future bloom!” The tree was made out of butcher paper and had a large brown trunk with branches that had been stuffed to give them a three-dimensional quality. The tree was then covered in green leaves, each with a name of a student and the school where they had been admitted.

The principal of School 2 recognized the powerful college-going messaging that these symbols conveyed, and vowed to invest in more of the same:

> One of my ideas, although I haven’t gotten around to it yet, students who are getting accepted to colleges, I wanted to keep a list, maybe even with our decision day. Get a list of all the schools that our kids are going to and buy those flags, and hang them up in the foyer or courtyard area of where our students are going.

At School 1 a similar idea had come to fruition, as painted pendants with student names and the university they had applied and been accepted to were displayed on the walls of the AVID room. However, the Principal at School 2 wanted to further “work on a display of student achievement” and find “a way to post and keep a record for years to come of who the valedictorian is,” as well as recognize “top SAT/ACT scoring students” by “having a spot for that to go up each year where we add the names to it.”

One of the schools sent the message that applying for college is a shared success by creating a picture of a large, four-foot thermometer in the hallway near the College Center. Over the thermometer was an exclamation: “College applications are heating up!” The thermometer was being used to measure the rising percentage of students who submitted at least one college application. As more students applied, an increased portion of the thermometer was shaded in red. This visual communicates that all students (a goal of 100%) are expected to apply for college and that students who have applied (roughly half of students at the time) are recognized as contributing to a greater campus wide goal. The filled portion of the thermometer also represents the community’s celebration of students who have applied to college.

In general, all faculty and student interviewees felt that students were celebrated for applying to and being accepted to college. As one student at School 1 shared how “the names of students that go to different colleges” were a normal and featured part of morning announcements. Her understanding was that, “I guess they're trying to do that to motivate you or something. ‘Oh, I want to do that, I want to go there.’” Other students across the three campuses talked about the individual pressures of going to college as this type of success was both expected by the school community and served as a reflection of the school as a whole. According to a student at School 3, “a lot of people from the school have reached a lot of really great—or have gone to really good places. I think that puts a little bit of pressure, but I think it’s good pressure, on the students to try to live up to that”.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

Considering the symbolic nature of the college-going messaging students received (Bolman & Deal, 2013), as well as the many messages that students contended with outside the school setting, as the ecological model of college readiness (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012) reveals, this study’s findings provide four distinct contributions to the existing literature on college-going cultures and the messaging associated with such efforts (Athanases, et al., 2016;

Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Knight-Diop, 2010; Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2015; McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Núñez, 2009; McKillip, Godfrey, & Rawls, 2012). Findings highlight the need to: 1) reconsider strong college-going cultures, 2) re-envision college-going cultures as dynamic, multi-layered, and responsive, 3) reframe postsecondary opportunities, and 4) re-evaluate for inequities in messaging and academic rigor. Implications for practice are discussed in relation to each conclusion.

Reconsider strong college-going cultures

This study focused on examining schools that predominantly served students of color and students from low-income backgrounds that presumably had strong college-going cultures. Sites were chosen based on demographics, location, and the schools' performance on Texas' college ready graduates (CRG) indicator. It was assumed that high college ready graduate rates would equate with a strong college-going culture. Although there is an inherent limitation in the CRG rates as they are based solely on test performance including ACT, SAT, and/or Texas's state level exit test, the latter is now replaced with the Texas Success Initiative Assessment. The CRG indicator does not account for actual enrollment at an institution of higher education. Nonetheless, the school sites had a large portion of their student body considered "college ready" based on the CRG rates. Consequently, secondary schools, districts, and postsecondary institutions working in tandem to build strong college-going cultures must go beyond standardized tests and end of course exams.

The fact that these schools, and likely many others as well, do not track their students' postsecondary persistence or completion rates, further problematizes the signification. That is, low-income, first-generation college freshman may be prepared for some coursework, but the skills and knowledge they gain to help them persist and complete their degree requirements will likely be those they glean from their postsecondary institution. The lasting influence of the high school on the student will be the relationships established with school personnel, and those that were critical in the student's success in the face of rigorous academics (Bosworth, Convertino, & Hurwitz, 2014; Knight & Marciano, 2013). The readiness of students at these schools, and underserved students at large, is indicative of any number of factors outside of standardized tests, or state accountability measures (Farmer-Hinton, 2011; Welton & Williams, 2015). In a context of neoliberal funding mechanisms, which pull on schools to continuously improve in order to avoid their own low campus ranks, a new definition of college readiness necessarily becomes nuanced to accommodate the lived experiences of first-generation students. Said nuance does not call for more, superimposed accountability and success metrics, but for more targeted support, especially for students like the ones in this study. Holland and Farmer-Hinton (2009) indicate that an important aspect of this pointed approach is school size. They show how "students in the smallest schools reported engaging in more school-related college preparatory activities" (p. 37). The schools in this study are all large, and any sense of a strong college-going culture must take into account the size of the school.

This study also drew heavily on the visible college culture messaging within each school setting; another nuance not done before. As the introduction of this paper indicates, visually, there were literally signs at all three schools advertising "college". These images definitely shaped the schools' culture, acting as symbols of school goals and norms. Yet the symbols were not readily seen as critical tools that actually indicate a student's responsiveness, or propensity to succeed in postsecondary studies. If anything, the visible college messaging that decorates a high school campus is a mere starting point; a prompt to engage in meaningful discourse about preparing for college. There is a space for research that could approach analyzing the significance of college culture messages and decorations through a semiotic lens, taking into account what the connotative significance becomes for both the campus and the student. For instance, at one of the schools in this study, there was a flyer in the hallway stating, “Keep Calm and Submit your FAFSA”. This message, which plays on a popular phrase coined by the British government in preparation for WWII, could presumably invoke student stress, apprehension, or refusal to participate altogether, based on its connotative implication that there is, actually, good reason to be anxious about the application process. This is the type of nuance in determining a shared meaning of “readiness”, that goes missed by historical, hegemonic systems of speech around education in the U.S., and evidently found here in Texas.

Findings shed light on how even at schools that might be considered to have strong college-going cultures, there is much to be learned and there is room for improvement. We urge schools and policymakers alike to also consider the ultimate goal of developing a strong college-going culture at schools, taking into account the cost borne by both the students and the school. We say this cautiously, given the increased focus on high-stakes testing and increased accountability measures nationwide; Texas schools are assessed on several additional postsecondary readiness indicators including dual and advanced course enrollment and Career and Technical Education course enrollment and credits. The argument could be made that such indicators are still limited and a more in-depth examination of a school’s efforts would more accurately indicate whether it has a strong college-going culture.

None of the schools tracked their students after graduation, and it is logical to consider that a true sense of college readiness, as informed by the student’s high school preparation, would likely indicate persistence beyond, at least, the freshman year of college. A student who can persist, say, beyond remedial coursework, and then beyond the first and second years of college, would likely have endured some rigorous curricula in their secondary schooling. However, an expanded definition of what constitutes a strong college-going culture would have to consider a lack of longitudinal, inter-institutional analyses.

Re-envision college-going cultures as dynamic, multi-layered, and responsive

With the previous recommendation in mind, findings also point to the need for re-envisioning notions of a college-going culture to one that is dynamic, multi-layered and responsive. The specific contexts of the school sites were purposefully considered in the design of the study (i.e., serving approximately 50% or more of students with financial need and 72% to 97% students of color), but these schools are not representative of all others across the country. Therefore, each school's college-going culture must be developed to reflect its students' specific needs within the larger socio-economic, cultural, historical, and political context in which the school is situated; aspects that are taken into account in Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong's ecological model of college readiness. This means that college-going cultures are fluid, ever-changing, requiring continuous improvement and self-reflection. This approach reflects aspects of what Knight and Marciano (2013) describe as a culturally relevant, schoolwide college-going culture.

A first step in this charge is for school leaders to evaluate the dominant explicit and implicit college-going messages conveyed on their campus to ensure that students' cultural and social capital are supported (Athanases, et al., 2015) and that messages challenge low-status or negative stereotypes associated with many students, and especially first-generation college students (Achinstein, et al., 2015). In practice, this means that school leaders must ensure, as through professional development, that those developing the closest relationships and providing guidance to students, often teachers and counselors, do not exhibit deficit thinking and instead hold high expectations for all students. While a student has agency in the process of preparing for college, “individual level traits that affect students’ experiences and their responses to experiences are themselves formed through interactions with environmental conditions” (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012, p. 94). Students can internalize the expectations others have of them, in combination with other life experiences and stereotypes made of their cultural group within society, resulting in their belief that they cannot succeed academically and perhaps are not college material (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012). Thus, school leaders and staff must remain cognizant of the lived realities of their students and the larger ideological, social, and political forces at play that shape their students’ choices when it comes to postsecondary aspirations and options. As the ecological model suggests, such macro issues include globalism, rationalism, capitalism, racism, issues of social stratification, the notion that we live in a meritocratic society, and viewing a college education as a public versus private good.

School leaders and staff alike are wise in not only promoting the postsecondary brands, resources, and opportunities, but in keeping close to those messages and systems of sharing that resonate with students—that seem to work and are equitable. Of particular importance in this process is providing more information about different financial aid options, with as much emphasis on the stipulations of subsidized and unsubsidized loans, as grants and scholarships. Additionally, as many students and staff at the schools pointed out, there were large numbers of students at the schools that had to work while attending high school. Many students and teachers believed this was often an impediment to students’ college aspirations and their ability to financially afford college. It would behoove the schools to provide students with the individual guidance on how they could potentially navigate the process of continuing to work if this was necessary within their familial role, and still further their education to obtain a degree or certificate in a field of interest that could provide them with greater economic security and an increased quality of life. Such guidance should not be the sole responsibility of counselors, but instead must be a team effort. Math teachers, for instance, might integrate a lesson about financing college into the curriculum.

Reframe postsecondary opportunities

Fostering a college-going culture requires preparing students for a variety of postsecondary options (i.e., flagship universities, community colleges, trade schools, etc.) and, as Rosenbaum (2011) argues, portraying a variety of these options sends a more realistic message, especially for first-generation students. Providing these multiple options was something that all three schools could improve, as conversations with faculty, staff, and students indicated that they felt that attending a four-year institution was an unrealistic goal to push for all. Yet the majority of the visual messages at the schools seemed to favor attending flagship universities and other four-year options. The schools in this study, as well as other schools that serve a racially and economically diverse student body, must partner with multiple community colleges, regional, Tier 1 and out-of-state universities to ensure that students are exposed to a wide range of postsecondary options. A direct-to-college, persist, and complete within five years of graduation, is perhaps close to an ideal experience that would indicate readiness. However, the realities of increasing, multiple pathways to postsecondary accreditation, and ready-for-employment graduates in the context of shifting demographics, wholly rejects the former ideal.

In Central Texas, multiple organizations collaborate to address this reality. The Austin College Access Network (ACAN) and the Austin Opportunity Youth Collaborative (AOYC), are networks of 9 and 9 community-based organizations respectively, who all work to change practice on the ground, while being guided by collective impact organizations. ACAN is guided by the E3 Alliance, a data-driven educational collaborative, and AOYC is guided by Workforce

Solution, the leadership and governing body for the Central Texas workforce system. Between these twenty or so organizations, those multiple pathways toward post-secondary completion become more interdependent. That is, no one student, school, organization, or community stakeholder should operate siloed—blind to the diverse realities of the greater—in this case regional—context. In this light, college readiness should probably not be considered as an end-point, but as a process. Without thorough knowledge of the collective community context influencing their students' lived experiences, high schools and their leaders are likely to miss out on real resources and support systems that could be critical to their alumni success.

School leaders and teachers must also be acutely aware of what success means at their school—providing a more inclusive understanding that accounts for both students who will pursue some type of postsecondary education and those who will join the workforce after high school. While getting more students to college is a broad goal, the narrow focus looks at the individual—how she navigates the coursework, the resources, the options presented, and, finally, her movement toward an implied outcome: college. The first-generation student may not see it so clearly, but we try to clarify.

Re-evaluate inequities in messaging and academic rigor

Ensuring students within a school are aware of the variety of postsecondary options that exist should also not amount to disseminating college information and support in inequitable ways. Unfortunately, there was a clear indication of continued variation in the quality and quantity of college information and messaging provided to students at the three schools, which reflected differences in academic tracking. Such tracking reveals the structural stratification embedded within our schools that continues to disproportionately negatively impact underserved students. An ecological model of college readiness suggests that the curriculum plays a key role in preparing students for college, as students gain college readiness through their encounters with "subject material in classrooms, books, and projects" within their microsystem (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012, p. 95). Although curriculum includes "the content of schooling in all of its forms (written and unwritten)", the formal, informal, and hidden curriculum (English, 2010, p. 5), the explicit and implicit verbal and visual messaging that students receive about college reflect all of these multiple forms.

Goals of secondary graduation must also come to integrate with the discourse and plans of postsecondary preparation, made real through college-linking coursework, and equitable, accessible options for support on campus (Hill, 2008). Goals are not enough. Engaging coursework that aligns to college-level realities, and varying curricula that meets the needs of an increasingly diverse student body are necessary strategies for promoting a college-going culture. Given the sociopolitical pressures schools must face with increased accountability measures that often adversely impact schools with high proportions of students of color and from low-income backgrounds, school leaders and staff must be more vigilant to ensure all students are provided high expectations and rigorous curricula in the development of a college-going culture (Welton & Williams, 2015). Systems of support must reflect real pathways, including those that are supported in networks rife with resources respective to each student's chosen direction (Bosworth, Convertino & Hurwitz, 2014). Pathways must also be chosen discretely and equitably among student, family, teacher, counselor, and educational leader, so that the incoming college student—first-generation and not—feels supported and encouraged to follow their interests. This latter aspect is key, as from an ecological perspective, "incongruent environments, as in the case of different cultural expectations in schools and families, [can result in] students [that] are less likely to experience the sustained, comprehensive proximal processes that lead to college readiness" (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012, p. 96).

Conclusion

Developing a college-going culture is a critical component for high schools like the ones in this study; schools serving large numbers of historically underrepresented students that often face increased challenges and inequities in preparing for and accessing a higher education (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Knight & Marciano, 2013; McClafferty, McDonough, & Nuñez, 2009; McKillip, Godfrey, & Rawls, 2012). Walking through the halls of the schools, said culture becomes a lived experience. Posters and pennants are there, but they are only signposts leading into classrooms, counselors' offices, libraries, and to the discourse between all of the stakeholders who participated in the study. There, with the principals, counselors, teachers, support staff, and students, is where the layers of college-going messaging are made clear and become nuanced; students must find their own fit for a postsecondary option. When a high school graduate walks off of one of these campuses for the last time, any cultural significance is far beyond the actual posters and pennants. The deep relevance is in the interpersonal ways of knowing that became real between each student and their respective college-brokering agents (e.g. school counselor, parent, teacher). Thus, school's messaging regarding college-going must be strategic in meeting the needs of the students' lived experiences, while accounting for historic marginalization—carried within and without each, respective schooling system.

A resounding implication of this study is that secondary faculty and leaders aiming to promote a more realistic college-going culture must portray a variety of postsecondary options. They must also reframe and reconsider how their explicit and implicit college-going messages either support or conflict with any number of values held by their increasingly diversifying student cohorts (Athanases, Achinstein, Curry, & Ogawa, 2016; Knight & Marciano, 2013; Martinez, & Deil-Amen, 2015) and their own school's mission and vision (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Educators and leaders must ensure messaging is equitable, inclusive, and affirming of students' cultural assets—cognizant of the complexities in developing any student's college readiness needs, given the "multiple interacting influences that emanate from both immediate and more distant levels of their [student's] social ecology" (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012, p. 94). The latter reflects the need to re-envision college-going cultures as dynamic, multi-layered, and responsive. Otherwise, without purposeful consideration, schools and their college-going messaging can do more harm than good; inhibiting college aspirations and opportunities.

Future research can expand upon the findings from this case study as well. Applying new methodologies could explore how school leaders, teachers, and students each experience and contribute to the college-going messaging on a campus; gauging ways to improve and accommodate various postsecondary aspirations (i.e., university, military, and workforce) and needs. In that vein, there are any number of implications for research of college-going cultures through action research, public pedagogical, critical discourse and/or semiotic analysis. It is equally important to consider how district, state, and federal policies shape the college-going culture of secondary campuses, eliciting different college-going messages. Additional studies that ascertain parent perspectives of college-going messaging are also needed, as parent perspectives were not included in this particular analysis. Finally, there remains a need for a deeper understanding of what constitutes a "college-going culture". A culture of any given school is only as deep as its most in-need voice. As this voice is heard, a school's culture exceeds its own relevance. A value of the school's culture is carried forward in each student that leaves its doors, those college bound and not.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Enrollment and demographic information of three school sites

School and Year	Enrollment	Economically Disadvantaged (%)	Demographics of Student Population (%)			
			Latino	Black	White	Asian
School 1						
2013-14	2578	49.90	66.8	5.95	20.7	4.1
2014-15	2682	46.0	66.6	6.0	20.8	4.1
2015-16	2658	44.6	67.5	6.8	19.6	3.7
School 2						
2013-14	2662	90.2	90.0	7.0	1.6	0.2
2014-15	2810	82.3	91.0	6.7	1.5	0.3
2015-16	2903	89.1	90.5	7.0	1.8	0.3
School 3						
2013-14	2770	51.3	96.9	0.2	1.7	0.9
2014-15	2703	56.2	97.0	0.2	1.7	0.9
2015-16	2752	59.0	97.1	0.2	1.6	1.0

Appendix B

Table 2. Individual and Group Interviews Collected by School and Stakeholder Group

	Individual Interviews	*Group Interviews*
School 1		
Administrators	4	
Teachers	14	Group 1 (2 teachers)
Counselor/Support Staff	3	
Students	6	Sophomore Group (2 students)
		Sophomore Group (2 students)
		Sophomore Group (4 students)
		Junior Group (3 students)
		Junior/Senior Group (3 students)
		Junior/Senior Group (4 students)
		Senior Group (2 students)
		Senior Group (2 students)
Parent or Community	6	Group 1 (2 parents)
School 2		
Administrators	4	
Teachers	13	Group 1 (2 teachers)
		Group 2 (2 teachers)
Counselor/Support Staff	9	
Students	7	Junior/Senior Group (2 students)
		Junior/Senior Group (2 students)
		Senior Group (2 students)
		Senior Group (2 students)
		Senior Group (2 students)
		Senior Group (3 students)
		Senior Group (4 students)
Parent or Community	7	
School 3		
Administrators	4	
Teachers	11	Group 1 (4 teachers)
		Group 2 (5 teachers)
Counselor/Support Staff	6	Group 1 (2 support staff)
		Group 2 (2 counselors)
		Group 3 (2 counselors)
Students	2	Junior Group (5 students)
		Junior Group (4 students)
		Junior Group (3 students)
		Junior/Senior Group (7 students)
		Senior Group (4 students)
		Senior Group (6 students)
Parent or Community	7	
Total Participants:	103	91

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Background Information

1. Adult-Can you tell me your role/relationship with the school and a bit about your expectations for students after they finish high school?
   Student-Can you tell me your age, what grade you are in, and a bit about your goals after you finish high school?

Developing college culture and college readiness

2. What do you feel are the school's expectations for students once they finish high school?
   a. How are these expectations conveyed, communicated?
3. Can you tell me about what you think it takes for a student/you to be ready for college?
4. Can you tell me about how the school promotes or helps students to be ready for college?
5. How often is college discussed or emphasized in school, by students, and staff?
   a. What is the school's responsibility in having these discussions and providing support for college?
6. How is the entire school community involved in creating a college culture on the campus?
   a. How are school staff and families involved?
   b. What means of communication or gatherings take place?
7. Where is college info and resources available on the campus?
   a. Is it integrated in courses and/or accessible to all?
8. What role do school counselors play in providing college information and assistance?
9. Are students/you aware of the exams required to get into college (PSAT, SAT, etc.)?
   a. Are there SAT/ACT prep sessions or any other programs offered to help with these exams?
10. Are students/you aware of how to apply for financial aid or to complete college applications?
11. What kinds of partnerships/relationships does the school have with universities/colleges?
12. Academically, what types of courses or programs (AP/IB/Dual enrollment) are offered/are you taking?
    a. Are courses challenging and help students/you develop as critical thinkers?
    b. To what degree is technology integrated in courses?
13. Are students/you aware of graduation requirements? How do students/you get informed about that?
14. Are students/you taught specific study skills? How so?
15. What is the availability of teachers or other academic supports outside of class? (ex. study hall, tutoring)
16. What type of teaching/learning is common in classrooms? (ex. collaborative, individual, discussion, lecture, open ended questions)
17. How ready are students/you for college based on what the school has provided?
18. In what ways can the school improve in preparing students for college?
19. Is there anything else you'd like to add or any questions you have?

Appendix D

Analysis Process	
Level 1	Photographs Reviewed and Analyzed = 14 Themes

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Theme	Example Photograph
● Promoting positive school culture and academic achievement	“The Price of Excellence is Discipline. The cost of mediocrity is disappointment” banner in hall
● School Mission/Vision/ Guiding Beliefs	School Mission posted in front foyer
● General school info, rules	School marquee spring 2014 listing dates for events that week including “Open house” “SAT for Juniors” “FAFSA Financial AID” and “Talent Show”
● Counseling department events	Seniors flyer for “Coffee with the counselors” to set up financial aid pin in hallway
● Academic support and navigation	2015-16 Tutorial Schedule poster for math and science by course, teacher, offered Monday-Thursday displayed in hallway
● Financial aid info	“Keep Calm and Submit your FAFSA/ TAFSA” flyer in hallway
● College information dissemination	“College Night” poster from local Community College in hallway
● College entrance exam info	SAT/ACT posters in glass case in hallway- “SAT vs ACT What is the difference?” “Where will your scores take you” with list of cut off scores and universities
● College plans and preparation in courses	On dry erase board in an Art class “College Visits” listed
● Career exploration in courses	Culinary arts bulletin board
● Classroom or office observations	Office front desk- Trophies on shelf, various small posters on cabinets, university pennants border the cabinets
● Postsecondary advertising	College week bulletin board in glass case with reminder that “All college applications are due on Dec.1”
● Athletic and extracurricular activities	Creative writing club flyer
● Student work or bulletin boards related to general academics	“Traits of global leaders” poster on lockers in hallway outside classroom

Analysis Process

Level 2 — 14 themes served as typologies to analyze interviews

Typologies combined to form six overarching themes supported by participant quotes

Typologies	Overarching Themes & Example Quotes
● Promoting positive school culture and academic achievement ● School mission/vision/guiding beliefs ● Postsecondary advertising	● **College is a revered goal with many options** “Every child that walks the halls of School 3 will be going to college, in my eyes.” ● **College is an individual and shared success** “On the announcements they’d do the names of students that go to different colleges.”
● College plans and preparation in courses ● Classroom or office observations ● Student work or bulletin boards related to general academics	● **Varying degrees of integration** “I'm always talking about college, and I'm always encouraging them, ‘Let's go talk to your counselors. Let's think about what we're going to do.’”
● College information dissemination ● Counseling department events ● Academic support and navigation ● College entrance exam info ● General school info, rules	● **Support and resources are at your reach** “We blow up the posters, the flyers and we post them around the school. Then we're assigned scholarships. Each counselor is assigned scholarships that they're responsible for.”
● Career exploration in courses	● **Think college AND career** “We have child guidance. They take you to daycares. I think they take you to one elementary school. You get to interact with the kids and just get the feel of it.”
● Financial aid info ● Athletic and extracurricular activities	● **Finding funding for college is vital** “they’re allowing us to know everything about financial aid”