

## **Examining College Opportunity Structures for Students of Color at High-“Minority,” High-Poverty Secondary Schools in Texas**

**ABSTRACT:** This study conducts an intersectional analysis of two adjoined qualitative studies, reanalyzing the data using a college opportunity framework (González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003) to examine how sources of social capital available within three high-“minority,” high-poverty high schools in Texas shape college opportunities for Latina/o and Black high school students. Findings indicate that counselors and teachers were sources of college information and support while advanced courses prepared students for college-level curriculum. However, these same support mechanisms often deterred students' access to quality academic preparation and college information. The increased focus on state-mandated accountability measures at the schools also limited students' level of academic preparation and college access. Additionally, state college access policies designed to increase the college participation of underrepresented groups effectively accomplished this policy intent, but these same policies influenced students' college choice decisions.

Within the last 25 years, the number of African American and Latina/o<sup>1</sup> students in K–12 public schools has significantly increased compared to White and Asian students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, from 1988 through 2008, the number of Hispanic students rose from 4.5 to 10.4 million and Black students, from 6.8 to 7.5 million, while the number of White students decreased from 28.0 to 26.7 million (Aud et al., 2010). Meanwhile in 2008, the combined enrollment of Asians, Pacific

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Islanders, and American Indians/Alaska Natives roughly stayed the same at 7.4% of all students in public schools. Despite these demographic shifts, it is Black and Latina/o students, or students of color, along with low-income students who continue to be disproportionately affected by educational inequities within today's school systems (Oakes, 2005).

Students of color often attend K–12 schools with the most novice teachers (Jerald, Haycock, & Wilkins, 2009), are overrepresented in special education (Ferri & Connor, 2005), and are underrepresented in gifted education (King, Kozleski, & Lansdowne, 2009) and in advanced placement (AP) courses (College Board, 2011). Furthermore, low-income students of color are rarely placed in high-level courses—the gateway to rigorous academic preparation to college—because they are often excluded from the hidden rules associated with inclusion in these courses (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002) or because structural forces within the school track them to lower-level courses (Mickelson & Heath, 1999; Oakes, 2005). Inequities at the K–12 level subsequently affect the relatively stagnant college enrollment rates for Black and Latina/o students. In 1997, for instance, 58% of Black and 65% of Latina/o students enrolled in college immediately after high school graduation. However, in 2006, the percentage of Black and Latina/o students who enrolled in college immediately after high school decreased to 55% and 58%, respectively, accounting for a 13% Black–White gap and a 10% Latina/o–White gap (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). This Black–White and Latina/o–White gap in college enrollment rates remains.

At the same time, there is an increased push nationwide to ensure that all high school students are college ready upon graduation (Conley, 2007, 2009). Even with the federal emphasis on academically preparing students for college through the promotion of state college readiness standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) and recent research supporting multiple pathways to college (Oakes & Saunders, 2008), the aforementioned inequities suggest that a nationwide systemic “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) remains for students of color in the pipeline to college. Given the current state of affairs, educational leaders need to be more cognizant and critical of how their own practices, those of their school staff, and the structure of their schools might assist or inhibit students of color in successfully accessing a postsecondary education.

In this qualitative study, an intersectional analysis (Griffin & Reddick, 2011) was conducted to examine sources of social capital that shape college opportunities for Latina/o and Black students attending three high schools serving a high-“minority,”<sup>2</sup> high-poverty (HMHP) student population. We recognize that a number of dimensions affect the pathways to

college for students of color—such as federal and state policies, parents, neighborhood, and the community. However, we reexamined our studies from the student perspective by employing a college opportunity framework (González et al., 2003) to explore what mechanisms simultaneously support and curtail college information, preparation, and choice decisions for students of color in secondary schools.

Moreover, the combined studies are situated in the state of Texas (one study in the central region of the state and one in the southern), where students of color represent the majority of the K–12 population, and this demographic phenomenon is reciprocated by extreme racial and socio-economic segregation among high schools throughout the state (Butler, 2010). The South Texas region is historically a majority Latina/o population. As such, most high schools in the region are high “minority” in enrollment. Unfortunately, the South Texas region over time has experienced extreme unemployment, high poverty rates, and limited access to K–12 and higher education funding resources when compared to the rest of the state (Yamamura & Martinez, 2010). High schools in the South Texas region are largely high poverty because of the aforementioned deficiency in resources. However, the emersion of racially segregated HMHP schools is *de facto* in nature in the remainder of the state (see Orfield & Lee, 2005). The reanalysis of our merged studies via González and colleagues’ (2003) framework provided us with a unique opportunity to explore the way that students perceive school personnel (e.g., teachers and counselors), school-level decisions (e.g., curricular implementation), as well as state-level policies that structure college opportunities for students of color in HMHP schools in a Texas context.

## **COLLEGE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

The secondary school context does not solely determine access to college preparation resources for students of color. A complex set of factors assist or confine opportunities necessary to matriculate to college. Perna (2006) proposes a conceptual model demonstrating how a student’s college access and choice decisions are influenced by four layers: an outer social, economic, and policy layer; the higher education context; the school and community context; and the habitus, which consists of demographic and social/cultural capital elements. Consequently, students of color in particular are pushed to the margins as a result of inextricable educational policies, school-level structural maladies, and school faculty actions.

Within secondary schools, school counselors play a significant role in helping students access a postsecondary education by acting as sources of informational, emotional, and moral support (González et al., 2003; McDonough, 2004, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Regrettably, Black, Latina/o, and low-income students who attend schools where they represent the majority typically receive lower levels of high school counselor support services and college application information than do those who attend high schools in which White and affluent students represent the majority (Oakes et al., 2006). Specifically, school counselors have been noted by students of color for being inaccessible (Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004; Vela-Gude et al., 2009), having low expectations for them at times (Vela-Gude et al., 2009), having too many responsibilities and varying roles to be effective (Corwin et al., 2004; McDonough, 2005; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003), and being gatekeepers to college information (González et al., 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Even when school counselors are available, guidance about college is unequal within schools. Oakes et al. (2006) reported that Black and Latina/o high school students were 46% more likely than White and Asian students to indicate that adults at their schools steered them away from attending a 4-year college and instead were encouraged to attend a community college, go to a vocational/trade school, or obtain a job after high school graduation. Additionally, Black and Latina/o students were 14% more likely than White and Asian students to report that they received insufficient assistance and information for applying to college. Similarly, in Corwin and colleagues' (2004) study, counselors were seen as resources "for the white kids and the Asian kids," while the "Mexican kids" sought assistance with college preparations from a particular teacher (p. 452). Alternatively, Vela-Gude and colleagues (2009) found that some Latina/o students perceived their high school counselors paying more attention to students who came from wealthier or more prestigious backgrounds. In an effort to uncover whether high school counselors reinforce or preempt social class structures, Linnehan (2006) found "a triple interaction between a student's race, social class and academic performance . . . to be a significant predictor of counselor recommendations" for postsecondary options (p. 1). This finding is particularly important because it stands in contrast to previous research (McDonough, 1997) that identifies socioeconomic status as the main barrier to college access.

Like counselors, teachers can be pivotal "school agents" (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) for students of color. As Venezia and colleagues (2003) point out, teachers may be more accessible to students and willing to assist them with obtaining college information or navigating the college choice

process, but teachers recognize that they are not trained to do so and are often unsettled by the possibility that they may misinform students. Being a high-quality teacher, however, can also contribute to the academic achievement and college readiness of students (Cabrera et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2004). Once again, students of color and low-income students are often "shortchanged," as they are taught "disproportionately by inexperienced, out-of-field, or uncertified teachers" (Peske & Haycock, 2006, p. 2). If a majority of students of color are being taught by low-quality teachers, it stands to reason that these students will not be prepared for a rigorous college-level curriculum and will likely be less prepared to take college entrance exams, potentially limiting their postsecondary options and outcomes.

## TEXAS CONTEXT

Like the rest of the nation, the state of Texas faces an uncertain future because it has not been able to meet the challenge of educating its rapidly growing Latina/o population, which is overwhelmingly undereducated compared to other racial/ethnic groups in the state (Waller, 2004). For instance, in 2008 only 70.8% of Hispanic students obtained a high school diploma when compared to Whites (81.7%) and Asian/Pacific Islanders (91.2%); this is the lowest percentage among all racial/ethnic populations in the state (Texas Education Agency, 2009). Although African Americans make up a smaller portion of the Texas population (11.6%; Texas State Data Center, 2009), they also did not fare well in obtaining a high school diploma in 2008 (71.8%). In this same year, 14.4% of Hispanic and 16.1% of African American students dropped out of high school. Of those Hispanic students in the state who did graduate in 2008, only 32% were considered college ready in language arts and mathematics, while this percentage was only 25% for African Americans (Texas Education Agency, 2009). Together, Latina/o and African American students in the state ranked last in being college ready compared to their White and Asian counterparts (Texas Education Agency, 2009).

## A SEGREGATED PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Texas, as well as a considerable number of states across the nation,<sup>3</sup> now serves a majority "minority" school population. Likewise, with Latina/os constituting close to 50% of students in Texas public schools, it is imperative to further examine how secondary school personnel and orga-

nizational structures contribute to their college opportunities. However, the increase in students of color is matched with a growth in school racial segregation across the state. For example, more than half of Latina/o high school students in the state attend high schools where greater than 75% of the students are Latina/o. Even though Black students represent approximately 15% of the state's school population, an astonishing 11% attend high schools that are majority Black (Butler, 2010). In contrast, a majority of White students attend predominately White high schools (Butler, 2010).

The advent of racial segregation across Texas high schools has precipitated a condition in which most students of color in the state attend high schools that are HMHP. Unfortunately, according to research, HMHP high schools endure the burden of school reform policies, practices, and disparities in educational resources and achievement. Students in HMHP high schools experience lower levels of teacher effectiveness, are at a higher risk of dropping out of school, receive limited college preparatory resources, and are less likely to be enrolled in college preparatory coursework than students in predominately White, affluent, or integrated high schools (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Zuckerbrod, 2007).

## STATE ACCOUNTABILITY

It is important to consider how state accountability measures, as developed in response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Kim & Sunderman, 2004), affect college opportunities for all students in Texas, particularly students of color. Previous research (McNeil, 2000; Orfield & Wald, 2000) has found that "the students who are most negatively affected by the consequences of high-stakes tests are low-income, Black and Latino" (French, 2003, p. 5). In Texas, the advent of mandated high-stakes testing<sup>4</sup> resulted in a curricular shift in schools where teachers now focus more on preparing students to pass the state exam than imparting a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for college (Hampton, 2005; Sloan, 2005). As Hursh (2007) notes, "because culturally advantaged middle-class and upper-class students are likely to rely on their cultural capital to pass the exams, it is the disadvantaged students who receive the additional drilling" (p. 301). Thus, as teachers lower expectations for the most disadvantaged students in response to high-stakes testing, the achievement gap further widens.

Texas, in addition to 25 other states, requires students to pass a high school exit exam to receive a high school diploma (Holme, Richards, Jirmerson, & Cohen, 2010). Previously, high school students were required to pass one summative assessment of all the core subjects; however, the

first cohort of Texas ninth graders in the 2011–2012 academic year transitioned to end-of-course exams for each core subject as the state graduation requirement (Center on Education Policy, 2011). While high school exit exams were designed to ensure that students be ready for and receive the necessary skills to enter the workforce and postsecondary education, Holme and colleagues' (2010) review of the literature demonstrates the contrary. The high school exit exams do little to follow through on the initial policy's intent to increase postsecondary readiness and participation, as studies have shown that these exams have little to no impact on postsecondary attainment (Holme et al., 2010). Moreover, the high-stakes pressure associated with high school exit exam participation negatively affects the test performance of Black students, Latina/o students, and English-language learners and is associated with an increase in dropout rates for urban high-poverty schools. This is consistent with the work of Perna and Thomas (2009), who found that high school state testing policies compromised a high school's ability to promote college enrollment and that the unintended consequences were of even greater severity at HMHP schools. Finally, most states adopting exit exam policies are located in the southern region of the United States, and as a result, more students in poverty and of color are affected by the negative high stakes of high school exit exams (Holme et al., 2010).

Ultimately, at the secondary level, "the pressure to raise test scores encourages schools to force weak students out of school before they take the required exam(s)" (Hursh, 2007, p. 301). As a result, the high-stakes nature of No Child Left Behind and state-level accountability "both directly and indirectly exacerbates racial, ethnic, and economic inequality in society" (p. 305). Therefore, the research presented suggests that accountability has a disproportionately egregious impact on students of color and students in poverty. The (in)effectiveness of high-stakes testing in relation to college opportunities must be reconsidered now that high schools in Texas serve students predominantly of color and students in poverty.

## COLLEGE ACCESS POLICIES

Texas's Top Ten Percent Plan, House Bill 88, is another widely known and contentious policy in the state that first arose in response to *Hopwood v. Texas, 1996* the case that banned affirmative action in college admissions. After the *Hopwood* decision, Latina/o and Black student enrollment at Texas flagship universities plummeted, and the Top Ten Percent Plan—which granted students ranking in the top 10% of their high school class automatic admission to public universities—was created to help ensure

access to Texas's top-tier universities for students from underrepresented communities in the state but in a race-neutral manner (Holley & Spencer, 1999; Horn & Flores, 2003; Tienda, Leicht, Sullivan, Maltese, & Lloyd, 2003). Research has found that the plan has contributed to increased numbers of rural, small town, low-income, and minority students attending Texas's flagships from high schools and regions in the state that had few to no students ever attending these institutions (Long, Saenz, & Tienda, 2009). The Top Ten Percent Plan has also increased HMHP school acceptance and enrollment in the state's flagship universities (Long et al., 2009); however, there is concern that this outcome sustains the segregated infrastructure of the state's public school system (Tienda & Niu, 2006).

At the same time, the plan has been criticized for a number of reasons, including being solely based on academic achievement (i.e., class rank; Horn & Flores, 2003; Tienda et al., 2003), disguising the use of race in admissions (Tienda, Alon, & Niu, 2008), and providing preferential treatment to less qualified students from underperforming schools (Tienda et al., 2003; Tienda & Niu, 2006). Parents from high-performing schools are the primary source of the third critique (Tienda & Niu, 2006). Another unintended consequence of the policy has been students strategically transferring to lower-performing schools, where they are likely to be in the top 10% of their class so that they then may gain automatic admission to a Texas flagship university (Cullen, Long, & Reback, 2011). A majority of this research, however, fails to capture the firsthand experiences of students who are impacted by these policies.

## **THEORETICAL LENS: COLLEGE OPPORTUNITY FRAMEWORK**

This study adopted a framework rooted in social capital theory—specifically, González and colleagues' (2003) college opportunity framework. From an individual perspective, social capital theory suggests that individuals draw on their relationships, or networks, and the information and resources embedded within these relationships to navigate society's institutions (Bourdieu, 1980; Lin, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Thus, within the school context, students form relationships with individuals that can assist them in accessing educational opportunities and college information and resources (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001). The individuals who provide students with these resources can be considered *institutional agents* (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) because of their ability and willingness to, directly or indirectly, negotiate the transmission of institutional resources to students. The resources themselves can be



tangible (college brochures, SAT pamphlets) and intangible (information, academic tutoring, mentoring; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). It is important to consider, however, that structures within schools shape how social capital is distributed and exchanged.

González and colleagues (2003) developed their college opportunity framework after examining how the primary and secondary school experiences of 22 Latina college students in California affected their college opportunities. The framework identifies potential agents of social capital, as well as potential agents of institutional neglect and abuse, and it distinguishes between high- and low-volume agents. High-volume agents of social capital "would be able to transmit directly or negotiate the transmission of all three . . . valued resources and opportunities" first noted by Stanton-Salazar (1997)—including emotional support, access to privileged information or knowledge, and opportunities for college admittance—while a low-volume agent of social capital would be able to transmit only one such resource (González et al., 2003, p. 153). In describing their K–12 primary and secondary school experiences, the Latina college students in the study identified the following potential agents of social capital within the school context: specialized honors programs, teachers, and counselors. Alternatively, González and colleagues (2003) defined institutional neglect as "the inability or unwillingness of schools or its personnel to prepare students for postsecondary education, particularly 4-year universities" (p. 153). Particular actions that were considered neglectful or abusive included "being emotionally discouraging, providing inaccurate information or insufficient knowledge, withholding critical information, and limiting access to opportunities for college" (p. 153). Students that had experienced all these neglectful acts were considered to have endured a high volume of institutional neglect and abuse, while students who endured a low volume of institutional neglect were those exposed to only one. Within the framework, school personnel and structures that were deemed as institutional agents of abuse and neglect included "the general school curriculum, teachers, counselors, and administrators" (p. 154).

We find that González and colleagues' (2003) college opportunity framework lends itself to the context of this study for a number of reasons. For one, the framework was based on the schooling experiences of students of color, albeit all females of Latino descent, while accounting for social capital within students' schools. By applying this framework to a study with a similar purpose that includes males and females of both Latino and African American descent, we can gain greater insight into the usefulness and applicability of the college opportunity framework. This framework can also help illuminate instances of institutional neglect and pressures

that commonly occur in HMHP schools. Findings from this study can further help “verify the explanatory power” (p. 168) of the college opportunity framework. The college opportunity framework was deemed appropriate for this study on the basis of the research questions posed. We sought to understand the sources of social capital available within HMHP high schools for Latina/o and Black students who aspire to go to college. We particularly wanted to know how school personnel or structures shape the college opportunities of Latina/o and Black students attending HMHP high schools.

## **METHOD**

In this study, which can be considered an intersectional analysis (Griffin & Reddick, 2011), we combined and reanalyzed a portion of data from two larger in-depth qualitative studies previously conducted by each author independently. Study 1 focused on the college choice process of Latina/o students attending two HMHP high schools in rural South Texas, and Study 2 focused on the opportunity networks (i.e., connections to college resources) of high school students in a semirural town in Central Texas. We found that whereas combining portions of our data sets for this study would be considered a nontraditional feat, this method has been successfully utilized before (Griffin & Reddick, 2011).

We specifically used methodologies espoused by Griffin and Reddick (2011) to guide and substantiate our own methodology. In their qualitative study on the mentoring practices of Black faculty at predominately White institutions, Griffin and Reddick describe how, from the onset of their independent research projects, they dialogued regarding similar research goals and design and acknowledged similarities in their emergent findings. As such, Griffin and Reddick felt that it was appropriate to combine their data sets and conduct a reanalysis through a theoretical framework, intersectionality, different from what was implemented in their separate studies.

We chose to combine narrative data for this study for a number of reasons. For one, we developed the research design as well as collected data and conducted analysis within the same time frame, between 2009 and 2010. While we conducted our respective studies separately, we were part of a writing group that met periodically within these 2 years. It was in these writing group meetings that we discussed the process of designing and implementing our studies and provided each other with critical feedback. Upon completing our studies, we reflected on our findings and found

that our studies were grounded in similar epistemological assumptions. One shared assumption key to our research is that our work is rooted in theories of social capital, closely monitoring how institutional structures affect students' access to college preparatory resources and information. We both also highlighted the perspectives of students of color, Black and Latina/o students, in navigating secondary school settings. Furthermore, despite utilizing similar but distinct interview protocol and conducting our studies in different high schools and regions of Texas, some of our results were comparable. Specifically, we found that some of the students in our studies encountered similar obstacles in gaining access to tangible college information, emotional support for college, and college knowledge within their schools. We thought that combining portions of our data sets and re-analyzing the narratives through a theoretical lens different from the ones that we had each used in our original studies would help illuminate a more nuanced understanding of how the sources of social capital within HMHP high schools shape college opportunities for students of color.

Therefore, this article draws on individual semistructured interviews (Seidman, 2006) conducted during the 2009–2010 school year with high school students of African American and Latina/o descent. Other interviews and informal conversations with school personnel (teachers and counselors) as well as field notes were analyzed as part of the data set for this study. The demographic profiles of participants from both studies are included in the appendix, which refers to demographic and academic indicators, family education, college resources, and postsecondary aspirations of students. What follows is a more detailed description of the participant samples, the school contexts, and the data collection methods utilized in the original two studies. Thereafter, the manner in which the data from the two studies were then reanalyzed for this research project is explained; then, the efforts taken to ensure the reliability and trustworthiness of the analysis are discussed, as well as the limitations of the study.

## STUDY 1: SOUTH TEXAS

*School context.* The two high schools that students attended—Madera and Palacios—had similar demographic compositions and can be considered HMHP schools. During the 2009–2010 academic school year, the student body at Madera was 94.9% Latina/o, and 89.4% were considered “economically disadvantaged” in that they qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (Texas Education Agency, 2010). The total student population at Madera was 3,184, with 265 (8.3%) being labeled English-language learners, 1,724 (54.1%) “at risk,”<sup>5</sup> 317 (10%) receiving gifted and talented educa-

tion services, and 367 (11.5%) enrolled in special education. Teachers at Madera were predominantly Latina/o (74.1%; Texas Education Agency, 2010). At Palacios High School, the total number of students during the same academic school year was 2,557, with a majority being Latina/o (97.3%) and considered "economically disadvantaged" (97.8%; Texas Education Agency, 2010). Among the student body, 268 (10.5%) were labeled English-language learners, 1,877 (73.4%) "at risk," and 148 (5.8%) gifted and talented, with 368 (14.4%) receiving special education services. The teachers at Palacios were also majority Latina/o (79.4%; Texas Education Agency, 2010).

*Participants.* The participants for the South Texas study were 20 Mexican American high school seniors (see appendix) from two high schools in one large school district in the region. Ten students (5 male, 5 female) were recruited with the assistance of school counselors and teachers from each high school according to the following criteria: identifying as Mexican American, being a senior at either of the two high schools, and aspiring to attend a college after graduating from high school, whether a 2- or 4-year institution. In addition to these criteria, students from diverse academic and socioeconomic backgrounds were sought. Two counselors from each high school, as well as one district-level counselor, were interviewed for the study.

*Procedures for data collection.* Two phenomenological semistructured interviews (Seidman, 2006) were conducted with each of the 20 student participants. The key questions in the first interview focused on the development of students' college aspirations, educational goals, and expectations and their sources of college information, support, and assistance in the context of their social networks. In the second interview, students were asked to reflect on and explain the meaning of the college choice process from their perspectives in the context of their social identities and sociocultural characteristics. All student interviews took place over the course of one academic school year (September 2009–May 2010) on school grounds before, during, or after school. Interviews lasted an average of 39 minutes. The length between students' first and second interviews ranged from 1 to 2 months, except for one student whose first and second interviews were conducted from one day to the next because of logistic limitations. All student interviews were audio recorded.

## STUDY 2: CENTRAL TEXAS

*School context.* Student participants in Study 2 attended Green High School (GHS), a high school situated in a semirural town and school

district approximately 12 miles outside a major metropolitan area in Texas. Over a 10-year span, an influx of families moved from the central city, changing Green High from a racially and socioeconomically balanced school to an HMHP high school (i.e., a school with more than 50% student of color and more than 50% low socioeconomic student enrollment). The school district did not anticipate the rapid demographic changes and, as a result, scrambled to build capacity and respond to the needs of their new student populations, which were increasingly of color, poor, and growing in overall enrollment. With the increasing numbers of students from neighboring districts enrolling in Green Independent School District in the last 10 years, Green High's student enrollment nearly doubled, from 597 students in 1998–1999 to 1,049 in 2009–2010.

Low socioeconomic student enrollment represented the most dramatic demographic change, increasing from 38.4% in the 1998–1999 school year to 80% in 2009–2010. Also by 2009–2010, more than 70% of the GHS population was considered “at risk” of dropping out. Also, Green High's English-language learner population increased nearly 5 times between 1998–1999 (3.2%) and 2009–2010 (16.6%). In the 1998–1999 school year, African American students represented 22.3% and Latina/o students, 27.2%; in 2008–2010, this increased to 34.6% and 54.1%, respectively. The increased enrollment of low-income students and students of color was met with an extreme decrease in White enrollment, from 40% in the 1998–1999 school year to 8.8% in 2009–2010. Finally, the demographics of the teaching staff did not match the diverse student body. Approximately 73% of the teachers were White, 10% African American, 15% Latina/o, and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander.

*Participants.* A total of 15 high school students of color participated (see appendix) in the Central Texas study: 5 males and 10 females. All participants were given the opportunity to self-identify their race or cultural background. Eight students identified as being of African descent; among these, 7 self-identified as Black and/or African American, and 1 simply stated that she was Black. Five students identified as Latina/o, with 3 identifying as Mexican American, 1 as Hispanic, and 1 as Mexican. Finally, two students identified as multiethnic. Alicia described her identity as “mixed with Dominican, Black, Cuban, and White, and adopted by a White family,” and Nicole described her identity as “British-American, Black, White, Mexican, and Indian.” Nine student participants were classified as seniors, 2 as juniors, and 4 as freshmen. Similar to Study 1, students from diverse academic and socioeconomic backgrounds were sought. This sample in both grade level and academic standing helped to determine distinctions in the capital that students had at their disposal for accessing college. School administrators and counselors randomly selected a list of 40 possible stu-

dent participants. The researcher met with each of the 40 to discuss the study and inquire about interest in participating. This original 40 was then narrowed to 15, as students either elected not to participate or had scheduling conflicts with interview times.

*Procedures for data collection.* All interview data for Study 2 was collected between December 2009 and May 2010. Semistructured interviews with students, conducted in a school conference room, lasted approximately 1 hour and usually occurred during a student's lunch break (the researcher would buy the students lunch), before or after school, or during an "off" period. During interviews, students were asked demographic and academic characteristic questions, such as racial/ethnic/cultural identity, age, parent/guardian education level, present grade point average, subject areas of AP/honors coursework or subject areas of non-AP coursework, post-high school plans (college, vocational training, workforce), and extracurricular activity involvement. Students engaged in conversations about their college pathways by identifying college resources available to them, relationships and support networks for going to college, and specific school personnel who connected them to college resources.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The first step taken in this intersectional analysis (Griffin & Reddick, 2011) was to reread the student transcripts as well as the field notes from informal and non-audio-recorded interviews with school personnel that were included in the data set for this research project. In this process, we reviewed the electronic version of our transcripts and field notes independently and proceeded to identify chunks of data, either a phrase or sentences, within each student transcript or field note that directly or indirectly identified sources of social capital within students' school settings that shaped their college opportunities. Our understanding of college opportunities was based on González and colleagues' (2003) college opportunity framework. Thus, instances were identified in which school personnel or school structures enabled or inhibited the transmission of emotional support, access to privileged college-related information or knowledge, or opportunities for college admittance. In this coding process, we electronically copied the chunks of data from each original transcript to our individual master Word document of preliminary themes. In doing this, we independently defined labels or codes and then met to discuss and compare our individual themes. We proceeded to collaboratively analyze the data through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) by reevaluating all the themes together and, in doing so, combined or collapsed some themes,

delineated between overarching themes and subthemes, and chose to eliminate some themes that were not sufficiently substantiated by the data. The culminating themes provided the findings for this study.

### RELIABILITY, TRUSTWORTHINESS, AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Various measures were taken to ensure the reliability of data. In working together and combining data from our two studies through the process of peer examination, we critiqued our respective initial themes and individually defined codes that emerged for this research project (Merriam, 1995). As a means of addressing issues of trustworthiness, we acknowledged our own biases and positionality in the process of conducting our individual studies and in reanalyzing the data for this project. As both of us are former K-12 educators in Texas and females of color—with one of us being Mexican American originally from South Texas and the other identifying as African American/Black and from North Texas—we both acknowledged the roles that our own values, biases, and firsthand experiences in the communities and school contexts that we studied could have in the process of analyzing data for this study. We recognized our insider knowledge of the communities and school contexts that we studied as strengths that enabled us to build rapport with students and school personnel while in the field. We also found our varying perspectives and experiences beneficial in the process of analyzing our data for this project, as we were able to each provide a different lens from which to view each other's data.

Despite efforts to ensure reliability and trustworthiness, this study is limited in a number of ways. As data for this project are drawn from two studies, there are inherent differences in the interview protocol used as well as slight variations in the characteristics of our student sample. Study 1 focused on Mexican American high school seniors, whereas Latina/o, students of African descent, and multiethnic high school students of various grade classifications were presented in Study 2. As a qualitative intersectional analysis of narrative data, this study does not seek to provide findings that are generalizable to all students of color in Central or South Texas or even the schools that students attended. Instead, this study purposefully provides a more detailed description of the sources of social capital available within the three HMHP high schools that the 35 students in this study attended that assisted or inhibited students from accessing college opportunities. In doing so, this study intended to provide a more detailed description of students' experiences in this process.

## RESULTS

Analyses revealed that “potential agents of social capital” within the context of the HMHP high schools that students attended included counselors who provided valuable college information, dynamic teachers who independently elected to help students navigate their college pathways, and dual-enrollment and AP courses that were a preview to college academic expectations. Alternatively, the same school personnel and rigorous curriculum that were sources of social capital for some students were considered sources of “institutional neglect and abuse” for others (González et al., 2003). For instance, school counselors were limited in their capacity to meet the needs of all students on campus; a majority of teachers were not committed to promoting college readiness in their classrooms; and course tracking and low academic expectations embedded in the school curriculum restricted college access and academic preparation. Furthermore, the intersectional analysis increased the breadth of our data and enabled us to recognize the considerable impact that state policies had on students’ levels of academic preparation and college access. While the intent of policies such as the state accountability system was to increase student academic readiness, high-stakes testing or “skill and drill” became the curricular and instructional focus in most classrooms, not ensuring that students are academically college ready. Additionally, state college access policies designed to increase the college participation of underrepresented groups effectively accomplished this intent, but these same policies influenced students’ college choice decisions.

### CARING BUT CONSTRAINED COUNSELORS

A majority of students identified the school counselor as a significant agent of social capital who supported their college aspirations or would “help you out with quite a bit” in accessing the varied college information, such as college application assistance, college brochures and fliers advertising college events, college entrance exam information, fee waivers for tests and applications, and financial aid and scholarship information. In all three high schools, counselors transformed their office waiting areas or their designated college and career centers into another resource to provide students and their parents a one-stop shop in completing college and financial aid applications. As Maritza pointed out,

they have a lot of fliers about like a bunch of colleges and the tests that you need to do and there’s some applications. . . . Sometimes we go and we get



some of the little fliers they have there. That's where we got the SAT dates so we could sign-up.

Thus, stopping by the counselor's office to pick up valuable college information was an encouraged practice and an alternative to scheduling an individual appointment with a counselor.

Counselors also provided students with college information via e-mail and printed newsletters, regularly scheduled classroom presentations, and individual meetings. At Madera High School, for instance, counselors conducted a "senior interview" with all 12th graders, in an effort to prepare students for graduation and postgraduation plans. At GHS, the counseling and career center was staffed daily with at least two AmeriCorps members who helped students sign up to take the SAT, complete college applications, and write college essays. Every student visiting the center had a personal file with a college and financial aid application checklist that she or he could access at any time; in exchange, students were required to enroll their parents in a FAFSA completion workshop.

Despite their good intentions, counselors were considered individuals who inhibited college opportunities for some students. Counselors were often too "busy" and unavailable to meet individually with students or provide pertinent graduation requirement information. In some cases, students were even misinformed about courses necessary for graduation. Tony, a South Texas student, shared the trouble that he had in trying to get his grade point average through the counselor's office, which he needed for college applications. He admitted, "Every time I go to the counselors, [they say] like 'Oh, well we're busy,' or 'we can't tell you right now.'" Tatiana reluctantly shared her perception of how counselors were constrained in their ability to meet with students individually. "Well, I don't want to give the school a bad name or anything," she said, "but my teachers kind of help me mostly." She said, "The counselors not so much because they're always usually busy with paperwork and stuff so they don't really have a chance to talk to you." Given students' perceptions of counselors' limited availability to meet with and guide them, it is no surprise that some students felt reluctant to seek counselors' assistance and often turned to teachers instead. Angela questioned whether counselors were fulfilling their job descriptions, defining a counselor as "somebody [who] is supposed to help you with anything you need, not only for schedules. That's mostly what they do is schedules."

For some students weaknesses in counselor services had a detrimental impact on obtaining the minimum requirements to even graduate high school. For example, upon obtaining her schedule her junior year Alicia,

at GHS, realized that she was not enrolled in any AP courses. Alicia did not elect to be enrolled in non-AP courses. A counselor made the decision for her. Alicia was new to GHS and did not know the counseling staff, and for this reason, she found it difficult to communicate with the counselors about her courses. She expressed her frustration:

I haven't talked to any counselors here, just can't seem to get an appointment with them. . . . I don't know. They have this rule where you have to go and sign in your name and they'll call you. But, they never call you down. So, I just gave up.

Alicia admitted that the non-AP courses were not much of a challenge for her, and as a result, she lost interest and frequently skipped classes.

Faculty in general and counselors specifically at all three high schools admitted that the multiple roles that counselors played in HMHP high schools often constrained them and affected the quality of their services. One counselor in South Texas stated that it would be ideal "in the perfect world to have one person in charge to try to help these kids [with college]," but counselors lacked the staffing capacity to facilitate the college application process, manage student records, administer state high school exit examinations, set students' course schedules, and provide socioemotional support to students. These narratives reveal the reality of counselors' current plight in HMHP high schools with being overwhelmed because of the high numbers of students that they serve and the varying and ubiquitous roles that they are designated to perform—additional tasks that come with additional state accountability and school reform pressures (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Furthermore, these findings are consistent with previous research that has found counselors to be inaccessible (Vela-Gude et al., 2009) due to large caseloads and being overcommitted to noncounseling activities (McDonough, 2005).

#### TEACHERS AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ARE VALUED BUT LIMITED IN NUMBERS

Some students mentioned teachers who were especially supportive of their college aspirations, encouraged college going, and provided tangible information and assistance. In such cases, these teachers were considered high-volume sources of social capital for students and were noted for actively integrating college knowledge into their courses, which students greatly appreciated. Typically, the English teacher or a director of an extracurricular activity took the time to talk to students about their college

aspirations. Beto described how some teachers discussed the college experience in class and offered assistance with applications:

The teachers are, they have a good knowledge of universities and you can like within like a talk in the class or whatever you can ask and they'll explain. Teachers help a lot. They always push you to do your best. And you know, you think about it and it's like, well, I want to go to college but then I don't know, and they're like, what do you mean I don't know, do your best. . . . So, they're always like, well if you need help stay after class or come by after school or during lunch or before school.

These teachers served as institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and independently elected to provide college information.

At all three HMHP high schools, systematic supports were not responsible for these student connections to college resources. While all teachers were generally considered supportive of students' college aspirations, only a handful went further by providing students with college knowledge or assistance. Students indicated that a specific time was not allotted during the school day for the dissemination of college knowledge in classrooms, which meant that teachers did not integrate college-related information into classes on a daily basis. Sergio suggested, "Teachers should be a little bit more informative and telling their students how, how this [getting into college] is done. I myself have been very confused on how I should apply." Therefore, the decision to integrate specific information into the curriculum was decentralized to the teachers. Maritza gave teachers the benefit of the doubt, saying that teachers are "trying to meet their own deadlines." It is these "deadlines" that often conflict with integrating tangible college information in lesson plans. Thus, as with counselors, other competing job pressures and responsibilities left many teachers incapacitated, and as a result, college-oriented class discussions occurred in isolation. Beyond school- or districtwide college information programs, such as college days or college nights, students typically received college-related information only if their teachers elected to do so.

Some teachers agreed that their high school should establish systematic dialogue about college. Without systematic efforts to provide college information, most students were unaware of the steps necessary to prepare for their college aspirations and ensure that they came to fruition. According to Mr. Trent, as compared with students in high schools in the Central Texas metropolitan area with greater resources, students at GHS were behind in terms of college knowledge. He noted how students at more resourced schools know their grade point averages, class ranks, and the courses that they need to be college ready. However, he said, "But you

drive over to Green High and those kids don't know that. Why is it that they don't know that? Because they haven't been taught that!" He admitted,

We haven't done a good job back when they were freshman or eighth graders coming to high school saying "these are the things that you need to know. We're going to teach you how to go and to ask a counselor, registrar for a copy of [your] transcript. We're going to teach you how to keep up with the number of credits that you have."

### THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM: EVIDENT VARIATIONS IN EXPECTATIONS AND RIGOR

The school curriculum was a critical source of college information and academic preparation for students at all three HMHP high schools. Students noted that dual-enrollment and AP courses better facilitated access to college by requiring them to academically perform at a college level. Also, dual-credit and AP courses provided opportunities for students to earn college credits while in high school. School district partnerships with local community colleges enabled high school students to earn college credits at no cost, and the local districts' commitment to waive AP test fees for students in HMHP schools meant that college was more accessible and affordable for low-income students of color and their families.

Students such as Henry admitted that enrollment in AP and dual-enrollment courses placed him and others in a privileged position in that AP courses were weighted greater than "regular courses" and provided an "advantage" to students by helping them gain "more [college] knowledge" while in high school. According to Paulo, teachers of AP and dual-credit courses "pressure you sometimes" and "treat you like college students. I'm getting prepared for that." Manny, from GHS, concurred that when compared to his former non-AP class, in AP he was required to "think more," and "my vocabulary is increasing." Angela said that students in her AP statistics class "know that they are the AP bunch and have more of a head on their shoulders."

Regrettably, academic expectations were generally low for those enrolled in non-AP classes, and students felt that their classmates were trying to "take it easy" because they "just don't care." Students enrolled in non-AP courses admitted that they did not need to study to make good grades, especially because the sole focus of these courses was preparation for the state high school exit examination. One Central Texas student disclosed how students enrolled in non-AP courses could still make A's and B's even when they "just do their work and get over with it" or if they write a paper the day before it is due. Alicia, another Central Texas student, experienced

academic boredom in her non-AP classes and said, "Now, my junior year I just . . . things have gone downhill. I just don't really care for school that much anymore. I feel like I come just to do it during the day so that I'm not bored." At GHS, it was recognized that in AP courses, with class sizes of 15 students or fewer, students would receive more personalized attention from teachers, whereas in non-AP courses, an average of 30 students were enrolled, and sometimes "there aren't enough chairs" for them. A combination of teachers' instructional shortfalls and nonengaging curricular content resulted in reduced student academic and behavioral expectations in non-AP courses. Beto recalled the differences in teacher expectations in AP and dual-enrollment classes compared to regular courses: "Teachers are more into like the work and they're more focused" in advanced courses. "I have taken some regular classes and what I've seen is that the teacher you know, they like not in a bad way but they goof around with students." He added, "Sometimes they're not so much focused into the class." Students in dual-credit and AP courses also described how they received a wealth of college application information and personal contact with college representatives and college outreach programs. Nevertheless, while conversing with peers, students discovered that those enrolled in non-AP or dual-credit courses did not receive the same access to such resources.

In South Texas, some students seemed to be misinformed about who could enroll in AP and dual-enrollment courses and how to enroll. Maritza explained, "You need to have like a certain kind of average . . . [to] take like AP. And to [take] dual [enrollment courses] I think you have to have the TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills] with like certain scores." Alternatively, Charlie said, "I don't think I'm qualified really [to take AP courses]. . . . Like your grades from last year have to be an 85 and above, and . . . it's not just open for everybody." Charlie believed that the same regulations held true for enrolling in dual-credit courses. The lack of clarity and consensus on the actual requirements needed to enroll in AP and dual-credit courses among students suggests a discrepancy in how information regarding the requisites for dual-enrollment and AP courses is disseminated by school personnel.

Some students, however, had been personally informed and recruited by school personnel to enroll in dual-credit or AP courses. For instance, at Madera High School Alejandra enrolled in more advanced courses based on her counselor's recommendations. She said, "Counselors, they would tell me, like since I had really good grades in regular classes, they told me, 'Well why don't you challenge yourself?' Well I did and I liked it." Angela felt that counselors at GHS often did not give students a choice of what courses to select. When Angela was asked how her course schedule was

designed, she said that counselors “just make it for you; they just make a schedule for you. Yeah you just get it the first day of school. You don’t see it yourself; it’s not like college where you can pick your classes.” Like Alejandra, Angela was recommended for AP courses because she achieved the highest possible score, *commended*, on her state high school exit exam. Other students, such as Cristian and Sergio, indicated that it was teachers who suggested that they take higher-track classes. Cristian said that he “found out” about AP and dual-enrollment courses through a teacher who “was the one asking us about it and then she explained to us like what they consisted of and I got interested in that.” Similarly, Sergio said that he was “mainly [informed] by my teachers, they were offering dual enrollment classes. . . . And they described it as you get college credit while getting a credit in high school and basically I’m like, ok sounds fine.”

The impact of high-stakes accountability on student expectations and curricular rigor was also particularly evident at GHS, as it was in its third consecutive year of poor academic performance under No Child Left Behind and state accountability guidelines. An *academically unacceptable* designation placed the school under the radar of the state education agency to improve its student academic achievement. On one hand, greater accountability to the state catalyzed Green High’s efforts to improve academic instruction campuswide. On the other, areas of improvement were not focused on improving teacher instruction per se, but instead all improvement efforts centered on students passing the high school state exit examination. The increase in the school’s overall state exit exam passing rate carried the most weight in determining whether GHS would be released from scrutiny by the state board of education.

Subsequently, a policy designed to boost academic achievement lowered schoolwide academic expectations, as remediation, intervention, and test preparation—not postsecondary preparation—became the instructional focus. Several teachers admitted that school personnel were doing anything necessary to get students to pass the state high school exit exam to remove Green High’s stigmatizing academically unacceptable label. This meant that teachers ultimately were not “thinking college” in their instructional planning. Alicia noted frustration with the state examination, TAKS, becoming the primary curricular content in most of her courses. When asked why she experienced boredom in her classes, Alicia responded,

This year, has been . . . feels like it’s all about TAKS, TAKS, TAKS. I know we have to pass TAKS because our school is not acceptable and it’s our last year [to improve to an acceptable rating] but it’s just . . . it’s annoying. I’m not going out of high school into college about TAKS. I want to learn about different things other than just TAKS problems.

This lack of attention to college preparation at GHS greatly influenced the AP program as well. Most of the teaching staff was occupied with instructing non-AP courses devoted to state exam preparation, which meant that few teachers were assigned to instruct AP courses. Furthermore, students enrolled in the few AP courses available recognized that the instruction was not very rigorous and would most likely not prepare them for college. Kendra, whose college aspiration was to enroll in an Ivy League university, admitted that she could academically excel in pre-AP courses without doing homework. "I don't study, like in class for me. I don't like homework or studying or anything like that," she said. "So if they give me homework or they say study, I study in class. That's the only time I do it," she admitted. Consequently, state accountability pressures triggered low academic expectations that permeated throughout the school, even in advanced courses.

#### STATE POLICIES THAT INCREASE COLLEGE ACCESS BUT RESTRICT COLLEGE CHOICE

As highlighted in the review of the literature, percentage plans are state-level policies that target increasing college access for underrepresented groups. Students at all three HMHP high schools were vocal about the benefits associated with Texas's Top Ten Percent Plan. In South Texas, students such as Fernando admitted that "being top 10% is actually an advantage . . . because they automatically accept you." Similarly, Zulema shared her excitement in knowing that she had multiple colleges from which to choose to attend because of her top-10% status: "Just being in top 10, made me [feel] like oh you can go anywhere. . . . I mean so, that is like, ok I can make it in college." Students at GHS who identified as top 10% also described the advantages of the supportive yet competitive nature among their top-10% peer group. Students in this peer group shared information about taking dual-credit courses and created healthy competition among one another in class rank. Some seniors had been in AP classes with their "academically focused" peer group since freshmen year, and according to Vanessa, "It's helpful to have our classes together because we aren't afraid or embarrassed to ask questions, we just kind of trust each other. Helping each other maintain their grades." Having a peer group in the top of the class helped them maintain a level of competitiveness that would be useful "especially in college since there is the best of the best there."

Alternatively, several students voiced their concerns with the fewer college opportunities that were afforded to students who did not graduate in the top 10% of their graduating class. Some non-top-10% students be-

lieved that they were at a disadvantage because universities “look at them [top-10% students] more than they look at other students,” and as such, top-10% students could “get admitted into colleges just so easy.” Other non-top-10% students noted the privileges that their counterparts received. For instance, Maritza discussed various “field trip” opportunities afforded to top-5% and top-10% students: “[School personnel] give them days off. . . . I don’t know, last year I think they went to like a field trip to like some campus from here. . . . [School personnel] do special things for them because they’re like in top 5.”

Students such as Cristina believed that not being a top-10% student limited the availability of scholarships that she could apply for as well. This constraint added additional pressures for those students like Cristina who came from low-income backgrounds. Christina felt that those who are in the top 10% are advantaged because of their automatic admission to any state university and their likelihood of obtaining scholarships because of their top-10% status; however, non-top-10% students “basically sometimes just have to pay their way through college or just go to like community college and not go where they really wanted.” While it is unclear whether the perceived privileges that students described are related to greater college opportunities, these perceived advantages still affect how non-top-10% students view their own opportunities to access college and, ultimately, how they limit their college choices.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS**

This study examined how school personnel and structures at three HMHP high schools in South and Central Texas shaped the college opportunities for 35 students of color by serving as “agents of social capital” and/or “agents of institutional abuse or neglect” (González et al., 2003). Of particular significance was the fact that our findings aligned with those of González et al. (2003), as they pertained to counselors, teachers, and school curriculum. While counselors and teachers both provided tangible college information and assistance with college applications, financial aid, and the college choice process, they experienced limitations in their ability to fully support students of color in their pathways to college. Counselors were less accessible for college information and individual assistance because of the large number of students whom they served and the multiple duties that they performed, such as managing student course schedules and responding to students’ immediate social and emotional needs. Teachers were confined to the scripted curriculum, leaving few opportunities to



promote going to college. Teachers who endorsed a college-going agenda in their classes were purposeful in doing so, often incorporating college essay writing or scholarship research activities into lessons. These types of teachers, however, were few in numbers. Therefore, college information was not systematically disseminated to all students in all three high schools in the study. Additionally, the increased focus on state-mandated accountability measures at GHS greatly shaped the focus and implementation of classroom curriculum that further delineated the differences in academic rigor between dual-enrollment and AP courses. Finally, Texas's Top Ten Percent Plan was designed to increase underrepresented students' access to 4-year public universities in the state; however, the intent of this policy did not match the reality of what students experienced in HMHP high schools in this study. Most students felt that teachers directed delivery of college information to only top-10% students. Also, because top-10% students were considered the focus of college-readiness efforts, non-top-10% students limited their own college choices and for the most part assumed that attending Texas's Tier 1 institutions was an unattainable aspiration.

Thus, these findings provide a unique opportunity for school leaders to directly hear from students of color regarding the manner in which college opportunities are both enhanced and inhibited for them within HMHP secondary school contexts. What follows is a list of needs and suggestions that can help guide school leaders and policymakers to improve the circumstances that students of color, perhaps all students, are facing in accessing college information, assistance, and preparatory courses in HMHP high schools. As findings from this study coincide with the work of González and colleagues (2003), some suggestions echo those made by previous researchers.

First, there is a continued need to prepare current and future educational leaders on how to diminish barriers to college opportunities for students of color within the school setting, particularly at HMHP schools. One such solution rests on the ability of high school administrators, teachers, counselors, and all other school personnel to commit to creating a college-going culture (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; McClafferty, McDonough, & Nunez, 2009). Research by McClafferty and colleagues (2009) can be utilized to help in this process. In their work with the Creating a College Culture project, McClafferty and colleagues identified nine principles that can be implemented: college talk, clear expectations, information and resources, a comprehensive counseling model, college-focused testing and curricula, faculty involvement, family involvement, college and university partnerships, and articulation between counselors and teachers at all

school levels. By creating a college-going culture on an entire campus, real and perceived inequities could be diminished in student expectations and academic rigor as it pertains to AP and dual-enrollment courses compared to regular courses. Professional development opportunities are also necessary for all school staff, including educational leaders who focus on the best practices and strategies to promote a college-going culture and the integration of college knowledge across the curriculum. Educational leaders can also include such practices into standards for effective teaching. This practice would be beneficial, as efforts to gauge college readiness are increasing nationwide (Conley, 2007, 2009).

Second, teachers, counselors, and administrators must be proactive in recognizing the larger institutional structures that can often limit their abilities to exert agency within their schools when it comes to issues of college preparation and access for students of color. Educational leaders can assist in this matter by utilizing systematic supports that ensure that time is allocated to the integration of college knowledge and support within the school day. All administrators in the HMHP schools in this study decentralized the responsibility of infusing college knowledge and supports to school personnel, specifically counselors and teachers. A hands-off approach to college readiness can produce detrimental outcomes for students in HMHP schools, especially when considering that most students in our study would be the first to attend college, many would be the first in their families to graduate from high school, and several were first-generation immigrants (see appendix). Therefore, as this study suggests, targeted systematic supports for college readiness are necessary in HMHP schools.

One approach would be for high school leaders to implement targeted college readiness supports into the campus improvement plan. High schools can embed college readiness into their school improvement plans in a number of ways including: creating small learning communities (Oxley, 2007) within a school, incorporating a study hall or homeroom period within the school day, or adopting a program such as AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination; Santiago & Brown, 2004), where, through an elective course, students are afforded the opportunity to discuss postsecondary aspirations and plans. Other options include adopting an early college high school model (Vargas, 2006) or offering multiple college and career pathways in a school, as is done in states such as California (Richmond, 2009) and Illinois—for the latter, the recent Race to the Top-funded Illinois Pathways STEM education initiative (Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, 2012). Illinois Pathways refers to a statewide “comprehensive high school reform strategy . . . that is characterized by college-prep curriculum, a technical core organized around an

industry theme, additional support for students, and workplace opportunities" (Richmond, 2009, p. 1). One example of this multiple-pathways approach was at the Central Texas high school where students had multiple options, or a three-pronged approach, to pursue their postsecondary aspirations. Students could solicit postsecondary application support at the Go Center (THECB, 2012), a state-funded college and career center; enroll in an elective AVID class; or receive real-world/hands-on training in an automotive repair class housed in the career technical program. However, as this study indicates, utilizing a multiple-pathways approach is not enough, as college readiness efforts must be multilayered and multifaceted.

Third, our findings are in alignment with existing research demonstrating how HMHP schools are underresourced to meet the needs of their student population—a population that is still underrepresented in postsecondary education. However, we must recognize the inventive strategies that school personnel in this study implemented to build capacity and meet the college resource needs of a HMHP high school student population. The HMHP high schools in this study strategically formed partnerships with local colleges and organizations to build capacity and provide additional college resources. Even though high school counselors were decoyed by other non-college-related responsibilities, the Central Texas high school, for example, had regularly scheduled volunteers to provide college application support that other school personnel did not have the time or funding to provide. Partners from the local community college scheduled sessions with parents at GHS several times a week to help complete the FAFSA, and AmeriCorp volunteers met with students in the college and career center everyday to help students complete college and scholarship applications and sign up to take the SAT. Similarly, the state of Texas developed a program called G-Force, where college students work part-time at college and career centers in local high schools as part of their work-study job responsibilities (THECB, 2009). At the time of the study, the two South Texas high schools had just begun working with G-Force mentors on their campus through a collaborative grant obtained by the local regional university.

Other notable supports highly utilized by students at the HMHP high schools in this study were TRIO-supported programs, such as Educational Talent Search and Upward Bound. At most high schools in this study, a TRIO program representative became a regular fixture in the college and career center and was considered a member of the school staff. Regrettably, these aforementioned programs in which HMHP high schools heavily rely remain funded by the federal government, and increased funding to support these programs remains precarious (Abdul-Alim, 2012).

Finally, one significant lesson learned from this study relates to the unintended consequences of state-level policies on college readiness in states similar to Texas, with majority “minority” student populations and a significant number of HMHP secondary schools. Students in this study described how the intense focus on high-stakes testing restricted the level in which school personnel emphasized college-going behaviors (see Perna & Thomas, 2009) and generally limited opportunities to learn (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009). Although aggressive testing policies were used to address statewide achievement gaps, students revealed that these policies negatively affected their college preparation. As such, Texas and states alike should reconsider policies that may unintentionally jeopardize the placement of its future workforce, which is predominately of color, into the college pipeline.

## APPENDIX: STUDENT PARTICIPANT PROFILES

	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Demographic Indicators<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Academic Indicators<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Family Education</i>	<i>College Resources</i>	<i>Postsecondary Aspirations</i>
Alejandra	Senior, MHS	Hispanic, first-generation immigrant	3.64. Not top 10%	Mother and father, college graduates and doctors. Sister attends Baylor University.	College fair, Internet, parents, peers, sister, university reps.	Apply to University of Texas—Austin, Baylor, and Southern Methodist University and study marketing.
Alicia	Junior, GHS	Dominican, Black, Cuban, and White; adopted by a White family	80s and 90s. Took AP in Maine and when first came to Green but was not made aware of options at Green	Mom is registered nurse; dad has associate degree.	English teacher has students search for colleges 20 minutes every Friday.	Become a teacher, go to a teacher college, or attend a state university.
Angela	Senior, GHS	Black, African American	3.5. Just enrolled in AP statistics	Foster parents have some college; biological family has no college education.	College and career center; will get free tuition because she is in foster care.	Attend state university to study nursing.
April	Senior, GHS	Black	3.0. Took pre-AP in middle school, did not take AP in high school	Mom went to a couple of years of college.	The college and career center.	Get accepted to state university, study criminal justice, be a social worker.

Beto	Senior, PHS	Hispanic, first-generation immigrant/college student	3.5. Top 10%	Mother and father, high school graduates. Three siblings attending college.	Church members, coaches, college fair, college mail, Internet, parent night, teachers	Apply to University of Texas-Austin, Texas A&M, maybe University of Oregon and Baylor.
Charlie	Senior, MHS	Mexican American, first-generation immigrant	Not top 10%	Mother, father, and brother, college graduates.	Brother, counselor, Internet, teachers, university reps	Attend local regional university or University of Texas-Austin. Interested in film school.
Cristian	Senior, MHS	Hispanic, first-generation immigrant/college student	A's-C's. Not top 10%	Mother, high school graduate.	Assistant principal, brother, counselor, Internet, teachers, peers	Attend local regional university for basics, transfer to a university in San Antonio or Austin. Interested in medical field.
Cristina	Senior, PHS	Hispanic, first-generation college student	A's/B's. Not top 10%	Mother and father, high school graduates.	Church members, college, mail, family, Internet, peers, teachers	Attend local regional university for basics, transfer to a 4-year university in state outside South Texas.

	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Demographic Indicators<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Academic Indicators<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Family Education</i>	<i>College Resources</i>	<i>Postsecondary Aspirations</i>
Eddie	Senior, MHS	Hispanic, first-generation immigrant/college student	3.4. Not top 10%	Mother completed elementary school.	Band teacher, counselor's office, Internet, neighbor, peers, university reps	Interested in Texas State University—San Marcos but likely will begin at local regional university.
Elisa	Senior, GHS	Mexican, parents came to the U.S. when they were very young	2.6. Did not take AP, because he did not want to do summer reading for English	Mom dropped out of middle school to help family; dad dropped out in elementary school to work.	Government teacher Coach Ivy invites colleges to speak, especially career tech colleges	Accepted to technical school to become a medical assistant.
Fernando	Senior, PHS	Hispanic, first-generation college student	4.2. Top 10%	Mother and father, high school graduates.	College fair, college field trip, counselors, Internet	Apply to University of Texas—Austin and study engineering.
Geneva	Senior, MHS	Hispanic	A's-C's. Not top 10%	Mother, high school graduate; stepfather, college graduate.	Counselor, Internet, university rep	Attend local regional university.
Henry	Senior, MHS	Mexican American	3.6. Not top 10%	Mother college graduate; father, high school graduate.	College fair, college mail, counselor, Internet, mother	Apply to University of Texas—Austin and local regional university. Wants to go to medical school to be an anesthesiologist.

Jasmin	Senior, MHS	Hispanic, first-generation immigrant/college student	3.7. Not top 10%	Mother, high school graduate. Older sister attends vocational school.	Counselors, college fair, Internet	Attend local regional university for basics, then attend a university in Texas or Boston with a veterinary program.
Julio	Senior, GHS	Mexican American	About 3.9 grade point average. First in class. Always taken AP and dual credit; has 18 college credits from dual-credit courses	Dad dropped out of elementary school, but his dad is doing well considering his education level.	College and career center	Already accepted to state flagship, will study veterinarian medicine.
Karina	Senior, PHS	Hispanic, first-generation college student	C's. Not top 10%	Father and brother, high school graduates. Mother completed middle school. Dad has a bachelor's in business.	Counselor, Internet, peers, teachers	Interested in going to college to start own day care. Not sure what college.
Kendra	Freshman, GHS	African American	3.9. All pre-AP classes	Dad graduated from high school, mom went to junior college, his mother is in beauty school.	AVID, university-sponsored outreach program	Ivy League, Dartmouth is her fallback plan.
Kevin	Freshman, GHS	African American	3.2. All pre-AP class	Dad graduated from high school, mom went to junior college, his mother is in beauty school.	AVID, African American parent organization raises scholarship money	Enroll in a state university.



	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Demographic Indicators<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Academic Indicators<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Family Education</i>	<i>College Resources</i>	<i>Postsecondary Aspirations</i>
Layla	Freshman, GHS	African American, father is a minister	Mostly B's. Not enrolled in pre-AP or AP, heard from friends its hard	Most of her family went to college.		Plans on going to college on an athletic scholarship.
Lisa	Senior, GHS	Hispanic	A/B student. Always taken AP in high school, also took AP in middle school	Neither of her parents went to college.	Coaches pushed her, "you have to pass to play sports"	Community college first 2 years, then transfer to state university.
Manny	Senior, GHS	Mom born in Mexico, he is born in US, raised mostly in Mexico	2.0. Decided to take an AP class senior year to have more of a challenge	Mother fought for him to be born in U.S. Family does not have much of an education.	After Devry came to the high school, went to college and career center to complete financial aid	Going to Devry to study video gaming, has already started taking some free classes.
Maritza	Senior, MHS	Hispanic, first-generation immigrant	3.2. Not top 10%	Mother and father, college graduates.	College fair, counselor office, Internet, peers, sister, teachers	Attend local regional university for basics, transfer to another university outside South Texas. Interested in optometry.

Melissa	Senior, GHS	African American	3.5. Top 10% of class. AP statistics, pre-AP physics, AP English, AP government, took pre-AP in MS	Mom went back to school but did not go to college straight out of high school. Mom is working on her master's.	College and career center	Attending state university to study nursing.
Nicole	Junior/senior, GHS	British American, Black, White, Mexican, and Indian	3.8. Was in AP 9th and 10th grade but not this year, did not want as much pressure	Will be first in family to go to college.	Gets connected to college volleyball recruiters	Private in-state 4-year college or state university.
Paulo	Senior, PHS	Hispanic, first-generation immigrant	4.06. Top 10%	Mother and three sisters, college graduates. Father completed middle school.	Counselor, college fair, family, Internet, Skills USA, teachers	Apply to University of Texas-Austin to study psychology, prelaw. Attend law school.
Rocio	Senior, PHS	Hispanic, first-generation college student	Not top 10%	Mother high school graduate.	College fair, counselor, teachers	Attend local regional university for basics, then transfer, possibly to Texas A&M University. Attend local regional university for basics and then transfer to another university. Wants to be an RN.
Selena	Senior, MHS	Mexican, American, first-generation immigrant/college student	B's/C's. Not top 10%	Mother, father, brother, high school graduates.	Brother, counselor, Internet, her physician, teachers	Attend local regional university for basics and then transfer to another university. Wants to be an RN.

	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Demographic Indicators<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Academic Indicators<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Family Education</i>	<i>College Resources</i>	<i>Postsecondary Aspirations</i>
Sergio	Senior, PHS	Hispanic, first-generation immigrant	A's. Top 10%	Mother, college graduate.	College fair, counselor, Internet, teachers	Attend local regional university.
Steven	Senior, MHS	Hispanic, first-generation college student	A's. Top 10%	Mother and father, high school graduates.	Brother, choir teacher, college fair, counselor, Internet, Parents Night, peers	Attend local regional university and pursue a career in science.
Tatiana	Senior, PHS	Hispanic first-generation immigrant/college student	3.88. Top 10%	Mother completed elementary, father middle school.	College mail, college fair, counselor's office, Internet, peers, teachers, university reps	Apply to several colleges in Texas, as well as Princeton and Macalester College.
Terrence	Freshman, GHS	African American	Mostly B's. Not enrolled in any AP courses	Will be the first in family to go to college.	AVID, young men leadership program	His brother is going to college, so he plans to do the same.
Tony	Senior, PHS	Hispanic, first-generation immigrant	B's-C's. Not top 10%	Mother and father, college graduates. Sister attends local regional university.	Coaches, college mail, counselor, Internet, sister	Attend a 4-year state university. Offered football scholarships at several state schools.
Vanessa	Senior, GHS	Mexican	Top 5% of class. In all AP courses	Father was licensed machinist, mom plans to return to school.	College and career center	State university, study architecture.

Xavier	Senior, GHS	Black	Never enrolled in AP; taking state exit exam interventions	Mother has high school diploma.	Met college basketball coach through teacher	Wants to apply to local historically Black college or community college.
Zulema	Senior, PHS	Hispanic, first-generation immigrant	3.71. Top 10%	Mother obtained associate's degree; father some college credit.	Aunt, college fair, counselor, Internet, peers, teachers	Apply to Sam Houston State University, Baylor University. Wants to be probation officer.

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Note. AP = advanced placement; AVID = Advancement via Individual Determination; GHS = Green High School; MHS = Madera High School; PHS = Palacios High School.

<sup>a</sup>Demographic indicators: Students verbally self-identified race/ethnicity and indicated immigrant and college generational status.

<sup>b</sup>Academic indicators: Students self-reported grade point average, class rank (top 10%), and course levels (AP and non-AP).

## NOTES

1. The terms *Latina/o* and *Hispanic* are used interchangeably in accordance with the literature cited.
2. Students of color in Texas now represent the majority, not the minority, of the school population. Therefore, we recognize that the term *high minority* should be problematized and reconsidered in the research literature. For this reason, we place the word *minority* in quotations.
3. According to a recent report by the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) entitled *Most Children Younger Than Age 1 Are Minorities*, Texas, California, New Mexico, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia are majority “minority” states.
4. Texas Senate Bill 1023 changed TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) to STARR (State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness). From spring 2012 onward, students in Grades 9–12 must take the STARR as an end-of-course assessment instead of a general core subject test.
5. The state defines a student “at risk of dropping out” if he or she did not advance from one grade level to the next for one or more school years, if he or she did not maintain a grade average of 70 in two or more subjects, if he or she did not perform satisfactorily on a state assessment, if he or she did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness assessment in prekindergarten through third grade, if student is pregnant or is a parent, or if student has been placed in an alternative school.

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