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The Soul of A School: An Ethnographic Study of College-Going Culture at an Urban High School

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The Soul of A School: An Ethnographic Study of College-Going Culture at an Urban High School

A Dissertation

Submitted to Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Educational Administration

by

Rashida Hiba Govan

B.S. Morgan State University, 1997
M.Ed. University of Maryland, 2003

May, 2011

Dedication

To my mother, Sandra D. Harrison, who inspires me to be a great educator and to be an exceptional woman. Thank you for carrying me through this process on your wings of prayer. To my father, Gerald “The Legend” Govan, for always offering words of support and encouragement. To my twin sister, Dara Aquila Govan, for helping me stay focused, in prayer, and on track. Finally, to Lawntai, for reminding me of why this work is important.

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Abstract

The role of school culture in facilitating underrepresented students' access to and success in college is examined in this ethnographic study. The purpose of this study is to examine an urban, public high school's culture in the southeast region of the United States with a high population of African Americans and students living in poverty. The college-going culture theory proposed by McClafferty, McDonough and Nunez (2002) and later refined by McDonough (2006) is used as a framework for this study and an ethnographic research design is employed using interviews, observations, open-ended surveys, and document review as data collection methods. The objective of the study is to describe the culture of an urban high school by examining its artifacts, values and beliefs and underlying assumptions, specifically as it relates to preparation of students for postsecondary education. Findings from this study will help inform strategies on reforming school culture to support college access and success for urban high school students, and will support the use of the college-going culture theory as a useful lens through which to understand college access issues. Additionally, this study helps to describe some of the common characteristics of urban education in the heart of education reform and describes the core challenges associated with developing college-going culture in urban communities with high poverty and low college attendance rates.

College-Going Culture, School Culture, College Readiness, College Access, Urban Schools, African American Students, School Reform

Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of Problem

It is imperative that people of color, the fastest growing populations in the country, gain access to higher education, since 60% of all new jobs in the global economy require at least some college education (Perry, 2008). By 2018- 2019, people of color will constitute more than 50% of the United States population (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008). Yet 30 years of evidence suggests that these populations have consistently struggled to gain access to postsecondary education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). From 1974 to 2003 the gap between Hispanics and Whites participating in higher education grew from 16 percentage points to 26 percentage points (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). During that same period, the Black- White participation gap in higher education grew from 12 percentage points to 15 percentage points. This gap in participation in higher education coincides with the increase of African Americans (19.3% to 24.3%) and Hispanics (19.2% to 20.6%) living in poverty between 2000 and 2006(Logan & Westrich, 2008).

Underrepresented populations must gain greater access to postsecondary education if the United States is to maintain its global prominence. However, should lagging participation rates for the fastest growing populations persist, poverty rates will continue to increase for larger proportions of Americans, and the United States will struggle to compete in this knowledge-based global economy. It is critical that educators reconceptualize the problem of college access in order to develop innovative and effective policies and strategies that help underrepresented students increase their access to and success in college.

Background

Lack of college readiness is a significant factor impacting underrepresented students' access to and success in college (Greene & Forster, 2003; Kirst & Bracco, 2004; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). In fact, some scholars submit that lack of college readiness is the primary cause of underrepresented student's low participation rates in higher education (Greene & Forster, 2003). Several issues related to college readiness emerge in the literature, including elementary/secondary and postsecondary (i.e., P-20) curricular misalignment; confusing array of tests; course-taking patterns; and lack of college knowledge (ACT, 2010; College Board, 2010; Conley, 2003; Kobrin et al., 2007; Noeth & Wimberly, 2003; Venezia et al., 2003). Specifically, underrepresented students typically take lower level curriculum in high school, consequently score lower on high stakes tests, and are enrolled in schools where counselor-to-student ratios are high (ACT, 2010; Cooper & Liou, 2007; Kobrin et al., 2002; Venezia et al., 2003).

Since, underrepresented students often lack college knowledge (i.e., awareness of the requirements and expectations for college success) they require support from counselors, teachers and parents to navigate the college preparation and planning process (Conley, 2008; Venezia, et al., 2003). Unfortunately, teachers and parents of underrepresented students also lack adequate knowledge of college requirements (Venezia et al., 2003). It is apparent from the literature on college readiness that reform is needed in schools and universities to ensure that underrepresented students have the knowledge, opportunities, and preparation necessary to successfully transition into college (Kirst & Bracco, 2004; Roderick et al., 2009). Examination of school contexts helps to unveil the ways in which schools are facilitating or hindering students' access to and success in college.

Literature on school effects indicates that schools influence students' college choice (Alexander & Eckland, 1977; Alexson & Kemnitz, 2004; McDonough, 1997). In some cases, the social status

composition of high schools is a good predictor of the selectivity of the colleges its students will attend (Alexander & Eckland, 1977; Alexson & Kemnitz, 2004; McDonough, 1997). School effects literature also indicates that the types of schools students' attend also are a good predictor of college attendance (Falsey & Heyns, 1984). While this literature shows a connection between school context and college choice and attendance, more insight into the role of school context in facilitating college access is needed (Alexson & Kemnitz, 2004; Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Scholars recommend that additional research be conducted on school culture and the ways in which culture can be shaped to facilitate college access and success (Falsey & Heyns, 1984; Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997).

Organizational culture literature, the bedrock of much of the literature on school culture, posits that culture influences the behavior, values, and beliefs of culture-sharing groups (Schein, 2004; Deal & Peterson, 2009). Within schools, various manifestations of culture such as myths, stories, mission statements, and mascots represent the underlying assumptions of a culture (Stolp & Smith, 1995; Deal & Peterson, 2009). In order to fully understand the roles of schools in meeting desired outcomes, one must examine its culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Findings from studies on school culture expose a link between school culture and student achievement (Gruenert, 2005; MacNeil, Prater & Busch, 2009; McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010; Pritchard, Morrow, & Marshall, 2005). Given what is known about the influence of school culture on behavior and organizational outcomes, it is sensible to consider its role in promoting college access (Deal & Peterson, 2009; McClafferty, McDonough, & Nunez, 2002; Schein, 2004).

McClafferty et al.'s (2002) work postulates that school cultures can be designed to support students' access to and success in college. The authors' college-going culture theory, which serves as the conceptual framework for this ethnographic study, is a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of school culture in supporting students' preparation for a wide array of postsecondary options

(McClafferty et al., 2002). This framework offers a set of nine principles that outline aspects of school culture that have a direct influence on college preparation including family involvement, comprehensive counseling model, and clear expectations. Components of the college-going culture theory are designed to combat many of the barriers to college readiness outlined in the literature (McClafferty et al., 2002; Kirst & Bracco, 2004). However, this theory is relatively new in the literature on college access. Thus, it seems prudent to propose a study applying this framework to improve understanding of how such cultures are shaped, how they appear in practice, and the barriers that exist in trying to reform or create such cultures in urban settings.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, I am examining college access issues for underrepresented populations by investigating urban high school culture and its role in facilitating their access to and success in postsecondary education. Such an examination helps to identify the ways in which these schools' structure, environment, curricula, programs and other aspects of school culture are shaped to promote college access and success. The use of the college-going culture theory in this investigation further substantiates it as an important addition to the literature (McClafferty et al., 2002; McDonough, 2006). Findings from this study also provide an in depth view of school culture and college access through the use of an ethnographic research design. In sum, the purpose of this ethnographic study is to examine college-going culture in an urban high school community in the southeast region of the United States, using observations, interviews, open- ended surveys, and document review to gain insight on the role of teachers, administrators, families, counselors, students and administrators in both shaping and maintaining this culture.

Research Questions

Through this study I offer a description of college-going culture at an urban high school in an effort to identify strategies to enhance school culture so that it encourages college access and success, especially for underrepresented students. The following research questions are posed:

- How is college-going culture expressed in an urban high school with a college preparatory mission?
 - How is college-going culture represented in the artifacts, values and beliefs, and underlying assumptions of the culture-sharing group under investigation; and
 - What roles do teachers; administrators; community members; families and peers play in college-going culture in an urban high school?

Significance of Study

Currently, the literature on barriers to postsecondary education lacks an emphasis on the role of school culture in supporting reform efforts (Deal & Peterson, 2009). My study fills this void by applying the college-going culture theory as a lens to investigate the role of school culture in facilitating college access and success of underserved students (McDonough, 2006). This comprehensive theory provides a lens through which to understand how these barriers emerge within urban contexts and the ways in which school cultures can be designed to address barriers to college access.

Additionally, examinations of college-going culture using the college-going culture theory have taken place on the west coast and in southwest regions of the United States (Harris, Tucker, Willis, 2008; McClafferty et al., 2002; McDonough, 2006). This ethnography took place in the southeast region of the United States. Where other studies fall short by using poorly defined constructs or examine the issue of college access too broadly, I addressed these gaps in this study by focusing on a set of well-defined components of college-going culture such as comprehensive counseling model, college partnerships,

faculty involvement, and clear expectations (McClafferty et al., 2002). Thus, this study on college-going culture in an urban high school adds significantly to the literature on college access issues for underserved populations.

Summary of Methods

An ethnographic research design is applied in this study since this qualitative method is best suited for investigations of culture (Creswell, 2007). As such, I used data collection methods associated with this research approach such as participant observation; structured observations (e.g., observations of subgroups within the school community); document analysis (e.g., school mission statement, correspondences, flyers, meeting minutes, etc.), interviews with key informants (i.e., school administrators, teachers and parents and open-ended surveys as described by Creswell (2007). Each of these data collection methods helped to answer my research questions and triangulated the data, further strengthening my research design.

The research site in which I conducted my study serves underrepresented students such as African Americans, low-income and first generation students, making it a good fit for my larger research agenda (i.e., to identify strategies to support underrepresented students' college access and success). To gain entry into the research site, I leveraged a preexisting relationship with the school administrator, who assisted me in assuming a role within the school community and in identifying key informants. Key informants involved in interviews and who completed questionnaires were given informed consent forms and the entire school community was informed of my presence at the school, the focus of my study, and the role I would play as an intern during school meetings, events, and at several other formal school gatherings.

Several data analysis strategies were used to help organize the data collected and ensure credibility of my findings. Among these strategies were memoing, reviewing data, coding data, organizing

data into themes, and using data matrices to organize and present data (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, I engaged in a process of researcher reflexivity to help control my biases, and also incorporated the use of a priori research to support my findings (Creswell, 2007). Other strategies that I applied to verify my findings are member checking through on-going member checks throughout the research process, follow-up interviews and presentation of core findings in a concept map to key informants to get feedback on the accuracy of my findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process of verification is ongoing and may also include future follow-ups with at the research site with key informants to continue to verify the accuracy of the results (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process ensures that study participants and other members of the school community consider the research process mutually beneficial.

Finally, several ethical considerations have been identified in relation to my ethnographic study. First, findings from the study could create tension within the organization under investigation (Schein, 2004). As such, I have been judicious in how I presented the findings to the community, specifically by verifying the accuracy of my findings and through the format in which the findings were shared (i.e., concept maps, reflective review of findings by participants, and presentation of commendations and recommendations to key informants based on findings from the study). Another potential ethical dilemma is that the school community that my findings could cast a negative light on the school (Schein, 2004). I managed this dilemma by maintaining the anonymity of the school. Finally, key informants may experience some concern regarding findings if the findings reflect poorly on the school community. Schein (2004) recommends that the researchers examining culture make sure that their involvement with an organization be a benefit to the organization. As such, findings from this study have been used to make recommendations to the school to help enhance its culture and improve overall performance. This approach is not part of traditional ethnographic methodology, however is consistent with critical

ethnography (Comstock, 1982). A more detailed explanation of the research design for this study of college-going culture at an urban high school can be found in chapter three.

Conceptual Framework

College-going culture theory is a developing theory put forth by McClafferty, McDonough, and Nunez (2002). This theory emerged from the work of the UCLA Project, an initiative that involved partnerships between UCLA and a group of urban K-12 schools to help create college culture in these schools. Over the course of four years, the researchers conducted interviews, document analysis, and observations to identify what is now referred to as the nine principles of college going culture (McClafferty, et al., 2002). Since then, the principles and conditions of college-going culture have been used in an action research study and have been endorsed by the College Board giving the budding theory greater credibility in the field and helping to establish it as a viable theory in which to inform practice (College Board, 2006; Harris, Tucker, Willis, 2008).

McClafferty et al. (2002) address the college access and success dilemma by offering a comprehensive model of school culture that responds to the multiplicity of barriers to college access and success captured in the literature. They posit that the issue of college access has been studied extensively from a multitude of angles, yet no sustainable impact has been made on closing the participation gap in higher education. This lack of progress is evidenced by steady higher education participation gap between African American/Latinos and Whites (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). By focusing on school culture reform through the college-going culture theory, McClafferty et al. (2002) hope to bring about sustainable, positive change by closing the participation gap in higher education between majority students and underrepresented students. In placing school culture at the center of the discourse on college access, McClafferty et al. (2002) offer a multipronged, resource-heavy theory to respond to the complexities of college access issues.

The first supposition of this theory is that students who attend college are educated and raised in environments that promote and value college (McDonough, 2006). In other words, school communities with a college-going culture promote college education as an asset and treat postsecondary education (and preparation for postsecondary education) as a priority. Another of the suppositions of this theory is that college attendance is more likely for students who identify college as a goal early on. Furthermore, this theory posits that families who lack information and resources are less likely to send children to college. Finally, college attendance is more likely for students who attend schools where counselors collaborate with other staff members (McDonough, 2006). These suppositions help to clarify the basis of the conditions McClafferty et al. (2002) identify as necessary in preparing all children for college access and success. These conditions are discussed next.

Four key conditions must exist in order to create a college-going culture in urban high school according to McClafferty et al. (2002). One of the core commitments of school leaders must be to build a college-going culture. Also, messages supporting students' pursuit of college preparation are frequent in K-12 settings with college-going culture. Another of the key conditions is "all counselors are college counselors" in schools with college-going culture (McClafferty et al., 2002, p. 11). Finally, schools with college-going culture establish partnerships between families, counselors, and teachers to prepare students for college (McDonough, 2006; McClafferty et al., 2002). All of these conditions address components of school culture and its impact on the outcome of college access and success.

While these four conditions are necessary within a college-going culture, they do not provide a guide for how to create a college-going culture. Thus, the college-going culture theory proposes nine principles of college culture that help to guide the process of developing and/ or maintaining college-going culture in K-12 settings (McClafferty et al., 2002; McDonough, 2006). These principles will be discussed at length in chapter two.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Introduction

The benefits of examining college-going culture at an urban high school are best understood in context with the broader issues facing underrepresented students educated in these settings. Much of the extant literature on college access indicates that schools play a significant role in facilitating underserved students' access to college (Alexander & Eckland, 1977; Falsey & Heyns, 1984; McDonough, 1997; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Perna, 2000). The role schools play in facilitating students' college access and success can best be understood by examining school culture, since culture influences behaviors and beliefs (McClafferty et al, 2002; McDonough, 1997; Schein, 2004; Stolp & Smith, 1995). Thus, an investigation of urban high school culture is a suitable approach to understanding the failures and successes of these institutions in preparing underserved students for postsecondary education.

This review of literature provides an overview of the major strands of literature that support an examination of the role of school culture in facilitating underserved students college access and success. I begin with an overview of college readiness literature, with a special focus on the experiences of underrepresented students and their college preparation and high school to college transitions. Examination of this literature is useful in framing the current study on college-going culture because the college-going culture framework was designed to address many of the barriers to college access and success exposed in this literature (ACT, 2010; Conley, 2008; McClafferty et al., 2002; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003).

Literature on school effects on the college choice process is also reviewed in order to underscore the importance of the role of school context in the college readiness and college access landscape. Next, a review of the core theoretical concepts of culture and school culture are explored along with several studies on the influence of school culture on a number of factors related to college access and success (e.g., student achievement). The review of literature concludes with a presentation of the nine principles of college-going culture and empirical studies that support the content of this theory.

College Readiness

The concept of college readiness is a heavily examined topic in educational research (Achieve, 2010; ACT, 2010; Conley, 2007; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003). College readiness refers to the degree to which previous academic and personal experiences have prepared one to meet the demands and expectations of college (Conley, 2007; Conley, 2008). Conley (2007/2008) outlines four domains of college readiness, suggesting that awareness within each domain leads to college readiness. These domains are as follows:

- Cognitive strategies (i.e., skills in analysis, interpretation, precision and accuracy, problem solving and reasoning);
- Content knowledge (i.e., mastery of required content knowledge in math, science, English, social studies, world languages and the arts);
- Academic behaviors (i.e., self-management skills such as realistic self-appraisal, time management, strategic study skills, etc.); and
- Contextual knowledge (i.e., knowledge of the college admissions process and ability to adapt to and function in the collegiate setting).

Lack of college readiness, rather than financial issues or the elimination of affirmative action, is considered by some scholars to be the primary reason for the underrepresentation of some students of color in higher education (Greene & Forster, 2003). Thus, an examination of the literature on college readiness is critical in shaping one's understanding of major trends in underrepresented students' pursuit of higher education.

Greene and Forster's (2003) study on graduation rates and college readiness exposes alarming trends in college readiness for college-bound students. The author's analysis of data from the United States Department of Education suggests that only 32% of high school graduates are college ready (Greene & Forster, 2003). The criteria for college readiness applied in this study were graduation from high school, completion of core curriculum (i.e., courses required for admission to college), and basic literacy skills. Based on these standards, only 20% of African American and 26% of Hispanic high school graduates were college ready as compared to 37% of Whites. The authors posit that greater alignment of standards and assessments between elementary/secondary and higher education (i.e., P-20) is necessary to improve college readiness, a recommendation proposed in much of the extant literature on college access (Achieve, 2010; Kirst & Bracco, 2004; Greene & Forster, 2003; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009).

A closer look at underrepresented students' performance on college admissions tests helps to further elucidate the gravity of the college readiness dilemma. A study by Kobrin, Sathy and Shaw (2007) comparing subgroup (e.g., income, race/ethnicity) performance on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) over a twenty-year period (i.e., from 1987 to 2007), identifies a series of trends that are noteworthy. The authors compare

subgroup performance on the SAT to subgroup performance on similar academic measures such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Kobrin et al., 2007). Study findings show a consistent trend in African American, Hispanic and American Indian performance on these tests (Kobrin et al., 2007). These underrepresented populations consistently score significantly lower on the SAT, ACT and NAEP than their White and Asian counterparts. The authors also conclude that there is a positive relationship between income and test scores, showing up to a 100-point difference in mean math scores between the lowest and highest income group (Kobrin et al., 2007). These findings are important to note since the ACT and SAT represent industry standards of college readiness (Breland, Maxey, Gernard, et al., 2002).

Similar findings were presented in the College Board's (2010) profile of their test takers indicating that these trends in performance are consistent three years after the Kobrin et al. (2003) study was published. The College Board's (2010) findings also show a difference in mean composite scores between public school students and private/parochial students, with public school students scoring lower than their counterparts. This is an interesting finding that may be explained by the literature on school effects reviewed later in this chapter. For now, a discussion on misaligned testing and assessment is presented regarding its relationship to students' college readiness.

Assessments/tests & college readiness

Conley (2003) posits that high school state assessments send mixed messages to students about college readiness. Students often believe these tests are indicators of their academic preparedness for college. The Conley (2003) study sought to examine how well state assessments measure college readiness.

Conley (2003) assembled a team of postsecondary and secondary high school educators who served as content specialists trained to rate the extent to which state assessments measured students' college readiness. Assessments from 20 states from various regions of the United States were examined. State assessments were given a grade of "A" (i.e., well aligned with college readiness standards), "B" (i.e., some alignment with college readiness standards) or "C" (i.e., poor alignment with college readiness standards). The overwhelming majority of tests evaluated earned a "B" or "C" grade from raters indicating that state high school assessments are not very good indicators of college readiness. The greatest misalignment was in math (e.g., no states in the study earned an "A" in the algebra standard and 12 of 20 earned a "C"). Conley recommends that states modify their assessments so that they are better indicators of college readiness. He recommends greater alignment of state assessments and postsecondary exams in order to eliminate test confusion (Conley, 2003).

Venezia, Kirst and Antonio (2003) propose similar recommendations as Conley (2003). The authors report that students are often confused by the numerous tests they take between high school and college. Students transitioning from high school to college take state assessments, college admissions tests (e.g., ACT or SAT) and college placement tests. In one case, students in one of the states used in this multi-state case study took up to 20 high stakes tests between high school and the beginning of college (Venezia et al., 2003). Venezia et al. (2003) found that these tests vary significantly in content and format. Students in the Venezia et al. (2003) study expressed confusion about the role of these tests, and reported experiencing test burden (i.e., fatigue from taking so many tests), a finding also echoed in Knight's (2003) ethnographic study of Latino and African American

college-bound students. These students expressed confusion regarding the importance of these assessments and regarding test preparation (Knight, 2003).

Finally, a one-state case study conducted by the ACT (2005) examined the test confusion phenomenon by comparing the success measures for state assessments with college readiness benchmarks for several ACT tests (e.g., ACT EXPLORE). This study involved the analysis of state data on student test performance on state assessment tests and ACT's college readiness tests (ACT, 2005). The analysis of this data showed that many students who passed state assessments fell short of reaching college readiness scores on ACT tests (ACT, 2005). For instance, 56% of students who passed their eighth grade state assessments in math did not meet the ACT college readiness benchmark. These findings indicate that many students who pass their state's assessments are not actually college ready (ACT, 2005). Although this report is based on a one-state case study, the authors suggest that additional analysis of state standards in 36 other states indicate that this trend is consistent across the United States (ACT, 2005).

It is obvious based on the aforementioned studies that test confusion occurs because the academic standards of states are misaligned with those of colleges and universities (ACT, 2005; Conley, 2003; Knight, 2003; Venezia et al., 2003). Success on state assessments can cause misconceptions about students' level of college readiness (Conley, 2003; Venezia et al. 2003). While proper alignment of state assessments, college admissions tests and college entrance exams is necessary to alleviate test confusion, addressing this problem only scratches the surface of the college readiness dilemma (Conley, 2003; Kirst & Bracco, 2004; Venezia et al., 2003). The diverse test content in this array of state, admissions, and college placements tests are representative of a larger

problem with P-20 (i.e. elementary/secondary and postsecondary education systems) curricular misalignment (Venezia et al., 2003).

P-20 curricular misalignment

A number of studies indicate that the misalignment of secondary and postsecondary curricular standards and requirements are a significant threat to students' college readiness (such as Achieve, 2010; ACT, 2005; ACT, 2007). For instance, findings from the ACT's (2007) national curriculum study indicate that there is a significant difference in secondary and postsecondary educators' perceptions of the level of importance of certain content knowledge and skills for students to be successful in college.

Venezia et al.'s (2003) findings put this misalignment into perspective. According to their findings, secondary educators were unfamiliar with postsecondary admissions and placement standards (Venezia et al., 2003). Similarly, the authors found that postsecondary admissions and placement officers were also unaware of elementary/secondary assessment and standards. Apparently, students are aware of the impact of the disjointedness of the P-20 systems, as captured by their expression of concerns that their high school courses had not adequately prepared them for college (Venezia et al., 2003). An examination of students' course-taking patterns helps to further illuminate the impact of P-20 curricular disjointedness on college readiness.

Students' high school course-taking pattern is another of the high school experiences that impacts college readiness (Kirst & Bracco, 2004). The rigor of high school curriculum, especially math curriculum, is a strong predictor of student success in college (ACT, 2010; Astin, 1993; College Board, 2008). Kirst and Bracco (2004) further posit that course-taking patterns are not consistent with the aspirations of high school students since

90% of high school students aspire to earn a bachelor's degree. Unfortunately, many students' course-taking patterns do not match their college aspirations (ACT, 2007; College Board, 2010; Kirst & Bracco, 2004; Venezia et al., 2003). Kirst & Bracco (2004) report that 90% of high school students aspire to attend college, however their enrollment in courses that are considered necessary for college readiness is relatively low in comparison (see ACT, 2010 review for additional statistics).

The course-taking patterns of underrepresented students are especially problematic (Kirst & Bracco, 2004). For instance, Kirst and Bracco (2004) reported that African American and Latino students were less likely than their White and Asian counterparts to enroll in college preparatory classes. The same is true for low-income students who are also less likely than their mid to high-income counterparts to enroll in college preparatory courses. Shettle et al. (2007) found the same trend in their study for the United States Department of Education. According to their findings African Americans and Hispanics were less likely to take a rigorous curriculum than White students (Asian students take the most rigorous math and science courses). They also noted the student achievement gap between Blacks/Hispanic and Whites noting up to a 0.36 grade point average gap (Shettle et al., 2007).

Also noteworthy is Noeth and Wimberly's (2002) finding that high school coursework influences the postsecondary planning process for students. Unfortunately, Noeth and Wimberly's (2002) instrument (i.e., the *College Planning Survey*) merely asked how helpful coursework, grades and other variables were in the postsecondary planning process. Thus, one is left to assume how these courses influence this postsecondary planning and decision-making process. The authors posit that students gain information on

college in college preparatory class and thus taking such courses influences their decisions to attend college (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Regardless of the limitations of this study, the authors' findings beg to question the role of course-taking patterns on students' decisions about their postsecondary plans.

Other findings from studies examining course-taking patterns indicate that all courses aren't created equal (Venezia et al., 2003). One informant in the Venezia et al. (2003) study indicated that some schools labeled courses "honors" once admissions offices began weighting grade point averages (i.e., assignment additional points to these averages when making admissions decisions). Thus, it is no surprise that educators in the study reported frequent encounters with shocked students who have taken high-level math courses (e.g., Calculus) in high school but still test into remedial math in college (Venezia et al., 2003).

To further amplify the importance of course-taking patterns in the college preparation process, the ACT (2010) found that taking a core curriculum is a significant predictor of college success. Their findings indicate that students taking a core curriculum were more likely to transition into college directly after high school graduation than other graduates, and were also more likely to persist to their second year in college (ACT, 2010). Students taking a core curriculum were more likely to earn a "B" average (i.e., 3.0+ GPA) in their first year courses and were less likely to take remedial courses. This course-taking pattern is positively related to family income, with 62% of ACT takers at the lowest income quartile taking a core curriculum while 82% of ACT takers at the highest income quartile take a core curriculum (ACT, 2010).

Additionally, the ACT (2010) study reported that only 64% of African Americans, 59% of Native Americans and 67% of Hispanics took a core curriculum. These course-taking patterns are markedly different than those of Asian and White ACT takers with 80% and 73% respectively enrolling in a core curriculum. Subsequently, underrepresented minorities and low-income students are less likely than their counterparts to earn a 3.0/B in their first year college courses and are more likely to take remedial courses in college.

High-level mathematics courses are also linked to higher levels of college readiness and success in college (ACT, 2010). Findings in the “Mind the Gaps” study show that the higher the high school math course taken, the higher the likelihood of college enrollment and persistence (ACT, 2010). This course-taking pattern also had a similar relationship to college performance with students taking the highest-level math courses in high school most likely to earn a 3.0 grade point average in their first year of college (ACT, 2010). The impact of remediation on students’ college success is lower grades, lower graduation rates, lower first-to-second year persistence rates, increased costs for enrollment (because remedial courses are non-credit) and extended time to complete degrees (ACT, 2010). In sum, course-taking patterns impact students’ college readiness and ultimately their college success (ACT, 2010).

Lack of college knowledge

Several studies on college readiness identify lack of college knowledge as another issue facing students, especially underrepresented students, seeking postsecondary education (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Knight, 2003; Venezia et al., 2003). For instance, Venezia et al. (2003) found that no more than 30% of students in their study, regardless of their characteristics (e.g., high income, honors students), were familiar with state-level college

access program guidelines (e.g., HOPE scholarship requirements). As previously stated, students in the Venezia et al. (2003) also reported minimal awareness of the admission requirements at selective institutions, were unfamiliar with course requirements at colleges and universities, consistently overestimated the cost of tuition and were unfamiliar with the content of college placement examinations. Interview and focus group data from the Venezia et al. (2003) study also highlight a plethora of students' misconceptions about college that illustrate their lack of college knowledge (e.g., senior classes don't count and community colleges don't have academic standards). Kuh (2007) suggests that underserved students clear understanding about the expectations for academic success and college readiness leaving them more vulnerable than other populations.

Historically, underrepresented students such as first generation students and underrepresented students have relied heavily on schools (i.e., teachers and counselors) to facilitate their career and education decisions (Coleman et al., 1966). This dependence on teachers and counselors still holds true, as several studies stress the importance of the role of teachers and counselors in informing students about college (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Knight, 2003; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Venezia et al., 2003).

Results from the Venezia et al. (2003) study indicate that students primarily sought information on college from parents, teachers and counselors. These findings mirror those of Knight (2003) and Noeth and Wimberly (2002), both of whose studies highlight parents and teachers as major influences in students' postsecondary education planning process. Counselors are also considered gatekeepers to college, as they are often the primary source of high stakes and functional information that help students' access college preparatory

classes, college admissions information and other important resources (Cooper & Liou, 2003). Unfortunately, students in urban school districts often have low contact with counselors due to high counselor-to-student ratios and a broad range of counseling priorities (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Venezia et al., 2003). Perhaps the most important issue to note in this discussion on college knowledge is that teachers are often ill-informed about college admissions requirements, but find themselves serving as college counselors in lieu of school counselors' limited availability to perform this responsibility (Knight, 2003; Venezia et al., 2003).

Finally, parents continue to be a consistent source of support and information for students pursuing postsecondary education (Chen, 2005; Knight, 2003; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Venezia et al., 2003). However, parents, especially those who did not attend college, lack adequate access to resources and information on college (Chen, 2005; Venezia et al., 2003). Thus, increasing access to resources and information is necessary for parents, teachers and students in order to improve underrepresented students access to and success in higher education (Kuh, 2007; Roderick et al., 2009; Venezia et al., 2003). Additional discussion on issues related to counseling, faculty involvement and parental involvement are covered later in the chapter in the discussion on the college-going culture theory (McClafferty et al., 2003).

In sum, findings from a number of studies reviewed here suggest that underrepresented students experience similar barriers to college readiness (ACT, 2010; College Board, 2008; Knight, 2003; Venezia et al., 2003). Underrepresented students consistently take lower level curriculum in high school and are less likely to take college preparatory courses (ACT, 2010; College Board, 2008; Venezia et al., 2003). Consequently,

underrepresented students score lower on high stakes tests and are often confused by the various tests required during the high school to college transition (College Board, 2010; Conley, 2003; Kobrin et al., 2007; Venezia et al., 2003). This population is also more likely to be enrolled in high schools where the counselor-student ratios are too high for meaningful college counseling (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Knight, 2003; Noeth & Wimberly, 2003; Venezia et al., 2003). Finally, these students and their parents and teachers (individuals who influence the college choice process the most), lack college knowledge especially regarding college requirements, admission standards, and the cost of tuition, which heavily influences students' decision-making in the postsecondary planning process (Knight, 2003; Venezia, et al., 2003).

This overview of the major college readiness issues facing underrepresented students begs to question, "Does the culture of urban high schools in which many underrepresented students are educated promote underachievement and low expectations? The next body of literature examined will consider the role of school context in the college choice process (i.e., postsecondary planning process).

School Effects

School effects literature specifically exams relationships between the type of schools students attend and its relationship to students' college-going decisions (Alexander & Eckland, 1977; McDonough, 1997; Alexson & Kemnitz, 2004). Much of the research already discussed in this review of literature addresses the influence of high school experiences on college readiness for students, especially those underrepresented in higher education (Knight, 2003; College Board, 2008). While the literature previously reviewed addressed the broader experiences of high school students in their transition to college, the next set of

literature looks specifically at the types of schools students attend and the influence these schools have on students' college choices. School effects literature makes the case for further consideration of the role of school culture in the college access dialogue.

The "Coleman Study" (Coleman et al., 1966), the pivotal work on the equality of educational opportunity in the United States of America, provides a foundation for one's understanding of present-day college access issues. This study (Coleman et al., 1966), explores in part the relationship between schools and student achievement. This national study examined the opportunity structure within the United States elementary/secondary education system by examining student characteristics and school characteristics to determine if educational opportunity is equally accessible to all students within this system.

Findings from the Coleman study indicate that schools educating the poor and people of color, especially African Americans, had the lowest quality teachers and the least number of academic-related activities and fewest resources (Coleman et al., 1966). The study also found that minority students' achievement positively correlated with school quality, more so than White students. Another finding of the Coleman study (1966) relevant to this examination of college-going culture in urban high schools is that student background has a more profound impact on students than schools. These findings unveil the role of school context in student achievement and also identify the role of external environmental factors in creating or sustaining barriers to postsecondary education for underrepresented populations. Coleman et al. (1966) presented a view of the United States schools as institutions that reproduce social inequities.

Alexander and Eckland (1977) are among the earlier scholars to examine the influence of schools on the college choice process of students. Their study examined the influence of school type on the selectivity of the college attended by students in their sample. The significance of this examination is its potential implications for equity in college access (Alexander & Eckland, 1977). In other words, does the social status composition of one's school afford them advantages or disadvantages in accessing selective universities? The authors found status composition of high schools had a modest (yet significant) relationship with the selectivity of colleges attended by males in the sample after controlling for academic ability, parental income and other extraneous variables (Alexander & Eckland, 1977). The social status of high school composition accounted for 25.2% of the variance in college selectivity and 7.5% of educational attainment. Based on the modest influence of high school status composition in their findings, the authors argued the schools as institutions do not reproduce educational inequities, a direct contradiction of Coleman et al.'s (1966) conclusion.

Several limitations must be noted regarding the Alexander and Eckland (1977) study. First, racial composition of the students in the sample was not included, although the authors indicate that their sample was nationally representative. Second, data used in this study was from a 1955 survey, which may mean that the number of minorities in the sample was relatively low, further limiting the usefulness of this study to the current examination on college-going culture at an urban high school. Finally, school curriculum, which has some relationship to status composition of a school (as noted in studies such as ACT, 2010, College Board, 2008, Venezia et al., 2003 where high income students are more likely than low income students to take college preparatory courses or a core curriculum),

was controlled as a variable in the study. As such, the study does little to illuminate the academic privileges associated with attending a high status secondary school. Furthermore, Alexander and Eckland's analysis does little to elucidate components of school context (i.e., school culture) outside of status composition that may facilitate students access to selective institutions. Regardless of these limitations, the Alexander and Eckland (1977) study supports further examination of the role of school context in the educational opportunity structure.

Falsey and Heyns (1984) investigate the role of school contexts in promoting college attendance rates by comparing private schools to public schools. Their findings indicate that the major differences in school context that account for higher college attendance rates for private school students are school culture, organizational policies, staff orientations and college counseling and resources (Falsey & Heyns, 1984). These findings are important to note for the current investigation on college-going culture in urban high schools because this perspective is represented in several of the principles of the college-going culture theory (Falsey & Heyns, 1984; McDonough, 2006).

McDonough's work (1997) on college choice expands the work of Falsey and Heyns (1984) by examining the role of educational institutions in promoting social inequalities through its culture (i.e., promotion and value of certain forms of cultural capital). Further, this study discusses the role of school communities in supporting and encouraging students' college aspirations and underscores the importance of organizational culture in promoting college access (McDonough, 1997). McDonough's findings suggest that cultural capital as well as organizational habitus, in this instance the school environment, influence students' college choice process. Both the Falsey and Heyns (1984) and McDonough (1997)

studies are critical to the current study on college-going culture because they support the notion that school culture is an important consideration in the literature on college access. McDonough's study (1997) is revisited later in this review of literature in discussions on its relationship to several principles of the college-going culture theory.

The Alexson and Kemnitz study (2004) examined the social class of high school composition, school structure and culture associated with the social status of the high school and the ways in which they prepare students for college differently. An underlying assumption of the study is that the higher the social class of high school students, the higher the values and standards of the school (Alexson & Kemnitz, 2004). This study's findings confirm a link between social status of school and college selectivity, although these findings were not conclusive for women in the study. Overall, grade point average, class rank and academic ability had the highest impact on college selectivity in the Alexson and Kemnitz study. They suggested future research be conducted on organizational and cultural structure of high schools and how they promote attendance at highly selective institutions. Their recommendations and findings support the current study because their study emphasized the importance of investigating school context and school culture.

Finally, Hill (2008) examined school effects on college enrollment, focusing specifically on strategies implemented by schools to connect students to college information and resources as the primary variable for school context. College-linking strategies examined in this study were encouraging college visits, assisting with the college and financial aid applications, and contacting college representatives on behalf of students (Hill, 2008). The extent to which schools report these activities and to whom these

activities and opportunities are available were the basis for categorization into the three school types (Hill, 2008).

Schools in the study were sorted into three categories describing the type of college-linking strategies used (Hill, 2008). The first was traditional schools in which limited information and resources were available to students and parents about college and where schools made minimal effort to distribute this information and resources. The second category of schools was clearinghouse schools in which resources and information were available, but were distributed inequitably amongst students and parents. The third and final school type was brokering schools where resources and information were plentiful and where schools were highly committed to linking students and parents to this information. Within the study, nine percent of schools were traditional, 25% were clearinghouse and 66% were brokering (Hill, 2008).

Traditional schools in the Hill (2008) study had the highest share of minority students. Clearinghouse schools were primarily public schools, and were socioeconomically low with higher proportion of low achieving students. Brokering schools served higher income students with higher parental educational attainment than the other two school types. Hill (2008) also found that college-linking strategies had a relationship with other variables such as student/teacher ratio.

The results of the Hill (2008) study show that students at brokering schools were 49% more likely to enroll at four-year colleges regardless of income or race/ethnicity. Hill (2008) also investigated the effect of school context on subgroup college enrollment. School effects (i.e. college-linking strategies) were not found to effect college enrollment differently across socioeconomic subgroups. For African Americans and Latinos, school

effects produced significant differences in college enrollment (Hill, 2008). African Americans in the Hill study (2008) were more likely to attend four-year colleges overall. Latinos attending clearinghouse schools in the Hill (2008) study also had a lower probability of attending a two-year college, but were also more likely to forgo college than attend a two-year college, an implication worth further exploration (Hill, 2008). This may mean that Latino students at clearinghouse schools who may be among the group of students who do not receive information and resources are falling through the cracks (Hill, 2008).

In sum, the literature on school effects gives credence to the notion that schools affect students' college choices (Alexander & Eckland, 1977; Alexson & Kemnitz, 2004; Falsey & Heyns, 1984; Hill, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Further examination of school culture and its role in facilitating students' college access and success is necessary to better understand the specific aspects of school context that give way to higher participation rates in college (Alexander & Kemnitz; McDonough, 1997). The next set of literature reviewed in this chapter examines the theoretical and empirical literature on school culture.

School Culture

Culture is an abstract concept in which there is no consensus on how it is defined (Deal & Peterson, 2009). However, there is general agreement that culture is a powerful construct that influences group values and beliefs and ultimately behavior (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Schein, 2004; Stolp & Smith, 1995). As such, examinations of culture help one to better understand the role of culture in facilitating certain group outcomes (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Schein, 2004). This ethnography seeks to concretize the abstraction of culture by describing in great detail the manifestations of college-going culture and the

ways in which the culture of the school being examined influences students' college access and success. This section of the review of literature presents an overview of the pivotal work on organizational culture, especially school culture, focusing on theoretical explanations of culture as well as empirical studies investigating the relationship between school culture and student achievement.

Schein's (2004) classic work on organizational culture provides a framework for understanding the abstract concept of culture. The author provides a formal definition of culture describing it as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 2004, p. 17). External adaptation deals with how a group defines who they are and why they exist in relationship to the external world (Schein, 2004). Internal integration refers to the agreed upon approach on how to exist as manifested in group behavior, thinking, language, sanctions, and other cultural expressions (Schein, 2004). The core concepts of external adaptation and internal integration as drivers of culture are important in contextualizing the foundations of the development of culture.

Schein's (2004) work also describes in great detail how culture evolves and particularly how it is institutionalized through rituals, traditions, language and other expressions. The author also categorizes the core manifestations of culture into three levels called artifacts, values and beliefs, and underlying assumptions. Artifacts refer to surface representations of a culture such as schedules, rituals, daily routines, and other tangible representations; values and beliefs, refer to the shared values and beliefs that inform

culture- sharing group behavior; and underlying assumptions, the most abstract and implicit of the levels, refers to the hidden messages and ideology that are beneath the surface and taken for granted. This contribution offers valuable guidance in the execution of this ethnography because it helped me to organize observed cultural phenomena into concrete categories of analysis.

Finally, Schein's (2004) discussion on the most effective approach to examining culture is particularly significant to the current study of college-going culture because it explicates the role of the researcher, criteria for validity of such an examinations, and the core ethnical dilemmas in conducting such research. Schein (2004) recommends a clinical research model in which the research model is cooperative, the researcher is both a researcher and a consultant, and the objective of research is improvement of the organization. Schein (2004) submits that this assumption of clinical research (i.e., purpose to change organizations) is counterintuitive to the purposes of ethnography, which seek to understand and describe. However, the clinical research approach is somewhat consistent with the objectives of critical ethnography, in that critical research is action-oriented with a focus on social justice (Comstock, 1982; Schein, 2004).

Schein (2004) also posits that studies of culture by outsiders are not valid unless the research process benefits those within the culture under study. Validity within this context is measured by its factual and interpretive accuracy, which can be achieved through triangulation and in the findings' use in predicting organizational behavior (Schein, 2004). Prediction is not an aim of qualitative research and better reflects the functionalist objectives of research that are not in line with those of qualitative research or the critical paradigm that informed my approach to this study (Kezar, Carducci & Contreras- McGavin,

2006). Finally, the author highlights some of the unique risks to participants involved in studies of culture (Schein, 2004). Among these potential risks are the potential that results cause inner turmoil within an organization. In sum, Schein's (2004) work on organizational culture illuminates the major forces from which culture emerges, the core manifestations of culture and the key strategies and considerations associated with researching culture.

Although Schein's (2004) piece on organizational culture is useful in framing one's understanding of culture, its focus is primarily on corporate culture. Stolp & Smith's contribution builds on the work of Schein, yet with a focus on organizational culture in schools. Deal and Peterson's (2009) contribution on school culture is also extremely useful in outlining the practical application of theories of culture within school settings. A brief discussion on Stolp & Smith's (1995) is next followed by an overview of Deal and Peterson's (2009) work on school culture.

Stolp and Smith (1995) provide a thorough analysis of school culture and climate and its role in facilitating positive outcomes. In particular, Stolp and Smith (1995) elucidate the terms school culture and school climate, positioning climate within the larger cultural context of a school. Further, the text provides a review of relevant literature that highlights the role of school culture and climate on student achievement, teacher satisfaction and a number of other desired outcomes. The book also highlights a number of climate assessment tools heavily used in education as well as survey instruments with items that seek to capture aspects of school culture that may lend themselves to these desired outcomes.

Stolp and Smith (1995) apply Schein's (1984/2004) three levels of organizational culture as the framework for examining school culture and use it continuously throughout

the text as a basis through which to identify and measure school culture. Finally, the authors offer three approaches to transforming school culture with a final analysis of the role of school leaders involved in the shaping and transformation of a school's culture.

Stolp and Smith (1995) make the case for school culture in the discourse on school reform, suggesting a school's culture, beyond its structure, informs the behavior of those within it. In other words, the implicit and explicit dimensions of a school's culture as expressed in its norms, values, beliefs, language, symbols, and rituals, and more, have a significant impact on how people behave within the school context. By focusing on school culture, school leaders are able to shape the behaviors of students and generate certain desired outcomes, in this case college access and success, by shaping a culture that supports this aim.

Stolp & Smith's (1995) *Transforming School Culture* is very useful in this ethnographic study of college-going culture in an urban high school because it clarifies the concept of school culture and presents concrete constructs that help one identify a school's culture, a task that escapes many because of its abstract nature. Stolp and Smith (1995) define school culture as "...historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and myths understood, maybe in varying degrees, by members of the school community" (p. 13). This contrasts with school climate in that school climate refers to the perceptions of a school culture by members of the culture-sharing group. Stolp and Smith (1995) explain that these terms are used interchangeably in the literature. For the sake of this ethnography on college-going culture, I have adopted the Stolp and Smith definition of school culture and school climate for the remainder of this study.

Deal and Peterson's (2009) contribution to the discussion on school culture is significant. The authors posit that the focus on policy and mandates in the school reform debate will not bring about sustainable changes to schools that promote better quality and accountability. Instead, the authors suggest that school culture become more central in this debate, and further posit that no sustainable change can be achieved without the support of school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009). The authors' assertion supports this examination of college-going culture since its overarching premise is that the presence of a college-going school culture has the potential to bring about sustainable, positive changes to the college access landscape for underrepresented students.

The importance of culture is explicated well in Deal and Peterson's (2004) work on shaping school culture. According to the authors, everything in a school is influenced by its culture. As such, it is important to understand the role of various manifestations of culture in promoting the values and beliefs of a school community. Deal and Peterson's (2004) use of case studies in illustrating the various manifestations of culture and their role in influencing behavior and perceptions is particularly useful. Their work extends that of Schein's (2004) by contextualizing the elements of organizational culture within educational organizations.

The authors specifically discuss various representations of culture within the levels outlined by Schein (2004) but as they are experienced in schools (Deal & Peterson, 2009). Among these representations of culture are stories, myths, missions, vision and values. The case studies described in the Deal and Peterson (2009) book provide examples of how one can interpret and manage the symbols of culture to bring about desired outcomes (e.g., college access) that are aligned with the purposes of schools (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Deal and Peterson's (2009) work is very useful in supporting my examination of school culture and its role in promoting college access and success. Next, several studies highlighting the relationship between school culture and student outcomes such as student achievement are discussed.

Several studies have examined the relationship between school culture and student achievement (Gruenert, 2005; MacNeil, Prater & Bush, 2009; McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2001; Pritchard, Morrow & Marshall, 2005). Several aspects of school culture that are strongly related to student achievement are identified in the findings. Positive perception of education and curriculum, extracurricular activities and social ratings (i.e., friendliness and belonging) had the strongest, positive relationship with student satisfaction and student achievement (Pritchard et al., 2005). School districts in the Pritchard et al. (2005) study with high culture ratings (i.e., participants' sense of belongingness to the organization; perception of respect and trust in teachers and students; support for adults and student learning and collaborative learning and work environment) had a strong positive relationship to student achievement in 8th and 11th grade writing.

Similarly, MacNeil et al. (2009) found that schools with healthier climate had higher student achievement. Two variables of healthy climate that had a significant impact on student achievement were goal focus (i.e. focus and agreement on and support of school's objectives) and adaptation (i.e., strong ability to tolerate stress while maintaining stability in response to external pressures) were strong predictors of student achievement. The schools categorized as exemplary (i.e., schools with the highest student achievement) had healthy climate ratings across all ten categories measured in the study (e.g., communication, morale, innovation, etc.). Personalization, or trusting relationships

between teachers and students, was a significant predictor of student achievement in the McClure et al. (2010) study, while collaborative school cultures were strong predictors of student achievement in the Gruenert study (2005). Thus, relationships, goal orientation, stability and morale and other factors characterizing health school culture have a significant influence on student achievement. These findings are important since the presentation of broad conceptualizations of healthy school culture that influence student achievement informed my analysis of the college-going culture at my research site (Gruenert, 2005; MacNeil et al., 2009; McClure et al., 2010; Pritchard et al., 2005).

Although student achievement is critical in facilitating students' college access and success, a need for a more specific explanation on the role of school culture in generating the outcome of college access and success is needed. College-going culture theory presented by McClafferty et al. (2003) helps to elucidate the ways in which such a culture supports schools' efforts to prepare students for college success. College-going culture is discussed in greater detail next, along with the empirical studies that support this framework (McClafferty et al., 2002).

College-Going Culture Theory

The college- going culture theory serves as the conceptual framework for this ethnography (McClafferty et al., 2002; McDonough, 2006). Its purpose is to provide a set of standards and guidelines to shape school culture that supports college access and success for all students. As part of the college-going culture theory, nine principles of college culture are proposed that help to guide the process of developing and/ or maintaining college- going culture in K-12 settings (McClafferty et al, 2002; McDonough, 2006).

College talk

The first principle of the college-going culture theory (McDonough, 2006; McClafferty et al, 2002) is *college talk*, which refers to clear and consistent communication between faculty, administrators, families and students regarding college preparation in order to help students gain an understanding of what is required to achieve college access and success (McDonough, 2006; McClafferty, 2002). McClafferty et al (2002) posit that college talk impacts students' college aspirations, college preparation, and informs students of what is expected of them in college. This coincides with Conley's work (2008) on college readiness, particularly his discussion on students' contextual skills and knowledge.

Contextual skills and knowledge, the fourth domain of Conley's college readiness model, refers to students' awareness of the college admissions and financial aid processes as well as students' understanding of the college culture and system. Conley posits that contextual knowledge and skills help students' navigate the college admissions process and the college environment. However, Conley also indicates that while such knowledge is necessary to successfully navigate the college choice process and the college environment, this type of knowledge is not readily available to all students.

Coleman's work (1988) on social capital and the ways in which it is converted into human capital adds to one's understanding of the importance of contextual knowledge and skills (Conley, 2008). Coleman describes the ways in which social contexts and social organizations (e.g., schools) influence economic exchanges and systems. Social capital, in the form of relationships and networks, is especially helpful in arming children with the experiences and skills necessary to navigate educational systems and processes that will gain them both human (e.g., college degree) and economic capital. These networks and

information channels are two related forms of social capital important in the college access debate, since social capital influences people's behavior and helps them appropriate resources.

In the case of underserved populations such as African Americans, Latinos, low-income students, and first generation students, social networks and information channels to help them gain the contextual knowledge and skills (also a form of social capital) necessary to navigate the college choice and college preparation processes may be lacking. The college-going culture theory (McDonough, 2006; McClafferty et al., 2002) responds to this gap in social capital by shaping a school culture that serves as part of students' social network. One of the goals of this school-based social network is to facilitate students' acquisition of the contextual knowledge and skills Conley (2008) describes that help them gain access to postsecondary education. Thus, acquisition of contextual knowledge and skills is an aim of the college talk principle of the college-going culture theory (McDonough, 2006; McClafferty et al, 2002).

Clear expectations

Clear expectations, the second principle of McClafferty et al's (2002) college-going culture theory, expounds on the previous discussion on social capital and college readiness. Clear expectations suggests that schools with college-going culture must clearly communicate their expectations that all children are prepared for college and must incorporate these expectations into the culture of the school so that key stakeholders (i.e., families, teachers, administrators and students) know their role in facilitating students' access to college. McClafferty et al (2002) point to the relationship between the clear expectations principle and students' college aspirations. The authors suggest that students'

college aspirations must be supported by adults with whom they interact. This includes parents, teachers, counselors and other members of the school community. But without college aspirations, plans cannot be materialized to facilitate students' access to college. This leads to the question "what and whom influences students' college aspirations?" Literature on college aspirations is examined next to elucidate some factors influencing students' college aspirations.

Cofer, Somers and VanderPutten (2002) used the National Educational Longitudinal Study to examine the relationship between students' college aspirations and their relationship to a number of variables including parent's expectation that they attend college. The study's findings indicate that students who identify college as a goal by eighth grade were more likely to enroll in college than their peers who had not done so by grade eight. There was also a strong and positive relationship between parents' expectations that their child pursue postsecondary education and actual student enrollment in postsecondary education. Thus, parent expectations influences students' college aspirations. Similarly, this study supports the notion that early college aspirations are important in facilitating students' access to postsecondary education.

Hossler, Schmit and Vesper (1999) also investigate the influences of college aspirations in their study on factors influencing students' college choice process. Their findings indicate that parental support for college plans was the most significant predictor of students' college aspirations. Additionally, having siblings or family members who attend(ed) college was also found to influence students' college aspirations positively. Finally, one's peer groups also influences students' college aspirations, finding that students' whose peers have college aspirations are also more likely develop college

aspirations. Consequently, Hossler et al (1999) found that students' with college aspirations require information and resources to go along with those aspirations, making it necessary that these students receive such information to assist them in the college search process. Thus, peers, family and parents are all cited as major influences in students' college aspirations.

McDonough's (1997) work discusses the role of school communities in supporting and encouraging student's college aspirations. The findings of this study indicate that both families and schools influence students' college choice process and their college aspirations. Specifically schools with cultures that promote the expectation that students pursue postsecondary education positively influenced students' college aspirations. The reverse was true for schools' without such expectations. Similar to the previous discussion on social capital, students' social networks including those of their parents influence students' college choice process and college aspirations.

McDonough's study (1997) also indicates that students with high socioeconomic statuses had parents and families who had higher levels of educational attainment and thus, access to social (e.g., contextual skills and knowledge) and cultural capital (e.g., private schools, private college counselors) that influenced students' to attend college and choose selective institutions. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often had parents with lower educational attainment and who lacked the social networks, information and cultural capital necessary to help students pursue highly selective institutions. These students usually had lower college aspirations and pursued less selective postsecondary institutions. McDonough also found that the socioeconomic status of schools' student populations impacted the way schools present college choice options.

Schools whose students were from low socioeconomic backgrounds presented students with fewer options for postsecondary education and often less selective options.

College guidance counselors play a major role in the dissemination of college information and resources and in shaping students' college aspirations. This will be discussed in greater detail during the discussion on the *comprehensive counseling principle* of the college-going culture theory as well as in the following examination of the *information and resources* principle of the college-going culture theory (McDonough, 2006). In sum, parents, school culture, and school counselors heavily influence students' college aspirations and college choice process.

Pitre 's comparative study (2006) on African American and White students' college aspirations, perceptions of high school preparation, and their college attendance produce interesting findings on another influence on students' college aspirations. Pitre 's study indicates that African American students' who believed their high school did not prepare them well or did not know if their high school prepared them well for college, were likely not to enroll in postsecondary education. These findings suggest that the culture of a school also shapes students' college aspirations, be it negative or positive. Next, the *information and resources* principle of the college-going culture theory is presented to examine its role in facilitating students' access to college (McClafferty et al, 2002; McDonough, 2006).

Information and resources

The next principle of the college-going culture theory posits that *information and resources* related to college must be current, comprehensive, and easily accessible to families, students, teachers and students (McClafferty et al, 2002; McDonough, 2006).

According to McClafferty et al (2002), schools with college-going culture have a plethora of

college information and resources related to the college choice process. This information is made available and accessible to parents, students and faculty alike.

McClafferty et al's (2002) college-going culture principle *information and resources*' is meant to help students' navigate the three-step college choice process explicated by Hossler, Schmit and Vesper (1999). The first step, *predisposition*, refers to students' development of aspirations for postsecondary education. This process usually occurs between the eight and ninth grade and is typically followed by students' demand for information to aid in the second stage of the college choice process.

The *search stage* follows predisposition, and involves students' gathering of information and examination of postsecondary school options. In this stage, students experience varying degrees of uncertainty related to the examination and identification of higher education options best suited for them amongst the thousands of options available (Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999). Their findings also indicate that guidance counselors, teachers, parents and friends serve as valuable sources of information. However, students' indicate that college publications received from colleges and universities and private organizations were their most frequently accessed source of information. Finally, the *choice stage* describes the process through which students select narrow down options for postsecondary education. Teachers, counselors and peers become most frequently accessed sources of information in this stage of the college choice process. Hossler et al's (1999) student supports the importance of access to current college information and resources in navigating the college choice process.

In schools with college-going culture faculty are expected to be astute on current college information and resources, although counselors are primarily responsible for

disseminating this information (McClafferty et al, 2002). This expectation responds to findings of several studies that indicate that students receive much of their information on college from school faculty (Antonio, Kirst & Venezia, 2003; Hearn, Jones & Turner, 2004; Bueschel & Venezia, 2004; MacLellan, Milton, Mintrop & Schmidtlein, 2004). Unfortunately, some studies have also found that faculty are not current on college information and resources (MacLellan, Milton, Mintrop & Schmidtlein, 2004). The college-going culture theory's expectation that faculty are up to date on this information is responsive to these findings and reflects an understanding of the important role that faculty play in helping students acquire what Conley (2008) refers to as contextual skills and knowledge.

McDonough's study (1997) on college choice is revisited again to examine the role of information and resources in facilitating students' access to college. A key feature of this study was the role of information and resources in influencing students college aspirations and college choice process. Students whose schools were situated in poorer communities shared less information and fewer resources on the college choice process, which also influenced students' college aspirations. All of these studies support the importance of information and resources in students' quest for postsecondary access (McDonough, 1997; Hossler, Schmit and Vesper, 1999; MacLellan, Milton, Mintrop & Schmidtlein, 2004; Antonio, Kirst & Venezia, 2003; Hearn, Jones & Turner, 2004; Bueschel & Venezia, 2004).

The first three principles of the college-going culture theory address the ways in which college-going culture facilitates students' acquisition of contextual skills and knowledge, a form of capital that is important in navigating the college choice process (McClafferty et al, 2002; Conley, 2008). *College talk* and *clear expectations*, as forms of

social capital, influence students' college aspirations and are key in the process of gaining access to postsecondary education. The information and resources principle is directly related to students' college choice process. In sum, these principles highlight three key features of college-going culture that lend themselves to college readiness. The next three principles of college culture emphasize the contributions of faculty, staff and school structure in creating a college- going culture.

Comprehensive counseling model

The next principle of the college-going culture theory calls for the adoption of a *comprehensive counseling model* in which all counseling interactions are focused on college counseling (McDonough, 2006). This principle presents the view of counselors as key in shaping college-going cultural norms in schools because of their influence over students' college choice process. Counselors are viewed as influential in shaping students' perceptions and attitudes about college going, and as critical in supporting students through the stressful college choice process.

As an example, Avery 's (2009) findings from a pilot study on college counseling and high- achieving, low-income students' college choice, support the importance of college counselors in the college choice process for these populations. Students in this study received private, individual college counseling from knowledgeable and experienced counselors. As a result, these students were more likely than their peers to enroll in more competitive institutions. Avery suggests that the quality of counseling experiences as well as the attitudes of counselors shape students' college choice. This further supports the role of counselors in shaping students' college choice process, and in shaping students' perceptions of students' attitudes and perceptions about the college choice process.

However, the literature points to a litany of issues that impact counselors' contributions to the establishment of schools' college-going culture (McDonough, 2005).

Several studies point out various barriers facing counselors in supporting students' access to college. (Bueschel & Venezia, 2004; Venezia, 2004; Merchant, 2004; Hearn, Jones & Turner, 2004; MacLellan Milton, Mintrop, & Schmidtlein, 2004). These studies indicate that counselors are burdened with a wide array of responsibilities unrelated to college counseling (e.g., referrals and scheduling) that limit their interactions with students during the college choice process (Venezia, 2004; Merchant, 2004; Hearn, Jones & Turner, 2004; MacLellan Milton, Mintrop, & Schmidtlein, 2004). On top of these vast responsibilities, counselor caseloads also limited the extent of the student- counselor interactions related to college counseling.

Each of these studies indicate that student to counselor ratios were entirely too large to support adequate student-counselor interactions, with student to counselor ratios ranging from 300:1 to 500:1 (Bueschel & Venezia, 2004; Venezia, 2004; Merchant, 2004; Hearn, Jones & Turner, 2004; MacLellan Milton, Mintrop, & Schmidtlein, 2004). Yet the American School Counselors Association, recommends a student to counselor ratio of 250:1 (ASCA, Student to School Counselor Ratios Released, <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/>). So despite what the literature reveals about the influence of college counselors on students' college choice process, schools have not addressed the structural barriers that prevent counselors from adequately supporting students' access to college (Bueschel & Venezia, 2004; Cooper & Liou, 2007; Hearn, Jones & Turner, 2004; McDonough, 1997; MacLellan Milton, Mintrop, & Schmidtlein, 2004; Merchant, 2004; Venezia, 2004).

Other studies reveal similar trends in college counseling that are harmful to students who experience barriers to higher education. Deil-Amen and Tevis (2010) found that students in their study lack one-to-one counseling opportunities with counselors. This limited their awareness of college choice options. Additionally, teachers and counselors at high poverty schools in the study were found to limit the scope of students' perceptions of their college choice. These findings are similar to McDonough's findings (1997).

Cooper and Liou (2007) also found that students' interactions with college counseling were limited due to counselors' vast responsibilities. Additionally, counselors' low expectations for students' postsecondary access were reflected in their lack of commitment to disseminate important college information and resources. These studies all reveal a problematic trend of low expectations, minimal college counseling interactions, overburdened counselors and high student: counselor ratios, all which have negative impacts on students college choice process (Bueschel & Venezia, 2004; Cooper & Liou, 2007; Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010; Hearn, Jones & Turner, 2004; MacLellan Milton, Mintrop, & Schmidlein, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Merchant, 2004; Venezia, 2004).

The *comprehensive counseling model* principle addresses structural dilemmas in counseling by calling for a reform of the role of counselors in schools with college-going culture (McClafferty et al, 2002). McClafferty et al report that counselors spend only 20% of their time on college counseling. In schools with college-going culture, structural barriers to college counseling are removed and counselors are provided with the professional development necessary to effectively perform their roles as college counselors. The idea here is that counselors must have the knowledge, skills and structure to facilitate students' college admissions process. These reforms address the challenges to

college counseling identified in the literature and are exemplified in the Farmer-Hinton and McCullough study (2008).

Farmer-Hinton and McCullough's (2008) study on college counseling in charter schools presents promising findings regarding the condition of college counseling. Their findings indicate that the role of college counselors had experienced some of the reforms outlined in the college-going culture theory in the school under investigation (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; McClafferty et al, 2002). Counselors in the study exhibited the characteristics laid out in the college-going culture theory including treating all counseling interactions as college counseling. Additionally, counselors in the study were able to establish "school-based social capital" by providing students with the information channels, experiences and norms (i.e., all forms of social capital) to help students acquire college knowledge (Conley, 2005; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough 2008).

The structural barriers that existed in this case study were those associated with organizational stressors common in start-up organizations like charter schools (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008). For example, high staff turnover in the charter school's first year distracted counselors from their counseling duties. Beyond this, counselors were able to shape norms of the school culture that contributed positively to the college-going culture. Once structural barriers were removed, counselors reported that they were able to develop comprehensive college counseling program that included enrichment workshops, college tours, and a host of other activities related to students acquisition of college knowledge (Conley, 2005; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008). This study provides an example of the comprehensive counseling model in action (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; McClafferty et al., 2002). The promise of school counselor reforms proposed by

McClafferty et al. (2002) may serve to positively impact counselor support of students' college access goals.

Testing and curriculum

Testing and curriculum, the next principle of the college-going culture theory, addresses the role of the school in ensuring that all students are informed about and prepared for (i.e., through test preparation and appropriate curriculum) college admission tests and college entry requirements (McClafferty et al., 2002). This means that schools with college-going cultures educate students about the importance of college admissions tests and prepare them through curricular offerings to do well on these exams. Furthermore, schools with college-going culture must offer the courses that make students eligible for college admissions and must offer coursework that helps students develop the skills to prepare them to successfully complete college level work [i.e., Conley's (2008) content knowledge and cognitive strategies].

The current landscape of urban schools leaves much to be desired. Literature on college access shows that many underrepresented students are overrepresented in non-honors courses (Antonio, Kirst & Venezia, 2003). In many cases, the rigorous curriculum that is required to be college ready is not available such as AP courses. When they are available, African American and Latino students are enrolling at a lesser rate than their white counterparts and are subsequently less informed about the college admissions process (Antonio, Kirst & Venezia, 2003). If students are not enrolled in rigorous college preparatory courses, they will not develop the content knowledge and cognitive strategies necessary to graduate high school "college ready" (Conley, 2008). Low enrollment in these courses should be no surprise since less than 12% of students in the study reported knew

the curricular requirements for college admissions (Antonio, Kirst & Venezia, 2003). These findings point to a disturbing national trend that further exacerbates the college access dilemma.

Similarly, students in urban settings often are unfamiliar with the role of college admissions tests, as well as the strategies to help them prepare for the tests (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010; Walpole, McDonough, Bauer, Gibson, Kanyi, & Toliver, 2005). In fact, Walpole et al. found that first generation students lacked adequate information to prepare for admissions tests and lack the resources to afford test preparation. The preferred method of preparing for the test was repeating test taking, a strategy that yields minimal (if any results). They also found that students viewed college admissions tests as unfair, which impacted their appraisal of the tests' value and of their performance. These findings suggest that underserved populations often lack the information, preparation and understanding of college admissions tests. These findings as well as those reported by Antonio, Kirst and Venezia (2003) reveal a pattern of misinformation and under preparedness that prevents students from gaining the content knowledge and cognitive strategies that Conley (2008) leads to college readiness. As such, the testing and curriculum principle of the college-going culture theory is of extreme importance.

Faculty Involvement

The final college-going culture principle that focuses on school faculty and staff roles within the college-going culture is faculty involvement (McClafferty et al, 2002). *Faculty involvement* emphasizes the role of school faculty in shaping college culture. Faculty help shape college-going culture by sharing college knowledge with students and their families and by incorporating college preparatory activities in class (McClafferty et al, 2002). This

principle speaks directly to the role faculty play in preparing students' academically for college level work. It also calls for faculty to be available to work with parents on supporting students' college preparation. Finally, this principle calls for faculty to find ways to incorporate discussions and activities on college readiness into existing classroom activities.

The rationale behind the faculty involvement in the college counseling process is that teachers spend more time with students than counselors and thus should support student's acquisition of college knowledge through faculty-student interactions (McClafferty et al, 2002). In order for faculty to meet these objectives, schools must provide teachers with current information on college admissions policies and professional development experiences that prepare them to support students in the college admissions process.

Antonio, Kirst and Venezia's (2003) report on the multi-state study on the disconnection between K-12 and postsecondary systems of education speak directly to the importance of faculty involvement in the college readiness process. Their findings indicated that faculty spend more time with students than counselors, yet were uninformed about college policies and admissions standards. Yet, students still cite teachers as a major source of information on the college choice process. Likewise, the structural barriers that impede counselors from supporting students' college readiness require that teachers fill this gap. Thus, regardless of teachers' preparedness to advise students in the college choice process, they are serving in this capacity both formally and informally. It is critical that faculty receive the necessary training to perform this expanded role.

The testing and curriculum, and faculty involvement principles are the first three principles in the college-going culture theory that address students' acquisition of content knowledge and cognitive strategies directly. The importance of these principles must be underscored because academic underpreparedness is a major college readiness issue that is reflected in remediation rates of students entering postsecondary institutions (Conley, 2005; Kirst & Bracco; 2004; Antonio, Kirst & Venezia, 2003).

Family Involvement

The final three principles of college culture address the role of external partners such as families and colleges and universities. First, families must be fully engaged in the schools with successful college cultures (McDonough, 2006, McClafferty et al, 2002). Schools with college-going culture view *family involvement*, as a partnership that strengthens students' support network (McClafferty et al, 2002). This principle establishes the expectation that school faculty and staff serve as a resource to parents making themselves available to answer questions about student preparation for college. Another key objective of this principle is to close the information gap by educating parents about the college choice and college preparation gap.

Perna and Titus (2005) study on parental involvement as a form of social capital and its relationship to college enrollment illuminate the positive impact of parents on college enrollment. Their findings indicate that parental involvement is an important form of social capital that is a positively related students' college enrollment regardless of other levels of capital. They recommend that schools and college preparation programs identify strategies to involve parents as partners in the college preparation process. In this study, parental involvement included parent contact with the school on students' academic

performance, parent conversations with school on student behavior, and parent-student conversations on educational matters.

Similarly a study on variations in parental involvement as influenced by socioeconomic status revealed that parental involvement is heavily influenced by the context in which families are positioned (Bell, Perna & Rowan-Kenyon, 2008). Parents of students at low-resource schools were often less informed about college choice processes and thus, were less involved. Parents who were in states where schools merit-based state scholarships existed were more involved by leveraging knowledge of the state aid to encourage student performance.

Parental educational attainment impacted parental involvement as well, as higher parental attainment meant higher degree of involvement (Bell, Perna & Rowan-Kenyon, 2005). This is more attributed to knowledge of the college preparatory process. Parents with low educational attainment rely more heavily on schools to help children navigate the college choice process. Other findings indicate that school expectations for parent involvement did not mesh with parent expectations on involvement. These expectations must be reconciled in order to better support students. Issues of parental involvement in the Bell, Perna and Rowan-Kenyon study (2008) illuminate the role of parents' college knowledge in facilitating parental involvement. The family involvement principle of the college-going culture theory focuses on partnerships with families and with increasing families' college knowledge.

College partnerships

College partnerships is another of the principles of college-going culture theory (McClafferty et al, 2002). This principle suggests that partnerships be formed to expose

students to college life, provide academic enrichment and increase students' awareness and commitment to the goal of attending college are key components of college culture (McClafferty et al, 2002). College preparation programs such as Upward Bound are examples of these partnerships. These partnerships have the potential to inspire college aspirations, help students develop contextual knowledge and skills, and adopt the academic behaviors that lead to college readiness (Conley, 2008).

Radcliffe and Stephens (2010) studied a college-school partnership program in which middle school students attended college tours and participated in writing marathons. Student responses to open-ended questions about their college visit reflected students' positive feelings about college life. Their reflections also captured students' identification of college aspirations. The school-university partnership that sponsored this writing marathon/college visit experienced produced a positive result in that it influenced students' college aspirations. The timing of this visit (i.e., during the middle school years) is also considerate since prior research suggests that students enter the predisposition stage of the college choice process in middle school (Hossler et al, 1999). Cofer et al (2002) reminds one that early college aspirations are a strong predictor of college enrollment. This type of college partnership is meaningful in the context of the college-going culture theory (McClafferty et al, 2002).

Clayton, Frierson, and Zulli's (1998) conducted a study on parent perceptions of Upward Bound, a college preparatory program that involves school-university partnerships). This federally- sponsored program brings underrepresented students to college campuses to support their college preparation. Through tutoring, personal development programs and intensive Saturday and summer engagement, students' are

prepared to pursue postsecondary education. The program works on skill development and addresses all four of Conley's (2008) domains of college readiness.

Parents who participated in the Clayton et al study (1998) reported high levels of satisfaction with Upward Bound. Parents perceived Upward Bound as having impacted improvement in their children's grades. They also report increases in student motivation,, independence and maturity; improvement of students' communication skills; and increases in students' self- confidence. Finally, parents' reported benefits for themselves including increased support in parenting, increased knowledge of higher education, and increased opportunities to interact with other parents. Thus, the Clayton et al study (1998) and the Radcliffe and Stephens work (2010) highlight the role of school-college partnerships in influencing students' college aspiration and in acquiring the awareness across Conley's (2008) four domains of college readiness. Thus, the *college partnerships* principle is a very important feature of the college-going culture theory (McClafferty et al, 2002).

Articulation

Finally, the *articulation* principle refers to the to forward college culture, K-12 schools in feeder groups (e.g., networks of schools that students in a community customarily attend from K-12) must collaborate to create a consistent and seamless college culture that prepares students for college from kindergarten through grade twelve (McClafferty et al, 2002). This principle is meant to smooth the transition between middle school and high school and to promote a college readiness as early as possible in the pipeline. Few studies were found on articulation, however, the need for smoother transition between middle school and high school was a key challenge identified by faculty

in Farmer- Hinton's (2008) study on a college preparation model at a charter school in Chicago, Illinois.

Studies on articulation that were examined focused on articulation between secondary and postsecondary schools. Findings of one study unveiled some challenges to the articulation process stemming from distrust between the two systems (Alexander & Kemnitz, 2004). Another study on dual-enrollment programs in Georgia showed promising signs of the benefits of postsecondary-secondary articulation (Hill & Lynch, 2008). Of the students who participated in dual-enrollment program who transitioned into technical colleges in Georgia, 81% earned a C or better on all college-level coursework. Of the students who participated in dual-enrollment programs who transitioned into University System of Georgia schools, 77% earned a C or better on all college-level coursework. These outcomes demonstrate the role of articulation in preparing students to enter higher education college ready.

In sum, these nine principles provide a roadmap for schools to follow in shaping college culture in the elementary/secondary education arena. The accompanying literature also helps to support the importance of the type of reform proposed in the college-going culture theory (McClafferty et al., 2002). Information presented in this section of the literature review elucidates the role of college-going culture in arming students with college knowledge (Conley, 2005). It also informs one of the various roles of faculty, students, teachers, staff and schools in general in promoting college readiness.

The use of the college-going culture theory (McDonough, 2006) as a framework is relatively new. As a result, very few studies have been conducted using this framework. The only study on record using this theory is the Harris, Tucker, and Willis action research

study (2008) examining the college-going culture of urban high schools in the Dallas-Fort Worth area of Texas, using the college-going culture theory as a framework. This study offers direct suggestions to participating schools on strategies to improve their school culture. The College Board (2006) also published a resource guide for schools based on the college-going culture theory (McDonough, 1996) that includes an environmental assessment tool, a rubric and strategies to shape and sustain college-going culture in high schools. However, no extensive empirical studies have been conducted using this framework (McDonough, 2006). My study on college-going culture at an urban high school will fill a void in the literature by providing a detailed description of such a culture in a school serving students underrepresented in postsecondary education.

Summary

In closing, this review of literature presents broad strokes of the extant literature on college readiness, school effects, school culture and college-going culture, all of which serve as the basis for my ethnographic study. It is apparent that further examination of school culture may add significantly to educators' understanding of the core barriers to postsecondary education for underrepresented students. The use of college-going culture theory in my study helps to direct one's focus in examining the ways in which school culture facilitates students' access to and success in college (McClafferty et al., 2002).

Since very few studies have used McClafferty et al.'s (2002) college-going culture as a theoretical framework, my study fills in this gap by applying this framework in the examination of a school that serves the population this model was meant to support. By examining the culture of a school that identifies as college preparatory, I was able to focus my examination on those aspects of the culture that, based on the literature, facilitate

college access and success. Likewise, I also identified the aspects of the culture that may serve as barriers to college access and success. Ultimately, my examination of college-going culture at an urban high school provides educators and other stakeholders with a more concrete understanding of the intricacies of the culture and the ways in which school culture, namely college-going culture, can be shaped in order to bring about sustainable improvements to underserved students' access to and success in college.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The research design for this ethnographic study of college-going culture is presented in this chapter. Ethnographic research is a methodology born out of the field of cultural anthropology (Creswell, 2007). This research methodology is used to examine the shared patterns of behavior, language, and beliefs of the members of culture-sharing groups (Creswell, 2007). Ethnographies are especially useful at presenting cultural portraits of culture-sharing groups because groups under study are presented holistically and in context (Airasian, Gay & Mills, 2009).

Ethnographies are grounded in social constructivism, critical, and other related paradigms, and as such stray away from scientific and logic-driven investigations of phenomena (Comstock, 1982; Kezar, Carducci & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). Instead, ethnographies are grounded in an epistemology that posits that the social world is socially constructed and that individuals, as agents of this construction, have the power to change social conditions (Comstock, 2007). Within critical research, participants in studies are viewed as subjects rather than objects, and are placed at the center of discourse and examination on a given topic. The core objectives of critical research, and as such critical ethnography, are to engage subjects in active reflection on their social conditions in order to raise their consciousness about social inequities, and to actively encourage social change (Comstock, 1982; Kezar et al., 2006).

I adopted a critical ethnographic design, for this study, which calls for one to examine hidden meanings of everyday phenomena that lend itself to the creation of inequitable conditions (Creswell, 2007; Kezar et al., 2006). In this case, I examined college-

going culture at an urban high school in order to better understand issues contributing to the inequities in postsecondary education participation for underrepresented students and to highlight aspects of college-going culture that serve to eliminate these inequities. In sum, this critical ethnography is grounded in the critical paradigm, which emphasizes the experiences and perspectives of subjects in order to promote reflection on social justice issues (e.g., college access) so that social change can be enacted.

The purpose of my ethnographic study was to examine the college-going culture in an urban high school community in the southeastern region of the United States. The primary and secondary research questions for this ethnographic study are:

- How is college-going culture expressed in an urban high school with a college preparatory mission?
 - How is college-going culture represented in the artifacts, values and beliefs and underlying assumptions of the culture-sharing group under investigation; and
 - What roles do teachers, administrators, community members, families and peers play in college-going culture in an urban high school?

Method

The study was approached in ways characteristic of qualitative research traditions. In this case, I interacted with participants in their natural setting in order to gain their perspectives of the phenomena under study, a key characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). The research process in the study was emergent and involved the use of various data sources to help examine the phenomena (e.g., college-gong culture) holistically. Also, data collected were descriptive and the focus of the study was broad and

in depth (Airasian, Gay, & Mills, 2009; Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, the goals of the study involved activism and advocacy for marginalized groups, also consistent with the critical paradigm, a paradigm commonly associated with the qualitative research tradition (Creswell, 2007).

Site of Study

The site of my study was James Weldon Johnson Academy (pseudonym), an urban, public charter high school in the southeast region of the United States. James Weldon Johnson Academy is situated in a community with high poverty rates, low parental educational attainment, and a high concentration of populations (e.g., 98% African Americans) underrepresented in higher education. The high school has a college-preparatory mission and has a critical mass of underserved and first generation students. At the time of the investigation, the school served approximately 140 students, of which 82.4% were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Eighteen percent of the students at this high school have documented learning disabilities.

During the course of the ethnography, James Weldon Johnson Academy was in its first year of existence. A private, national charter management organization called ARISE (pseudonym) has oversight of the school. As such, the school received both public and private monies to support them fiscally. ARISE has a “central office” in Central City, the city in which the school is located, that manages many administrative tasks such as budgeting, development, and facilities issues. The school administration consisted of a school principal, a dean of students, an athletics director/community relations director, a special education coordinator, and a school counselor. Although the school had autonomy in how

daily rituals were carried out, many of the structures within the school were based on models adopted by the national organization that oversees the school.

One of the characteristics of James Weldon Johnson Academy that made it an attractive option to conduct an ethnography on college-going culture at an urban high school is its affiliation with their national charter organization. ARISE has an established set of values, beliefs and practices that support their mission of preparing students for success to and through college. These elements of culture are applied in all of their schools and as such, James Weldon Johnson Academy was no exception. The Academy was an especially good fit for this study since it's school culture is in development. As a result, my examination of the school's college-going culture allowed me to observe the process of culture development, a process that may be missed in a school with a longstanding school culture.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher in this ethnographic study of college going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy was that of observer-participant and later as a participant-observer. I began my time at James Weldon Johnson Academy serving as an observer, making observations of the daily routines and taking field notes. However, I also interacted with study participants during interviews and in the process of establishing rapport. As an observer-participant, I was able to record observations than one who is a more active participant (Creswell, 2001). As my duties as an intern at Johnson Academy intensified, I became more of a participant-observer, which allowed for greater embedding into the culture, but that made observations more difficult. I managed this process by keeping copious field notes, and by establishing boundaries for my participation at

different points in time at the school in order to make sure I was able to gain insight on aspects of the school's college-going culture. Also, I was able to manage data collection in such a way that when my internship responsibilities intensified I shifted my data collection efforts away from observations to other forms of data collection such as interviewing and document review.

It is important to disclose aspects of my professional and personal background that impact my perspective as a researcher on this topic. I have worked in higher education for more than a decade in the areas of student affairs and enrollment management. Much of that experience has been in college admissions, which has afforded me opportunities to work closely with school communities such as those involved in this study. I have also worked with college readiness and college preparatory initiatives and programs directly servicing, supporting, and engaging urban high school communities. Some of my other related work includes a position as a research intern for a college preparatory program for underrepresented students examining program effectiveness and partnerships between schools, universities, civic organizations and non-profit organizations. This experience helped me familiarize myself with the terrain of urban high schools, although the roles I've previously assumed have primarily been as an outsider or external stakeholder in the school community.

The benefit of having been an outsider was that I did not come to the school context with the same expectations or preconceived notions about school culture as perhaps one with more direct experience. This allowed me to investigate school culture with less bias and fresh eyes. My experience in higher education in admissions informed my perspective on college readiness and college access, which could potentially bias my perspective since

my professional and academic experiences give me perspective on the challenges underrepresented students encounter (related to college readiness) when they attend college. However, I chose to investigate this from the K-12 lens, which required me to remain open since I have less practical understanding of how school culture is developed and maintained. My experiences working with K-12 schools helped me identify strategies to gain entry into the urban high school communities under investigation.

One of my biases that was challenging to manage deals closely with my African-centered ideology and African American identity. As a critical educator and an African-centered educator, I constantly examine my experiences through a lens that places issues of race at the center of my analysis. Examining a school culture in which the majority of the students are African American and the majority of the staff are not, I had to manage any suspicions about intent that surfaced. I was fortunate enough to develop a very close relationship with the school leader and other teachers with whom I could have candid conversations about issues of race as they related to the school and my experiences in conducting this study.

Similarly, the close bond I created with the school leaders and other members of the staff made it all the more difficult to tell their story for fear that there may be repercussions for participants for their participation. The school community is very small since the school is in its first year. Thus, I had to work diligently to shield the identities of the participants, the school, the charter management organization and the city. Conducting regular member checks also helped to ensure that I could tell the participants' stories in their voice while also providing certain protections to ensure their anonymity in this document.

Finally, another bias that surfaced deals with my credentials as a traditionally trained educator. Many of the educators with whom I came in contact during this study entered the profession through alternative certification programs. At the same time, traditional education programs are under fire across the country (Banchero, 2010). Thus, I was probably more critical of teachers with such backgrounds. The member check process and the use of a critical friend helped to temper these biases. It should also be noted that by embedding myself in the culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy, I impacted the culture in which I was examining. Thus, I have included some of my personal interactions within the culture in this dissertation.

Participants

Although the entire school community was observed, a selection of the school community was interviewed and several teachers and staff were selected to participate in open-ended surveys. All interview and open-ended survey participants were selected using maximum variation sampling to get data from participants that represent a cross section of the population. The school principal assisted me in identifying some key informants such as parents and special student populations. I also was able to identify key informants through my rapport with members of the school community based on my work as an intern at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

My study on college-going culture involved the examination of an urban high school community. Observations of the population were conducted throughout the ten-month time frame of this study. However, maximum variation sampling, a purposeful sampling method in which data is collected from a cross-section of a population, was used to identify interview and survey participants. This sampling method ensured that data collected was

representative of the larger community. Specifically, the school principal, two parents, three teachers, and four groups of students served as key informants. These informants participated in special data collection activities including interviews, structured observations and surveys.

Key Informants

The school principal is an important informant in this study because he is primarily responsible for shaping the school's culture. This informant will help to guide my selection of observations, selection of other key informants, and selection of artifacts and documents for review. His perspectives should allow me to gain a greater understanding of the underlying beliefs that inform the social and structural components of the school's culture. Finally, establishing this relationship with the school principal should help to support the verification process in this study, since the principal will be involved in member checks throughout the duration of the study.

Parent informants included in this sample were a member of the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) and one parent less involved at the school. The PTSA parent was selected because of her unique position within the school as a full partner in the school community. Her perspectives shed light on parents' role in building and supporting the school culture under study. The PTSA is also a subgroup that was observed throughout the course of this study. The second parent was selected because of her peripheral role within the school community. Her participation in the study provided a different perspective on parental involvement at the urban college preparatory high school under study. The perspectives of the two parents involved in interviews These two perspectives as well as

perspectives gleaned from other data sources (e.g., document review, observations) should offer a broad view of parental involvement in the school culture.

The two teachers selected as key informants in this study offer unique perspectives on the college-going culture at the high school. The first informant teaches a course on college readiness, and can present key information on the role of teachers in shaping a college-going culture. Additionally, the college readiness course meets some of the responsibilities of a college counselor. This is important because the high school currently does not have a college counselor. The second instructor teaches a high stakes course and can offer useful perspectives on the experiences of teachers in preparing students for the rigor and requirements of college. Both teachers can also help to suggest observations that are useful for me to get a full understanding of the school's culture from the teachers' purview.

Another group of informants are students at the urban high school. This group of informants was the most important group examined in the study because they were the focus of college access efforts. Thus, it was important that a wide range of students within the study site were observed and engaged in this study. Students in the sample represent four core groups.

I examined closely the experiences of special needs students through observations of their experiences in class. This helped me to get a clear understanding of how special needs students were engaged in within the school community and helped to determine how they were supported in the college readiness efforts of the school. Similarly, honor students were also observed during class sessions. This gave an alternative viewpoint through which to understand the full scope of the student experience at James Weldon

Johnson Academy. Another group examined was student leaders. This group represents a subgroup of students that were highly involved in shaping the school culture and who represented, by position, the entire student body.

I worked closely with one advisory at the school. Advisories are small groups of a cross-section of students who meet regularly to discuss college readiness topics, community issues, and to strengthen students' support network within the school community. This group was led by a staff member and periodically facilitated by me. Observations of this group provided me with in depth student perspectives that were representative of the entire student population.

Initially I intended to get students to participate in an open-ended questionnaire. Instead I was able to use writing samples from an English class reflection on students' experiences at the school. These writing samples were reviewed to get a sense of students' perceptions of James Weldon Johnson Academy and eliminated the need for me to execute the student questionnaires. Students in the English class represented a cross section of students at the school and were very helpful in describing in their own voice, student experiences at James Weldon Johnson Academy. In sum, informants in the sample represented a cross-section of subpopulations within the school setting that helped shape my awareness of the urban high school's culture.

Data Collection

Data collection took place over a ten-month period between June and March. Observations, document review (e.g., school mission statement, marketing literature, meeting minutes and agendas, etc.- all are kept by school principal), artifact analysis, and

interviews were used to identify and examine cultural patterns and participant perspectives on school culture.

Observations were conducted of James Weldon Johnson Academy over a ten-month time span. These observations began with me serving as an observer-participant and evolved into participant-observer as my role in the school became more specific. All observations of the school context were conducted using a generic observation protocol outlined by Airasian, Gay and Mills (2009, p. 370) in order to help me answer the stated research questions and to gain a broader understanding of the school culture, especially aspects of the culture that may not be reflected in the college-going culture theory. In some cases, photographs were taken of the physical setting to support the accurate and thorough description of the physical environment.

Document review was another important method of data collection used in this study. Some of the documents that were reviewed include the school's mission statement, professional development documents and internal reports on school-community relations. In addition, I obtained meeting minutes, professional development handouts and faculty/staff work. Correspondences between parents/teachers and the school/community were also reviewed in addition to student work and data collected by the school. Key informants recommended other documents for review such as newsletters and internal communications. Document review added to the data I collected by painting a thorough cultural portrait of college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

After some initial observations of the school context, hour-long, structured interviews were held with the principal, two teachers, and two parents (i.e., total of five interviews) to gain their perspectives on college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson

Academy and to assist in interpreting the data collected. Interview protocols were developed for each of the groups interviewed and reviewed by a panel of experts to determine the validity of the questions. Among these expert panelists were a doctoral student, a retired school principal, a college admissions director, and an assistant principal at another school. Additionally, my dissertation committee reviewed many of my interview questions in the earlier phase of the dissertation process. These interviews occurred at a variety of locations selected by participants in neighborhoods either near the school or near their homes. All interviews were recorded for accuracy (see Appendix C for final interview questions). Pseudonyms were be used for all interviewees.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research can best be described as a spiral in which several aspects of data analysis occur in concert with one another, and organization of data is key (Creswell 2007). This circular process involves data collection, organization of the data, reading and reviewing the data and memoing (Creswell, 2007). The process also involves describing, categorizing and interpreting the data and finally representing the data through visual aids and narrative forms. As previously mentioned, this process is not linear and various aspects of the process such as reading, categorizing, and memoing are ongoing (Creswell, 2007). The overarching objective of the data analysis process is to reduce the data, highlight important details, and to create a narrative out of the core themes.

Data collection methods used in this ethnographic study of college-going culture at an urban high school brought forth rich data. Thus, several data management strategies were used to ensure accuracy, organization and security (e.g., confidentiality) of the data

collected. Audio recordings of interviews were reviewed immediately after interviews, followed by transcription of the interview data. Field notes were recorded of the observations capturing descriptive notes, reflective notes and photographs and/or diagrams of the setting as appropriate (Creswell, 2007). Notes from document reviews and data collected from open-ended surveys were handled similarly.

For all the data collected, I organized the text, audio, image and video files into computer a program called Journler. This program allowed me to enter any text, audio, image and video versions of data I collected as journal entries in the program. In Journler entries can be labeled with categories (e.g., interviews, memos) for easy organization of files. Additionally, the program uses tags, or keywords to help find connections between entries with similar topics. In this case, my tags were the codes that used in a particular entry. Journler allowed me to find connections between entries (e.g., transcriptions and document summaries) sharing the same tags (i.e., code). Finally, the program has a Lexicon feature that allowed me to search all my entries using keywords. This feature also allowed me to see the frequency with which particular words were used across all entries. These features proved very useful in the management of data collected in this study. Any hard copies of data that could not be stored in Journler were kept in a locked file cabinet when not in use to make certain that participant confidentiality was secured. The data analysis process for this study on college-going culture at an urban high school required that I write a thorough description of the school community and the participants involved in the study. Data collected was reviewed throughout the data collection process and for the purposes of informing the questions posed and information sought. All data was coded throughout the data collection process. Initially I generated a list of a priori codes such as

“academic behaviors” and “family involvement” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All other codes began as keywords, one or two word descriptors to assist with quick review of the data. As these keywords began to appear more frequently, they became established codes in my data. Eventually, codes were grouped into families of codes based on their relationship to each other (e.g., codes such as academic behaviors, cognitive strategies, contextual knowledge and content knowledge were grouped into a family of codes known as college readiness).

Also, memos were written throughout the data collection process as part of my preliminary data analysis process. Contact summary forms and document analysis forms were also used to manage the data analysis process in the earlier stages (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As data collection came to a close, the most thorough aspect of analysis of the data began. I reviewed the data collected (i.e., read) and wrote more thorough memos regarding my impressions of the data. I also drafted memos on the data associated with codes and families of codes that occurred frequently in the data. These memos served as the starting point for the identification of themes. These themes became the core drivers of the narrative (i.e., interpretation and discussion of findings). Where helpful core themes and concepts of the study were represented visually using tables and other visual aids (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interpretation of the themes and data collected were based on the theoretical framework selected for this study, the college-going culture theory (McDonough, 2006). Themes that emerged that were not consistent with the theoretical framework of this study were supported using related literature or highlighted with direct quotes and references to data.

A list of the most commonly used codes in the study are included in the appendix of this dissertation.

Verification

Several verification procedures were used to ensure credibility of this ethnographic study on college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Strategies such as member checks were used to verify my analyses of the data (Creswell, 2007; Daley, 2004). Visual displays were created to organize and reduce data in the study and to present themes and connections between themes that emerged in the study. These displays were shared with key informants to get their feedback on the accuracy of these concepts. The member checking process was an ongoing process conducted periodically throughout my data analysis process through follow-up conversations and participant reviews of the major themes and key findings.

Peer debriefing and researcher reflexivity were also strategies I employed to ensure validity. While conducting this research at James Weldon Johnson, another outsider was observing the school as well for a book she was writing on the education context in Central City. We met periodically to discuss our observations as well as the ethical dilemmas associated with our work and the challenges in presenting final. This observer helped to challenge my perspectives and findings and helped me consider alternative analyses of the data collected. Researcher reflexivity also helped me to identify and manage my biases by keeping a record of my reactions to my research experiences and by providing a space in which to document and reflect on biases that emerged during the research process.

Triangulation of data also helped ensure the credibility of the study, since this process required that data collected in the study come from a variety of sources. By

triangulating the data, I was able to better identify consistencies amongst community members' perceptions of the school culture and in turn reveal the shared perceptions and experiences of the school community. Finally, college-going culture theory (McDonough, 2006) and other related literature was used to interpret the data to for the purposes of theoretical validation.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations emerged in this study on college-going culture in an urban high school. Since adolescents were involved in the study it was important that the perceived power dynamics that emerged as a result of age differences between participants and me was considered and addressed as they may have hindered or impacted the responses or behaviors of participants. Establishing rapport with students helped to address this issue, as did clarifying my role at James Weldon Johnson. Regardless, the potential impact of such dynamics will be explicated in greater detail in Chapter 5. Likewise, participants in the study were assured that their responses remained anonymous to eliminate the threat of retaliation (i.e., in the event that their perspectives don't jibe with those of their superiors). Clarifying the researcher's role and reiterating the objectives of the study addressed this ethical dilemma. Also, allowing participants to review the final presentation of findings prior to the formal presentation to the entire school community also helped to address this ethical dilemma.

Another ethical consideration deals with challenges related to families' participation in the study. Oftentimes families of students in urban settings are disengaged, many times due to their perception of the school context and based on their own school experiences (Ogbu, 1987). Their perspective is critical to understanding college-going culture, and thus

I took steps to establish rapport with families. Furthermore, I made sure that findings from the study were shared with all facets of the community that I engaged in accessible language and in a relevant format.

Finally, a challenging ethical dilemma I encountered was reports from participants of practices that could be considered unethical. I chose to deal with this dilemma by determining if these practices were related to my study. If in fact I observed a practice that I believed could have been interpreted as unethical, I brought it to the attention of the school leader or other participants through the same process of questioning I used throughout the data collection process. The questioning process helped to keep key figures at the school apprised of the fact that the ethical egregious behavior has been observed. Fortunately, I did not observe any incidents I considered especially egregious.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to convey the intricacies of an urban school culture designed to facilitate the college readiness, access and success of low-income, first generation, students of color. The complexities of this college-going culture can best be understood by experiencing it, and as the researcher I had the great fortune of embedding myself in the school culture through my role as a participant observer and to a greater extent as an intern at James Weldon Johnson Academy in Central City. It is my hope that this chapter offers the reader an in-depth description of this culture through the lens of the members of the school community.

The primary and secondary research questions guiding this examination of college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy were as follows:

- How is college-going culture expressed in an urban high school with a college preparatory mission?
 - How is college-going culture represented in the artifacts, values and beliefs and underlying assumptions of the culture-sharing group under investigation; and
 - What roles do teachers and staff, administrators, community members, families and peers play in college-going culture in an urban high school?

Please note that the terms teachers and staff are used interchangeably. Likewise, the term administrator refers to the school leader who is also referred to as the principal.

The findings from my examination of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy are presented in depth in this chapter.

Overview of Chapter

Findings from this study are presented in three parts. Part one begins with a cultural portrait of James Weldon Johnson. Here I provide details on the background, history and community context that led to the founding of James Weldon Johnson Academy. Additionally, I share details on the events leading up to the opening of the school that helped to lay the groundwork for the intended culture of James Weldon Johnson Academy. Part two of this chapter presents a more detailed description of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson by describing the representations of the culture as reflected in the artifacts, espoused values and beliefs of the members of the school community and the basic assumptions reflected in the tacit thoughts, perceptions, beliefs and feelings of members of this culture-sharing group.

Part three of this chapter describes in detail the various roles played by teachers, administrators, families, community members and students within the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. This analysis is derived primarily from the interview data, student reflections, teacher/staff questionnaires and observations examining this phenomenon directly. Finally, part four of this chapter presents the core themes that emerged in my investigation of the school culture, providing a more thorough explanation of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. This chapter will close with a succinct summary of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy in order to answer the primary research question guiding this dissertation study.

Central City

Central City, home of James Weldon Johnson Academy, is a mid-sized urban community with a population of close to 350,000. The city is relatively poor with poverty rates more than twice the national average. Much of the poverty in Central City is highly concentrated in several neighborhoods that also battle high crime and blight. In fact, Central City has one of the highest murder rates in the nation. Conversely, the city also has a sizable middle class population with pockets of extreme wealth, bustling commercial districts, tourist attractions, relatively large health care sector and several colleges and universities.

According to the 2010 Census data, Central City's racial demographics are 60% African American, 33% White, almost 3% Asian and 5% Hispanic. In contrast, a 2010 report on the state of public education in Central City shows an 89% African American student population, with 84% of its students also living in poverty (figure based on the percentage of students who receive free and reduced lunch). In fact, these numbers are even higher if selective admissions schools are not included in these statistics. Historically, low-income, African Americans in the city have heavily attended Central City Public schools while the wealthy and middle class attended private and parochial schools. The story of Central City is the proverbial "tale of two cities."

In a presentation on the state of education in Central City, the James Weldon Johnson Academy principal and a district representative reported that a cohort of high school students in Central City had a 56% graduation rate. Only 10% of that same class earned a college degree within 10 years of starting high school. The city's economic plight

is inextricably tied to the educational landscape of the city. Thus, low wage jobs are a reality for citizens with low educational attainment.

The largest industry in Central City is hospitality, which accounts for 40% of jobs. Other major industries include health care and higher education, both of which provide jobs that often require some postsecondary education. Very few high wage, blue-collar jobs exist in the city. Thus, many Central City residents without the benefit of college education are limited to low wage jobs in hospitality and tourism. The implications of low educational attainment and low wage employment are far reaching.

For instance, a parent of a James Weldon Johnson Academy student has worked for a local hotel for 20 years. She makes \$10 an hour. Her wage, hardly a reflection of the hard work she does, requires that she commit more than 60 hours per week in order to cover her family's living expenses. This also means less time available to participate actively with her child's school or to engage in many school activities that support her child's success. This is representative of the work life of many families of James Weldon Johnson Academy students.

Central City Public Schools have been plagued with problems for decades. The state eventually stepped in and took over the school system largely due to poor performance by the majority of schools in the district. Since then, the District has experienced modest gains in school performance and an upsurge of charter schools across the city. The following story provides a glimpse of some of the issues present in the education landscape of Central City and offers an explanation of the title of this dissertation.

The Soul of a School

During the course of this research experience, I had the opportunity to attend a community meeting regarding the allocation of resources (i.e., school buildings and money for renovations) for charter management organizations in Central City. This meeting was organized to provide community members an opportunity to share their feedback on the school district's resource allocation and decision-making process. The meeting was contentious and tense primarily because the allocation of several million dollars in renovations and resources was at stake. The meeting was held at a newly constructed school in a neighborhood near James Weldon Johnson Academy, one of four new schools built in the city over the past decade. The building's modern design made it stick out amongst the aged homes in the neighborhood.

When I first entered the building a representative from ARISE stood at the door passing out t-shirts that said "ARISE" in big, bright letters (i.e., navy blue shirt with neon green lettering). I imagine they were expecting lots of supporters, because they had a couple of boxes of shirts. I watched as several students and their families representing ARISE schools entered the building. Students from ARISE middle schools wore their school uniforms of khaki pants and light blue polo shirts. James Weldon Johnson Academy students wore button-down, white, collared shirts with blue and gray ties and navy blue slacks or plaid, navy blue and gray skirts. Students wore the ARISE t-shirts they received at the meeting over their uniform shirts.

The room in which the meeting was held was a somewhat narrow and long space with rows of chairs set up in a U-shape with an aisle in the middle. The space was modern, with white tiled floors, bright fluorescent lights, and freshly painted, pale, yellow walls. The

chairs, relatively new, all faced a stage where a screen was set up facing the audience. On the screen was a PowerPoint presentation outlining the steps of the decision-making process for the allocation of resources to charter management organizations.

ARISE supporters, primarily parents and students enrolled in ARISE schools, as well as ARISE teachers and administrators, were all seated in one section from the center of the room to the far right corner of the room facing the front of the stage. In all, there were close to 50 ARISE supporters in attendance. A quick glance of the ARISE section showed a sea of blue shirts, the neon green “ARISE” seemed illuminated on the center of the shirts. Based on the correspondence we received regarding the evening’s meeting, families of students at James Weldon Johnson Academy were there to “represent a dramatic statement about our (the Academy) support from friends and neighbors...to advocate for the future of James Weldon Johnson Academy at Turner High School.” According to the correspondence, Academy supporters were to attend the meeting to advocate for substantial improvements and upgrades to the Turner High School building. Among these supporters was the police chief from the precinct near the Academy. The families of ARISE students filed into the room in small groups in a very organized and orderly fashion.

Seated at the right side of the room, facing the side of the stage was a smaller group of citizens from the neighborhood in which James Weldon Johnson Academy is housed. About 30 children and families held signs that read “Real Community Choice for Colgate.” The group was comprised of primarily middle class White families, and their small children, many of whom were not school-aged.

The group stood out amongst the mostly African American attendees. Their style of dress ranged from business attire to white t-shirts and khakis and long, maxi skirts with

tank tops. The children, who were mostly under the age of six, sat on the floor towards the back of the room eating pizza and walking barefoot around the area in which they were seated. They also made crafts that their parents brought to keep them occupied during the meeting. This group was also very organized, yet rather talkative and more casual in their presentation. These parents and concerned citizens were there to advocate for control and influence over a neighborhood school called Colgate School, (pseudonym) which was slated to receive a \$15.5 million renovation.

On the left side of the stage another set of chairs faced the stage. There, another group of concerned citizens was seated. This group was even smaller and was comprised of approximately 10 elderly, African American men and women from the community surrounding the school in which the meeting was being held. The elders were dressed in business casual clothing and were relatively reserved and quiet. They too were organized, but with one spokesman who was to address their desire to have a greater voice in the resource allocation decision-making process, as well as authentic communication between the community and the decision-making body with Central City Public Schools.

As the program began, representatives from Central City Public Schools outlined the decision-making process, indicating that no formal decisions had been made about what charter management organizations would gain resources for newly constructed schools or renovations. They handed out a document that listed schools in the community and their current status. The list indicated that James Weldon Johnson Academy would remain in Turner High School. Thus, the Academy was a contender for resources for renovations.

One by one, parents of students at ARISE schools sang their praises, commenting on how effective and impressive the schools were. They used words and phrases like

“orderly,” “disciplined,” and “excitement for learning” to describe the schools. They gave testimonies about how ARISE is helping prepare their children for college and they expressed their unyielding belief that their children will make it to and through college. Teachers from ARISE’s middle schools spoke about their school’s effectiveness, their high standardized test scores (i.e., one of the seven ARISE schools in Central City had the highest state standardized test scores in the city), their college preparatory curriculum and the breadth of co-curricular offerings of the ARISE schools (e.g., yoga, music and art).

One ARISE teacher acknowledged his middle school children in the audience accompanied by their parents. He delivered his address about the merits of ARISE schools. Towards the end of the teacher’s address, the moderator (i.e., a representative from Central City Public Schools) signaled that the teacher was almost out of time. The teacher asked his students to stand, and like clockwork, they got up in unison and recited a chant describing the school’s values (e.g., hard work). The presentations began to resemble a sales pitch. This presentation seemed somewhat scripted.

Next, speakers from the group concerned with the fate of Colgate School began to take to the podium. They argued that the ARISE schools were good for some children, but not their children. They desired a school option that reflected the diversity of the community (i.e., the neighborhood is predominately moderate and middle income African Americans and Whites). Perhaps the overwhelmingly low-income, and African American student population enrolled in ARISE schools didn’t appeal to them. Interestingly enough, the group of families from this group did not represent the diversity of the community since they were almost all White. At any rate, some expressed disdain with ARISE’s focus on structure and discipline, stating that they wanted a more relaxed environment for their

children that encouraged individuality and creativity (i.e., referencing ARISE schools' uniform policy and espoused value of structure). One member of the group, shared negative stories about her experience in getting support for her hearing impaired son when he was enrolled in an ARISE school. Her comments were met with heckles from ARISE parents. In the background I could hear ARISE employees say, "I know who she is" and characterizing the parent as a nuisance.

Other advocates from the group vying for influence over the Colgate School project suggested that decisions had already been made about the charter management organizations that would receive resources in this round of allocations. The speaker said that an ARISE executive (who he called by name) proclaimed as long as a year ago that ARISE would gain control of Colgate School. They explained, ARISE would have its own mini-school district in the Central City community which houses James Weldon Johnson Academy. From the group's perspective this meant that they have no real choice for their children's schools if the only neighborhood schools are ARISE schools. Hence, the "Real Community Choice for Colgate" signs they wielded.

If this accusation was correct, this community meeting was merely a symbol and had very little influence on the decision-making process for resource allocation. The Central City Public School representative dismissed the speaker's claims saying that the district was in the preliminary stages of decision-making and that no decisions had been made to date. The group's speeches were passionate and highly charged.

Finally, the elderly man who served as the spokesperson for the group of elderly citizens from the surrounding neighborhood came to the podium to address the audience.

His comments were directly related to the group's desire to have more voice in the decision-making process. Much like the speaker who came before him, the elderly man expressed his belief that the community meeting and other events like it were more superficial than consequential. In other words, these meetings were staged to give the appearance of a process involving community voice.

The speaker described the meeting as patronizing and expressed the implications of conducting the business of education reform in this manner. His sentiment, and perhaps that of the group he represented (they quietly nodded in agreement at every point he made) was that the "outsiders" who were key players in the education reform movement in Central City were transplants. He said that communities like the one he represents would be impacted by these outsiders' decisions long after they are gone. Thus, he asked the school district representatives to show the community enough respect to engage the community in the decision-making processes regarding resource allocation. Although his view of the meeting was negative, he was very poised and respectful in how he presented his opinion. The word that comes to my mind when I think about his presentation is "dignified."

In closing, the speaker said that his group was not "just interested in bricks and mortar." They were interested in "the soul of the school." He went on to say that the soul of a school is determined by what goes on inside, by who runs it, and who attends the school. This statement resonated with me because this study is concerned with just that. Through this ethnography, I sought to get to the core of what characterizes and comprises the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. This dissertation gets its title from the description given by the community leader who spoke that evening.

This story is important for another reason. The community meeting, with its various tensions, stakeholders and interests as well as the competition for resources and control, is indicative of the education reform climate in Central City. Large charter management organizations like ARISE maneuver in this landscape like a “well-oiled machine” while smaller, grassroots community groups struggle for voice and influence. This influence is even less when the group of concerned citizens is under-resourced *as compared to wealthier organizations and other stakeholders).

Additionally, other debates represented in this vignette highlight critiques of the education reform movement in Central City. One of those critiques was that very few teachers in the workforce in Central City were from Central City and that “outsiders” were influencing education reform decisions to a greater extent than the communities that were most impacted by these decisions. As an example, all but one of the teachers and administrators at one ARISE Middle School came through Teach for America programs or a similar alternative certification program. Only two were from the Central City Metropolitan area.

Additionally, accusations of back-room deals surfaced in this vignette regarding decisions on control of the Colgate School. Similarly, the establishment of a new ARISE high school in Central City (i.e., James Weldon Johnson) was both supported and met with suspicion by members of the community. As such, the principal of James Weldon Johnson Academy and executives from ARISE had to be very strategic about how they proceeded with opening the Academy. On a side note, ARISE *did* get control of the Colgate School, as well as some oversight of the \$15.5 million building renovation. This acquisition means that ARISE controls a significant portion of the charter schools in Central City and as such

has a strong voice and influence on education reform in the City. It also means they are another step closer to meeting their big goal of graduating 1000+ first generation students from college by 2022.

History and Evolution of James Weldon Johnson Academy

The building in which James Weldon Johnson Academy is housed has a history dating back to 1939, when it was erected as a school to educate the children of working-class white families who lived in the neighborhood. The school, Bragg Senior High School (pseudonym), was originally named for a slave owning, confederate general turned state governor. The Rebel Flag (i.e., school symbol) and the Rebel Yell (i.e., school newspaper) were the primary symbols of Bragg Senior High School. According to an alumna of the school from the early 1950s, Bragg Senior High School was not known for its academic performance. In fact, she mentioned that high-achieving students with college aspirations “went elsewhere.” Regardless, fond memories of the school abound, as evidenced by postings on web communities of the school’s alumni social networking sites across the Internet.

As the political climate in the nation changed and grew wearier of segregation, the days of Jim Crow were challenged. Although Brown Vs. Board of Education called for the end of separate but equal in 1954, Central City did not begin to integrate their schools until 1960. Despite a major push for integration in Central City, the school with the Rebel Flag would not experience a “demographic shift” until 1967 when the first African American students were enrolled at the school.

An alumna of the school who was part of the first group of eight African Americans at Bragg Senior High School recalled her days at the school with the Rebel flag. In an

address given to the new teachers and staff at James Weldon Johnson Academy, this alumna shared stories about playing in the band (which waved the Rebel Flag); harassment by her peers; working very hard academically; attempts to push her out by faculty and administrators; and the love and support of one teacher. Despite these experiences, even she has high regard for the school and the impact that experience, though tried, had on the development of her character. The following year, Bragg Senior High School enrolled 300 African American students.

Over time, white flight in Central City shifted the neighborhood demographics around Bragg Senior High School. The once working class white community was now working class African American. African American students now comprised the majority of students at Bragg Senior High School. Generations of families attended Bragg, which continued to hold the reputation of a low-performing school. However, an alumna from the early 1990s who also is the president of the school's alumni association also expressed fond memories of her time at Bragg. She recalled experiences with caring staff and a no-nonsense school leader who was trusted by staff and students and who created a safe, learning environment for kids.

But, by the mid-1990s, schools like Bragg experienced another major change after a citywide effort to rename schools to better reflect the students they served. Thus, schools like Bragg that boasted names of white, slave-owners, yet served primarily African Americans were assigned new names, like Nat Turner (pseudonym).

An alumna who attended the school during the time of the name change recalled her experience with a much different tenor than did previous alumni. Her remembrance of Turner High School was that of a school in which “they didn’t care” about students. She

described a school environment in which “cutting” class was the norm and school leadership changed often and was ineffective. In fact, this same alumna characterized Turner as a “babysitting service.” The change in name from Bragg to Turner actually hurt the reputation of the school and disconnected previous alumni, many of whom were family members, from identifying with it’s new “identity.”

While the other accounts from alumni I had heard indicated a strained love for Bragg, Turner High School had left a negative imprint on this woman. But was this a broader experience for students at Turner High School? According to school performance data distributed to staff at James Weldon Johnson Academy, Turner High School was a failing school in Central City. Its enrollment was low, matching its low school performance score. Community members who volunteered at Turner High School during the 2009-2010 school year described the school as understaffed and in need of support. These key stakeholders played a major role in the establishment of James Weldon Johnson Academy.

James Weldon Johnson Academy

When the announcement was made that Turner High School would be closing, the community and school’s alumni were up in arms. Community meetings were held, discussions ensued on social networking sites, and people wanted answers. Where would children in this Central City neighborhood go to high school? Was the next school to come into the neighborhood going to serve children well? Who would lead this school?

ARISE answered the community’s call. They already were approved to open a charter school in the Turner High School building, but knew it would be prudent to engage the community in a dialogue about who they are and their intentions for the opening of a new school. Led by the founding principal of James Weldon Johnson Academy, the

community and the school leader engaged in dialogues about the type of school they wanted in their community and the plans for James Weldon Johnson Academy. The school leader was extremely effective at garnering support for his vision of a high school that would prepare children from this Central City community for college. Many of these community members turned out to support preparation for the school's opening during the summer of 2010.

After obtaining support from the neighborhood associations, churches and community organizations, the school leader commenced to lay out his plan for the new school. His plans included the recruitment and hiring of a staff that supported ARISE's "big goal" to graduate 1000+ first generation college students by 2022. He also engaged more than 1000 volunteers to beautify the school and acquire resources to support the opening of the school. On top of that, he designed a comprehensive and intense pre-school (i.e., prior to the opening of school) professional development program that would bring together his talented new staff to begin their journey of opening James Weldon Johnson Academy.

The pre-school professional development covered many topics and was comprised of activities designed "to develop a strong team and family; to prepare teachers to engage in pedagogical practices that reflected high quality development and delivery of instruction; to design systems that are respectful of the students that they serve; and to develop effective school operations reflective of best practices." This weeklong professional development series included homework, readings, and reflections and was intensely focused on preparing for the opening of a unique school with an ambitious goal.

Another significant event that was held was the student orientation. This event was designed to acclimate students to the expectations and culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy; to introduce them to beliefs and habits that lead to student success; and to foster the development of relationships with peers and staff that would excite them about attending the Academy. This event was also held on a college campus, a practice that is representative of the school's commitment to facilitating their students' access to and success in college. The program closed with a family gathering in which students shared reflections and stories about their experience and where families were formally inducted into the James Weldon Johnson team and family.

The final program that helped to lay the foundation for a successful college-going culture was a special summer school session to support students' transitioning into James Weldon Johnson Academy from schools outside of the ARISE network. This special summer session included skill-building classes, assessments and student-teacher engagement to continue to acclimate students into the culture influenced by the ARISE charter management organization. These activities led up to the opening of James Weldon Johnson Academy in August of 2010.

The next section of this chapter provides a closer view of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy and the ways in which the three levels of culture relate to the college preparatory mission of the school and its college-going culture

Expressions of College-Going Culture

Organizational culture, however difficult to analyze and assess, can be translated through an examination of its artifacts, espoused values and beliefs, and its basic assumptions (Schein, 2004). Schein (2004) posits that organizational cultures can be

deciphered when the three levels of an organization's culture are examined closely, each unveiling deeper, and more complex meaning and explanatory power than the previous.

Artifacts

James Weldon Johnson Academy is a college preparatory high school with the mission to prepare students to graduate high school college-ready, to access college and graduate college. The entire school design is intended to prepare first generation students for access to and success in college, and to develop in these students the qualities necessary for them to succeed in college and beyond. This is reflected in the basic structures of the school, or the artifacts. Many of these artifacts are representative of the college-going culture theory principles. Thus, where appropriate, these connections are noted.

When I first visited the Turner High School building in June of 2010 to meet with James Weldon Johnson Academy's principal, I found the building to be dark and uncomfortably hot. The building is a large cement structure with minimal architectural details outside including a few decorative vertical lines next to the main entrance doors and small leaf pattern boxes above the entryway. The exterior doors, all freshly painted blue, are made from heavy metal frames with fiberglass windows in the center, metal door handles on the exterior and push bars on the interior. The school's windows are cloudy so they are difficult to peer into. The window frames, shaped like crosses, have four small panes of fiberglass. The building is very old and the style is dated. It has an old, "institutional" feel.

James Weldon Johnson Academy, now housed in Turner High School, occupies one wing of the third floor, while an ARISE middle school is housed on the second floor. The first floor of the Turner High School building houses a daycare run by ARISE that serves

toddlers, several of whom are children of ARISE employees. Shared spaces between the middle school and the Academy are also located on the first floor including a room used as an art studio, a cafeteria and an auditorium. Additionally, a band room is located on the first floor. This room is narrow and long with gray cement floors with drains sporadically around the room, high, and large fiberglass windows and metal cabinets.

The gymnasium for the school is in an annex, a basic cement building across the street from the school. The back of the main building has a courtyard and walkway that leads to the street facing the annex gymnasium. A high metal fence encloses the courtyard. Additionally, the first floor is home to the ARISE central office, which relocated once Turner High School's administration vacated the building during the summer of 2010. The office is updated with new walnut desks and counters decorated with college pennants for schools like Yale University, the University of Michigan and Morehouse College. The floors in the office are putty-colored cinderblock with a line of green tiles around the perimeter. The walls are a bright-colored yellow and the furniture includes new loveseats. The ceilings are made from drop ceiling tiles.

When I first met with the principal in June of 2010, much of the building was being redecorated and upgraded for the school's opening in the fall. Many volunteers, mostly in their early twenties, were in classrooms painting and cleaning out old relics from Turner High School. It was very dark because the lights were off, likely to manage the temperature in the building because outdoor temperatures were over 90 degrees. The building's air conditioning was not working, so fans almost the width of the hallways spun in the background making a low, humming noise. Some of the floors on the third level were aged, parquet hardwood that had been stained and painted so much over the years they looked

like tiles with a marble pattern rather than wood. Through the paint and stain, some of the original beauty of the parquet could still be seen.

The ceilings had exposed, large white pipes, and drop ceiling tiles. The floorboards had cracked paint and the chair rails wrapped the walls all the way around the third floor. Classrooms were standard size, most with enough space to accommodate close to 25 students with desks and chairs. The old chalkboards were black and framed with dark wood, with bulletin boards next to them. The chalkboards and bulletin boards spanned the entire length of the wall. In some classrooms one more wall was covered with a blackboard and bulletin board. At this point the rooms were clean slates, ready for whatever upgrades volunteers, teachers and staff would make to the building in preparation for their opening.

Today when I enter James Weldon Johnson Academy I see a building with symbols that reflect the school's college preparatory mission. The side entrance where students enter in the morning has a painted mural of African American leaders including President Barack Obama and civil rights leader, Rosa Parks in the hallway. This mural was painted when Turner High School was still open and was left up when the school transitioned to James Weldon Johnson Academy and ARISE Middle School. The cafeteria where students start their day with breakfast, morning announcements and sometimes study hall, has college flags hanging from the ceiling. Most of the universities represented in the flags are large, state-run, universities like University of Oklahoma and Auburn University.

The walls are newly painted in eggshell white and sage green, with the chair rail painted walnut brown separating the two wall colors for added contrast. The floors are the same as the hallways, with putty-colored cinderblock and sage green details around the perimeter and center of the room. Foldable gray tables with attached blue stools,

commonly used in school buildings, serve as seating and workspace for students. Towards the back of the cafeteria there are large blue banners for the various classes ARISE will graduate from the “Class of 2014” banner representing the year the incoming freshmen class at James Weldon Johnson Academy will graduate high school to the “Class of 2022” banner, which represents the year ARISE expects to meet their “big goal” of graduating 1000+ first generation college students.

More symbols representing James Weldon Johnson Academy’s college-going culture are apparent on the third floor, the level of Turner High School in which James Weldon Johnson Academy is housed. Throughout the hallway there are college pennants lining the eggshell white walls. Various institution types are represented such as ivy league schools like Princeton University, historically Black colleges and universities like Morgan State University, large public universities like Louisiana State University and private colleges like Kalamazoo College. Next to some of the pennants are short overviews of the colleges including prominent alumni, enrollment figures, and the number of ARISE alumni attending these schools from ARISE schools across the country.

Like the other areas of the school, chair rails have been painted a walnut brown and the lower half of the hallway walls painted sage green. Most of the floors are traditional, cinderblock in putty and sage green. However, the parquet floors remain in several areas of the third floor. Lighting is still very dim, and so the hallways lack the brightness of other areas of the school such as the cafeteria. Light from the windows brings in natural light that helps brighten up the space. Hanging from the ceilings are placards in blue or white with inspirational quotes and the Academy’s core values. Here is a bulleted list of the content of some of the placards that hang from the ceiling at James Weldon Johnson Academy:

- Team and Family;
- Failure is not an option;
- You are here to succeed;
- Which wolf wins? (A reference to the story of the two wolves described in the *Feed the Good Wolf* theme);
- And a quote by Aristotle that reads, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit” (Representative of the Academy’s *habits of mind* value).

Teachers, staff and the school leader also selected inspirational quotes that are posted outside of their classrooms. For instance, outside of one teacher’s room a quote by Epictetus reads, “Only the educated are free.” The classrooms that once had old, wood framed blackboards and wooden bulletin boards now also have Promethean Interactive White Boards and projectors, an interactive technology system that allows one to use the board as a whiteboard for writing, or for use to project still and moving images such as movies and PowerPoint presentations. Each classroom has lists of expectations for students. For instance, one list of class expectations reads, “You are in your seats silently working; Respect yourself, your teammates, and me; Always do your absolute best work.” Expectations in one of the math classrooms read, “Algebra Revolution: Know the Steps; Show Your Work; Perfect Practice; Be Confident.”

Classrooms also have symbols representing the college preparatory aim of the high school, such as college flags or famous college graduates. Most classes also have the school’s core values posted as well (e.g., focus on results; team and family; constant learning; and helping others). These artifacts are representative of the college-going

culture principle, college talk (i.e., clear and consistent messaging about what is required to access college and succeed in college) and of consistent messaging to students regarding their aspiration to attend college, also a condition of schools with college-going cultures (McDonough, 2006). They are also representative of other James Weldon Johnson Academy values and beliefs described in greater detail under the heading *values and beliefs*.

Another important artifact that represents James Weldon Johnson Academy's college preparatory mission is its course offerings. Each student takes physics, Spanish, English, world geography, geometry/algebra, instrumental music and a college readiness course during the course of a seven and a half hour day. The college readiness course is designed to develop students' academic behaviors and cognitive strategies, two concepts associated with college readiness, and to provide students with the contextual awareness of the expectations and culture of college life (Conley, 2007; Conley, 2008). In sum, the college readiness course is designed to arm these first generation students with college knowledge. Likewise, the Academy's course of study is designed to meet the core curriculum (i.e., classes required for admission into most colleges and universities). These course offerings are consistent with the testing and curriculum principle (i.e., access to tests, courses, information and resources for college access and success) of the college-going culture theory and the information and resources principle that refers to current information and resources on college that is available to students, families and staff (McClafferty et al., 2002; McDonough, 2006).

Other artifacts that represent the college preparatory mission of the school are its community partnerships. James Weldon Johnson Academy is one of the local university's target schools for Upward Bound, a federal TRIO program designed to help first generation

and low-income students prepare for and access college. It also is one of the school partners of another college preparatory program called College Track. This after school program provides academic enrichment courses, student activities, college advising and planning and service learning opportunities. These are but two college and community partnerships that support the college-going culture of the Academy. Both of these partnerships provide students with additional support for college preparation and exposure to colleges and universities and are consistent with the college partnerships principle (e.g., college visits) of the college-going culture theory (McClafferty et al., 2002; McDonough, 2006).

Beyond the basic structures of the school, James Weldon Johnson has several policies and practices that also represent well their commitment to the college readiness, access and success of their students. First, their grading policy does not allow for students to receive a failing grade for a class during their freshman year. Instead, students are offered opportunities to make up work and get more time on assignments in order to master academic concepts and skills. This policy known as the “incomplete policy,” is complemented by a structured time for “reteaching” called X-Factor. On Fridays, James Weldon Johnson has early dismissal, which allows students who require additional assistance or additional time to make up work, direct instructional time with teachers. This small group learning takes place after early dismissal and provides students nearly an additional two hours to master content.

Finally, students with exceptionalities are mainstreamed into traditional classes, while getting the support of an instructional aide that helps them stay on task and on pace with their peers. Some of these students also get “pull out” courses where they can enhance

their cognitive skills and meet individually or in small groups with teachers and instructional assistants. These policies and practices reflect a commitment to prepare *all* children for a wide range of postsecondary options, the cornerstone of the college-going culture theory (McClafferty et al., 2002). These are a few of the artifacts that are representative of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Values and beliefs

There are several explicit and implicit values that are expressed or in practice at James Weldon Johnson Academy. These values and beliefs serve as the underpinnings of the practices, policies and structures (i.e., artifacts) in place at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

There are four core values at James Weldon Johnson Academy. These values include (a) team and family, (b) helping others, (c) focus on results, and (d) constant learning. These values and beliefs are taught to everyone in the community from students and their families to teachers and staff. They are reflected on signs, on report cards and a host of other documents, as well as speeches, and other artifacts at the school. The following paragraphs will provide an overview of each of the school's core values with examples of how these values are expressed and reflected at James Weldon Johnson Academy. These core values are represented in Figure 1, which highlights the values and beliefs at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Core values are represented in pink. Observed values are in gray and values not yet fully integrated are in green. A discussion of each of these levels of values and beliefs are discussed following Figure 1.

Figure 1 Values, Beliefs & Artifacts



The value of *team and family* reflects the belief that members of the school community including teachers, administrators, staff, students and their families regard one another as members of a team as well as members of a family. The concept of team and family is a critical concept that is viewed as a necessary condition to successfully meet the big goal at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

The team and family value is represented in a number of places within the Academy. For instance, the teacher's lounge is named the Team and Family Room, a nod to the role this space serves in facilitating the action of team and family during staff meetings, social gatherings and teacher preparation time. Another example of the value of team and family in practice is the support the entire school community shows the school band during performances, parades and community events. When the James Weldon Johnson Academy band performs, their team and family are not far behind. For instance, students who supported the marching band by attending a parade in which the band was performing received shout-outs (i.e., public praise) during morning announcements.

Finally, the team and family value was demonstrated in an exceptional manner when a James Weldon Johnson Academy student's sister was brutally murdered. This tragic incident occurred during the winter break. Upon the news of this incident, students and their families, teachers, and administrators showed an outpouring of support through phone calls, hugs, and messages of condolence and other related gestures. Although members of the school community err from time to time by not exhibiting this value, it is at its core, an important aspiration of the school community.

Helping others is a value best represented by the quote "When a teammate needs help, we give it; when we need help, we ask." This quote is included on the professional

development agenda from the pre-school professional development meeting in July. The quote is used frequently by the principal and the value is expressed through the resources, support and guidance provided to teammates willingly to ensure their success and the success of the school.

Among these resources is a customizable, web-based data management system called *Drop the Chalk* designed especially to help teachers', staff and the principal track student mastery of specific skills and content; attendance; discipline issues; and other student-related data. For instance, teachers can post data on student progress on learning specific concepts (e.g., punctuation). If a student does not exhibit mastery, teachers can record related data in *Drop the Chalk*. Subsequently, the system can generate a list of students who have not reached mastery of various skills and concepts and assign them to "reteaching" sessions (i.e., small group or one-on-one lessons or tutoring).

Teachers helped to customize the *Drop the Chalk* system recommending ways in which the system could be tailored to help them maximize their effectiveness. One of the customizations teachers requested was a tracking tool to capture narrative report card data (i.e., data regarding students' development of effective academic behaviors and other narrative data on student development). This resource also is representative of the Academy's *focus on results* core value. Data in the *Drop the Chalk* system drives the design of interventions aimed at helping students' meet academic goals and requirements. Teacher input and influence on the design of *Drop the Chalk* also represents the college-going culture principle, faculty involvement (i.e., teachers actively participate in shaping and supporting a college-going culture).

The principal also allowed teachers to create their desired learning environments by asking teachers to envision what they wanted in their classrooms and by providing resources so teachers could customize their classrooms. Among the lists of customizations were furniture, framed art and posters, and paint to decorate classrooms specific to the desires of the teachers. For instance, the counselor requested and received a maroon leather sectional sofa, while another teacher was able to order pictures of prominent African American leaders. Teachers could order whatever books they wanted as well as college paraphernalia. One teacher ordered a University of Illinois college flag for her classroom similar to the flags hanging in the cafeteria. The music teacher was also able to purchase accessories for instruments such as mouthpieces and reeds. Additional resources that were provided to each teacher and staff member were Promethean White Boards (mentioned earlier in the artifacts section) in each classroom, a Macbook and an iPad. Teachers also receive monthly stipends to pay for cell phone use associated with work.

Several practices at the school also reflect the value of helping others. I observed teachers sharing best practices over lunch on a regular basis in the “Team and Family Room.” Teachers also make a practice of observing each other’s classrooms and then conferencing with each other to share feedback. This practice is also linked to the *professional teaching* value discussed later in this section. This value is also promoted with students through the 25 hours of service learning performed by the team and family per year. Service learning is performed during “Saturday school” (i.e., school sessions held periodically on Saturdays) throughout the surrounding neighborhoods in Central City and across state lines during their end of year field trip. These are just a few examples of the helping others value in practice.

Evidence-based practice is essential within the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Thus the value, *focus on results* is one that is regarded very highly within the school community. Data are used to drive most decisions at James Weldon Johnson Academy and efforts are commonly focused on desired outcomes. As previously noted, teachers track student academic progress in *Drop the Chalk* in order to design and assign students' specific interventions to improve student achievement. Likewise, data on demerits and discipline issues is tracked in this system. Teachers receive updates on the number of demerits they issue each week to help them reflect on their management of students and to determine if new strategies should be adopted to improve student management.

Another example of the Academy's focus on results is that teachers are held accountable for student performance and review student performance data to evaluate their teaching effectiveness. One Saturday professional development session was dedicated to the review of students' standardized test results. Teachers examined this data and were instructed to evaluate the data to try to identify gaps in instruction or strategies to bolster student achievement on these tests. Additionally, data from a report I compiled on community relations for the school revealed that the most frequent correspondences with families were for detention phone calls. The principal used this data to inform the decision to modify practices at the Academy regarding communication with families. Based on this data, teachers, staff and the principal incorporated positive phone calls to families into their regular schedule.

The principal models a focus on results during professional development sessions in which a clearly defined set of objectives and outcomes are articulated verbally and on

handouts. Almost every activity at James Weldon Johnson Academy is centered on the achievement of specific, well-defined and measurable outcomes. For instance, one aim from the pre-school professional development was, “Teachers will articulate the three beliefs at James Weldon Johnson Academy about students and their behavior.” The assessment plan for this aim involved teachers completing the prompt, “The three beliefs at James Weldon Johnson Academy about students and their behavior are...” Another aim was “Teachers will identify best practices in the successful education of African American children.” The assessment plan for this aim involved a writing prompt that read, “Some of the best practices in the successful education of African American children include...”

Similarly, web-based surveys are issued to teachers and staff daily during professional development and weekly during the school year to ascertain teacher mastery of various aims, to help the principal facilitate teachers and staff reflection on their practice, and to gauge the effectiveness of professional development sessions and staff meetings. For example, teachers are sometimes asked to post brief reading reflections on assigned professional development readings or to evaluate staff meetings. Data collected from these surveys helps the principal direct his work in supporting teacher development.

Students are also taught the importance of focusing on results early on at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Goal setting is taught at orientation and in various classes. As an example, I taught a lesson on goal setting during student orientation in which students learned to set SMART (i.e., specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely) goals. Part of the session involved students’ brainstorming goals for the school year and the semester and the creation of visual symbols of their goals with craft materials. Students wore these symbols on their lanyards to help them focus on the result of achieving their goals.

Students also established big goals and enabling goals during class exercises in English class. This goal setting process helped students' direct their efforts throughout the year. Of this process a teacher said, "I give their folders back at random points in the year and, we just review. Then they go back to their enabling goal and see what they've done and where they are as far as their big goal."

Here, the teacher is referencing a lesson she did on the achievement gap and the impact of a college degree on one's earning potential. Students described in detail the type of lifestyle they want to live in adulthood and the type of income required to achieve this lifestyle. From that exercise, they developed a set of goals, including educational goals that they revisit regularly to track their progress in meeting their enabling goals and their big goals. Similarly, during peak testing time in the school, student performance goals for standardized tests are posted in advertisements (e.g., creative banners) around school (e.g., ACT EXPLORE score goal is 20). The focus on results value is heavily embedded in practices at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Finally, *constant learning* is the last of the four core values at James Weldon Johnson Academy. This value highlights the importance of learning and development within the school's culture and is indicative of the belief that continuous learning is a standard at the school.

Constant learning is reflected in weekly meetings that include professional development sessions usually introducing new pedagogical skills to add to teachers' repertoire of skills. Professional development sessions are usually structured much like a college course with homework assignments and assigned readings. Along the same line, teachers receive the Johnson Journal (pseudonym) annually, a reading packet featuring

nearly 200 pages of literature on topics related to pedagogy and the development of highly effective teachers.

Teachers and students both receive summer reading, which consists of a wide selection of books across different genres and interests. At the midpoint in the school year, teachers devised personal plans for constant learning that they shared with team and family members at the daylong professional development meeting. Finally, round table classes (i.e., small, student advisory groups) are often reserved for students' reflections on their learning outside of the classroom under the leadership of their round table instructor. As an example, during one round table session, students reflected on the school's values and developed skits to demonstrate how the values are in practice at the Academy.

A few other values and beliefs have surfaced in my examination of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. These espoused values and beliefs are a little less prominent than the Academy's core values; however, they are as important to the practices and policies at the school and moreover to the college-going culture.

Since James Weldon Johnson Academy is still in its first year and the school culture is in development, several of these values and beliefs are in the process of being fully integrated into the shared belief and value system of the culture-sharing group (i.e., the school community). Regardless, they are reflected frequently enough that they deserve attention. Each of the values and beliefs is described next and is also presented in the values and beliefs Figure 1 shaded in gray or green with an example of an artifact (i.e., structure, symbol, behavior, ritual, etc. that represents the value or belief in practice at James Weldon Johnson Academy).

One of the institutional beliefs at James Weldon Johnson Academy is that intelligence is a product of effort rather than a fixed and innate quality. Thus, hard work and effective effort are the core drivers of student achievement. The concept of effort-based ability, popularized by scholars such as Carol Dweck (2007/2010), is a value that is taught to teachers at the Academy during the pre-school professional development and to students during orientation.

One concept associated with effort-based ability is “grit,” a non-cognitive trait that involves qualities such as focus, resilience, diligence, and sustained energy towards the achievement of a long-term goal (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, et. al, 2007). Teachers and staff calculate their grit using the grit scale (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) and the belief in effort-based ability is promoted to students through the use of language such as “Your I WILL is more important than your I.Q.,” the English class motto at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Ongoing efforts are made to replace language that reflects the dominant assumptions of the deterministic quality of intelligence. A reflection of this effort can be found in a statement made by the principal. Regarding effort-based ability, the principal says, “Areas where you feel inadequate are probably areas where you stopped trying or internalized the belief that you can’t”. Similarly, the principal can be heard saying, “Students aren’t lazy. They aren’t properly motivated.” Another saying heard at the school is, “All errors do not become mistakes unless we refuse to correct them.” This statement is similar to a quote that is posted on a placard in the hallway that reads, “Life is all about making mistakes and learning from them.” The work of internalizing this belief in the

minds of students and teachers and staff is part of the ongoing culture-shaping work at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Failure is not an option at James Weldon Johnson Academy, and as an institution they take the stance that students must succeed by any means necessary. This belief is coupled with a set of strategies and practices that facilitate student success. Among these practices are the James Weldon Johnson Academy grading policy that does not allow for students to fail, but instead gives them additional time and support to be successful. This belief is also discussed in greater detail under the theme *by any means necessary*. The failure is not an option value was expressed during pre-school professional development as an ARISE charter management organization value. The organization explicitly states that achievement for all students is the goal and that failure is not an option. Additionally, the failure is not an option value is on one of the many placards on display at the school.

Finally, this value is internalized by some parents, one of described ARISE schools in this way,

Its design was to reach the child ... that's not being prepared the way they should, you know. Because you know how ARISE says "failure is not an option." It's not an option and you know that's what I expect. Failure is not an option!

This quote expresses this parent's belief in the school's internalization of the broader ARISE value of failure is not an option.

The *development of the whole child* is valued significantly at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Associated with this value is the prevailing belief that students learn in a variety of ways, many of which occur beyond classrooms and the corridors of the school. Likewise, extracurricular activities are considered an important tool in facilitating student

commitment to James Weldon Johnson Academy. Associated with this idea is the concept presented by the principal that extracurricular activities help students “develop habits of mind and work to leverage these habits for academic success.”

Awareness of the connection between co-curricular activities and student learning, college aspirations, and persistence is evidenced in the statements, “I am creating and developing extracurriculars for students to have investment and buy-in at the school,” and in the respondent statement, “(I) Inform students about resources and opportunities outside of school that are associated with our school’s college preparatory mission.” Similarly, the principal evidenced his belief that student activities are a priority when he hired a full-time administrator in the Academy’s first year whose goal is to get “100% participation in extracurricular activities.”

Other evidence that James Weldon Johnson Academy embraces the value of the development of the whole child, is found in the school’s offering of a wide range of extracurricular activities to enhance student learning, increase student commitment to the school and to encourage the development of skills and habits that are transferrable to the classroom. Among those activities are a full-fledged athletic program with basketball, track and field, volleyball, and lacrosse. Several clubs and organizations were also amongst the first activities executed at the school. Clubs such as the art club, skateboard club, the student government association and the chess club emerged as early as September of the school’s first year.

Additionally, all students take a music course at the Academy. The music program at the Academy is amongst their most successful and is evidenced by the creation of the popular James Weldon Johnson Academy marching band, a highly acclaimed, “up and

coming” band in Central City. The James Weldon Johnson band is a source of great pride to the entire school community and the surrounding neighborhood.

Finally, the belief in the development of the whole child is reflected in the marketing pieces for James Weldon Johnson Academy. This promotional literature indicates that James Weldon Johnson Academy offers “Extensive enrichment and extracurricular activity: Visual Arts, Drama, Band, Yearbook...” Thus, artifacts such as marketing materials, the athletic program and extracurricular activities, professional positions and quotes from the school leader all reflect the development of the whole child value at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Professional teaching is valued at James Weldon Johnson Academy and is promoted through a series of practices. Professional teaching is a term I heard used by the school leader when referencing his teachers. It refers to the idea that teachers are scholar practitioners that engage in reflexive practice. As such, engage in a series of practices that help them reflect on their teaching strategies that regard teachers as experts in the delivery of instruction, and that provide teachers with opportunities for collaborative decision-making with the principals on matters such as hiring of new teachers. One example of an exercise that is part of the school leader’s efforts to professionalize teaching is his engagement of teachers and staff in the consultancy process.

The consultancy process is an exercise that teachers underwent when developing their mid term exams. During the consultancy process, teachers present their midterm exams and receive feedback on their documents. First, teachers present to the staff the basis for their decisions regarding the development of test structure, including the purpose of the structure, how the test was designed, and any related background information. Next,

the entire staff reviews the test document and then asks clarifying questions to the presenting teacher. This is followed by a discussion on the mid-term in which the presenting teacher observes. During this step in the consultancy process, teachers share their perspectives on the quality of the test. Finally, the author reflects on the discussion and responds as necessary. Then the entire group reflects on how the consultancy process can teachers and staff learn new ways to improve their test development strategies.

Another example of the professional teaching value represents the principal's regard for teachers as leaders in the school. As such, teachers are invited to observe teaching candidates during sample lessons and can engage teaching candidates in discussions to gain greater insight on their fit for the James Weldon Johnson Academy team and family. The school leader also values teachers' and staff's feedback on teacher candidate and weighs this feedback in his hiring decision. These are a few examples of the professional teaching value.

This value is closely related to the constant learning value, which in part promotes teachers' learning of current trends and best practices in pedagogy in their development as scholar practitioners/professional teachers. Perhaps this value is linked to the fact that many of the teachers at James Weldon Johnson Academy came through alternative certification programs like Teach for America and are early career teachers. Whatever the reason, the principal believes in valuing his teachers as professionals and in helping them develop skills as scholar practitioners.

Another belief that is directly related to student learning is the belief that success is not by chance but by habit. Individuals who are successful develop and practice habits that

are directly responsible for their success. This belief is strongly associated with the belief in effort-based ability.

Evidence of the institutionalization of the value of habits of mind is the use of narrative report cards at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Narrative report cards are documentation of students' development of qualities consistent with the values of the Academy and qualities associated with academic success. These report cards are issued once a year for all four years and are shared with students and parents at a report card conference. These conferences are meant to celebrate students' development of these valuable habits and to develop plans for the continued development of others. The principal commented that the narrative report card "is the most important representation of the school's values."

At James Weldon Johnson they also believe that effective schools have effective systems that help facilitate student success. Thus, James Weldon Johnson has developed highly structured school systems to help them meet their goals. Some examples of these systems are the comprehensive discipline matrix and consequence system, their system for entering and exiting classes, and the management of transitions in hallways during the change of classes. An extensive discussion of these systems is offered under the theme, *rules and consequences*.

The belief that all kids can go to college is touted frequently at James Weldon Johnson Academy. This is an institutional value and belief that has not fully been adopted by everyone at the school and will be discussed in the discussion on the culture-sharing groups basic assumptions. However, the overwhelming majority of people within the school hold this value and belief.

The “we believe” statement at James Weldon Johnson Academy highlights the institutional beliefs about discipline and student management. This statement reads,

We believe students want to do the right thing; We believe students will do the right thing when they know what it is, believe they can do it, and believe it will get them what they want; We believe when students don’t do the right thing, it’s because of something I did or didn’t do.

These assumptions about student management serve as the foundation for the design of the student management system at James Weldon Johnson Academy. “We Believe” is accompanied by a belief statement regarding student management that says,

Our plan will be Proactive: Effective teachers focus on preventing problems instead of constantly dealing with them; Instructional: Effective teachers directly teach expectations at the beginning of the year, review them as necessary, and treat misbehavior as an opportunity to teach replacement behavior; and Positive: Effective teachers build collaborative relationships with students and provide them with meaningful, positive feedback to enhance motivation and performance.

In summary, discipline at James Weldon Johnson Academy is meant to be proactive, effective and positive. These statements place accountability on adults (i.e., administrators, teachers and staff) through the belief that student misbehavior is regarded as a direct result of what “I have done or have not done.” While this statement is posted on the wall in the Team and Family Room, and is referenced periodically, it is not always reflected in how discipline is carried out day-to-day. This will be discussed in further detail in the discussion of the theme *rules and consequences*. Regardless, it is a belief to which James Weldon Johnson Academy aspires.

Underlying assumptions

There are several basic assumptions that members of the James Weldon Johnson Academy staff and students carry that influence their behavior, thoughts, perceptions and beliefs. Although this overview of basic assumptions is not exhaustive, the following paragraphs describe some of the more common assumptions of members of the school community.

A common assumption at James Weldon Johnson Academy is that students must be managed through a system of rules and behavioral expectations to keep them in line and in order. When student behavior is not managed, and misconduct occurs, it is a direct reflection of ineffective systems. This is reflected in teacher statements about inconsistencies in the student management systems. During a staff meeting in February, teachers discussed their frustration with the rules and consequences systems talking a lot about inconsistencies in enforcing rules, and how they did not agree with lots of the rules. Student misconduct is often explained away by inconsistencies in the application of the consequences. This assumption is somewhat incongruent with the “we believe” statement, because it focuses attention on systems instead of on the role of teachers, staff and administrators in shaping learning environments where student misconduct is well-managed. This is discussed in greater detail in the discussion on the theme *rules and consequences*.

Some teachers and staff believe that students’ work ethic and attitudes are the biggest barriers to students’ access to and success in college. One teacher noted that students’ greatest barrier to college access and success was their “Lack of accountability to him/herself.” Another respondent remarked that students barriers to college access and

success is “Lack of drive and grit to go above and beyond,” while another respondent said, students’ lack of “Respect towards peers and authority” and their “Childish or irresponsible behavior” are the biggest issues. These comments represent the most frequent responses on teacher and staff questionnaires, however a few other responses should be noted. Several respondents indicated that the “Our teachers meeting our students’ needs” was the biggest barrier to students’ access to and success in college, a remark that may be connected to the fact that most teachers at the Academy are early career teachers with on average of four years teaching experience. These perceptions are revisited in the discussion of the theme *cultural competence*.

Students view finances as a central consideration for their postsecondary plans and access to college. Students cite finances frequently as an important consideration in their quest to access college. Many students at James Weldon Johnson Academy may qualify for financial aid based on the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch (i.e., this is often an indicator of poverty levels in schools). Regardless, students appear to believe that they must receive scholarships in order to gain access to college. Student reflections captured remarks on students’ beliefs about what they need in order to gain access to college. The following quotes from student reflections indicate that students regard finances as a central requirement for college access:

- “I have to have the money (to get into college)...”
- “I have to keep my grades high and earn a scholarship.”
- “Have the grades and money.”
- “Pass all my courses and get a scholarship or get a football scholarship.”
- “Have required GPA and tuition or scholarship.”

- “GPA; Tuition.”

Similarly, money is an important focus of students’ post-high school plans. One respondent said, “My plans are to get a job (well paying) and live my life.” Another student said, “I will go to college, get my degree, and I will get me a well paid job.” Comments like this were common in student reflections. This may suggest that finances are a major driver for students’ college aspirations.

The state’s merit-based award system is assumed by students to be the standard they must meet in order to gain access to college. One third of student respondents mentioned the state’s merit-based award system as the requirement for college access. This assumption is reflected in their fixation on meeting the requirements for the state program (exemplified in their student reflections), which starts at a 2.5 GPA and an ACT score of 20.

Unfortunately, these requirements are at the low end of college admissions standards and put students at a disadvantage for gaining access to a wide range of schools upon graduation from high school. Furthermore, the state merit-based award program may undergo changes to its requirements that may negatively impact students whose grades meet the current minimum requirement.

Parents have a limited role in their partnership with the school. However, they should motivate their children, and reinforce what is taught at James Weldon Johnson Academy. This basic assumption is unveiled in teacher and administrator descriptions of the role of parents. As an example, “reinforcing expectations” set by the school and “Communicating with teachers to have messages that are aligned” are some teachers’ and staff’s perceptions of the roles of parents. This assumption may be predicated on the fact

that most parents of students at the Academy are not college educated and often have limited time with their children due to the extended school day (This assumption is discussed further in the following discussion on roles). As such, it is assumed that parents can do little more than advocate, support and encourage their children and reinforce the Academy's messages at home.

Another assumption at James Weldon Johnson Academy is that students have a limited understanding of college and what is required to access college and succeed in college. As such, they must be taught how to be collegians. Along the same lines, there is a universal "collegiate way" (i.e., college students and graduates act like, look like, think like, etc.). One respondent mentioned that,

They have no concept of it, too. That's one of the biggest things. There's a lot of kids who don't have family members or close family friends...like their teachers or maybe one or two people if...they're lucky. They have no clue.

This comment reflects a common perception of staff at the Academy regarding students' awareness of college life. This assumption is influenced by the fact that most students at James Weldon Johnson Academy do not have a member of their immediate families that hold degrees. However, this does not take into account that extended family members of some students have college degrees, and thus some students have access to this form of social capital. In student reflections about ten of the 24 respondents noted extended family members who have gone to and graduated college.

Regardless, teachers and staff have assumed the role of enlightening students about college life. One respondent said, "I introduce students to the 'cool' opportunities I had as a college student." Another respondent said,

When working with students I consistently talk about my college experience, what kinds of opportunities are available at and after college, and how important it is to supporting a family and leading a satisfying life. My role is to help open students' eyes to how wonderful college is and support them in doing what they need to do now in order to succeed in college later."

Many interactions between teachers and staff and students at the Academy promote such beliefs through discussions on what college students do and how college students behave. In the student reflections a respondent said, "My principal helps me by showing me how people supposed to act in college." A few other student responses in their reflections indicate that students are getting information from teachers and staff about what constitutes the college experience.

Several study participants expressed concern that some teachers and staff at the Academy are minimally aware of the common experiences of African American collegians. As such, the "universal collegiate experience" may not be indicative of what students at James Weldon Johnson Academy will experience. This is discussed in further detail in the *cultural competence* theme. Overall, this type of faculty involvement in promoting the value of college and in providing information on college life is representative of the faculty involvement principle of the college-going culture theory.

Developing relationships with families is a secondary responsibility of teachers and staff. This is an assumption of some teachers and staff that I observed through a review of several forms of data. When asked about their top priorities on teacher and staff questionnaires, only one teacher/staff response identified parent relations as a top

priority. This informant replied that a top priority is building “Strong relationships with students and staff and families.”

Teachers’/staff’s most frequent responses to the question regarding their top priorities were related to instruction, the development of a positive learning environment and in some cases developing relationships with students. For example, one respondent said their top priority was to, “Assist students in learning reading, writing and research skills necessary to put them on a path to be successful in college” while another respondent said, “To create a safe space within my classroom for all students.” Other responses addressed teachers and staff’s specific duties such as, “To make sure my students have a functional knowledge of Spanish” and “Coordinating the schools RTI (Response to Intervention) program.” Interview data reflected similar sentiments.

The school leader regards family relations as one of his top priorities. Regarding his top priorities the school leader says his role involves, “...Recruiting, retaining and developing great teachers...pushing, promoting creative mission-aligned sometimes radical activities, events programs practices policies that achieve what we do; and building and sustaining a strong, vibrant community of supporters...from parents to neighborhood leaders.”

He noted, however, that some teachers and staff have not made these relationships a top priority. This is evidenced by the fact that several teachers and staff had not completed required home visits at the start of the year, an important relationship-building tool for teachers and staff at the Academy. Additionally, I observed minimal teacher (i.e., one teacher) participation from teachers and staff in the Parent Teacher Student Association. Language used to describe parent-teacher interactions usually places

responsibility on parents to initiate such interactions, as in a teacher's description of parents' role as "Communicating with teachers to have messages that are aligned." However, teachers and staff initiate many (if not most) teacher-parent interactions (e.g., report card conferences and calls home).

Another common assumption at James Weldon Johnson Academy appears to be in conflict with the school's belief that all kids can go to college. Some teachers and staff at James Weldon Johnson Academy believe that student learning disabilities may prevent students from making academic gains necessary for college readiness and access. This assumption is evidenced by my observation of the comment that "college isn't for everyone" made by a staff member during a meeting.

Evidence of this assumption is also found in the teacher questionnaires, where several responses spoke to the need to "be realistic about postsecondary options (especially the options of students' with learning disabilities). These remarks, while in direct conflict with the values at James Weldon Johnson Academy, are not in direct conflict with the college-going culture framework, which uses a broader term, *postsecondary options*, as in to prepare students for a "full range of postsecondary options upon graduation" (McClafferty et al., 2002, p. 5). In other words postsecondary options within the college-going culture framework are not limited to traditional college and university experiences (McClafferty et al., 2002). These assumptions are captured visually in Figure 2, with student assumptions highlighted in green.

Figure 2 Soul of a School: Basic Assumptions

Assumption #1 Students must be managed through a system of rules. When student behavior is not well managed, it is due to systematic inconsistencies.
Assumption #2 Parents have a limited role in their partnership with the school.
Assumption #3 Students' limited college knowledge requires they be taught how to be collegians. There is a "universal collegiate way."
Assumption #4 Developing relationships with parents is a secondary responsibility of teachers and staff.
Assumption #5 College is not for everyone.
Assumption #6 The biggest barriers to students' access to and success in college is students' work ethic and their attitudes.
Assumption #7 Money significantly influences students' college aspirations and their beliefs about college access and success.
Assumption #8 The state's merit-based award system is assumed by students to be the standard they must meet in order to gain access to college.

Roles Within the College-Going Culture

In examining the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy, I felt it important to learn more about the roles different members of the school community play in shaping and supporting the college-going culture at the school. Through observations and intentional questioning during interviews and the open-ended questionnaire, as well as information gleaned from student reflections, I was able to get a good sense of the roles played by each of the key stakeholders within the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Next, I will discuss the roles of the principal, teachers and staff, students, parents and community. For each of the key stakeholders I will note their own perception of their roles followed by a description of other stakeholders' perception of the role they play in supporting and shaping the college-going culture. Students' perception of the roles of key stakeholders is examined last and includes a table with excerpts from student reflections and a brief analysis of their perceptions in relationship to those of the other key stakeholders. Subsequently, a more in depth discussion on stakeholder roles is also included in the description of the theme *clear expectations*.

Additionally, Figure 3 presents Venn diagrams, one of which highlights the principal's perception of his role (depicted in the pink circle), along with other stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's roles (depicted in the green circle). Areas in which there is agreement between the principal's perception and other stakeholders' perceptions of the principal's roles are highlighted in the overlapping area of the Venn diagram and are in bold print. A Venn diagram highlighting the roles of teachers' is also

presented in the same fashion in Figure 3. Figure 3.1 highlights the roles of parents, community members, and students in the same format as the Venn diagrams in Figure 3.

The principal as the school leader has a very important role in shaping and supporting the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. In an interview with the principal I sought to gain greater insight into his perception of the role he plays in shaping the school's college-going culture. Of this role the principals says his job is "...to support teachers in the work they do which ranges from providing a compelling... accessible vision; to removing obstacles; to creating opportunities; to challenging and pushing; to saying this isn't good enough; to ask for the impossible sometimes and to expect it." This quote is representative of the school leader's preferred style of leadership, which can be described as transformative and symbolic (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

In his view, he serves as the visionary at the school and creates the environment through which this vision can be attained. More specifically, the vision he seeks is the achievement of the school's big goal, "to graduate 1000+ first generation college students by 2022." A closer look at the more practical and concrete role of the principal at James Weldon Johnson Academy is discussed next.

The principal at James Weldon Johnson Academy considers himself responsible for "human capital, programs and practices and stakeholder management." This description seems to reflect the perception of other stakeholders regarding the role of the principal. This area of agreement between the principal's perception and the perceptions of stakeholders is highlighted in the overlapping area of the Venn diagram in Figure 3 that highlights the principal's role. Stakeholders such as parents and teachers most commonly indicate that the principal's role is to set the tone for the school culture; to ensure mission

alignment between policies, practices and programs and the school's overarching mission; to support teachers in their professional development; to set the priorities of the school; to create mechanisms through which to gain community support and engagement; and to introduce college readiness initiatives at James Weldon Johnson Academy. These roles of the principal (according to other stakeholders) are highlighted in the green circle of the Principal's Roles Venn diagram in Figure 3.

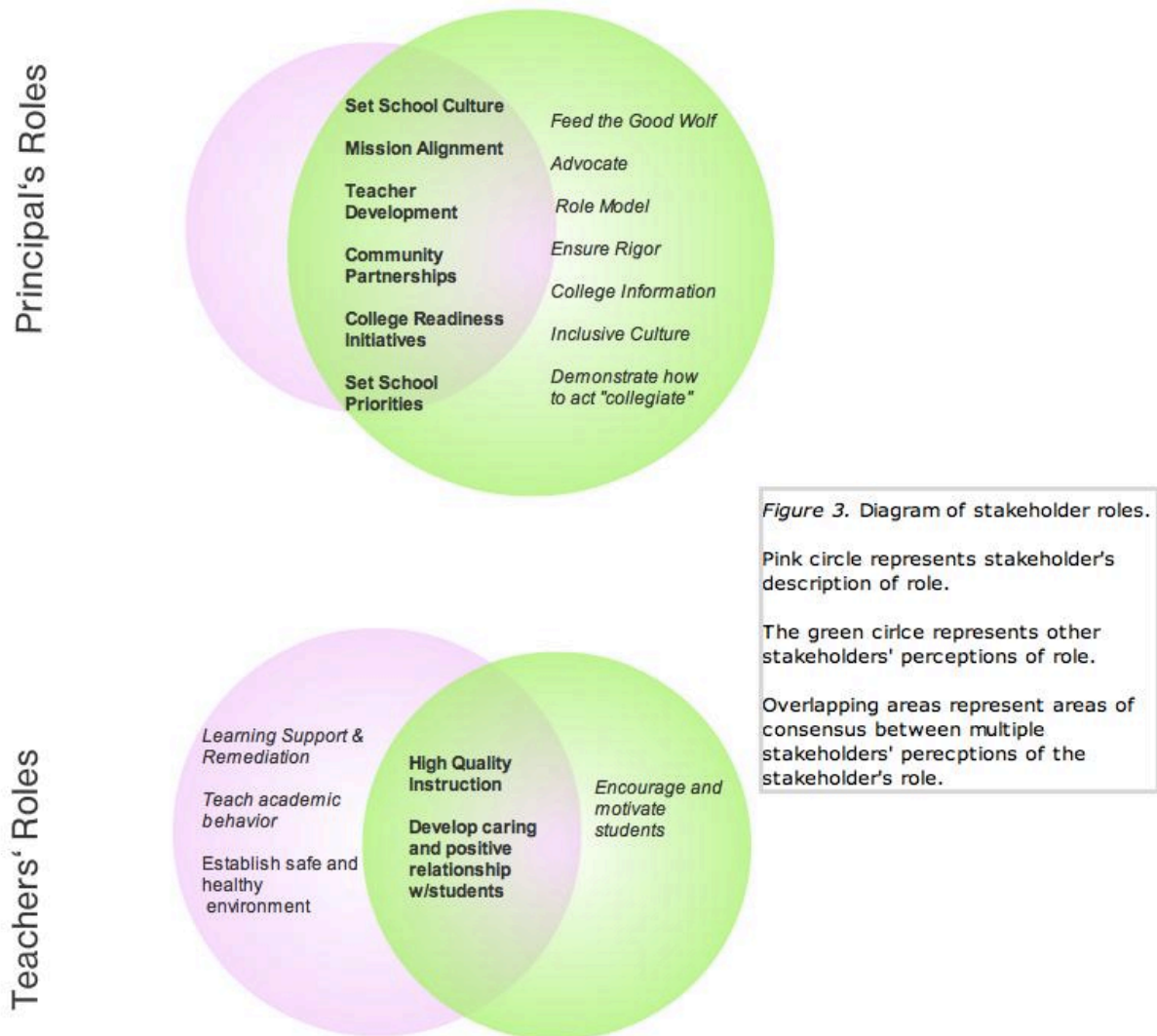
Other roles of the principal described by key stakeholders are to motivate and inspire students and staff; to strengthen student commitment to the goal of a college degree; to serve as a role model, advocate, and supporter of children; to "Feed the Good Wolf" (i.e., encouragement and positive feedback to students); to ensure a rigorous and challenging curriculum for students; and to shape a positive and inclusive school culture. In short, it seems that the principal's role within the school culture is to create a vision and to facilitate the execution of the vision. Although the principal did not mention some of these roles, his synopsis of his role was broad enough to encompass most of the additional roles highlighted by other stakeholders.

Teachers play a significant role in the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. From their perspective, teachers are responsible for delivering high quality and relevant instruction that prepares students for the academic demands of college. A teacher remarked that teachers' roles are to ensure that "students are able to master the content based on their ability coming in." Another staff respondent said teachers' roles are to, "Develop strong academic behaviors in students; enhance the cognitive strategies of students associated with college success; introduce students to information and resources about the college admissions process and the college context."

Other staff respondents indicate that teachers' roles are to help students "build good habits for long-term success." Furthermore, teachers indicate the importance of their role in ensuring all students are prepared for postsecondary education options through remediation and other learning support for students with special needs. On a softer side, the development of positive, caring relationships with students is an important role identified by teachers, as was the establishment of a safe and healthy learning environment for all students.

Similarly, other key stakeholders including the principal and parents regard the teachers' role as critical to the success of the school and its students. A parent respondent noted that teachers are to "Provide students with rigorous preparation for college." The principal echoed this sentiment and added that the teachers' roles are to connect with students, and to encourage them and motivate them to do the things they need to do to prepare for postsecondary education. This quote from the principal, "Teachers are the most important people in the building," exemplifies the centrality of the role teachers' play in shaping a successful college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Figure 3 is shown next to illustrate these varying perceptions and the instances in which stakeholders find agreement on a given role.

Figure 3 Perception of Stakeholder Roles



Parents are by far the closest adults in the lives of their children. Their influence has far reaching implications for the success of their children and of the school. From the perspective of parents, their role is to motivate and encourage their children and to hold them accountable for meeting certain behavioral and academic expectations (e.g., respecting teachers; completing assignments). One parent said her role is to, “Just constantly just keep telling them how important education is because education is the key.” Another comment indicated that parents’ role is to, “Stay on them. Make sure they’re studying. Making sure they’re devoting their free time to studying.”

Parent informants also consider themselves responsible for engaging their children in positive activities outside of school and for facilitating students’ development of integrity, good habits and skills. For instance, one parent said, “We go into the library. We spend some time in the library.” Parents also believe they are responsible for exposing their children to colleges and for staying abreast of their child’s academic progress. This is reflected in a parent’s remarks that her job is, “Showing them different colleges. Reading up on (them)... and staying in their ear like I want you to succeed. I know you can succeed.” Finally, according a parent respondents, parents are responsible for protecting their children from harm.

From the perspective of the school leader and teachers at James Weldon Johnson Academy, parents’ roles vary depending on their ability and access. One informant offered that students’ parents can be a major barrier to college access because, “Their parents didn’t have access to any good schools at all and they might not really respect education much and understandably why. They had horrible experiences at school like that meant a lot.” This respondent went on to say, “They could have a really limited role or some parents

have a really, really invested role, though too at the same time. So, I think it's just more like case-by case."

Regardless, the general consensus amongst teachers and the principal is that parents' role within the college-going culture is to encourage their children to attend college; to reinforce the school's expectations; to communicate with teachers for "message alignment" (i.e., so that parents and teachers are sending the same messages to children); to advocate for and support their children; and to hold children accountable for meeting the school's expectations. Remarks about message alignment were made in teacher questionnaires and in interviews. For instance, one teacher said, "I guess also the parents should buy into the message, too, so they can be reinforcing the message at home." Greater discussion on the role of parents is offered in the discussion of the theme *clear expectations*.

Community members also are viewed as key stakeholders at James Weldon Johnson Academy. An internal school report on the community's perception of James Weldon Johnson Academy presents two core responsibilities of the community as described by community opinion leaders. According to these opinion leaders the primary role that the community plays at James Weldon Johnson Academy is to "hold (the) school's feet to the fire and support the school." Thus, the community's role as represented in the voice of community opinion leaders is to hold the school accountable for delivering high quality instruction and a high quality learning environment for the academic, personal and social development of the children in the community it serves and to support the school in meeting these objectives.

Parents, teachers and staff and community members also present similar views of the community roles' in their interviews and questionnaires. One parent said, "Just providing, trying to provide a loving environment you know recreation wise. Make sure the child stays engaged with something to do." Another respondent remarked, " The community needs to be involved. I feel the community to also be somewhat like the advocate as the parent. They need to be questioning what's going on. They need to be involved." One teacher offered, "All of the people that students come in contact with should believe and use language that the student will, by whatever means necessary, and deserves to go to college." The school leader says the community serves as,

I think facilitators, too. Removing barriers... if barriers need to be removed.

Creating opportunities if opportunities don't exist. Being advocates, allies, partners, mentors, collaborators, um, challengers sometimes, too. You know, if we're not doing something we should be doing then it's okay to say that, too.

Other respondents suggest that the community should " Provide money and time to support students" while another respondent says the community should participate in the school's college readiness initiatives like convocation and college student for a day.

The general perception of the role of the community in supporting James Weldon Johnson Academy's college-going culture is to create opportunities for positive engagement of students outside of school; and to support and encourage positive behavior and decision-making in students. Additionally, community members' roles are to participate in James Weldon Johnson Academy's college readiness initiatives, to volunteer in other capacities, to advocate for children and to challenge the school. Based on these perceptions

of the role of the community, community members are viewed as partners in facilitating the school's college preparatory mission.

The final stakeholders whose role is examined are students. Students' perceptions of their role within the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy are gleaned from student reflections. These reflections primarily reference students' perceptions of their role in preparing for college, yet they provide a closer look at perceptions of their role at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Most of their responses address the behaviors, habits and attitudes they must exhibit in order to get into college. For instance, students said the following about their role in preparing for college:

- Get a good education; keep focus
- Work hard and prepare myself for college
- Hard work and be yourself
- Learn focus, do my best, work hard
- You have to be in school; Do good in high school; Have required GPA and tuition or scholarship
- You need good grades and have to be well rounded and by well rounded I mean joining clubs

These responses reflect the most common of students' perceptions of their role in preparing for college. I use these responses to determine students' view of their role within the college-going culture. The broader role of students as described in their reflections is to "work hard," part of the main cultural ideal of James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Teachers, parents and the school leader had the least to say about the role students' play to support the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. However, the

principal offered that, “I believe students play the most important role. I mean, and I believe that from my own experience...I mean they’re partners, too... if they didn’t want this to work, it wouldn’t.” This quote reflects the general opinion that parents, teachers and administrator have about the role of students. In short, the students’ role within the college-going culture is to buy-in to the college-going culture and to embrace the belief that they’re going to college. Parents also offer that students’ role is to work hard, be engaged learners, and to be respectful and positive.

These descriptions of students’ roles by key stakeholders are somewhat passive. However, the students’ own reflections of their roles describe a far more active role for students within the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Figure 3.1 is featured next, providing an overview of perceptions of roles of parents, students and community members. The Venn diagrams in Figure 3.1 are presented in the same manner in which the diagrams are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3.1 Stakeholder Roles Continued

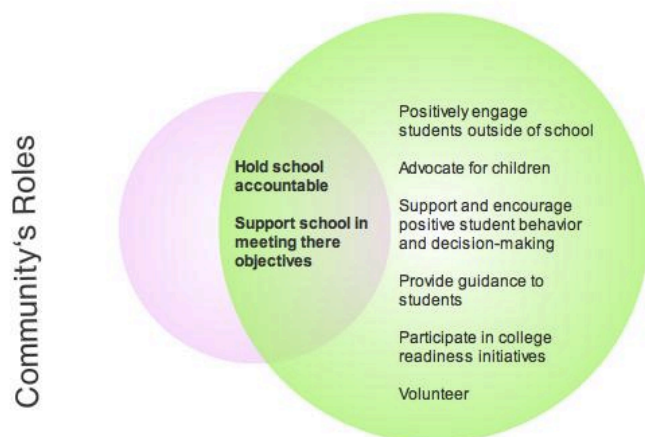
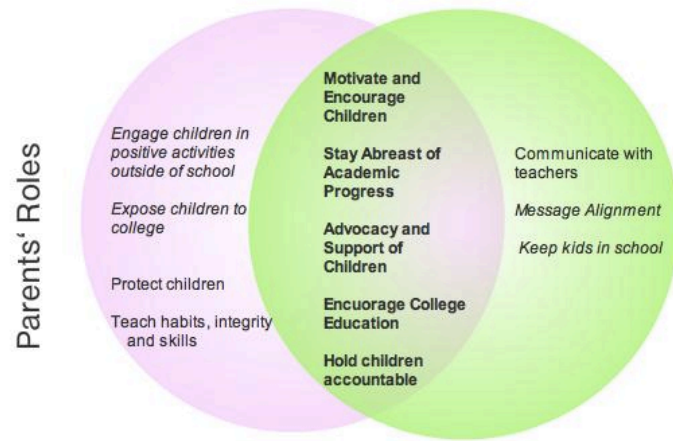


Figure 3.1. Diagram of stakeholder roles.

Pink circle represents stakeholder's description of role.

The green circle represents other stakeholders' perceptions of role.

Overlapping areas represent areas of consensus between multiple stakeholders' perceptions of the stakeholder's role.

Next, I present student perspectives on the roles that parents, teachers and staff, community and the school administrator in supporting students' preparation for college. These student perceptions were gleaned from 24 student reflections from a writing assignment in English class. The students represent a cross section of students at James Weldon Johnson Academy (e.g., various ability levels). Student perceptions of stakeholder roles are presented in Table 1 and are followed by a brief analysis of these perspectives.

Table 1

Student Perceptions of Stakeholders' Roles in Supporting Students

Principal's Roles	Teachers' Roles	Parents' Roles	Community's Roles
Tell us a lot about college	Help us with our work	They motivate me to work harder	Like community service
Gives us more opportunities	Stay on us about grades and every thing else	Telling me that college is the goal you need to set to be someone you want to be in life	Support us
Make sure I'm on task	Nothing	My parents help by keeping me in school	Cause they ain't got nothing so I watch what they go through
Makes me learn from mistakes and guide me to letting the good wolf win (the battle out of the bad and good wolf)	My teachers help me by pushing me to my limit	Guiding me to do the right thing	Nothing
Nothing	Some of them helps us but other don't	My mother care about my grades	By supporting our school
My principal helps me by showing me how people supposed to act in college	Work hard teaching us	Force me to do my best	I don't talk to my neighbors
By telling us about the SAT's test and explore testing	They teach me what I need to know	They support me along the way	IDK
Make me go to class	My teachers try they best to help me	Talk...a lot!	Nothing
Give us tips	Give me work Push me to do better in classes and to what I'm supposed to do succeed throughout my 3 more years of high school	My parents do not	They love chanting me on
Giving me a school to go to and teachers	They help me pick my grades	Help me get through school	They give good words to lead me
My principal don't help me at all	The teach me what I need to know	My mother and father tell me life lessons	And my community members do not
	My teacher does not	They help me the most; never give up on me	Support me
			They don't help me

These student responses present a wide range of responsibilities and roles played by adults in facilitating their preparation for college. Students see their parents as motivators, people who hold them accountable and the people in their lives who are responsible for what they do. They also indicate parents' role in their lives in teaching them values such as integrity. This is lost to some teachers who rarely mention parents' role in parenting as an important or at all. Students clearly value parents' role in encouraging them to consider college, in teaching them life skills and supporting and motivating them to make good decisions, get good grades and to exhibit a good work ethic.

The student responses also indicate a range of relationships that varies in quality and influence. This is especially variable among their perceptions of teachers and the principal. It seems that teachers and the principal primarily motivate them and give them the skills required to gain access to college. However, the quality of their relationships with the principal or teachers clearly impacts their perception of the quality of the assistance they get from these individuals. As for the community, some students view them as supportive of the school and encouraging, while others view them as a reminder of where and what they don't want to be, or no help at all. This range of responses sheds light on the importance of relationships in the lives of students especially in how these relationships impact student effort and college aspirations.

The Soul of a School: Core Themes

The core themes that emerged in the data are presented next. These themes are described in relationship to their connection to and impact on college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Rigor, Relevance and Relationships

Tony Wagner (2002) introduced the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework as a guide to transform secondary schools so that they respond to students' needs for preparation for participation in a knowledge-based economy. These interdependent principles refer to rigorous curriculum and instruction delivered in ways that are relevant to the type of interactions students have or will have in the world, delivered by educators with whom students have a strong, positive relationship. This framework often referred to as the "new 3R's," shifts focus from mastery of traditional content areas to mastery of cognitive skills and academic behaviors such as problem solving; communication and study skills; strong work habits; and respect, all skills highly valued in the workforce (Wagner, 2002).

Some examples of the adherence to the 3R's framework at James Weldon Johnson Academy are the extended school day to increase instructional time; the emphasis on grit and effort-based ability to develop students' beliefs and habits that lead to a strong work ethic, resilience and diligence; and the "student as volunteer" (Schelchty, 2005). Each of these concepts are in practice or discussion at the Academy.

For instance, the concept of grit, a non-cognitive variable that includes the skills and behaviors associated with long-term success such as focus, resilience, diligence, and sustained energy towards the achievement of a long-term goal, was introduced to staff during pre-school professional development (Duckworth et al., 2007). This concept was presented to teachers to help them replace common beliefs about intelligence (i.e., it is innate), with an effort-based view of intelligence (Dweck, 2007; 2010). The concept of grit is meant to enhance teachers' understanding that hard work, perseverance and other

related qualities will inevitably lead to Academy students' success, and that such behaviors can be taught. The link between grit and rigor is that students' development of grit can help improve students' success with rigorous curriculum. This is an important belief that the school leader tries to integrate into practice at the Academy.

A belief in effort-based ability also supports the belief that all kids can learn, especially if children can be taught the work ethic required for success. The question, "Why will KIPP Renaissance staff avoid using the word smart and instead use the word hardworking to describe students and one another?" This question is one of the reflection questions posed to teachers and staff to assess their understanding of and buy-in to of this institutional belief (i.e., effort-based ability).

Similarly, students were presented several lessons during the summer student orientation that were meant to generate in students a belief that "I believe with hard work and the support of my team and family, I can achieve anything I set my mind to-including a college degree!" This verbiage is used in the orientation documents entitled "goals and outcomes." Throughout the four-day summer orientation, students learned goal-setting, planning and organization skills, and other soft skills commonly linked with student success.

The language "grit" and the concepts related to effort-based ability such a working hard are played up in student responses and teacher and staff responses to varying degrees. Some respondents mention the value to "always 'work hard, be nice,' and a desire for more "Clarity surrounding the importance of working hard and being nice." Some teachers and staff reference students lack of grit as a shortcoming and barrier to student success. To that, one teacher said,

I want to say is that they have to continue to go on to exhibit the grit to get there but in our school I think that's not applicable yet because they're not, they don't yet have the resources or the confidence or the skill set or the tools to have that grit and to persevere. Because they haven't been provided with that grounding the knowledge hasn't even been laid for them to stand on or to get there yet. So I don't feel like. I just look at the accountability as far as college-going. I take it 100% off the kids. I really do.

This remark reflects a belief that teachers are responsible for developing in students the skills and attitudes that are associated with grit. Likewise, discussions on effort-based ability during professional development were meant to impact teachers' understanding of how this concept impacts teaching practice (according to the objectives of the discussion). I am uncertain, however, that this belief is fully integrated into practice at the Academy.

Participant concerns about rigor also surfaced frequently in my examination of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. One teacher posited there is a lack of uniformity in rigor at the school and that "a peak at a mid-term exam and then looking at part of the ACT will show you that it's probably not where it needs to be." Another teacher echoed this belief saying "there's not much rigor in the curriculum across the board." This quote indicates that the content and design of school-based tests are not on par with what will be expected of students when they take college admissions tests. Concerns about rigor also surfaced in the discussion with visiting, aspiring school leaders who came to observe James Weldon Johnson Academy. Their feedback included comments such as "not enough higher order thinking skills being required," "look out for low level objectives" and "how can you balance meeting kids where they are with college prep

rigor?" Similarly, during an observation of a meeting a teacher admitted that she had not really required students to apply advanced reasoning skills in her lessons and teaching. Lack of a rigorous course of study is a threat to students' college access and success (Achieve, 2009).

So, why is rigor at James Weldon Johnson Academy not at a level consistent with their college-preparatory goals? Remarks (like those previously mentioned) made by teachers reflect a basic assumption that many students at the Academy are not prepared for rigor yet (yet being the operative word).

Other remarks by staff indicate a perception that students "lack drive and grit to go above and beyond." Remarks about students' work ethic, grit and level of accountability to oneself were common in the data. Are negative perceptions of students' work ethic related to the lack of rigor at the school or perhaps, the perception of some students' low skill level is the cause of the limited rigor at the Academy? Could it also be that some teachers still have not embraced the belief in effort-based ability that would help students' acquire the tools to overcome their academic underpreparedness in ways that will help them persevere through a rigorous course of study?

During the early part of the year (September), I had a conversation with a teacher regarding a math skill-building class the teacher was teaching for students far below grade level in math computation. A course was developed to enhance their skills so they could enhance their basic skills to increase their success in algebra class. The teacher told me, "These students are stupid. They can't learn. I can't teach them." Consequently, this teacher's treatment of the children in her class made it evident that this was her belief. The teachers' behavior and beliefs were in direct conflict with the effort-based ability belief

articulated at the Academy and furthermore, her behavior worked in detriment to the children. As a result, the teacher was terminated shortly thereafter.

But other teacher comments suggest they have not fully embraced this belief in effort-based ability as well. One teacher said,

Because we're losing all our good kids... and when I say good kids, 'cause they're all good kids. When I say good kids I mean kids that just have that natural gift and have that academic ability without being pushed too hard.

This statement indicates that this teacher still holds on to the idea that intelligence is innate, a contradictory belief to the effort-based ability belief so important to the Academy's development of student behaviors that will help them persist with a rigorous curriculum.

Other statements from teachers suggest that there is still some degree of belief that students are not yet capable of meeting the demands of a rigorous curriculum. One respondent said, "they're taking geometry and algebra at the same time, which may be a little overwhelming for a student like on a sixth grade leveling math." This reflects a limited belief on the part of this teacher in students' ability to engage in the rigorous course of study at the Academy. This belief is reflected elsewhere, including in the level of rigor of courses at the Academy. Along these same lines, concerns regarding low expectations surfaced in my investigation of the school culture. For instance, another respondent said, "don't feel that expectations are high because, number one there's not much rigor in the curriculum across the board." Another respondent said of the school's culture,

It's idealized as a culture that prepares students for college in the sense of having high expectations and in the sense of where we're directing our students. And my

concern is that as a first year school and as a staff that is fairly inexperienced across the board if you averaged out the years of experience for teachers, that we're not you know necessarily holding high expectations uniformly, or consistently even with teachers day to day.

Another staff member said, "no excuses for students and staff" is an important change that needs to be made to the school culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. There was no shortage of these comments in teacher and staff questionnaires and in interviews with teachers and staff.

These examples indicate that efforts to increase expectations and rigor at the Academy may need to be more intentionally focused on instilling in students a belief in effort-based ability and in providing tools to develop grit and habits of mind that lead to student success. Currently, language and practices of some members of the culture-sharing group do not yet reflect the beliefs that are linked to student success (e.g., effort-based ability). Despite the varied views amongst staff on the level of rigor at the Academy, parent participants and student participants consider the curriculum at James Weldon Johnson Academy to be outstanding. One parent respondent said, " I feel like, really like, I love the educational program" at ARISE schools. Student respondents indicate that they are being adequately prepared for college, as in comments like, "My school prepare me by giving me all the work they can so I can go to college" and "They give us (state merit-based program requirements) and they teach us really well."

Despite these diverse perspectives on rigor and associated beliefs regarding student ability, the level of rigor at the Academy emerged as an important issue for examination. Rigorous curriculum is a significant component of college-going culture and is a strong

predictor of student success in college. ((ACT, 2010; Astin, 1993; College Board, 2008).

Based on the testing and curriculum principle of the college-going culture theory, students must have access to the courses associated with college readiness (McClafferty, et al., 2002; McDonough, 2006). Although the Academy offers such courses, there may be some discrepancy in the level of rigor of these courses, an issue that may have implications for student success in college.

Education reform literature informs that positive relationships between adults and students have a positive impact on student outcomes (Wagner, 2002). In my examination of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy, relationships building and the quality of adult-student relationships at the Academy emerged as a significant feature and discussion within the school culture.

The James Weldon Johnson Academy team and family value demonstrates the connectedness to the importance of relationships in the 3 R's framework and the role of relationships in supporting student success (Wagner, 2002). Round table groups at the Academy also are geared towards the development of strong bonds between students and teachers that are long lasting. Finally, the four-year commitment teachers make to the Academy help in the development of such relationships and in consistency in positive adult relationships in students' lives.

Some teacher and staff respondents mention that they help "Make students feel loved and cared about" and "Make sure that the students feel comfortable and have a safe learning environment." These examples support the analysis that relationship building is viewed as a priority at the Academy. All of these initiatives are examples of the Academy's master plan to enhance relationships associated with student success.

The quality of relationships between adults at James Weldon Johnson Academy and students varies greatly. Student reflections illustrate how broad the range of relationships is between students and key stakeholders (see Table 1). Some students' perception of teachers indicates that teachers "Push me to do better in classes and to what I'm supposed to do succeed throughout my 3 more years of high school." Other respondents said, "My teachers try the best to help me." In fact, most student respondents viewed their teachers favorably. Views of the principal vary to a greater degree. Student respondents express that the school leader "(He) supported us with things and gives us advice" while others described him as unhelpful. The quality of relationships between students and adults at the Academy require further examination.

During a visit from aspiring school leaders involved in a national leadership program, observations of classrooms at the Academy generated feedback on the quality of student-teacher relationships. Among this feedback were remarks such as the "level of rapport between teachers and students seemed low" and "how do you show students you are interested in them?" During the feedback session between the visitors and the school leader, a guest reflected her concerns regarding the quality of these relationships. The principal responded by sharing several formal ways the school works to enhance relationships and then expressed his view that relationships are more important than systems. He acknowledged that a shift in thinking and practice is necessary at the Academy and that this change is in progress.

To illustrate the conflicting views about relationships amongst the James Weldon Johnson Academy team and family, I offer a description of an exchange between the teachers and me about student-teacher relationships. At a professional development

meeting in which the principal led a discussion about student management, he suggested that a systems approach to discipline will not work and that relationship building is more effective. Teachers pushed back with focused comments on the need for stronger consequence systems. Shortly thereafter, I engaged in a conversation with a few teachers in which I was asked my view of their discipline at James Weldon Johnson Academy. The conversation played out like this:

I think there's a tug of war between the principal and teachers. He wants more relationship building and you want more systems. If 95% of your conversations on discipline focuses on systems and only 5% focuses on relationships, then that's the problem, I remarked. Another teacher replied, "Don't people need to feel safe in order to build relationships? To that I replied, "When you build relationships you create the trust necessary to make systems work. Without it, systems are doomed to fail.

This dialogue reveals the "which came first" debate fueling these discussions about relationships and systems. This exchange also reveals a host of assumptions that are important in understanding the dynamics impacting student-teacher relationships. First, there may be some reliance of some teachers on systems to manage students. One teacher commented that "... we're relying very heavily on some 'magic structure' to appear in the school" to deliver the kind of culture the staff desires." This reliance on systems is also evidenced by the 49 infraction, 17 consequence discipline matrix and consequence system at the school. An entire theme is dedicated to a discussion on the rules and consequence-laden culture of James Weldon Johnson Academy. The discipline model and other related topics are discussed further in the rules and consequences theme.

The second important point to address is this notion of safety. The teacher's remarks about safety lead to the questions "Who is feeling unsafe at the Academy, and what needs to happen to ensure the culture of the school is safe for everyone?"

The principal has been explicit on the importance of relationships, "What we believe here is that personal relationships are essential to students' success." Regardless, the schools' value of highly structured learning environments may be bucking their other values regarding the importance of relationships. Perhaps the community's understanding of these values and the ways in which they are put into practice should be revisited in order to reconcile this clash of practices so that they are more complementary than conflicting. But upon closer examination of the culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy, one will find a few beliefs and practices that fall outside of these values. For instance, one respondent said,

I think we're sort of grasping for control when we think that other things aren't going well. Like, "Oh the kids aren't super excited and participating. Oh the kids are sort of acting out or being disrespectful. We need to make it more controlling and structured. " So, I think that's the easiest and quickest direction to go in. Like (more rules), I'm gonna countdown and I'm gonna expect this and if not, BOOM!

Consequence or here's a new rule or something like that. And I think that that hurts the trust and the confidence that the students might have of us, and the teachers.

This quote illustrates the tension between practice regarding student management that may be impacting the quality of relationships between adults and students at the Academy negatively. This is discussed further in the rules and consequences theme. These examples illustrate a range of factors influencing student-adult relationships and reflect

variance in the quality of relationships between students and adults at the school. Yet, the priority of the school leader on facilitating the development of high quality relationships is indicative of the understanding of the importance of such relationships within a college-going culture.

The relevance of learning activities at James Weldon Johnson Academy emerged as an important consideration in the examination of the school's college-going culture.

Relevance refers to learning activities that teach important skills, as well as the level of connectedness and value of school learning activities to the activities in which students are engaged in other areas of their lives (Wagner, 2002).

The importance of relevance as a priority for teachers at the Academy was first introduced during pre-school professional development. During that time, the principal introduced Schelchty's (2005) concept of the student as volunteer, that speaks to the idea that educators are responsible for designing high quality learning experiences in which students want to invest their time and energy. The principal also laid out a list of 10 characteristics of relevant assignments, such as student choice in "how and what is done within specified parameters" and "novelty and variety." This discussion on students as volunteers also called for teachers to share best practices from their most successful assignments over the course of their teaching careers.

My examination of the school culture at James Weldon Johnson included observations of classes. These observations allowed me to see a wide range of engaging teaching styles and strategies in practice. The use of manipulatives in geometry class, use of video in the classrooms, brain breaks (i.e., breaks in which students do silly dances or fun games to release idle energy during 100-minute classes), interviews, debates and unit-long

projects are among some of the learning activities and instructional strategies I've observed while at James Weldon Johnson Academy. I have also observed some classes that are primarily lecture-based and some classes where silence and compliance are treated as engagement. The wide range of learning and teaching styles of students and teachers represents the diversity within the school and differentiation of instruction and relevance are two areas of pedagogy that are often considered when developing lessons.

There is also a certain degree of disengagement in some students at the Academy that is fairly consistent. These students are often off-task and disruptive in the same classes and on a regular basis. In one class observation I was asked by a teacher to sit behind two girls who had been disruptive in previous classes. During my observation the students followed the lesson with their guided notes (i.e., handouts that accompany lectures with blanks for key concepts that help learners stay focused and on task). However, the task of following the lecture proved to be uninteresting to them.

The girls quickly engaged in a dialogue, causing some distraction especially to the instructor. I tried to redirect students gently, by reminding them to get on task, but determined that the conversation they were having was far more interesting to them and engaging than the lesson that was being delivered. After all, they were able to fill in their guided notes, answer all related questions regarding the lesson and hold a conversation at the same time. This example represents an experience for some students at the Academy.

Comments such as "this class is boring" or "I can't stand that class" reflect some students' aversion to certain teaching styles. Oftentimes, student disruptions are a direct response to boredom in the classroom. More recently I spoke with a student in the hallway (removing students to the hallway during class time is a method sometimes used to

redirect student behavior at the Academy) to find out why he was asked to leave class. He informed me that he was bored in class so he let out a loud sigh, which caused a disruption. I have observed this student on several occasions in the hallway during this class period. According to the Academy's beliefs about student management, a student's behavior will be repeated when the behavior yields the desired outcome. This scenario raises an interesting question. If this idea is true, are some students escaping boredom by disrupting classes at James Weldon Johnson Academy?

Although teaching styles at the Academy are varied, the lesson structure is usually similar across classes. One teacher describes the learning environment as predictable, saying, "...we create problems for ourselves. I think kids are pretty bored in a lot of classes and we hear it, you know. Kids are bored with the structure of school sometimes." Another teacher said,

I think every adolescent needs to have a 'why'? ...Making things real. Hooking your lessons with concepts that are real. And I just feel like that has to be done. Because the kids are at a point where they can make a choice to not do that. And that's an easier choice for a lot of them.

This quote reflects a concern that lack of student engagement or relevance of lessons may discourage students from maintaining an interest in education.

The rigor, relevance, and relationships theme highlights values and practices at James Weldon Johnson Academy that are related to the 3R's framework (Wagner, 2002). It also sheds light on the practices and values that are still under development within the culture (e.g., development of relationships with students and actual integration of effort-based ability belief into practice). Although the Academy holds beliefs and uses strategies

and language that fall within the 3R's framework, the myriad concepts from grit to students as volunteers might be too many to recall in practice. Perhaps a simplified version of the values and beliefs may help to improve alignment of practices that can lead to stronger rigor, relevance and relationships at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Also, the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework is closely tied to the testing and curriculum (e.g., rigorous, college preparatory curriculum), faculty involvement (e.g., development of relationships that enhance student achievement), and clear expectations (e.g, clearly articulated expectations for students to exhibit grit to persist through a rigorous curriculum) principles of the college-going culture theory as discussed above.

Rules and Consequences

Student experiences at James Weldon Johnson can be characterized in part as laden with rules and consequences. This theme examines the beliefs, assumptions, language and practices related to the system of rules and consequences in practice at James Weldon Johnson Academy. Attention is paid to the impact of this aspect of the culture on student-teacher relationships, student development of maturity and the relationship between rules and consequences and preparation for college.

When first introduced to James Weldon Johnson Academy, I learned right away that teachers, staff and the school leader pride themselves in creating a highly structured learning environment of systems that effectively and respectfully manage students. During the earlier phase of my data collection I sat in on a conversation where staff and the school leader about what characterized ARISE schools. The list they generated included a description of ARISE schools as “highly structured.” I observed their development of many of these systems through a mostly collaborative process including the development of the

grading policy, the discipline matrix and demerit system (i.e., the consequence system) as well as several other practices that help in the management of students. System development is part of the complex structures that characterize ARISE schools.

For some adults at James Weldon Johnson Academy, highly structured learning environments translated to a rule and consequence laden school culture. For instance, student noise in the cafeteria was relatively loud. So, within the first few weeks of school, students lost the privilege of sitting in the cafeteria with their friends. From September to February, students were required to sit with their round table for both breakfast and lunch. Regarding this practice, one teacher said, “I mean it’s a culture that in some ways is not a high school culture. You know, in my high school we ate lunch and never, hardly ever saw a teacher and it was fine.”

Another rule that is enforced at the Academy is that students cannot use the bathroom during class time with the exception of the one “emergency” they get per semester. Instead, students are expected to use the time they have between classes to use the bathroom. Since students get five minutes to change classes, and they only occupy one wing of the third floor, the five-minute change of classes is viewed as sufficient for bathroom use as well. Similarly, during the course of the semester, students were disallowed from getting water during the change of classes. I observed teachers ushering students past the water fountain to discourage lollygagging. The principal expressed on the first day of school that students are expected to be “constantly moving,” referencing the pitfalls of idle time (e.g., no leaning on the walls).

These are just a few of the practices and systems created that are indicative of the school’s highly structured characteristic. Is the assumption in play at the Academy that high

school students require a complex set of rules and consequences to manage their behavior? Next a description of the discipline matrix process is presented to provide a view of the philosophies and beliefs underlying this set of rules and consequences and the process engaged to create it.

The development of the discipline matrix may help to illuminate the process engaged to develop these systems. The discipline matrix is a spreadsheet that highlights 49 possible student infractions that may occur and the 17 possible consequences students may receive for each infraction. The school leader engaged teachers and staff in a collaborative process to develop this matrix, which is a significant part of the Academy's student management system. It should be noted that the discipline matrix is structured using the Academy's "proactive, positive and instructional" student management beliefs framework.

The process began with the principal handing out the open spreadsheet. The only items filled in were the list of infractions on the far left column and a row of possible consequences on the top row. So, the center of the matrix was empty so that the teachers and staff could determine for each infraction, the most suitable consequence for the infraction. For each infraction teachers debated the merits of each possible consequence and the ways in which the consequence would help teach children "replacement behaviors," one of the goals outlined in the student management discussion (e.g., consequences should teach students replacement behaviors).

Some of the conversations that were considerate of the proactive, positive and instructional beliefs regarding student management were meant to ensure that consequences were not counterproductive. For instance, teachers were adamant that

students should not get suspended for skipping class. They viewed such a consequence as counterproductive. Instead, students would receive a lunch detention. Similarly, the school leader believed it important to assign a serious consequence for missing homework, since the objective is to discourage the students from missing this important learning activity. Additionally, the principal informed that missing homework is viewed seriously because students can access teachers until 9pm each night.

After some discussion, teachers came up with a demerit system. Students receive one automatic demerit for infractions like missing homework, incomplete homework, tardy for class, tardy for school, dress code violations, using profanity, and “hallway expectation violation” (e.g., noisy). Lesser offenses include disrespect and insubordination, which results in a teacher-generated disciplinary action. More serious offenses that require family contact include infractions such as excessive school absences, frequent dress code violations, cutting class, forging parent signatures, major disruption of school, and gang activity.

The most serious violations were violent acts and other physical altercations and theft. Most of this discussion centered around the Academy’s no tolerance policy, which requires a 1-3 day suspension for violence, behavior contracts and second offense of 5-7 day suspensions. Students could also be assigned to Saturday school, that sometimes uses service learning as a punitive measure. Students could be assigned to Saturday school to clean up the building or paint the hallways. The most serious offenses such as weapon offenses, sexual harassment, sexual misconduct and any drug or alcohol violation requires a mandatory report to law enforcement. The longest suspension on the discipline matrix is for the sale of drugs, which can cost students up to a 10-day suspension.

During the discussion of possible consequences, a few noteworthy considerations were mentioned. First, the principal stated that academic exercises should not be punitive. Another consideration I brought forth is possible consequences for bystanders to offenses. The quote “silence means approval” was used to focus this point because some students (and adults) are taught not to “snitch” (i.e., tell authorities) when they witness an offense such as an illegal act. This leads to a culture where violence and intimidation is rampant. Thus, teachers and staff added consequences for bystanders (i.e., assignment to Saturday school).

However, Saturday school was not meant to be primarily punitive, but is rather meant to provide additional academic support, according to the principal’s remarks, “there shouldn’t be lots of kids in Saturday school for punitive reasons.” Instead, the principal recommends students in crisis go to counselors, in-school suspension as an option, and lunch detention. There was also discussion on leveraging student activities and clubs to address behavior issues (e.g., suspension from band or dance team). Additionally, round table groups were identified as an effective place to develop student habits for success and for reinforcing the value of coming to school and being on time.

The discipline matrix, by design was meant to be instructive, proactive and positive. This is evidenced by the principals response to my question, “How do consequences and policies relate to college readiness. His response was, “ We place value on being on time. (We’re) Preparing them for consequences they may experience in college. There are no rewards for coming late. So, when these structures aren’t in place they (students) are still set up for success” (based on their habits of mind learned through systems like the discipline matrix).

Although the student management system at James Weldon Johnson Academy includes classroom management strategies including systems for managing time and classroom space, behavior modification strategies, and the communication of expectations, much attention is spent on rules and consequences in some classes. Language used at the school reflects this emphasis such as terms like “demerit goals” and “consequence systems.” During students’ round table period, students work with their advisor to set goals for the number of demerits they plan to earn each week.

Walking past a class one day I overheard a teacher saying, “We have a new consequence system” that she was presenting that day. Hallways at the school also have graphs showing the round tables that have the least demerits, hoping to use rewards such as pizza parties and fried chicken lunches as incentives to stay within their demerit goal. Round tables sometimes get shout-outs for “only earning X number of demerits.” A student in the roundtable I worked with most often described the irony of the demerit goal practice saying, “ This is dumb! I don’t plan on getting in trouble.” Upon making this statement the student set a goal of no demerits. To that the teacher said, “Way to set the bar high!” These interactions may be messaging to students that teachers, staff and administrator’s expect that students will do the wrong thing.

Other indications that rules and consequences are a large part of the school culture are school-wide detentions and daily calls home to parents to inform them about student detentions. Some of the work I did at the school on school-community relations (as part of my internship) indicated that most correspondences with parents were for negative

reasons. This prompted a change in the way they handled calls home, including an increase in positive calls home.

Regardless of this awareness, execution of these systems continued, showing evidence that the management system may need modification. One week in October a teacher issued 129 demerits, almost as many demerits as there are students enrolled at the school. By mid-October 436 automatic detentions were issued and 1413 demerits for disobedience and insubordination were given. The principal-led discussions prodding teachers to reflect on the school's stated beliefs regarding student management and to consider what these patterns of behavior might be indicating.

Conversations on student management usually resulted in new rules and methods of student management including strategies like writing student names on the board as a warning and adding a check next to it if a demerit was to be issued. Some teachers grew reliant on the casting out method, in which students were asked to leave classes for a time if they were disruptive or disrespectful. While these students were out of the classroom, teachers could keep students in the classroom on task and engaged in an activity long enough to step outside and redirect the ousted students' behavior. However, the casting out method became what one teacher called, "an unintentional norm." Regarding this practice one teacher said,

If your whole day consists of being nagged and nagged and nagged and nagged and not taught and you're a student that's being put out of the classroom more than you're in the classroom, how could we expect them to be interested in college?

This quote reflects the potential impact of this rule-laden culture on students' college aspirations and attitudes towards education. Students frequently expressed

discontent with this aspect of the culture. One student said that James Weldon Johnson Academy needed to “Change some of the school rules because it’s not fair we get treated like middle school kids.”

An entire code emerged in my research called “Baby,” a label assigned to experiences in which rigid rules limited students’ choices at the Academy. Examples of such experiences include assigned seats at lunch and having students “write lines” or punishment papers as a teacher-generated consequence. A significant portion of student reflections voiced their disappointment in the limited options they had at the school, the manner in which they are treated (e.g., “we are babyfied”), and the lack of independence and maturity they are able to exhibit because of the rules and regulations at the school. At the same time, teachers indicated that one of the barriers to students academic success is their (lack of) “Respect towards peers and authority” and their “Childish or irresponsible behavior.” What within this system promotes the development of maturity in students? Have they considered that students have few options to socialize during the day?

Another example of the emphasis on compliance at the Academy is found in my description of my observation of students’ transition from lunch to class one day. One afternoon after students were dismissed from lunch, students were directed to walk up the three flights of stairs back to their classes in total silence. If a student made a sound, whether it was a giggle, a whisper or a scream, they were required to walk back down to the bottom of the stairs and start again. Some students had to endure this process as many as three times. The objective of this strategy was to reduce students’ noise level while they travelled through the building so as not to disturb others in the building. The result was a

host of angry students and a number of outbursts including, “I’m not doing this shit!” This strategy was not effective and was abandoned immediately.

I have also observed a teacher withhold test review as punishment for student non-compliance and deny students participation in special college-readiness assemblies as a punishment as well. These student management strategies do little to support student development of positive habits and in some cases prevent them from gaining experiences that may support their preparation for college. Additionally, these management strategies go against the mandate by the principal that “ academic exercises should not be punitive.”

Student management strategies such as these can result in other unintentional outcomes, such as damaged relationships with students; a concern reflected in this teacher’s quote. “ You might lose more by using your authority... because it hurt the relationships.” These examples beg to question, are these practices aligned with the articulated beliefs and assumptions about student management at James Weldon Johnson Academy? Are these strategies positive, proactive, and instructional?

Interestingly enough, each of the two parents interviewed during this study remarked about discipline at James Weldon Johnson Academy. One suggested that student discipline is an area of improvement needed most at the school, citing observations of students’ disrespectful interactions with teachers and staff. Another parent compared the culture to a dictatorship. She expressed genuine concern that the school was not preparing students for college but for “the institution” (i.e., prison). These views do little to provide a solution to the challenge of creating a safe and structured environment where strong and positive relationships exist between teachers, staff and students.

In a conversation with the principal regarding student management at James Weldon Johnson Academy, he noted that improvements were being made in how teachers manage student discipline. There are still some teachers that tend to rely on rigid rules and consequence systems, but he regarded this as a reflection of teacher inexperience. Several teachers at the Academy are in their third year and as noted previously the average amount of teaching experience at the Academy is 4 years.

Several changes have taken place throughout the year to respond to the challenges of student management. For instance, in January the principal rolled out a revised version of the discipline matrix. One revision in the matrix is that teachers would take greater ownership of the detention process. Instead of school-wide detentions, teachers would have to manage their own detentions in exchange for less frequently scheduled school-wide detentions. The thinking behind this is that “discipline strategies will only work if all people involved in a conflict are present” to address them. The principal reminded teachers that, “The purpose of detention is not to take a pound of flesh... the purpose of detention is to change behavior.”

The next major change to the discipline matrix was a mandatory 30-day suspension for fights. From my observation, teachers and staff were in favor of this new policy because they offered no feedback. However, in private conversations regarding this lengthy, no-tolerance rule, teachers expressed to me disappointment and frustration that such practices are in place at the school. The shared that one student even had a 45-day suspension (i.e., 45 school days) for fighting. In talking to the school leader about this policy, he said that he doesn’t really use it, but he hopes that saying that will discourage students from fighting. In total, close to 15 fights have occurred on campus and a loaded

handgun was also brought to school. The dilemma of managing student behavior and keeping children safe in an urban setting is a significant challenge, a challenge schools across the country face regardless of income level or community type.

So, these rules and consequences are designed to keep the school community safe, and to be proactive, positive and instructional. But are these approaches bringing about the outcomes they intended? Student voices say that these rules in consequences are negatively impacting their experiences. Here are a list of comments by students regarding their perception of the school culture and the ways in which it can be improved specifically related to rules and how students are treated:

- They can start treating us like high school students.
- The school need to lay off of the rules.
- ...The teachers not giving us demerits for nothing.
- The school can be improved if they didn't have no mess going on; letting us sit where we wanna sit in the cafeteria and going to different places to have fun instead of doing work.
- Change some of the school rules because it's not fair we get treated like middle school kids like little kids.
- More freedom, not too hard, stop babying.

The most frequent responses had to do with students' perceptions that they were getting "babied" and that there are too many rules and consequences at the school. It should be noted that student do not take physical education at the Academy this year, have extended days, and have short lunch periods three times per week. This rigid schedule, necessary to a degree to meet their college readiness requirements may be preventing

students from having a more enjoyable high school experience. However, staff at the Academy are aware of the impact of this lack of outlets on students high school experience. At a staff meeting in February, one teacher inferred that the extended day without outlets makes them (students) want to bolt out of school just like some of us felt right now. After that meeting, teachers voted to allow students to sit where they wanted in the cafeteria.

In sum, it may be helpful to revisit some of these practices to ensure alignment with the school's values and beliefs about student management. Likewise, an examination of hidden assumptions about students may be helpful to determine if such assumptions are influencing interpretations of student behavior. Are these rules and consequences negatively impacting student-teacher relationships? Or still yet, is another factor impacting student discipline? The next theme explores the issue of cultural competence at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Cultural Competence

Cultural differences between students and teachers and staff require additional examination as it relates to its possible impact on student learning. During the coding process of data analysis this theme emerged and will be discussed in full here.

I begin with a quote from a parent interview where concern was expressed regarding teachers' cultural awareness of the students they serve. The parent commented,

The teachers are doing the best that they can but I think that what they really needed before they were just thrown in that water I think that they did need that cultural awareness of, this is what you're dealing with...These are the types of homes that some of them are coming from...Some of these children don't get hot meals.

They eatin' noodles and potato chips. So, we gotta get to that. We gotta get to the heart of the matter. And then you'll, I think you'll see a change in the behavior.

This quote reminds me of a situation I observed at the school in which a teacher removed a student from class for being, as he described it, disrespectful. During one of the earlier class periods at James Weldon Academy, the teacher brought the student into the dean of students' office stating that the young man said something disrespectful. However, the teacher could not recall exactly what the student said. The teacher appeared frustrated, quickly stated his issue, and abruptly left the room to return to his unattended class.

Once the teacher left I asked the young man what happened. He shared with me that his heart was hurting and that he felt like he was dying. He said he told the teacher he needed to go to the nurse, but the teacher asked him to wait. The student promptly told him that he could not wait and that he really needed to go. The teacher's response was to continue to keep him on hold, since the young man's interruptions interfered with the teacher's assistance of another student. So, the student told the teacher, using a phrase like, "You've got it messed up if you think I'm 'bout to sit here." This response prompted the teacher to take the student to see the dean.

After hearing this story I asked the student what he ate the night before. To that he responded, "noodles and hot sauce." I wondered if this was by choice or if the student did not have access to another meal option. Since the student indicated he was not feeling well, the dean of students instructed him to go to the nurse to get his issue addressed. When the student returned, he reported that the nurse believed he had heartburn and that he was given medicine to relieve his discomfort.

After the student felt a little better, the dean and I talked to him candidly about how he addressed his needs in the classroom. We asked him to consider the other ways in which he could have handled the situation and brought to his attention that his presentation of his issue may have influenced the teacher's reaction. In essence, we determined that the student was not trying to be disrespectful, but rather he was trying to get his needs met.

As we continued our discussion, I explained to the student that the teacher, a young white male, may not be familiar with the terminology the student used and thus may have interpreted what the student said as intentionally rude based on the student's tone. That the teacher wasn't able to articulate what aspect of the content of the student's remark was rude influenced my analysis.

One lesson that the student could take away from this experience is that if he wants to get his needs met, he should adjust his communication style so that the person with whom he is speaking is able to understand what he's trying to get across. I explained that while I understood what he said, some of what he said could get lost in translation if the person with whom he is speaking is not familiar with his vernacular. The bottom line, you don't speak to your mother, the same way you speak to your friends. We all modify how we speak so that we are effective at getting what we want from different types of people. The student's job while at James Weldon Johnson Academy is to learn new ways to communicate so he is able to communicate effectively with all kinds of people.

This scenario brings to mind several issues that broadly represent the impact of cultural competence and awareness on relationships between students and teachers at James Weldon Johnson Academy. First, in revisiting one of the assumptions on student management previously mentioned, students repeat behaviors that get them what they

want. The student in this case repeated this type of behavior in order to get what he wanted or needed. Here he needed to leave the classroom to take care of his heartburn. His initial approach to ask was ineffective at getting him what he needed, so he resorted to an approach that he knew would get him sent out of class to address his situation. What did the teacher do in that situation that would entice the student to behave in ways consistent with the expectations in that classroom?

Second, the cultural difference between the teacher and the student, those differences related to their generational gap, economic backgrounds, race and perhaps different life experiences, may have been at the root of this misunderstanding. What assumptions did the teacher *and* student make that may have influenced each of them to interpret the other's actions as ill intentioned? Did the teacher consider the possibility that an experience outside of school may have impacted the student's behavior?

Finally, one of the issues highlighted in this vignette is that the student felt ill and had challenges getting assistance from the teacher to relieve his discomfort. In this case, the teacher interpreted the student's actions as unwarranted, and focused on the behavior rather than the student's intended outcome. Was miscommunication the core issue in this scenario? Could the possible miscommunication be a direct result of cultural differences? Was the student really being disrespectful? Could the teacher have managed this situation differently so as not to allow this situation to become a distraction from student learning (i.e., the teacher had to leave class to handle the situation)? Regardless, teachers, staff and administrators may want to consider the role of cultural differences between students and its impact on student-teacher interactions and student learning. Without such considerations, the result could be more misunderstandings.

One of my initial observations of the school culture was that of the racial make up of the staff and students. Of the 14 teachers and staff at James Weldon Johnson, only three are African American. The rest of the staff is White, including the school leader. In contrast, 98% of the students at the Academy are African American. The principal made a point to engage his staff in dialogue on this racial dynamic, spending three and a half hours during pre-school professional development through presentations on racial identity development and culturally responsive and responsible pedagogy.

Many of the readings in the Johnson Journal (i.e., professional development reading packet) also addressed the issue of cultural competence including excerpts from Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1994) book Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children and excerpts from the book Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom (Delpit, 2006). Finally, teachers were asked to reflect on and share their reasons for working with this student population (i.e., low-income, African Americans) resulting in a wide range of responses representing varying degrees of acknowledgment of these obvious cultural differences.

Here is a summary of some of the teacher and staff's responses to their reflections on why they chose to teach at a school serving this population:

- For the community and not the race.
- They are like me. It's a conscientious choice.
- It's where I use my skills the most.
- I felt at home. Then I realized the system forces associated with race and income.
- It was a conscious decision because I'm from here.
- I was influenced by an experience.

These responses suggest that the racial and economic make-up of the student population factored into some of the teachers and staff's decisions to teach at James Weldon Johnson Academy. However, for some other teachers and staff, students' identities did not influence their decision to teach at the Academy.

This presents a potential challenge, however, in shaping a culturally relevant school. Ladson-Billings (1994) posits that culturally relevant schools hire teachers that "have an expressed interest and a desire to work with African American students" (p. 143). In order to develop culturally responsible pedagogy at James Weldon Johnson Academy, teachers also need opportunities to observe culturally relevant teaching, especially by master teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Most teachers at James Weldon Johnson Academy are early career teachers that could benefit from such experiences, an issue acknowledged by several participants in the study. As an example, one response on the teacher/staff open-ended questionnaire to a question regarding students' barriers to college access and success read, "Our teachers meeting our students' needs."

Another study participant responded that the biggest barrier to Academy students' access to and success in college is,

Experienced teachers. Experienced teachers. I mean come on. I'm getting better and better at my job... I am not nearly experienced or good enough for my students and it breaks me down and it's frustrating because I am overwhelmed with how important the job is..."

In a small group discussion on this topic one teacher went on to say, "I don't see race." The trouble with that idea is that it does not acknowledge a major aspect of one's identity that may be of significant importance. Ignoring one's cultural identity can also be

interpreted as ignoring one's culture and in essence exhibiting lack of care or interest in understanding others.

A quote from a teacher brings this phenomenon to light.

We have to stop pretending like the cultural barrier is not there, because that's what people are doing at this point. I mean heads are being turned, eyes are being closed to the fact that one of the biggest walls between... our staff being able to reach our students is the fact that they do not understand them, they do not connect to them, they cannot relate to them and they're not making efforts to do so.

James Weldon Johnson Academy staff have been encouraged formally and informally by the school leader to learn more about the culture of the students and the families they serve and about the communities in which students live. Cultural competence is an aspect of teacher and staff performance that is appraised on their evaluations. Teachers were also encouraged to draft personal learning plans to outline strategies to learn more about the communities and students they serve. The principal explicitly stated that the work of developing this awareness is important in helping teachers fulfill their responsibility to help students develop a positive racial identity. However, my observations suggest that this aspect of teacher development is often cursory. For instance, one tenth of pre-school professional development was spent on developing teachers' cultural competence (i.e., Cultural competence is not a clearly defined construct for some teachers and staff at James Weldon Johnson Academy).

For instance, one teacher asked me to assist her with devising a plan to enhance her cultural competence. In our discussion I asked her three questions. What is your race or ethnicity? What is the most challenging part of being your race or ethnicity? Finally, how

does your race or ethnicity impact your relationship with cultural others? The teacher mulled over these questions and began to respond admitting that she had not spent much time considering how the cultural difference impacted instruction and student learning. Her efforts to work through her understanding of the role of cultural competence in her teaching are an important step in developing culturally responsive and responsible pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The principal is acutely aware of the impact of the lack of structural diversity at James Weldon Johnson Academy. He says, "I think that we still have some structural barriers within the school. (The need for) More teachers of color is a barrier for James Weldon Johnson Academy students. I think the mindset that some of our teachers are growing out of by sometimes by being forced and pushed and pulled...is also a barrier." Perhaps he is referencing the assumption some teachers have regarding the priority of developing their cultural awareness.

This remark referenced the lack of structural diversity of the staff at James Weldon Johnson Academy, and the barrier this creates for students of color to identify themselves as college material and identify in general with teachers and staff. One informant commented on the perception that some teachers, administrators and staff's cultural differences prevent them from investing fully in the success of the children at James Weldon Johnson Academy. The informant remarked,

I don't feel like they're true stakeholders in this because they don't realize, it's not as real for them, because when they look around at their family everybody's going to college. Ok. When they look at the people in their neighborhoods, their families, everyone is going to college...and they (students) don't believe that they

have...people working around them that are 100% committed and believe in their success. They don't, so they don't act like it.

Here, the informant draws a connection between student misconduct and students' perception of teacher investment in student success. This informant identifies cultural differences as an issue impacting relationships between some students and the teachers, staff, and administrators with whom students do not have a cultural connection. It may not be fair to assume, however, that teachers at the Academy primarily come from communities where their families and friends all go to college, although this may be the more common experience of teachers. This does, however, raise the question, "Are teachers who are from outside of these urban communities true stakeholders?"

The aforementioned comments on "true stakeholders" reminds me of the *soul of the school* story described earlier in this chapter, in which the speaker suggested that "outsiders" in Central City were impacting education reform in ways that will impact the community long after these "transplants" are gone. Even if these perceptions are inaccurate, it may be beneficial to examine them as a school community to build stronger rapport with the community and to shift this perception.

Finally, lack of cultural diversity and of cultural awareness among the staff may have an impact on the facilitation of students' college preparation, access and success. Several teachers and staff have very little awareness of the Black collegiate experience and the challenges associated with that experience. This is illustrated in this remark from a teacher at the Academy.

...Right now in our school, since we are so small staffed, a lot of our teachers don't really know about the different opportunities, I feel like they don't understand the

concept of historically Black colleges and universities well. They don't know anything about that at all. I don't think they know about college for black kids and he (the principal) needs to be facilitating that learning.

This remark is similar to another comment made by a staff member during pre-school professional development. In a private conversation with me an Academy staffer expressed disappointment that one of the teachers was unfamiliar with the abbreviation HBCU (i.e., historically Black colleges and universities). This staffer went on to express concern that the teacher might be ineffective at supporting African American children in their college preparation if they are ill informed about collegiate option designed especially to meet the needs of African American learners. While I am unsure that lack of awareness of the HBCU abbreviation means that a teacher is ill equipped to support students' college preparation, this observation does raise the issue of awareness of the African American collegiate experience. Are teachers familiar with the common experiences of African American collegians?

Some teachers also have very few relationships with African American professionals in Central City, an issue that arose during the planning of the Convocation. Likewise, students at James Weldon Johnson Academy know very few African American college graduates. This creates a potential challenge in concretizing both students' and teachers' views of African American collegians.

As an example, during the planning of a college readiness event, a couple of teachers expressed concerns that the college student mentors might expose students to marijuana or attempt to engage students inappropriately. My reaction as the individual taking the lead on the project was to inform them that it has been my experience that students who

volunteer for such events are usually student leaders and are conscientious about the way in which they engage students. I wondered what informed the teachers' concerns. One teacher shared that she observed those behaviors at her liberal arts college.

In the same conversation, it was brought to the planning committee's attention that the special event was scheduled on St. Patrick's Day. I thought the concern was that teachers and staff required time on this day to observe the holiday. In fact, the teacher was concerned that the student mentors at the historically Black university partnering on the project would be preoccupied with observing the holiday. She said that St. Patrick's Day was a very big deal for collegians. An African American teacher on the committee informed her that it had little bearing on our event because the holiday has little significance for African American collegians. These examples reveal some assumptions of teachers about a "universal" college experience that may not be reflective or indicative of the African American collegiate experience. Enhancing teachers' cultural competence involves learning more about the experience for which they are preparing students.

Cultural and socioeconomic difference between teachers and students often impacts the effectiveness of communication regarding the benefits of college. Some teachers frame the benefits of college intrinsically, as evidenced by several responses on teacher questionnaires and in interviews. One teacher said,

I sometimes debate them over the lucrative possibilities of getting a degree, the joy of self-exploration, the nature of freedom college offers, the winning of status and respect, the change to network, the opportunity to become a professional or get a further degree or the fun of going to college.

Based on students' responses on their reflections, most students aspire to go to college for the extrinsic rewards of a good job, which likely is associated with their need to break their cycle of poverty by making money to have a "good life." Students' focus on financial rewards associated with degree attainment is reflected in the statement, "My plans is to go to college and graduate, get a job, and plan my future."

Cultural competence is not just a function of importance for White teachers in James Weldon Johnson Academy. All teachers have to acknowledge cultural differences between students and teachers. One's position of privilege as well as one's personal experiences are part of one's worldview and shape the way one interacts with others. An experience I had early on at James Weldon Johnson Academy brings this concept to light.

One Monday morning in September, a video surfaced of several young ladies from the Academy on a YouTube, dancing provocatively in their school uniforms in one of the bathrooms at school (during school hours). The video also showed simulations of the girls stealing from the local corner store, and one scene in which one of the girls was taking off her clothes while dancing provocatively. The young lady in the "strip scene" wore a t-shirt and shorts small enough to be underwear, and a tank top that was revealed when she took off her shirt. The dance style the girls performed mimicked what might be seen in a strip club. I was asked to come in and talk to the girls about the implications of their decision to participate in this video.

During the course of our discussion, I asked the girls why they performed the entire dance with their backs to the camera so you could only see their "backside." I also asked the girls what a stranger might think was being advertised in the video if they saw it for the first time without knowing the girls. I also shared with them the dangers of posting videos

like that on the internet because they could have lasting effects on how they are perceived and could even impact admissions decisions should an admission officer ever see the video.

The girls peered at me with puzzled looks. One girl said, "What's the big deal. We were just dancing. My mother dances like that." They went on to explain to me that I was not from Central City and maybe did not realize that "this is what we do." I informed them that I was familiar with the style of dance and the music that goes along with it, but the bigger issue is that others outside of Central City may not understand. My response was an attempt to shift their perception that I had judged them and their culture, when in essence I had. My privilege and life experiences inform my perception that these dances are unappealing to me (in some cases), particularly when minors perform them. I found the dance to be very provocative and inappropriate, but who am I to determine appropriateness?

These dances are customary and have meaning and significance to the ladies. I had to figure out how to approach this discussion so that I would not offend but rather generate the type of response in the ladies that would prevent them from making future videos. When two parents arrived and joined our conversation they reinforced the notion that the dancing was not a problem. Instead of being concerned about the dancing and even the "stripping" and imitated "Stealing," the parents focused on who put the video on YouTube and on how the video could be altered by someone with technological skills.

I was confused that the parents were not concerned at how the students presented themselves, further revealing my bias. So, I focused on the fact that the girls filmed the video during school hours and that they put themselves at risk because the video was accessible on the Internet. Furthermore, performing that video in their school uniforms

gave a negative impression of James Weldon Johnson Academy, in the way it depicted how students use class time at school. I also talked with the young lady who performed the “strip tease,” and informed her that this behavior is unacceptable for a minor. The parents and the girls seemed on board with where we ended up and apologized for their poor decision.

The lesson I learned was that I have to manage my biases and be aware of how my privilege and different life experiences inform my view of the students’ culture. This type of examination of one’s cultural competence and biases is important in engaging students “in ways that are respectful”, an objective of the student management system at the Academy. Regardless of racial and ethnic background, other cultural differences have to be considered in working with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. A quote from a teacher addresses this challenge.

These kids there’s like a constant struggle and battle with the person that they are sometimes forced to be when they’re outside of the school and the person they are expected to be when they’re at school. Because at school you know fighting is intolerable and then in their neighborhoods you have to fight to survive or to stay safe. Using incorrect grammar in school is unacceptable but this is how my parents talk, this is how my pastor talks, this is how my friends talk. Why is it not okay? And I feel like the struggle comes with like honoring all that we are. Because in a sense like that is who they are and I don’t feel like that’s for anyone to judge you know right and wrong. That’s who they are, that’s what they come from, that’s what they know. So I mean... respecting that those wires are there and not trying to rewire

them but add more wires so they have more to reach. And I feel like that's the biggest struggle that creates so many different problems.

This quote speaks to the importance of respecting what children bring to the table when they walk in the door. Students' "wires" represent their connection to their culture and community. According to this teacher, schools should respect that and make no attempts to "rewire them." Instead, schools should focus on teaching students new skills and exposing them to new experiences that give them "new wires" so they can access more opportunities.

bell hooks' work Teaching to Transgress (1994) addresses the phenomena of essentialism in education, in which the culture and practices of the dominant culture are considered the appropriate concepts to be taught. In the vignette about the video, I presented my views as if they were appropriate. The outcome was the marginalization of students' experience and culture. In many of these examples discussed in this theme, a "hidden curriculum" may be in practice that privileges the perspectives and experiences of those in the dominant culture, in this case the adults at James Weldon Johnson Academy and at the same time marginalizes the experiences of students (hooks, 1994). Some of the practices, marginalize the experiences of students in ways that may be damaging, especially to relationships between adults and students at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Cultural competence also may influence teachers' perception of parents. For instance, one teacher during a round table session asked her students to write the definitions on the board of the characteristics listed on the narrative report card. Since report card conferences were about to begin with parents she was concerned that "some of the parents might not know what the words mean." Some of the words on the narrative

report card are the Academy's four core values (e.g., focus on results), and terms like creativity, curiosity, bravery, persistence, integrity love, kindness, and vitality among others. On what did she base the assumption that parents would not know what these words meant? Is there another way the teacher could have phrased the statement so as not to project the assumption that parents lacked awareness of words like "love" and "integrity"?

Other assumptions about parents surface and have been noted throughout this chapter such as the assumption that, "There parents didn't have access to any good schools at all and they might not really respect education much and understandably why." What assumptions inform this teacher's statement "a lot of our parents aren't that present you know in sort of literal and metaphorical ways." Is there a link between cultural competence and teacher, staff and administrator's perceptions of parents? Does one's cultural competence impact one's interpretation of student behavior (e.g., teacher perceptions of students' manners). Finally, how conscience are teachers, staff and the principal of the potential practice of essentialism at the Academy and how such practices marginalize the children they serve?

In sum, the cultural competence theme presents a few examples of how a lack of cultural competence may be factoring into some of the relationship issues present at the school. Cultural differences may influence teachers' tacit beliefs about student behavior, impacting their interpretation and perception of students. Likewise, a lack of cultural competence presents challenges in messaging the benefits of college and in preparing students for the experiences commonly shared by African American college graduates.

Finally, the practice of essentialism may be marginalizing the experiences of students while privileging the dominant culture of some of the adults at the Academy.

This theme is important to examine because misinterpretations and misunderstandings rooted in lack of cultural competence can damage relationships important to developing positive relationships that lead to student success. Moreover, lack of cultural competence or a lack of consideration of the possibility that cultural differences may be impacting student learning can result in outcomes that are disastrous for children.

By Any Means Necessary

A brief observation of James Weldon Johnson Academy will reveal a prevalent attitude that student success will be achieved by any means necessary. This theme examines this attitude more extensively and its relationship to the *failure is not an option* belief presented earlier in the chapter. Special attention is given to the learning support practices at the school, especially for students with learning disabilities.

James Weldon Johnson Academy exhibits a commitment to aligning learner support services with their failure is not an option value. In my ten-month interactions with the team and family at James Weldon Johnson Academy, I observed a series of practices and policies that reflect a strong commitment to preparing all students for a wide range of options after high school. Several school policies and practices, namely the grading policy and the X-Factor initiative, are also indicative of their commitment to student success. A brief overview of some of the services that work in support of student learning and development are described next.

One of the support efforts that stood out in my observations was an effort managed by the school counselor. This effort acknowledged that the first step in supporting learners

is making sure they come to school. Each morning the counselor called students who were absent from school to identify the factors preventing them from attending. If students missed the bus or needed some encouragement to attend, her role was to pick them up and make sure they got to school.

There are no truant officers in Central City, so it's incumbent upon the students, their families and schools to monitor and address attendance issues. This means that students can choose not to attend school with very little recourse. A strategy usually imposed by schools to enforce student attendance expectations is to report families receiving state assistance to a social services agency. This sets up an antagonistic dynamic between schools and families. At James Weldon Johnson Academy, this strategy is used only in extreme cases. Most attendance issues are addressed through the counselor's calls to students' homes and by picking them up.

The counselor also makes sure students mental health needs are met through a series of efforts. Mental health counseling is provided at the school, addressing challenges faced by students dealing with significant issues. The counselor has been called to address situations ranging from supporting a student after she was raped to helping others manage life transitions such as pregnancies, loss of family and friends or acclimation to the school environment. These services make it possible for many students to function at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Significant support is provided to students to make sure all learners access the general curriculum. All students take the same core courses. However students who require additional assistance get support from an instructional assistant or during pull out classes. The special education coordinator meets regularly with general education teachers

to review and identify teaching strategies that are most effective for students' learning styles.

Behavioral intervention plans are also created to support positive behavior in students, and to support behavior modifications and modifications to the learning environment to prevent undesired behaviors. The coordinator also ensures that accommodations are provided to students with individual education plans and that remediation is available for the teaching of basic skills. Internship experiences are also provided to students who require experiential learning opportunities immediately in order to keep them engaged at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Finally, the X-Factor initiative and the grading policy are two approaches to learner support that are a reflection of the by any means necessary approach to student success. X-Factor, discussed previously in this text, provides students with the opportunity to work in small groups or individually after early dismissal on Fridays. This allows students to make up work missed during the week and continue to make progress towards mastery of various content.

The grading policy at James Weldon Johnson Academy is nontraditional and is designed to eliminate students' chance of failure. Instead students get extra time throughout the semester to gain mastery of concepts and complete assignments. This policy has received mixed reviews within the school community. Teachers and staff often describe this policy as a mechanism through which bad academic habits are established. Comments such as these were recorded in field notes, interviews and questionnaires.

The principal's take on the grading policy is reflected in these statements,

...Some good practices and policies don't show results right away like incompletes. If I had let teachers vote, they would have voted to get rid of incompletes because they think it encourages laziness, mediocrity, a spirit of "I don't have to do this." In fact, it doesn't. It does initially, but we can and we have put in place some other things that say, "You still have to do it anyway, so you might as well do it the first time." So we have tons fewer incompletes right now second semester because teachers have figured out.

The grading policy described above is consistent with the promotion of the growth mindset presented in the work of Carol Dweck (2010). The James Weldon Johnson Academy grading policy encourages students to apply a growth mindset, the belief associated with the concept of effort-based ability. Students who apply a growth mindset interpret academic obstacles as a chance to learn and an opportunity to work harder. In order to get students to internalize these beliefs, Dweck (2010) recommends designing grading policies that give students opportunities to learn from their mistakes and to develop good work habits, without a focus on failure, but rather a focus on progress.

The incomplete policy at James Weldon Johnson Academy, if implemented with this understanding in mind, can be very effective. In fact, students regard the grading policy and the X-Factor initiative most favorably in their reflections on attending James Weldon Johnson Academy. One student respondent said, "What I like most about James Weldon Johnson is they let you make up your work on Friday." Another respondent expressed appreciation "That we get a chance to bring our grades up on Fridays."

Several teachers expressed concern about student academic levels at James Weldon Johnson Academy, as reflected in the comment, "Working with SPED students creates

specific challenges. Some of my students have learning disabilities that will prevent them from improving significantly and I fear that their reading skills, especially will not get to a college level.” However, the learning support services provided at James Weldon Johnson Academy reflect an absolute faith in students’ ability to close the achievement gap and in teachers to facilitate this process. From my perspective, the tenor of many of these concerns expressed by teachers is indicative of their undying commitment to prepare all students for pathways to and through college.

Clear Expectations

Various data sources from this examination of college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson academy conveyed the importance of explicit and transparent expectations for all stakeholders at James Weldon Johnson Academy. This theme is also consistent with the clear expectations principle of the college-going culture theory (McClafferty et al., 2002). According to McClafferty et al. (2002), schools with college-going cultures set explicit goals regarding the preparation of students for college and specifies, communicates and operationalizes the roles of key stakeholders supporting the work of preparing students for college. This means, all stakeholders that make up the James Weldon Johnson Academy team and family (e.g., students, teachers and staff, community members and families) should be clear about the role they play in supporting the school’s efforts to prepare students for college. Findings associated with this theme will also be discussed in relation to their connection to the college-going culture theory.

Data collected during my investigation of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy expose myriad expectations muddling up any clarity or uniformity that communicates explicitly the expected roles of key stakeholders. A teacher provided insight

on the impact of the lack of clear expectations on students noting, “We had this like hodgepodge of different expectations in different classrooms. And I’m no expert on schools but I believe it’s gonna leave kids confused.”

This belief that expectations for students are unclear surfaced in a staff meeting in February. Teachers expressed concern that there are not clear expectations for students and how policies change from week to week. I also had not observed clear and consistent expectations except for in the area of discipline. Even there, teachers expressed concern regarding inconsistencies in how rules and policies are applied. One teacher stated the expectation is to “work hard and be nice.” This phrase is an expression of the cultural ideal of James Weldon Johnson, but may be too abstract to give students a specific and applicable understanding of their roles.

Another noteworthy observation was that teachers, parents and the school leader all gave broad and conceptual descriptions for the role students play within the college-going culture. One of the descriptions of students’ role is to “to trust us, trust themselves, and...trust that when we ask them to do something that it’s something they can do and is worth doing.” Some participants indicated that they expect students to exhibit grit, however, another participant suggested that teachers had not provided students with the tools or experiences to develop grit. While the debate rages on regarding students’ role within the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy, students seem to have arrived at a consensus that they are responsible for working hard, getting good grades and making good decisions (See Figure 3.1).

Parents and community members have the same general expectations of teachers and staff at James Weldon Johnson Academy. A review of my field notes from a

presentation made by Turner and Bragg High School alumni and community partners, as well as document review of an internal report on school-community relations indicates that families and community members want the staff at James Weldon Johnson Academy to stand and deliver. In an interview one parent said, “I expect them to live up to their creed to you know... ‘failure is not an option.’ It’s not an option and you know that’s what I expect. Failure is not an option!” In brief, families and community members expect the school to deliver a rigorous course of study, to exhibit care and concern for the well being of the children they serve, and ultimately get their children to and through college.

On the other hand, the James Weldon Johnson Academy team and family have varying degrees of expectations for parents in supporting the college-going culture. As previously noted in the section on roles, some staff and the school leader view the parent’s roles as varying depending on their educational background or the quality of their relationship with their children (e.g., reference the school leader’s reference to a parent with substance abuse issues in the section on parents’ roles). The most comprehensive role for parents described by a teacher or staff member is reflected in this quote,

I feel like parents play the role of an advocate. So, continuing to push it at home to be that academic support for a child and even if you can’t academically support them, because of course we have parents that cannot sit down and do physics problem because I cannot sit down and do a Physics problem...“I can’t help you with that but I’m gonna find the person who can help you.”

The same respondent went on to say,

...Parents should have to be the ones to say ...“When’s the college fair” or “How are you guys working towards this mission? When is my child going to get to go on a

college campus? Let me know so I can (you know) be involved in this. Can someone set a college tour for us?" Those are the kinds of questions, I would love to see parents doing... And even if their parents can't be that person because they're single, and working two jobs, and have other kids to take care of. I respect that totally. But to be the parent that says like, I'm going to make sure my child gets it."

This remark reflects best how parents view their own roles in facilitating students' college access and success. One parent respondent said, "I do talk to his teachers every so often...Sometimes he would come home and I would always ask him about his homework." As previously noted, parents indicate that they are responsible for, "Showing them different colleges. Reading up on...they have the 14 year old that's at Morehouse right now, like "Hey y'all! Y'all need to step y'all game up." These responsibilities fall outside of the scope of what most teacher, staff and school leader responses indicated and are reflected in Figure 3.1. Students likewise commented frequently in student reflections on the role their parents play in encouraging and motivating them, teaching them integrity and values, holding them accountable and encouraging college attendance. Students' perceptions of the roles their parents' play in helping them get into college are noted in Table 1.

In other areas of the school culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy, formal roles for parents are well defined. Parents involved with the Parent Teacher Student Association are asked to focus on advocacy of the school to the external community, fundraising and increasing membership. Although the advocacy, membership and fundraising goals directly and indirectly support the college-going mission of the school, this provides parents with little clarity on how they help facilitate students' preparation for and access to college. Moreover, it presents a limited role for the most important adults in the lives of children.

The incongruence between stakeholder perceptions of parents' roles within the James Weldon Johnson Academy college-going culture suggests that parent roles are not clearly defined within the Academy's school culture as it relates to family involvement in facilitating students' access to and success in college. According to the college-going culture theory, family involvement is an essential feature of the college-going culture (McClafferty et al., 2002).

On a similar note, parents can be assisted in providing information and resources to their children on matters such as the college admissions and financial aid processes, if schools adhere to the information and resources principle of the college-going culture theory (McClafferty et al., 2002). Thus, regardless of a parents' educational background, schools can help parents engage as partners in students' college preparation by providing them with information and resources for college.

From my observations and from the feedback of parent respondents, James Weldon Johnson Academy has not done much in the way of providing such information and resources to families. When asked about the ways in which the school provides information on college to families, one parent respondent said, "I haven't really seen any yet. I haven't seen any. Programs for the parents you said. Well, the only one I'm aware of there's a savings plan you can set up. I am aware of that one." Another respondent said, "Beside the PTSA meeting with the Upward Bound Program. That's basically about it." So, it appears that it may be helpful if the school increases the flow of information to parents so they can support students' college preparation outside of school. For the most part, no clear expectations are set for parents outside of motivating and encouraging students and reinforcing the college-going messages touted at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

In order for these parental roles to be formalized, teachers, staff, the school leader and families may consider engaging in collaboration to clarify their expectations of the roles parents play within the college-going culture. This collaboration may work in service to the broader college readiness goals of the students at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

Expectations for community members' roles at James Weldon Johnson are consistent among stakeholders. The school leader, teachers and staff, parents (and some students), expect members of the community and community partners to create opportunities outside of school that support the school's college-going mission; participate in programs at the school that educate students about college and beyond; provide direct services such as tutoring and mentoring to students; and support the school financially and through the establishment of internships for students and other related activities. Stakeholder expectations for the community are presented on Figure 3.1. Student perceptions of the role of community members at their school are illustrated in Table 1.

Community engagement at James Weldon Johnson has been very important in the first year especially in providing students with models of college graduates and professionals who share racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. These community partnerships have also generated longer-term support of the school and the potential for new partnerships and initiatives supporting students at James Weldon Johnson Academy. For instance, several volunteers who served as mentors at the Convocation continue to maintain relationships with students, taking them for lunch and checking in on their progress. Another group of undergraduate students I brought to the school for a Black History Month event expressed interest in started a program for boys at the Academy.

Similarly, another mentor from the convocation applied to be a teacher at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

But how is the expectation for community engagement formally communicated to the community? What formal mechanisms are in place to nurture and establish these partnerships? The principal is currently responsible for establishing these partnerships but a larger-scale effort can be executed to strengthen community partnerships in Central City.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that students have expectations of the school experience as well. On the very first day of school, students were asked to share their perceptions about the difference between middle school and high school. Some of the responses were (a) “More maturity,” (b) “more responsibility, and (c) “more independence.” Other responses dealt with uniforms, classes, more extracurricular activities and new people. However, student reflections and my observation reveal a very different experience for students than what they expected.

For instance, one student respondent noted, “I thought it was going to be a great high school, but it’s not a high school. They don’t treat us like a high school.” Another student reported, “I chose to go to Johnson because all the opportunities I thought was going to be here but isn’t.” Some students love the Academy as is presented in the student remark, “Because its a great school and it shows us a lot about team and family.” Another student said, “I choose to go to James Weldon Johnson Academy because I like what ARISE do.” Although students’ express varying viewpoints on James Weldon Johnson Academy overall, many students noted in their reflections a desire for the Academy to “lay off the rules.” These expressions were previously noted in the theme *rules and consequences*.

Finally, I observed students who expressed dissatisfaction with the school, primarily referring to the school's status as a first year charter school. One student looking over promotional materials for the school remarked, "this school ain't nothing like this book." I asked him what did he mean and he said, "we don't have none of this stuff." The promotional materials identified a list of extracurricular activities, most of which are offered at James Weldon Johnson Academy.

The student also mentioned that the pictures did not reflect the actual school setting, even though the pictures in the brochure were taken at the school (I will admit that the school brochures provide a "different" and somewhat more attractive view of the appearance of the school). Still, the student seemed to interpret these few inconsistencies in the brochure as a broken promise. Another student I spoke with expressed a desire to attend a school with a more established history, because traditional schools have more sports offerings, "real homecomings" and other traditional high school activities. These are some of the students' expectations and perspectives of James Weldon Johnson Academy.

In order for teachers, staff and the school leader to establish stronger relationships with students, it may be helpful to find strategies to increase student voice in the setting of expectations at James Weldon Johnson Academy (e.g., leveraging the student government association). The practice of including student voice has been found to generate positive perceptions of school culture (Wallach, Ramsey, Lowry & Copland, 2006).

In sum, if clear and explicit expectations or all key stakeholders are defined the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy may be enhanced. This can be done through respectful and collaborative processes with families, students, teachers and

community partners. Clear expectations are an important component of a strong, college-going culture (McClafferty et al., 2002).

Seeing is Believing

Difficulty in concretizing the concept of college for freshmen in high school, many of whom will be the first in their immediate families to attend college, is commonly referenced in the data collected during this study. This theme explores the issue of making the concept of college a reality for high school freshmen and the initiatives enacted at the school to help achieve this outcome.

The challenge of helping students focus their energies on their college aspirations is a difficult task during the freshman year. A parent participant in the study said, "I'm having a hard time getting him to know that what he does now in the ninth grade is so, so, so important." Comments reflecting this challenge were found in interview responses and responses on teacher and staff questionnaires. For instance, one respondent said, "It is difficult to show our students that their decisions as ninth graders affect their access to and success in college." Efforts to prepare students successfully for college hinge on students' understanding of the importance of making good decisions early in order to positively impact their success in the future. Furthermore, as first generation students, the school leader believes it is important to create a set of experiences to help students envision themselves as collegians through observations and experiences with African American collegians and college graduates. This belief is reflected in this quote,

I just think you know the, the concept of college is still a concept. It's too abstract still. So, that's why the college student for a day, college graduate for a day, all of the steps we've taken this fall to make that more concrete make the pay off of a college

degree really concrete; Like “Here’s what you get to do when you’re a college graduate that you probably don’t get to do when you’re not.” Um, this is, these are people who look like you, and whose stories may be similar to yours, who’ve done it too. And, you know, their stories

Hence the name of this theme, seeing is believing.

Three key components of the school culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy help shape students’ personal vision of college and to positively influence their college aspirations. First, student orientation for the Academy was held on a college campus. This four-day and three-night orientation provided students with an opportunity to try out the college experience and featured many activities congruent with the values of the school that are associated with their college success. The concept of effort-based ability and grit were presented to students at this event, as were several other similar concepts.

Students were also engaged in interest groups to allow students to begin development of leadership skills and to facilitate commitment to the school early on. Some of these interest groups were a talent show planning group, a slideshow group and a newsletter group. Each day of student orientation students met with these groups to work on small projects associated with the closing session for student orientation. These experiences helped students gain a broader understanding of the college experience, as did the other social engagement activities included at orientation.

Another example of a James Weldon Johnson Academy practice that helps students internalize the idea that they are future collegians is the roundtable advisory group. Students were assigned to these small groups that meet several times a week to discuss topics related to student success, college readiness and other related topics. Among these

topics include examination of social issues like bullying; discussions on good-decision making; and topics related to character development and development of academic behaviors (e.g., narrative report card). These small groups remain in tact all four years of high school. This helps to build another support network that keeps students focused on their goal to go to college and graduate from college.

Finally, James Weldon Johnson Academy offers a required college readiness class for students all four years of high school. Each year the course will address topics related to college readiness and college preparation activities appropriate for a given cohort of students. For instance, in their senior year students in the college readiness course will be required to apply to three colleges and to apply for a number of scholarships.

The college readiness course currently is used to reinforce habits and beliefs promoted at James Weldon Johnson Academy (e.g., habits of mind) and to teach students academic behaviors important for success to and through college. Although students often do not see the connection between these lessons and actual college preparation, the literature on college readiness indicates that students who are successful in college practice the academic behaviors and master the cognitive strategies taught in the course (Conley, 2007). Additionally, the course serves to teach students about the college context. Students in the college readiness class have heard panel discussions featuring collegians from a local Historically Black University and have also engaged in dialogue with guest speakers such as college professors. These experiences provide students with ongoing exposure to the contextual knowledge and habits and skills needed to be successful collegians.

Several programs at James Weldon Johnson Academy also help to maintain students' focus on the goal of college attendance and graduation. My internship at the school required that I coordinate several of these events with the support of the James Weldon Johnson Academy team and family. These events included the annual convocation, Black history month celebration, and the college student for a day event. Several other events will be held this year with a similar focus on helping students envision themselves and their lives as college graduates including career day and college graduate for a day (i.e., day-long shadowing experience with an African American professional to see what life is like for college graduates).

The convocation, a ceremony that was the brainchild of the principal, is an annual event that celebrates students' decision and efforts to go to college. The event was held in the school's auditorium on a Saturday afternoon in November. More than 50 African American college graduates (and a couple of White college graduates) served as mentors to Academy students that day. These mentors were dressed in business attire while students were dressed in their school uniforms.

Before the convocation began, parents and other volunteers arrived early to set up the auditorium. A large "James Weldon Johnson Academy" banner hung from the ceiling of the stage while theatre lights shined down on the center stage. The hardwood stage was decorated with a blue and white balloon arch donated by one of the Academy parents. Other parent and volunteers helped to set up the podium in the center of the stage as well as to place programs on the chairs where attendees would be seated. Large photograph posters of the Academy students in action (e.g., studying, having fun, performing, etc) lined the perimeter of the auditorium to remind attendees of the journey students' are taking to

get to college. A table in the front of the room held a sound system that would play the music for student performances and for the student and mentor procession.

As families awaited the procession of their children, mentors and Academy students had their first meeting in the school's cafeteria. I made an announcement to students telling them how much we believe in them and their ability to go to college. I told them the entire community supports them in their efforts to get to college, so much so that the college graduates before them had come to help them in their journey to college. Each student would have the opportunity to meet a college graduate and to walk down the auditorium aisle as a symbol of where they will be four years from now.

Both the students and the mentors were shy. I stood in the middle of the cafeteria giving my speech while the mentors stood behind me. I asked the students to stand up and introduce themselves to any of the mentors, and then escort them to the table. The students were apprehensive, but after some prodding on my part, they got up and met their mentors. Students and mentors talked for several minutes asking questions of each other, learning about the mentors alma maters and preparing to line up for the processional.

As we moved on to transition to the auditorium, teachers from the Academy introduced themselves to the mentors paired with students in their round table and then lined them up to process into the auditorium. Each mentor was handed a "class of 2014" tassel to give to students, while students were handed a special pin that they would present to their mentor at the specified time. Students, mentors and staff began to walk towards the entrance of the auditorium. On cue, when Pomp and Circumstance began to play over the sound system, the doors to the back of the auditorium swung open, revealing

the line of future college graduates and their mentors as they processed into the auditorium.

The event continued with two student masters of ceremony who introduced the all of the performances and addresses for the day. The event began with the singing of the Negro National Anthem, performed by one of the mentors, a recent graduate of a local college, and three students selected by the student government. The entire audience performed the song with them. Next, a minister from a church in the neighborhood, also a speaker from the pre-school professional development series, delivered the invocation, praying for the success of the school and each student at the Academy. The student government association president spoke next delivering an inspirational message about their future as collegians and about the excitement associated with preparing for college. Then the inaugural performance of the James Weldon Johnson Academy dance team performed a modern dance piece called "Still I Rise." The girls dressed in black leotards and printed African and "ethnic" print lapas. They performed beautifully commanding a standing ovation.

As it grew closer for the special convocation ceremony, a special guest speaker delivered a keynote address. The keynote speaker, an executive from the Central City ARISE team, was introduced giving his impressive background as a graduate of a prominent Historically Black College, a stint in corporate America and now an executive position with this nationally acclaimed education organization. His address drew parallels between the opening of the Academy and the beginning of other cultural revolutions. He told the students that they were apart of something special, as the first class that will

graduate from this new institution. He also reminded them to do their best, excel academically and to be a leader in their community.

After much applause for the keynote address, the principal came to the podium and asked the students and their mentors to rise. While standing the principal gave inspirational words on the students' quest for a college degree. He acknowledged the difficulty in seeing that far into the future to understand the road travelled to attain a degree. He acknowledged the mentors, stating that they are what the students will become if they persevere, work hard and commit to graduating from college. At that moment, the mentors were asked to give students their first piece of college regalia, the tassel, stating that the students had taken their first step towards college by attending James Weldon Johnson Academy. The students were told that each year they persisted through high school they would be given another piece of their regalia until finally, the graduate in 2014. Families, seemingly encouraged and excited about that possibility, applauded loudly cheering on their children.

When the applause died down, the principal asked the students and mentors to remain standing. He began to tell a story about a little boy on a beach that was covered with thousands of starfish. Concerned about the starfish the boy picked up a starfish and threw it in the water. He continued to pick up these starfish one by one and threw them into the ocean. A passerby approached the boy asking him what he was doing. The onlooker said, "There are thousands of starfish on this beach. You can't save them all." The boy turned to the man in introspection, then looked back at the starfish covered beach. He bent back over and picked up another starfish. Then he turned to the man and said, "I helped that one." The boy continued to throw the starfish in the ocean reminding the

onlooker of the difference he had made. The principal told the mentors that today they made a difference in the lives of the children at James Weldon Johnson Academy. As a token of their appreciation the students turned to their mentors and handed them a starfish pin in thanks.

Before the event was over, another special student performance took place. The James Weldon Johnson Academy marching band had its first performance before an audience. Attendees watched as the novice musicians took to the stage to perform to numbers. The songs, while elementary, were performed with confidence and the students were applauded loudly. The music teacher turned to the audience and informed the crowd that most of the students in the band had never played an instrument until they came to James Weldon Johnson Academy in August. He described the group of students as hardworking and dedicated and explained how their character and work ethic will take them far. He then went on to challenge other musicians in the school who were not participating in the band to get involved and asked the mentors and families to encourage these students to make history by being part of the new band. Finally, the band director named a young lady in the band as the new student bandleader because of her exceptional work ethic and commitment. To this, her family and friends broke out in cheers.

The event closed with a benediction from the neighborhood minister followed by the students and mentors processing out of the auditorium where families could meet their children and their mentors. The event was well received and (to my estimation) was a fantastic way to remind the students' at James Weldon Johnson Academy of the importance of their journey to and through college. The entire event was also beneficial in getting

families, community members and students on board with the college-going goal of the school.

During my time at James Weldon Johnson Academy I also served on the Career and College Readiness committee. This group of teachers and staff are responsible for the planning and execution of college student for a day, college graduate for a day, career day and the black history month program. The two events that are discussed in more detail are the black history month program and the college student for a day event.

The career and college readiness committee at James Weldon Johnson Academy executed an idea to expose students to a fun and entertaining aspect of the African American collegiate experience, through the introduction of African American fraternities and sororities for black history month. This mini-fair involved representatives from several undergraduate members of African American fraternities and sororities. These young collegians taught the students about prominent members of their organizations such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Nikki Giovanni, and Rosa Parks. Students also learned about the academic requirements for membership in these organizations as well as the primary tenets of leadership, service, scholarship and friendship promoted in these organizations.

The program also allowed students to ask collegians questions about their college experience to get a more realistic idea of what college life might be like for them. The program concluded with a step show exhibition where fraternity and sorority members demonstrated traditional dances performed by their members. This event helped students gain another perspective on the college experience in a way that helped them more easily envision themselves.

Finally, the college student for a day event held at a local historically black university gave students the experience of shadowing college students for a day. Students were paired with a college student with whom they attended classes, visited residence halls, ate in dining halls and played basketball. Approximately 70 college students volunteered to serve as mentors to the students for the day. Student reflections highlighted the value of this experience as students made the connection between this experience and their preparation for college life. One student respondent indicated that the Academy helps prepare students for college “By telling me what I should expect from college and taking me to a college.” Another student remarked that the school helps with college preparation “By taking a college class about it; by bring people in to tell us about college; (and) Taking us to the University.” These are just some of the many activities that are offered at James Weldon Johnson Academy to help students internalize and strengthen their goal commitment to earn a college degree.

Feed the Good Wolf

The final theme to be discussed refers to a story that has become a culture tale at James Weldon Johnson Academy. The story of the wolves is a Cherokee legend that has become a symbol of one of James Weldon Johnson Academy’s ideals. The story speaks of a person dealing with the dilemma of figuring out how to make sure that the worst parts of oneself do not overtake the best parts of oneself. The moral of the story is that when one chooses to nurture and develop the best parts of oneself, one will inevitably become the best version of oneself.

This theme emerged in many observations, interviews and reflections and demonstrates the power of this story; its influence on language at the school and the

feedback that team and family crave. This theme explores the meaning of *feeding the good wolf* at James Weldon Johnson Academy and how it is, and should be practiced according to members of the school community.

The good wolf has become a powerful story with shared meaning for members of the culture-sharing group at James Weldon Johnson Academy. School t-shirts don sayings about the good wolf, team and family members wear a wolf pin on their lanyards and backpacks, a “Feed the Good Wolf” quote hangs in the hallway, and stories are shared at assemblies on how students fed the good wolf on a given day or week. These stories reveal some of the countercultural challenges students encounter on their quest to pursue a college education.

At an assembly, students were asked to share stories on how they let the good wolf win. One student, “I let the good wolf win because I came to school today even though my mother said I didn’t have to.” Another student said “I let the good wolf win because I didn’t steal this laptop when I could have.” Both students expressed the understanding that the choices they made to feed the good wolf are aligned with their goals for the attainment of a college degree.

There are countless good wolf stories to be shared at James Weldon Johnson Academy. The counselor spoke of some of the challenges students have to overcome just to come to school saying, “It’s a miracle that they are sitting in these classrooms each day.” The resilience students show at James Weldon Johnson Academy should be commended because as one teacher stated, “the kids are at a point where they can make a choice to not do that. And that’s an easier choice for a lot of them.” In this instance the teacher was referring to students engagement in class work, but the argument still holds true.

Sometimes it is easier to feed the bad wolf, but students who choose to nurture their best qualities by exhibiting integrity and resilience, in a sometimes-harsh environment, should be encouraged and honored regularly.

Several participants expressed this feeling. One said, “ I also think that we have created an alignment in the culture where the only incentive is not being punished. So, therefore, there is no reason to go up, to meet any high expectations.” This participant was speaking of the absence of a formal rewards system at James Weldon Johnson Academy. On that same topic another participant said, “I think awards for achievement and really creating a positive culture for achievement. That’s one thing that we’ve been really absent about.” This participant also noted,

We’ve got a lot of kids that are doing the right thing and doing amazing things day in and day out. They’re leaders sort of informally with their friends. And they’re just, wonderful students in all different sorts of ways. And I think we need to celebrate them better through various different ways; awards; assemblies. Just doing things to show that we value this.

Other participants share the same belief. One participant indicated that the rules and consequence laden system at the school focuses a great deal on the bad wolf. This participant believes that more emphasis needs to be placed on acknowledging students that feed the good wolf.

Although the feed the good wolf story speaks of an internal struggle and on the personal choices one makes to be their best, members of the culture-sharing group have expanded the meaning of feeding the good wolf. Many members of the Academy team and family believe that others can feed one’s good wolf. One participant said, “When I say, feed

the good wolf, to me... pat that kid on the back and let them know, hey you did a good job today in class. I think you're gonna have a great day.'"

This belief is echoed in student reflections. One student in speaking about the role the principal plays at James Weldon Johnson Academy said, he "makes me learn from mistakes and guide me to letting the good wolf win." This statement is indicative of the positive relationships and bonds that are formed when one acknowledges the best in others.

Formally, there is no reward system in place at James Weldon Johnson Academy. However, acknowledgements of student achievements and good decision-making show up in the school newsletter, during shout-outs (i.e., public, verbal acknowledgements of individual achievements) at group gatherings and on the electronic message board at school. Additionally, bulletin boards acknowledge students' academic achievements. It is apparent that the members of the culture-sharing group want to celebrate students' victories, small and large, more often.

Thus, the story of the two wolves is an important symbol at James Weldon Johnson Academy that inspires integrity, effort and good decision-making. The development of a formal reward system and the frequent celebrations of the ways in which members of the Academy team and family feed the good wolf are important to respondents and desired.

This chapter provides a detailed description of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. The final chapter of this dissertation puts into perspective the meaning of these findings and the broader implications these findings offer to improve practice or generate new ideas for future research. Additionally, a concept map highlighting the core themes from my findings is presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Overview of Study

This study on college-going culture at an urban high school sought to describe the important role of school culture in shaping secondary institutions that effectively prepare underrepresented students for access to and success in college. The study is a significant addition to the literature on college access issues because it examines college access issues within the context in which they emerge.

Most research on college access issues looks at a small set of variables and the impact of these variables on college access and success. This study explored school culture using the college-going culture framework, which considers many factors that impact college access and success for underrepresented students (McClafferty et al., 2002). Although the college-going culture framework was used to guide my inquiry, the exploratory quality of qualitative research allowed room for new or unexpected themes and topics to emerge. As such, this study provides new insights to the college access debate that are useful additions to the literature on urban education and college readiness, access and success.

Since this study was concerned with exploring various dimensions of school culture, the ethnographic research approach was well suited for this examination. This approach required me to embed myself into the culture of the school; first as an observer-participant; then as a participant observer; and finally as a consultant presenting my findings in a format that included recommendations for the continued development of the school's college-going culture. My focus on the three levels of culture and the roles of members of

the school community provided me an advantage in understanding the full scope of the impact and influence of concepts like cultural values and beliefs on the practices and behaviors of individuals in a culture-sharing group.

Limitations

One of the major challenges of qualitative research its subjectivity and the presence of researcher bias. Despite my best efforts to manage this, my perspectives inevitably creep into the presentation of the culture. This limitation is mitigated by the rich description of the school culture provided that allows one to draw one's own conclusions. Another limitation of this study is that findings are not generalizable. However, providing a thorough description of the culture development process is useful in preparing school leaders and educators to tackle the complexities of this process.

Many details about the school culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy were omitted to manage the breadth of this dissertation. Over my ten-month stint at the Academy I gathered enough data to write volumes on a number of topics. Ultimately, as the primary data collection tool in this study, I had to make the difficult decision on what to include in this volume. So, that which I viewed as important and related to my topic was included. If another researcher examined the same culture they might have chosen to emphasize other findings.

Thus, it is important to note that all of the themes, values and beliefs, assumptions and artifacts presented were those most relevant to my research questions or those most frequently reflected in the data. Regardless, that which I observed and the other data I collected was based on the questions I raised. As such, I include all interview question and the teacher and staff questionnaire in the appendix of this dissertation so one is able to

determine how I executed my inquiries. Additionally, I discuss in great detail the process I underwent to ensure trustworthiness and credibility in my methodology chapter.

Finally, a significant limitation of this study was that it was conducted at a brand new school. Thus, several components of the school culture have yet to be introduced or solidified. For instance, the college-going culture theoretical framework applied in this study highlights the role of a comprehensive counseling model that does not yet exist at the school under study (McClafferty et al., 2002). The benefits associated with examining a new school far outweigh this limitation. I had a rare opportunity to see how college-going culture is shaped and to learn about some of the core challenges associated with this process. Implications of this study are discussed next.

Implications

The scope of the findings from this ethnographic study adequately answered my research questions. First, the cultural portrait of James Weldon Johnson Academy provided an introduction to the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. The subsequent findings revealed a synergy between the three levels of culture (i.e., artifacts, values and beliefs and assumptions) at James Weldon Johnson Academy. This finding is rather interesting because establishing culture is an ongoing process. That the majority of the artifacts within the culture complement the values of the school as well as the assumptions of the culture-sharing group, is a good indication that the development of a college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy is well underway.

Other findings in the study suggest that basic assumptions of some members of the culture-sharing group are somewhat contradictory to the espoused beliefs and values of the Academy. For instance, although highly structured environments are valued at James

Weldon Johnson Academy, their student management systems place great emphasis on what student behavior tells educators about the environment and conditions at a school. Instead of executing a student management system that reflects both a highly structured environment and an onus on adults to create conditions for positive student outcomes, a rigorous, detailed and complex system of rules and consequences emerged.

The underlying assumption that surfaced was that adults at the school expected and anticipated students would err. Instead of addressing conditions that would limit student misconduct, they commenced to creating a system that was rigid and sometimes communicated a distrust in students that was potentially damaging to student-teacher relationships.

In contrast, one of the symbols that grew in significance in the school was that of the good wolf. The story of the two wolves told by the principal during student orientation became somewhat of a motto for the school (i.e., feed the good wolf), accompanied by pins, t-shirts and signs to match. This story gave the culture-sharing group accessible, shared language to express their desires to celebrate good decisions and small wins associated with student integrity, grit, and other valued behaviors and beliefs. These examples provide a glimpse at the organic quality of culture. Those whom encounter it undeniably alter culture.

All findings in this study were subject to frequent member checks, triangulation and other methods to ensure credibility. As such, themes presented in chapter four offer authentic views of the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy. As an example, the by any means necessary theme described several best practices in use at the

school that supported the preparation of all students for a wide range of postsecondary options.

One finding that stood out was the rigor, relevance and relationship theme. This theme, framed by the work of Wagner (2002) describes the difficult task of building a team of professionals that can execute practices reflective of institutional values. The 3R's framework was outside of the literature I reviewed in chapter two, as was the work of Dweck (2010) and Ladson-Billings (1994) that I had to access to generate clearer understanding of what I was observing. Culturally relevant and responsible pedagogy and the growth mindset are two strands of literature emphasized in the P-12 literature on student achievement (Dweck, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994). However, this literature is not often referenced in discussions on college access. This cross section of literature across the P-16 spectrum enhances the usefulness of these findings for educators across the aisles of P-12 and postsecondary education.

Practical implications of these findings are useful in work on shaping college-going cultures that effectively prepare students for competition in a knowledge-based economy. First, an examination of the artifacts, values and beliefs and assumptions that make up the college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy show myriad concepts that applied in practice can seem contradictory and confusing. Several of the themes such as rigor, relevance and relationships and rules and consequences indicate that too many virtues and values can create confusion and difficulty in applying and executing reflective practice. In other words, a school culture that promotes more than 10 beliefs and values about a wide range of matters from approaches to teaching to strategies for student management are difficult to remember, internalize and reflect in practice.

Findings in this study call for the simplification of cultural frameworks that are broad enough to encompass a variety of values and beliefs that fall within it. Thus, instead of having a set of values and beliefs and assumptions for student management, and then another set of values, beliefs and assumptions regarding notions of intelligence, an emphasis on a broader cultural framework that reflects the wide range of values and beliefs is likely easier to integrate into practice. As an example, the 3 R's framework by Wagner (2002) is broad enough to encompass concepts like team and family (i.e., relationships), grit (i.e., rigor), and James Weldon Johnson's beliefs and assumptions about student management (i.e., relevance). Thus, findings from this study call for the development of broad and simple cultural frameworks in the development of effective college-going cultures. A concept map is presented next highlighting relationships between core themes of the findings of this study. Additionally, a concept map of a revised model for college-going culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy informed by the analyses of each theme in this study is presented next.

Figure 4 Concept Map of Core Themes

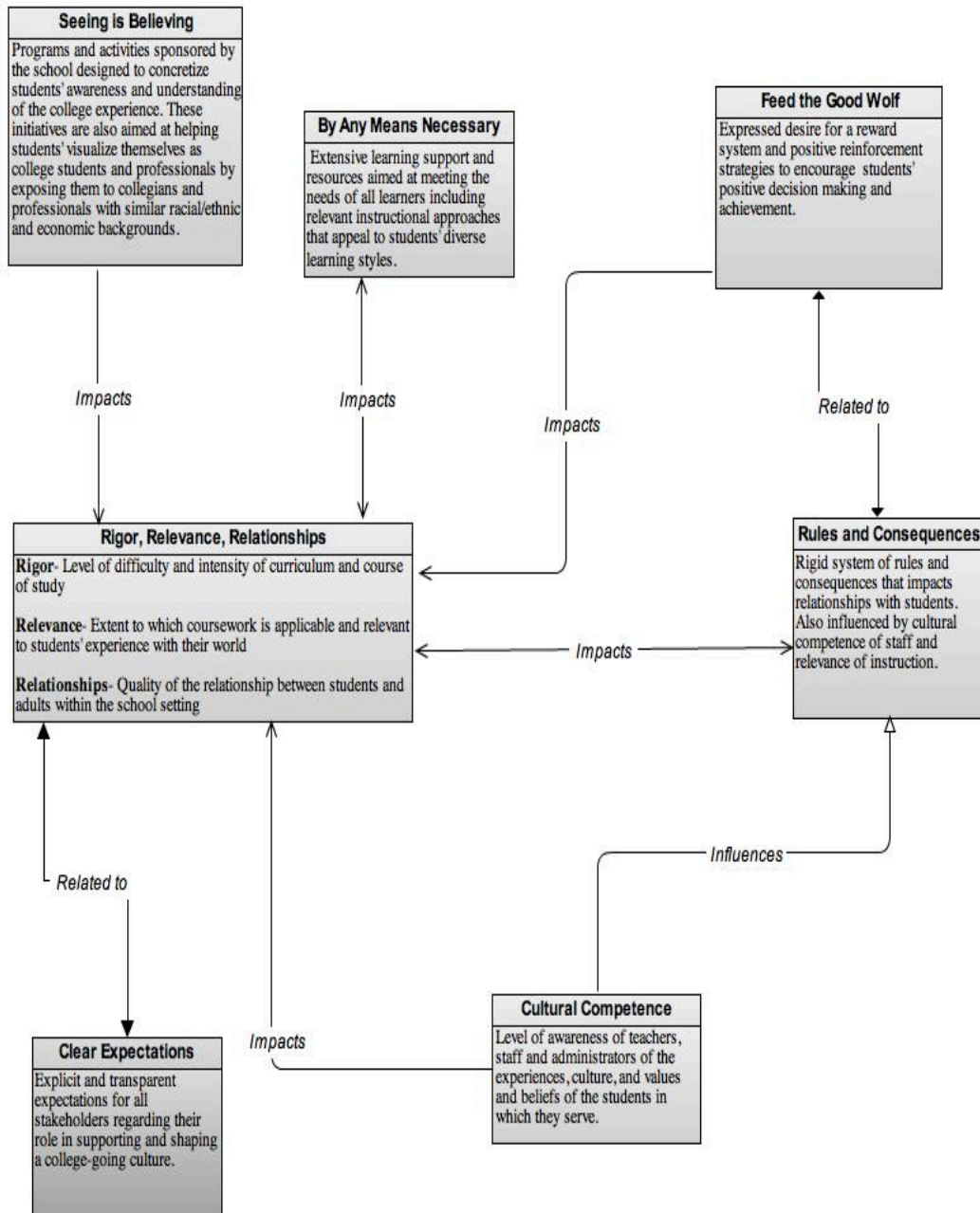
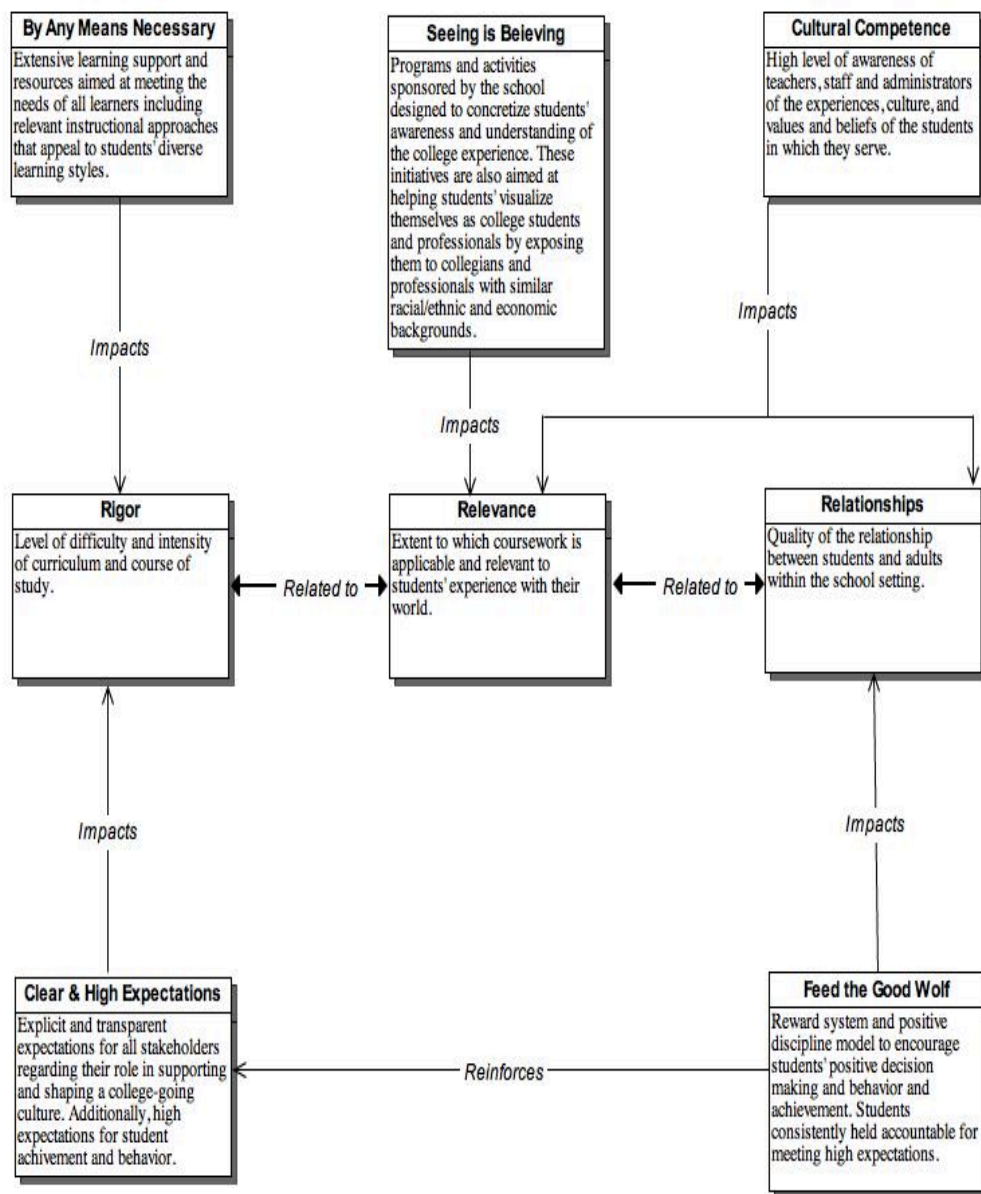


Figure 5 Revised Model of College-Going Culture at James Weldon Johnson Academy



Another key finding from this study is importance of community engagement within the college-going culture. James Weldon Johnson Academy's partnerships with the community helped them to gain credibility with families and students in promoting its values. This is likely because members of the community are a better reflection of the students at James Weldon Johnson than are the staff. As such, when community members support the college readiness efforts of the school, student buy-in is greater. Community engagement also helps schools to expand and develop school-based social capital that is extremely beneficial to first generation and other underrepresented students. Events such as the Academy's college student for a day and annual convocation helped students expand their social network in ways that can be leveraged down the line to help facilitate students' access to college.

The cultural competence theme is also important to the discussion on college access and success for underrepresented students, particularly those in schools in urban contexts. The emergence of charter schools in urban districts across the country has brought with it an emergence of programs like Teach for America, a program that in some cities has significantly changed the demographics of the teaching workforce. Many of these teachers come from places other than those in which they teach or have racial or ethnic identities different from the students they serve. Cultural competence, then, becomes a central part of the dialogue in teacher training for reasons outlined in chapter four.

Among those issues is the impact of cultural competence on the delivery of instruction (i.e., rigor and relevance) and on the relationships forged with students associated with positive student outcomes. Additionally, findings from this study also highlight the importance of creating culturally relevant schools that practice culturally

responsive and responsible pedagogy (Ladson-Billing, 1994). Teachers in schools serving African American students or students who have traditionally been underserved (i.e., low income students) should have a specific interest in teaching students from these populations. Findings indicate that when teachers teach in schools where they are not actively and intentionally practicing pedagogical approaches that are sensitive to the backgrounds of the students they serve, it can create issues that have a significant impact on a school's ability to develop a strong, positive and effective college-going culture. This is an area of the literature on college-going culture that has not been explored to a great extent.

Findings from this ethnography also present some best practices and emerging practices that show a lot of promise. James Weldon Johnson's student orientation is a high energy, college immersion and leadership experience that is an excellent tool for building college partnerships, promoting beliefs and values that are linked to student success and the forging of strong bonds between peers and between school staff and students. This promising practice is an excellent way to introduce the college-going culture of a school.

The narrative report card at James Weldon Johnson Academy is one such practice that is useful in facilitating dialogues between teachers, students and their families about the development of soft skills and habits of mind that lead to student success. All students can experience both growth and success with this report card and the report card conference is an excellent tool to build authentic partnerships with families in support of students' college aspirations.

This brings me to my final discussion on implications. Collaboration in the building of authentic partnerships may be an effective approach to building strong, authentic

relationships with key stakeholders that engages them as full partners within the college-going culture. A collaborative process to outline expectations may lead to the establishment of more specific and extensive types of support from stakeholders than currently exist. The findings on expectations and roles indicate a perception of limited roles for parents on the part of school employees but a more expansive parental role as envisioned by the parents themselves.

The same can be said for community partners and students. Thus, a collaborative process in which key stakeholders participate in the clarification and specification of their roles within the college-going culture, can lead to stronger, more sustainable partnerships that work in service to the achievement of college access for underrepresented students.

Future Research

The research process for the execution of this ethnography on college-going culture in an urban high school brings to light two key areas in which future research should be focused. First, future research on college access issues for underrepresented students should be executed to generate new theories that are specifically focused on the design of school culture that is responsive to the specific needs of underrepresented students. This requires a fusion of literature from P-12 and higher education to form a more effective framework and a more comprehensive consideration of the long-term experiences underrepresented students have in preparing for, accessing and successfully graduating college.

Future studies should also be conducted on the role of school culture in facilitating students access to and success in college. Only a handful of studies, including this ethnography, address this topic. Findings from this study indicate that long-term

examinations (e.g., examination of college-going culture over a four-year period) of college-going culture may prove useful in describing the ways in which culture can be modified to bolster underrepresented students readiness for college and access to college.

Closing

This study aptly entitled *The Soul of a School*, describes the significant impact of intangible concepts like values and assumptions on tangible outcomes like student achievement. This study revealed the power of culture in influencing behaviors and offers educators and other key stakeholders with valuable lessons on the role of relationships, perceptions and beliefs on behavior and educational practices. Why is this significant? In a nutshell, relationships, perceptions and beliefs are free, but the cost of examining and leveraging them can be priceless. Likewise, the cost of ignoring their role in facilitating certain outcomes can be costly in ways that are devastating to students in their quest to access postsecondary education. This study gets to the core of the matter by describing the power of culture in facilitating underrepresented students' college readiness, access and success.

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Appendix A

University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research University of New Orleans

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Andre M. Perry

Co-Investigator: Rashida H. Govan

Date: February 18, 2011

Protocol Title: "The Soul of a School: An Ethnographic Study of College-Going Culture at an Urban High School"

IRB#: 05Feb11

Your proposal was reviewed by the full IRB. The group voted to approve your proposal pending that you adequately address several issues. Your responses to those issues have been received and you have adequately addressed all of the issues raised by the committee. Your project is now in compliance with UNO and Federal regulations and you may begin conducting your research.

Please remember that approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Use the IRB number listed on this letter in all future correspondence regarding this proposal.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best of luck with your project!
Sincerely,

Robert Laird, Ph.D., Chair
Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

Appendix B

Interview Questions (Parents)

1. Please describe your involvement at your child's school?
2. Please describe your involvement with your child's schooling?
3. How has the school provided you with information on college?
4. What programs are in place at the school to educate parents about college (readiness)?
5. What role do parents play in helping students' go to college and succeed in college?
6. What roles do the following people play in facilitating students' college access and success:
 - a. Principal:
 - b. Teachers:
 - c. Counselors:
 - d. Students:
 - e. Community:
7. What are the biggest barriers that students face in getting into college and succeeding in college? How are these barriers removed?
8. What expectations do you have of the KIPP Renaissance High School in preparing your child for college?
9. What are the school's expectations of you to help your child prepare for college?
10. What is KIPP Renaissance doing well as a school?
11. In what areas can KIPP Renaissance improve?

Appendix C

Interview Questions (Teachers)

1. Please describe the school culture at KIPP Renaissance High School?
2. What are the characteristics of the ideal college going culture for the students you serve?
3. What are the biggest challenges your school faces in creating the ideal college going culture?
4. What needs to happen at KIPP Renaissance High School to create the ideal college going culture?
5. What role do teachers play in making your school more college-focused?
6. What role do you play in educating students about the college experience (e.g., expectations, culture, preparation, etc.)?
7. What academic skills do you think are most important for students to succeed in college?
8. Please discuss the level of rigor of assignments, curriculum and academic expectations for students at KIPP Renaissance High School. Specifically, is the academic rigor at Renaissance at a level consistent with college readiness benchmarks?
9. How familiar are you with Louisiana TOPS, and TOPS Tech Early Start Program?
10. How familiar are you with the college admissions process and with college admissions standards?
11. How do you respond to students who do not aspire to go to college?
12. How do you respond to parents who do not believe their child can/will go to college or do not want their child to go to college?
13. What roles do the principal, parents, students and the community play in facilitating students' college access and success?
14. What are the biggest barriers to students at KRHS' college access and success? How are these barriers removed?

Appendix D

Interview Questions (Principal)

1. Please describe the school culture at KIPP Renaissance High School?
2. What needs to happen at KIPP Renaissance High School to create the ideal college going culture?
3. What are the biggest barriers to KRHS *students'* college access and success? How are these barriers removed?
4. What role do you play in facilitating students' college access and success?
5. What are your top priorities as a principal in shaping KRHS' college-going culture?
6. Please discuss the level of rigor of assignments, curriculum and academic expectations for students at KIPP Renaissance High School. Specifically, is the academic rigor at Renaissance at a level consistent with college readiness benchmarks?
7. What is KIPP Renaissance doing particularly well in supporting its college-going culture?
8. What is the school's philosophy regarding the notion that all students can go to and succeed in college? How and where is that philosophy expressed formally to students, teachers/staff, parents and community?
9. How does your school emphasize college advocacy during the hiring and evaluation process?
10. How does KRHS partner with parents in their children's college preparation?
11. What roles do parents, teachers, students and the community play in facilitating students' college access and success?
12. What should parents and the community expect from school leaders at KRHS?
13. How do you respond to students who do not aspire to go to college?
14. How do you respond to parents who do not believe their child will go to college or do not want their child to go to college?
15. What types of partnerships have you established with community organizations, including universities, in support of your school's college-going culture?
16. What formal articulation initiatives are in place to recruit and enroll students from your feeder schools?

- a. Do any of these initiatives ease students' transition into the KRS culture?
- 17. How do you determine if your school is not a good fit for certain students? What process do you undergo when such a situation emerges?
- 18. How do you envision your counseling model evolving over the next few years in support of your college preparatory mission?
- 19. How do your professional development initiatives for teachers/staff help them meet the long and short-term college readiness goals of KRHS?
- 20. Please discuss the core policies and practices at KRHS that support the achievement of the "Big Goal?"
 - a. How do you address policies and practices that don't generate intended outcomes?

Appendix E (Letters of Consent)

Letter of Consent for Staff

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Andre Perry in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling & Foundations at the University of New Orleans.

1. I am conducting a research study to examine the college-going culture at an urban high school. I am requesting your participation in a series of 30 to 60-minute interviews in which I will gain your perspectives on KIPP Renaissance High School's culture as it relates to college readiness, access and success. You may also be asked to participate in an open-ended survey and you may be the subject of several observations. Questions posed in the interview and on the survey, as well as observations are meant to gain insight on perceptions of the school culture and experiences of members of the school community with the school's culture.
2. Although we do not anticipate any risk to you, the potential risk exists that you may disclose personal or sensitive information during the course of this research; you may also choose to disclose information that may be damaging to your professional reputation. You are not required to share such information. Regardless, all personal information collected will be kept confidential. Furthermore, you will have an opportunity to see a draft of the final report at which time you can verify and modify aspects of the draft that you feel may be harmful.
3. Limits to confidentiality exist for this study. The researcher must report any suspected or observed abuse or any disclosure of a participant's threat to harm oneself or others.
4. Although there may be no direct benefit you, the possible benefit of your participation is to assist educators, students, parents and community members in shaping school cultures that support college access and success for underrepresented students. This study may also help KIPP Renaissance High School make improvements to its existing school culture.
5. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. No personal data will be collected.
6. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and no compensation will be offered for your participation.
7. Should you have any questions regarding this research or your participation, please contact Rashida Govan by phone at (443) 622-8946 or by email at rgovan@uno.edu. You may also request a copy of the open-ended questionnaire and interview questions.
8. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

Sincerely,

Rashida H. Govan

By signing below you are giving your consent to participate in the above study. If you consent to audio recording during the duration of your interview please initial _____.

Signature

Printed Name

Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, please contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon at the University of New Orleans (504) 280-3990.

Letter of Consent for Parent/Community Participants

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Andre Perry in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling & Foundations at the University of New Orleans.

1. I am conducting a study to learn about how KIPP Renaissance High School helps children prepare for college. I am requesting your participation in a 30-60 minute interview. Questions asked in the interview will help me learn more about your experiences with KIPP Renaissance High School.
2. While we do not expect any risks to you, the potential risk exists that you may share personal or sensitive information during the study; all personal information shared will be kept confidential.
3. There are limits to privacy for this study. I must report any suspected or observed abuse or any disclosure of a participant's threat to harm oneself or others. This study may not directly help you, but your participation may help educators design schools that help children go to college and succeed in college. This study may also help KIPP Renaissance High School make improvements to the school.
4. The results of this study may be published, but your name will not be used. No personal information will be collected.
5. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and no payment will be offered for your participation.
6. If you have any questions about this study or your child's participation, please contact Rashida Govan by phone at (443) 622-8946 or by email at rgovan@uno.edu. You may also request a copy of the open-ended survey.
7. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

Sincerely,

Rashida H. Govan

By signing below you are giving your consent to participate in the above study. If you consent to audio recording during the duration of your interview please initial _____.

Signature

Printed Name

Date

If you have any questions about your child's rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel your child has been placed at risk, please contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon at the University of New Orleans (504) 280-3990.

Appendix F

Open-Ended Questionnaire (Teachers & Staff)

1. What are your top three priorities as a counselor/teacher?
2. How is your day/year structured?
3. How do you respond to students who do not aspire to go to college?
4. What are some of the core challenges you face in preparing students for access to and success in college?

5. What is your role in supporting/shaping college-going culture?

6. What roles do the principal, community members, students and parents play in supporting/shaping college-going culture?

Principal:

Community:

Students:

Parents:

7. How can the school's culture be improved to better support its college preparatory mission?

VITA

The author is from Plainfield, New Jersey. She obtained her Bachelor's of Science degree in Elementary Education from Morgan State University in 1997 and her Master's degree in Counseling and Personnel Services from the University of Maryland in 2003. She enrolled in the graduate program at the University of New Orleans to pursue her PhD in Educational Leadership and Administration, and is a Marcus B. Christian Scholarship Recipient and a 2011 William L. Boyd National Educational Politics Workshop Emerging Scholar.