

Fostering a college-going culture for historically underserved students: One principal's role

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Abstract

Current scholarship focused on a college-going culture and college readiness in schools often underestimates or gives little attention to the role of the school leader. This study draws on qualitative data from a larger descriptive case study to help fill this gap by examining the role and approach of one principal at a public high school in Texas that has found success in graduating a large proportion of its racially and economically diverse student population college ready. The principal's leadership strategies and challenges he faced are revealed through his narrative and the perspective of multiple stakeholders to more aptly understand how his role and approach contributed to the school's college-going culture.

Keywords: college-going culture, college readiness, high school principal

Fostering a college-going culture for historically underserved students:

One principal's role

Today, more than ever before, elementary and secondary school teachers and leaders are charged with preparing and graduating students who are deemed college ready; capable of enrolling and succeeding in a credit-bearing general education course at a two- or four-year degree-granting postsecondary institution without remediation (Conley, 2011). The construct of college readiness itself has emerged and evolved over the last fifteen years as “an umbrella term that refers to the multidimensional set of skills, traits, habits, and knowledge that students need to enter college with the capacity to succeed once they are enrolled” (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012, p. 2). Various models have been developed to help ascertain the particular facets that contribute to and challenges that can impede a student's college readiness (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Conley, 2011), all of which recognize the complexity of this construct.

A key component to promoting college readiness is developing a college-going culture on a school campus. According to Corwin and Tierney (2007), a college-going culture is one in which “aspirations and behaviors conducive to preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in college” are cultivated by a school (p. 3). This culture is “tangible, pervasive and beneficial” and can be “developed in a specialized section of a school, such as within a magnet program or small learning community” (p. 3). Ideally, however, a college culture “should be inclusive and accessible to all students” (p. 3). It can be argued that such a culture is particularly critical at high need, high poverty schools in order to close the historic and persistent gaps in college enrollment and completion rates among low-income, English learner, and racially diverse students and their counterparts.

Reports like the *ESEA Blueprint for Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), *Promoting College and Career Readiness: A Pocket Guide for State and District Leaders* (Sambolt & Blumenthal, 2013), and the College Board's *Creating a College-Going Culture Guide* (2006) provide guidance on how PK-12 school and district leaders can support college readiness efforts on a campus and create a college-going culture. Yet, a limited number of studies have also provided frameworks to approach this feat or offered strategies that have proven successful in schools that lacked such a culture (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Jones, Bensimon, McNair, & Dowd, 2011; MacDonald & Dorr, 2006; McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Núñez, 2009; Schneider, 2007). Often, however, the role of the school leader in existing literature is given little attention; despite evidence indicating the critical role that school leaders play in changing the culture of a school (Deal & Peterson, 2010; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). More importantly, in-depth examples of how school leaders at schools that predominantly serve underserved students, including those from racially and economically diverse backgrounds, can and have successfully cultivated or helped sustain a college-going culture on a campus are needed.

Drawing on a portion of qualitative data from a larger descriptive case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014) that examined the college-going culture and college readiness efforts at three public high schools in Texas, this study focused on the role and approach of one of the school principals in an attempt to contribute to the limited scholarship in this area. What is particularly unique about this study is that it purposefully focuses on the role of a principal at a racially and economically diverse school that has found consistent success in graduating a large proportion of its' students college ready. It is more often the case in previous literature (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Fujimoto, Garcia, Medina, & Perez, 2013; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009;

Jones, et al., 2011; MacDonald & Dorr, 2006; McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Núñez, 2009; Schneider, 2007), that schools that serve students from similar diverse demographic backgrounds focus on how the school can improve to support a college-going culture. Therefore, the focus here is on understanding how the principal contributed to the school's current college readiness efforts and college-going culture, drawing on his perspective and that of others on the campus to provide a more holistic picture of his approach. Two research questions guided the study: How did the school principal help foster a college-going culture with regards to particular approaches or strategies? What challenges, if any, were faced along the way in the school principal's efforts?

College Readiness, College Culture, and School Leaders

While there is a growing body of literature on issues of college readiness and college culture, there are still uncertainties regarding these concepts and how to foster and measure them. Though often appearing in conjunction, the terms "college readiness" and "college-going culture" have distinct meanings. College readiness is measured at the individual level; a college ready student has the mindset and disposition that will enable him or her to understand key lessons in college courses and maximize the college experience (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Conley, 2007, 2011). Rather than being measured at the individual level, a college-going culture encompasses the whole school community. Through efforts by administration and staff, it creates the expectation of postsecondary education for all students and supports them in reaching their goals (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; McKillip, Godfrey, & Rawls, 2013).

Together, these constructs currently are being emphasized through educational policy efforts across the country, including Texas. Two particular policy pieces in Texas, *Closing the Gaps* and House Bill 5, accentuate the need for college-going cultures in high schools to promote

college readiness in students. *Closing the Gaps* created a statewide vision for both increasing participation in higher education and increasing student success in higher education (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2010), reflecting the college readiness construct. House Bill 5, passed by the Texas Legislature in 2013, includes various aspects that “guid[e] Texas students to demonstrate postsecondary readiness” (Education Service Center 20, n.d.). To achieve this level of readiness, a college-going culture is imperative.

Conley (2011) was one of the first to examine the various facets that contribute to college readiness: key content strategies, key content knowledge, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness. On one hand, this model delineates specific aspects that can help guide educators in their efforts to increase college readiness among their students. However, purporting a one-size-fits-all model has also been considered detrimental to ensuring that students are adequately prepared for postsecondary education, as this model does not address the contextual needs of schools and students (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Thus, a more comprehensive model of college readiness, like the one offered by Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong (2012), is more appropriate as it takes into account the unique backgrounds of diverse students and communities, and the various stakeholders and interrelated factors that are at play that impact the college readiness of a student.

However, there remains a dearth of literature that particularly examines the role of school leaders in fostering a college-going culture and college readiness in schools. In *Promoting College and Career Readiness: A Pocket Guide for State and District Leaders*, Sambolt and Blumenthal (2013) stated, “College and career readiness is rapidly supplanting high school graduation as a key priority of the K-12 education system” (p. 2). Because of this, understanding the role of a school leader in these change efforts is essential. From an instructional perspective,

the work of Conley (2007) provides some indication of the role school leadership plays. For instance, a school leader can help arrange the school schedule in such a way that it provides for time to explore vertical alignment, to “bring teachers together to discuss how each course fits with the other courses in a department and across departments” (Conley, 2007, p. 25). This collaborative experience between colleagues allows teachers to increase rigor while ensuring a consistent curriculum for all students (p. 25). Through Professional Learning Communities and other collaborative experiences for teachers, school leaders can build a collective commitment to “foster a college-going community among school staff which can help address challenges such as lack of teacher buy-in and low teacher expectations” (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006, p.11).

Not only is it important to increase collaboration within a school, but increasing “vertical collaboration between elementary, middle, and high schools is essential to prevent gaps in curricula and ensure content mastery” (Sambolt & Blumenthal, 2013, p. 9). In addition to P-12 alignment, collaborating with institutions of higher education (IHEs) to ensure that college and career readiness standards align with their entrance requirements and that students have a connection to college life is important (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; MacDonald & Dorr, 2006; Sambolt & Blumenthal, 2013). The school leader is responsible for facilitating communication between these various educational stakeholders to ensure that their school’s focus and direction is towards college readiness along the P-16 pipeline.

While increasing collaboration among P-16 partners and preparing students through a rigorous, college-level curriculum are essential components of building a college culture, they are not enough to ensure success beyond high school, especially among underserved students that have been historically underrepresented in higher education (e.g., Black/African American, Latino, low-income students, and those who would be the first in their family to attend college).

Research has shown that low-income youth and students of color from low socio-economic backgrounds are generally less likely to have access to resources needed for college preparation, making college access and outreach programs and services offered during high school essential to help fill this void (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Knight & Marciano, 2013; McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Núñez, 2009). School leaders must be willing to embrace programs like Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) that have been proven to increase Advanced Placement (AP) course taking among students of color and low income students (Watt, Powell, Mendiola, & Cossio, 2006) and provide many of the necessary skills and academic preparation to transition to and persevere in college; helping AVID high school graduates stay on track to graduate college within six years and have higher first year retention rates when compared to their counterparts at their respective postsecondary institutions (Huerta, Watt, & Reyes, 2013; Mendiola, Watt, & Huerta, 2010; Watt, Huerta, & Alkan, 2011).

School leaders must also reach out to parents and encourage all staff members to keep parents informed of their child's progress and postsecondary opportunities as well (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006). It is also important that school leaders not work in isolation; a student's entire family must be included in the process. School personnel should "provide clear and high expectations and...enact culturally relevant practices that, in concert with students' families, support Black and Latina/o youth's learning opportunities, their college aspirations, and eventually their access to a range of postsecondary institutions" (Knight & Marciano, 2013, p. 33). School leaders must also use a variety of strategies to reach out to parents and engage in conversations about students. Although traditional communication strategies such as sending letters home, issuing report cards, and holding open houses are effective, "information that is communicated directly and personally to parents...is valued more highly" (Reyes, Scribner, &

Scribner, 1999, p. 55). In a study of high-performing Hispanic Schools in Texas, Reyes et al. found that “when school staff make information accessible to parents, levels of trust increase and parents become more effective participants in their children’s education” (Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999, p. 55), leading to greater success in school and beyond.

A lack of school-wide support for college, as evidenced by insufficient or absent college-going mission statements, lack of relationships with IHEs, academic programs without a college emphasis, weak college emphasis among staff, and limited space for college activities, leaves large numbers of students without access to college guidance (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). A purposeful focus on fostering college readiness and establishing a college-going culture is needed to allow students to pursue their dreams of an academic life beyond high school, and “administrators perform a central role in fostering [this] culture” (Corwin & Tierney, 2007, p. 10). Though this can be challenging for school leaders, especially in urban areas with underserved student populations, it is important “to create a college-going community within the school where the values, norms, and social roles associated with college-going are present and consistently reinforced” (Schneider, 2007, p. 8), to orient students to a college-going mindset and build a college-going culture.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study drew on the work of Louis and Wahlstrom (2011), who speak to the role of principals in changing and improving the culture of a school in general, and McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, and Núñez’s (2009) nine guiding principles to develop a college-going culture, in particular. From a more general standpoint, Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) indicate, “changing a school’s culture requires *shared or distributed leadership*, which engages many stakeholders in major improvement roles, and *instructional*

leadership, in which administrators take responsibility for shaping improvements at the classroom level” (p. 52). More specifically, Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) suggest that the ability for a principal to improve a school’s culture is predicated on three elements: ensuring excellent instruction within the classroom, establishing core values and norms that are shared by all on a campus, and building trust among stakeholders.

Improving the culture, and specifically instruction, of a school requires that a principal make learning and professional development for teachers and administrators a priority; this way the resources and knowledge of all school staff are utilized and enhanced. Professional learning communities can be utilized to support this effort (Bausmith & Barry, 2011), and more specifically help establish the collective work of improving student learning through shared responsibility and leadership (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). At the core of such collaboration is trust: between school leaders and teachers, teachers and parents, and among teachers. The school leader sets the precedent for building such trust, knowing that “trust is hard to obtain and easy to break, and it requires persistence, patience, and consistency in all leadership behaviors” (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011, p. 55).

To uniquely change a school’s culture to one that is college-going, McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, and Núñez (2009) outlined nine guiding principles based on their own work and previous literature. The first principle in their framework relates to *college talk*, which is characterized by clear, ongoing communication among students, teachers, administrators, and families about what it takes to get to college. The second principle refers to *clear expectations* and how schools need to provide explicit, clearly defined goals with regards to postsecondary education that are communicated in ways that make these goals a part of the school culture. The third principle focuses on providing comprehensive, up-to-date, and easily accessible

information and resources to all students, families, and school personnel. Another key aspect of a developing a college culture includes adopting a *comprehensive counseling model* to ensure that all student interactions with counseling staff provide opportunities for college counseling. The fifth principle relates to college-focused *testing and curricula*. Students must have access to and information about college preparation and entrance exams (PSAT, SAT, etc.) and courses (e.g., algebra and advanced placement). The next three principles focus on the need to involve and develop relationships with key stakeholders in this process: *faculty involvement*, *family involvement*, and *college and university partnerships*. The final principle relates to the ongoing *articulation* necessary between counselors and teachers among all schools in a feeder group.

Methods

This study drew on a subset of qualitative data that was gathered during the 2013-2014 academic year from a larger descriptive multisite case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014) that was designed and led by the first author and examined the college-going culture and college readiness efforts at three public high schools in Texas. The three schools are in different regions of the state (South, Central, and Gulf Coast region) and all serve a majority of students of color and at least 50% of students that qualify for free and/or reduced lunch. At the same time, each school is finding success in graduating about 50% or more of its students from all racial/ethnic and income backgrounds college ready in mathematics, language arts, and both combined subjects. College readiness was based on the Texas Education Agency's College Ready Graduates (CRG) Indicator, which is calculated for graduates of each high school in Texas based on SAT, ACT, or Texas' state mandated exit level exam scores. While a 50% college ready graduates rate may not seem optimal, the high schools in the larger study were identified among

only a few schools in their regions that serve such a diverse student population with consistent (for at least three academic years prior to 2013-2014) college ready graduate rates this high.

This study examined the role of one of the school principals in the multisite case study, Mr. Avery (pseudonym), in fostering the college-going culture and college readiness efforts at Foundation high school (pseudonym) in Central Texas. Foundation high school's student body was comprised of 2,578 students during the 2013-2014 school year who identified as follows: 66.8% Latino, 5.95% African American, 20.7% White, 4.1% Asian (Texas Education Agency, 2014). Fifty percent of students also qualified for free or reduced lunch. During this same year there were 156 teachers on the campus, of which 30.6% identified as Latina/o, 4.6% African American, 1.9% Asian, and 63.4% White (Texas Education Agency, 2014). The average years of experience among teachers at Foundation high school was 9.9 years. The school offers a host of academic programs and courses, including Gifted and Talented, AVID (which serves 325 students), 18 AP courses in various subjects including Art, Biology, Calculus, Chemistry, Economics, Latin, Physics, Spanish, Statistics, and U.S. Government and History, dual credit courses in English, U.S. History, Pre-Calculus, and Calculus, Career and Technology courses (offered in automotive, business/audio video/photography, construction technology, family and consumer sciences, health science, law enforcement, and STEM), fine arts courses (offered in art, band, dance, theater/drama, choir, orchestra), and ROTC. There are also numerous sports teams, clubs, and other extracurricular opportunities for students, with additional information and support for college offered through a College Center that is overseen by a full-time district funded specialist, who works in coordination with the school counselors, the three AVID teachers on campus, as well as teachers and administration to help promote a college-going culture on the campus.

Data Collection Process

In the larger case study, multiple forms of qualitative data were collected in a systematic manner from a number of stakeholders on each campus to ensure rigor and triangulation of data (Yin, 2014). Protocols were developed for the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, based on understandings of college readiness and a college-going culture in previous literature. Questions in both protocols focused on the interviewees' perspectives of the college-going culture on the campus and other college readiness efforts. Examples of questions included: What do you feel are the school's expectations for students once they finish high school? What does being ready for college mean to you? How does the school promote or help students to be ready for college?

Over the course of one week at each school, participants were solicited through a combination of purposeful means, as well as through snowball sampling and random convenience (Creswell, 2013). For instance, all principals and at least one counselor were interviewed at each school. Administrators and students were asked to suggest teachers who could be interviewed based on their longevity at the school, so they could speak to changes in the culture and leadership on the campus over the years, as well as teachers who they felt could particularly contribute to the topic area. Some teachers were also identified as potential participants at random, chosen from a master list of teachers on each campus. Participation among teachers ultimately depended on their willingness to participate, their availability to be interviewed during their conference period or before or after school, and the ability of the lead author to fit each interview into the data collection schedule for the week's time at each school. In an effort to garner student participation without encroaching on class time, some students were randomly solicited for participation during their lunch hour. Other student participants were

solicited from those that had a class period serving as library or office aides; often these were seniors at each school. Other students were solicited through the student council as well, with the assistance of the faculty sponsor.

A total of 25 participants were interviewed at Foundation high school including Mr. Avery, the lead counselor at the school, 10 teachers, and 13 students from varying grade levels. A majority of participants were interviewed individually utilizing a semi-structured format, except for two teachers that were interviewed together, and 11 students, who were interviewed in four focus groups. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy. Additional data included school documents (e.g., school newspapers, principal newsletters, college-related fliers, etc.), approximately 30 hours of observations, and additional observables (i.e., photographs). Observations in common areas like the library, hallways, cafeteria, and the school's College Center focused on capturing interactions between students and peers, as well as students and school personnel to gain a general perspective of the school climate, and capture any interactions that appeared to be college-focused. Other observations that were captured with similar intent included an observation of an English team meeting, one period in an English classroom, and two periods in a social studies course in which mentoring between seniors and freshman took place. Observations and photographs also helped capture the general aesthetics of the school, with particular focus on posters, student work, and/or any other materials/visuals in hallways and common areas that were focused on postsecondary success. Field notes were also kept to capture additional reflections and sense-making throughout the data collection process.

Analysis

Analysis of data was inductive (Creswell, 2013) and followed Yin's (2011) five-phase cycle of analysis. This included first *compiling* all textual data and reviewing additional

observables, and then open coding the textual data in the second *disassembling* phase. In this process, the authors individually examined all of the written data with the conceptual framework in mind; Louis and Wahlstrom's (2011) understandings of the role of principals in changing and improving a school's culture and McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, and Núñez's (2009) nine guiding principles to develop a college-going culture. We each derived a list of codes, with supporting textual data in this process. In the third *reassembling* phase, the authors met to discuss initial codes and proceeded to discern common overarching themes that were supported by the data; the conceptual framework, supporting literature, and research questions were considered in this process. Some codes were eliminated and others were redefined in this stage, with analysis being recursive and iterative in nature. In the *interpreting* phase, the authors recognized that the most significant culminating themes fell under two overarching categories: 1) laying the groundwork for a college-going culture and 2) sustaining a college-going culture. Findings were couched around these two overarching categories, resulting in a number of subthemes within each category. Providing *concluding* remarks for the study was the final step in this process.

Positionality of the Researchers

As qualitative researchers, the authors acknowledge their positionality with regards to the study. The first author identifies as a Mexican American/Latina female who grew up along the U.S.-Mexico border in south Texas. As a former public school teacher and counselor, she drew on her insider knowledge and understandings of school systems to gain access to and develop a rapport with the school communities in the multisite case study. Prior to engaging in this research, she did not have any personal or professional ties to the three high schools under study. The first author also adheres to a constructivist worldview, in that she believes that an objective

truth does not exist. Rather she believes that individuals' perspectives are subjective in nature and based on lived experiences, which are socially, culturally, and historically situated (Creswell, 2013). Thus, the first author remained cognizant of this throughout the duration of the study.

The second author identifies as a White female who grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, along the U.S.-Mexico border in Texas, and Central Texas. She is currently enrolled in a doctoral program in education. Prior to beginning her doctoral work, she had twelve years of experience teaching 2nd - 8th grades in public schools in Texas, Delaware, and Arizona. This experience helped her navigate the school setting and establish a rapport with school staff and students. Prior to beginning this research, she did not have any personal or professional connections to the three high schools under study.

Findings

Principal Avery was interviewed during his fifth complete year at Foundation high school (2013-2014). He revealed he had taught at the school for three years about 10 years prior. He had left Foundation as a teacher when he was hired as an assistant principal at a high school in the district, where he remained for four years. After that, he was hired as an assistant principal at a middle school where he remained until his principal suggested, "you ought to put your name in [for principal of Foundation]. See what happens." Mr. Avery's first thoughts were that it was "not going to happen." Pleasantly surprised, however, he was hired and began his tenure at Foundation high school mid-year in January of 2009 after the previous principal was promoted to a district-level position. Thus, his history with the school and staff impacted how he approached his transition to the principalship and how he engaged in college readiness efforts. Admittedly he felt "it was kind of weird" at first since "many of the people I worked with as a teacher were still

here, and now I'm coming back as their boss...but of course they were great. I mean everybody embraced me coming back.”

In speaking with him and the other study participants, two overarching thematic categories became evident in terms of how Mr. Avery proceeded in fostering a college-going culture and supporting college readiness efforts. This included: 1) *laying the groundwork* for a college-going culture, and 2) *sustaining* a college-going culture. To lay the groundwork, Mr. Avery primarily: a) built trust with faculty and staff through support and empowerment, b) expected higher standards and effort from teachers and students, c) secured strong instructional leadership through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and d) established academic support programs for students with the most academic need. To sustain efforts he: a) remained student-centered (stressing student learning and relationship building), b) engaged in college talk and conveyed high expectations, c) supported integration of college and career readiness strategies in courses, and d) embraced innovation and recognition of needs for continued school improvement.

Laying the Groundwork

Building trust through support and empowerment. Upon being hired, Mr. Avery knew that in order to create the type of college-going culture and school community that he believed necessary to ensure academic and college readiness success for students he first needed to assess the current culture of the campus and particularly consider the needs of the faculty. This was key in order to ensure faculty involvement and establish clear expectations for students and faculty regarding postsecondary education; two principles of building a college culture (McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Núñez, 2009). He did this by observing and listening, “The first 3 months, I took copious notes of everything about the campus...I started really trying...to

make sense of all of this.” He did not make any drastic changes during his first semester, and waited until the summer to really focus on building his credibility with his teachers and staff by providing them with staff development himself. “I didn’t want to bring anybody in. Because I, you need credibility as a new principal. You need to establish yourself as an instructional leader. You need to have a better understanding of what a campus vision should look like.”

He also gained teachers’ trust by empowering them through leadership and remaining visible and open to their concerns, reflecting Louis and Wahlstrom’s (2011) notion that distributed leadership is necessary to change a school’s culture. Again, it was important for him to do this in order to begin to make changes at the school that teachers could support, changes that would more aptly promote a college-going culture. Faculty spoke to how Mr. Avery led by example. The department coordinator for fine arts believed that Mr. Avery particularly shaped the school’s strong emphasis on student learning, which ultimately impacts students’ college readiness. “It is not something that we just say we do. That comes down from leadership. That’s Mr. Avery’s thing. That’s what he looks at. He doesn’t just say that’s his—that is his thing.” Having been at the school for 11 years, she could compare Mr. Avery to previous administrators.

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

Building trust and credibility in order to then begin to implement change to foster a stronger college-going culture, however, did not come without challenges. Mr. Avery explained how this took time, and how some veteran teachers in particular were not initially supportive of his vision for the school. This vision entailed utilizing the strongest and most experienced teachers, who were often solely teaching advanced courses, to work with the most struggling students in order to ensure more students were college ready. He described how one department coordinator who had been teaching at the school for almost 40 years actually resigned because he did not want to have to make this move. Mr. Avery had “approached him in the sense of you’re a leader” and explained how “No one’s going to follow if you’re not going to get in the trenches with them.” In the end, Mr. Avery explained how this teacher, “understood, but it was coming to terms that the expectations of life was changing, and education, so I either need to get on board or I need to move on.”

Expecting higher standards. Another aspect of laying the groundwork for building a college-going culture entailed expecting more from teachers and students. This aligned with the principle of providing clear and explicit expectations about postsecondary education (McKillip, Godfrey, & Rawls, 2013) and ensuring excellent instruction in classrooms (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Teachers recognized these higher expectations for them and their students, and appreciated it. One of the school’s AVID teachers shared her perspective.

He [Mr. Avery] also started pushing for more rigor. We were seeing, with AP [Advanced Placement] scores and stuff, they were okay, but there weren’t many kids taking AP.

Even though our AP classes were open, they really weren’t. Teachers were saying ‘You’re not ready for AP. Get out.’ Now we’re seeing more ‘You aren’t ready for AP. What can we do to help you get there?’

Ensuring students have access to advanced courses that help prepare them for more rigorous, college-level work reflects the fifth guiding principle of a college-going culture (McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Núñez, 2009).

The English department coordinator also believed Mr. Avery helped change the mindset of many teachers about the demographic shift in the student body that the school was experiencing over the last several years. With the school seeing greater numbers of lower income students, students of color, and future first generation college students, many teachers seemed to think that these students could not perform as previous generations of Foundation students who were predominantly more affluent or White. In essence, teachers were exhibiting deficit thinking regarding more diverse students, which can impact teachers' college expectations for students.

A lot of people over the years would say Foundation's not the same campus it used to be, and it's because all the really good kids went to [other district school], or the really good kids went to [other district school]. And I think Mr. Avery made the point that we had to stop making excuses for ourselves, because when you started looking at the data and the progression of what Foundation students were able to do, we were outperforming ourselves 10 years ago...all the kids that unfortunately everyone thinks of as the leftovers, those kids still perform well. They have the skills and they have the potential and I think it's, we kind of consider Foundation like an underdog school. Because I think people kind of tend to underestimate here. And I think that that's something that Mr. Avery has been really pushing us to try to change and to try to think about differently.

Another teacher reiterated, "He has really high expectations for us" noting how "he supports the teachers 100%. He's here for the students and that's the way it's supposed to be." These higher expectations were conveyed through the manner in which Mr. Avery talked to

faculty and treated and respected them “as professionals.” This teacher attributed the school’s rising college readiness success to these increased expectations: “I mean, since he’s been here our scores have gone up higher and higher as far as standardized test scores go. Then the same thing with the graduation rate and the dropout rate. All of those things have—well, graduation’s increased and dropout decreased.”

Securing strong leadership through PLCs. To help ensure increased academic rigor for all students so that they would be college ready and provide teachers with the necessary support to improve their craft, Mr. Avery adopted the use of PLCs on campus; an approach encouraged but not required by the district. He felt PLCs organized by department would help build strong instructional leaders at the school, ensure collective responsibility for student learning, and provide for shared norms and values (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). He ensured the effectiveness of PLCs by requiring that each PLC submit a report to him that he personally reviewed and returned with his feedback. One teacher expanded on this, referring to the increased presence of Mr. Avery and the administration in classrooms as a means of ensuring that what teachers indicated they were going to teach, as stipulated in their PLC reports, was actually happening.

They’re doing walk-throughs like crazy ‘cuz they wanna know whether or not we’re really doing stuff in the classroom with the kids...The feedback is immediate. They come in with their iPads and they have these special forms. As soon as they click send that sends straight to our PDAS [Professional Development and Appraisal System] system and it’s sent email to us. We get to see it.

The fine arts department coordinator also noted how “Mr. Avery’s expectations of us, as a staff, is that we’re not about just putting things on paper. We’re about how has that student learned. We’re not just looking at scores, either.” She described how Mr. Avery wanted “to make

sure that the grade is a measure of learning” and “that’s why our PLCs are so crucial. He and [the academic dean] stay on top of our PLCs, to make sure that we understand what a learning objective is. Are we meeting it every day? Are the students learning?” The math department head reiterated how Mr. Avery’s passion for and commitment to PLCs translated to increased collaboration among teachers for student success and a campus-wide vision:

That PLC form is there to push and to guide ninth through twelfth grade instruction...because what that allows for is one, you have a common vision, a common goal. If you have that weak, struggling teacher, for whatever reason it may be—content, affective, they don’t know how to teach kids because they’ve either one, come from the private industry back into public, or bounced around, or they’re new—whatever reason, that supports that teacher...it [PLC] helps with turnover rate [as well].

However, as a teacher in the social studies department with 21 years of experience admitted, the increased collaboration and shared responsibility among teachers that was required with PLCs was a change that was not necessarily embraced by all at first and still remains a challenge for some. “Oh, there were definitely growing pains, yeah. [Laughs] Because my personal gripe about changes is when I first started teaching...There was not a culture of sharing amongst lesson plans, amongst teachers.” Yet, with time she recognized that while “it was hard to move to the PLC thing, the PLC thing makes us better teachers. It makes us more of a team for the students than our own individual islands of education.”

Establishing academic support programs. Mr. Avery also recognized that providing a rigorous college level curriculum for all students was at the core of a college culture to ensure students were obtaining key content knowledge, strategies, and learning the necessary academic behaviors (Conley, 2011) that would enable them to succeed in their postsecondary pursuits.

When he arrived at Foundation a part of understanding the culture of the school meant examining the school's performance on various state and national exams, as well as students' performance in courses and school benchmarks. Once areas of need were identified he said one thing they created was "a pyramid of intervention[s]." He also found that there was a specific need to provide freshmen with increased academic and social support, to ensure they had a strong basis that would sustain them for their subsequent years in high school and beyond. Over the years, the freshman focused intervention had changed in name and form due in part to budget cuts and logistics, but Mr. Avery described at least the first and current iteration of it.

We created a 9th grade, kind of like, alternative learning environment... Basically what it was is that every teacher at the, we have a group of 9th graders that come in that were not promoted to 9th grade but they were placed. So those kids we put in the 9th grade center. We picked four of the best teachers that we had on campus that taught these kids... They earned their way back into the regular classroom. So at six weeks they transitioned back into the classroom, but now the teachers can recommend new kids to the academy.

However, as the state of Texas underwent budget cuts the program could not continue and Mr. Avery and his staff had to become resourceful and inventive. They created a freshman center that was "a little more challenging logistically because you have to hand schedule everything." It still consists of "a team of four teachers. And those four teachers share the exact same 130 kids a day. And they meet every Friday, and they don't talk about curriculum. They just talk about kids." He explained how "If they have 20 kids failing within that house team, they split it up. Instead of every teacher having to call 20 homes, they have to call five. And they tell the whole story versus just their story." He expanded, "My argument to the teachers in that was now you will always be able to say something good about a child. You're not going to just call a

parent and tell them that the kid is failing your class, but guess what? That kid is passing another class. Now you have some success you can talk about.”

Mr. Avery admitted that initially some parents of students who were in the freshman intervention in its first year of existence were not supportive. But Mr. Avery reiterated how, “That’s where you have to be willing to have difficult conversations” and include family in efforts that help ensure students’ readiness for postsecondary success, as recommended by MacDonald and Dorr (2006). He told parents, “Okay, so you’re assuming full responsibility for your child is what you’re telling me? Well, what do you mean? Well, we’re offering support for you, but you’re opting out.” He believed that once he placed more responsibility on parents for ensuring their child would succeed academically, that parents would then be more willing to try the freshman intervention. “It turned out that most of the parents came back later and said ‘we had kids who never passed TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills] test and they ended up commended on it.’...So it had great success there.” Mr. Avery believed this effort contributed to his “credibility that if you do something deliberate and your actions are deliberate, then you can see improvement.”

Teachers were convinced of the success of the freshman intervention as well, as it also allowed them to “discuss the students that we are most concerned about, for whatever reason, lack of attendance, lack of participation, dropping grades.” Additional support was provided by “the counselors [who also] attend those meetings, because then the counselors can get involved.”

Sustaining Efforts

Remaining student-centered by focusing on learning and relationships. Repeatedly participants referred to Mr. Avery’s primary focus on building relationships with students and putting student learning first, essential components to sustaining a college-going culture. As

several faculty noted, Mr. Avery was known for his slogan, “It’s all about people, not programs...It’s the people that make the difference.” One teacher reiterated this explaining how, “It’s the relationships that we build with our students that ultimately pushes them in the right direction. He says that all the time.” Mr. Avery himself described some of the expectations he held for staff to ensure this:

One of my expectations and you’ll see this is, whenever the bell rings, every administrator has to stop what they’re doing and go out. Not just to be out and just stand there. It’s visiting with kids, talking with kids, and being visible. The teachers have to be at their doors greeting kids...You know, even myself. When kids are leaving campus you’re going to tell them have a good lunch, you have your pass? It’s not yelling at kids. It’s really just talking to them and I think that really started to give them the self-respect they need.

Other teachers described how the school’s success in being student centered really started at the top, with Mr. Avery’s distributed leadership and his high expectations for student learning.

That comes down from leadership. That’s Mr. Avery’s thing. That’s what he looks at. He doesn’t just say that’s his—that is his thing. Do we prepare a class—do we prepare our objectives for the maximum amount of student learning? Or, are we worried about whether they have a nose ring? Or, are we worried about little things that don’t really matter about student learning?

Two English teachers also discussed how the school took measures to ensure that students were invested and were building relationships with peers and adults on campus. One explained, “I think that we’re really good at blanketing the campus. That’s been Mr. Avery’s mantra...every kid needs to be involved in something where they’re being monitored, by one

more adult who cares about how that kid does.” While the other reiterated how this expectation of being involved and connected to the school was an expectation shared with incoming freshman. “So the other day we had the 8th graders on campus and Mr. Avery made the point of saying ‘how many of you are involved in something right now?’ A few of them raised their hand.” Mr. Avery responded by saying, “Next year, all of you will raise your hand.” “I think that makes a big impact. They see themselves in the school, and that’s a big thing.”

Building relationships with students and putting student learning first was definitely an expectation from leadership that became a shared value among participants. The head counselor spoke about how she shared this vision, and emphasized how faculty and staff that might not be in that same “boat” and on board with this vision would “need to allow somebody [else] to get in that boat so that that person collaborates towards reaching that goal.”

Engaging in college talk and conveying high expectations. While student participants were less cognizant of the ways in which Mr. Avery had strategically laid the groundwork for the college-going culture at Foundation high school and made strides to increase college readiness among students, more were aware of how he regularly engaged in college talk (McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Núñez, 2009) with students and expressed his high expectations for students and staff. As one female student who was active in the student council recalled, “whenever he makes announcements to seniors or we have a senior meeting...he makes sure to emphasize, where are you going with life? What do you wanna do about college?” Two other senior males agreed, recalling how Mr. Avery “wants everybody to go to college and have a good future.”

One female in her junior year recalled how Mr. Avery would “round up all the kids to go in the auditorium” and try to get students to consider their future. “Last year he did the Rocky

speech...he showed us a video clip of just keep moving forward. Education matters. You need to take it serious.” “I think that helps,” she admitted, and explained how “they do things like that that inspire you and help you get on the right track.” Another teacher also shared how Mr. Avery contributed to “that kind of support and atmosphere, the whole life after high school postsecondary plans, that’s a topic that’s in every faculty meeting. It’s something that is constantly discussed. It’s an expectation. These kids have got to have a plan.”

Mr. Avery acknowledged his emphasis on college expectations and college discussions as well. “We talk about it. We talk college and career when we communicate.” He referred to “the senior meetings” where he “always ask[s], ‘how many of you are going to college?’ And we talk about, it’s not just about saying, it’s about doing.” “Any time there is a venue that allows me to speak to the student body. I’m not a big PA [public announcement] guy; I think that’s so out of touch with the kids. So, anytime I can stand in front of them and do that I think it makes a better connection.”

Supporting integration of college-focused strategies in courses. Foundation high school has the largest AVID program in the district, and according to Principal Avery, the program “has really pushed our college culture.” Faculty, staff, and students recognized the program’s success but were cognizant that not all students could be in the AVID program because of capacity constraints; AVID serves only 325 students. According to one of the three AVID-trained teachers on campus, the success of AVID was in part because it “always had that really strong administrative background [sic] here at Foundation.” She described how the four principals prior to Mr. Avery all supported AVID, and how Mr. Avery had been to “maybe 2 or 3” of the summer AVID trainings himself, and so he was particularly supportive of utilizing some specific strategies used in AVID in other courses, as in the case of Cornell notes. His

reasoning was, “If AVID is so effective, why wouldn’t we have that support system for all kids?” Recognizing the leadership capacity of his AVID teachers (Mills, Huerta, Watt, & Martinez, 2014), Mr. Avery also strategically appointed one of Foundation’s AVID teachers as the school’s dual credit liaison, and one of the other AVID teachers as the AP liaison. “We did that on purpose because they are already targeting kids, but then they can use that to help identify kids that we may have missed and push through there.”

The AVID teachers spoke of Mr. Avery’s support for the integration of AVID strategies throughout the curriculum, as one indicated:

Mr. Avery knows that it works...So he sees how important it is. We push to get a lot of the strategies throughout the school. We don’t call them AVID strategies because teachers tend to say, another program, what do we have to do with it now? So we push those strategies and not call them AVID. So if you go into some of the classrooms you’ll see most of the teachers using the Cornell Note System now, you know, and it was an initial AVID strategy that we kind of pushed through.

Another staff member reiterated how “the college culture and postsecondary plans is [sic] brought up in every opportunity it can fit into the curriculum,” reflecting MacDonald and Dorr’s (2006) assertion that students should hear, see, and talk about college with their teachers on a regular basis. This staff member stressed how the integration of college-focused strategies in the curriculum was dependent on “an academic team that solidly and consistently believes in that” and that Mr. Avery and the entire administration worked hard to ensure that teachers were on board with this. “Faculty buy-in and support are essential components of promoting a college-going culture” (MacDonald & Dorr, 2006, p. 11); by emphasizing the need for teachers to incorporate college talk and strategies into their classrooms, Mr. Avery promoted college

readiness for students at Foundation. It was also clear that AVID played a significant role in how Mr. Avery and previous school leaders built and sustained Foundation's college culture.

However, AVID's capacity constraints required other complimentary strategies, like PLCs and specific academic support programs, be used to sustain the college-going culture of the campus.

Embracing innovation and recognizing needs for school improvement. The term innovative often emerged among faculty and staff participants when describing Mr. Avery and his approach to creating a college-going culture in particular and to college readiness and school improvement in general. As one teacher noted, "we are fortunate to have Mr. Avery, who is very innovative and believes in the success of the child, that every child can succeed at something." In fact, Mr. Avery's innovative practices garnered the attention of others outside the school and as a consequence he was awarded an innovation award in the fall of 2014 by the school district. What seemed especially innovative about Mr. Avery's approach was his willingness to think outside the box and try new programs and initiatives to help students succeed. At the same time, he was cognizant of assessing programs and practices for success and initiating change to improve them.

Faculty in particular discussed specific programs and practices that Mr. Avery had helped implement, like the freshman house, or embracing PLCs, that contributed to the college culture and college readiness. One program that the school had recently implemented was a mentor program that trained seniors to be mentors to freshmen. The program was integrated as a part of a required course for seniors and freshmen, although seniors had to specifically apply to be a mentor. The teacher who taught the senior level course where the mentor program was initiated was also the school's student council advisor. Her perspective on the program follows:

It is so important because the seniors that are in the mentor program aren't all high fliers.

They are good students. They are good citizens, but when you have a senior saying to a

freshman, 'I screwed up my freshman year, and now I'm realizing why it's so important,' that really has a much bigger impact than if I were to say the exact same words.

The mentor program had emerged after "Mr. Avery and some other teachers went on a [site] visit somewhere to another state...so they saw something similar to it."

Key to Mr. Avery's innovation was that he implemented strategies to regularly assess the school's progress and that of particular programs to ensure continuous school improvement. He intentionally sought input not only from his staff but from students as well; a clear sign of distributed leadership and collective responsibility to improve school culture (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011).

Every year at the end of the year, I take all of the seniors to a faculty meeting, or to a student meeting and I have charts set up and I let the kids talk about, if I could do the past four years over again, what would have helped me be more successful? What would have helped me be more college ready? So I take that information and that's kind of how I plan my staff development.

He also formed "a student advisory team" that met once a month and was "composed of 24 kids, mainly two kids from all different areas, fine arts, athletics, special ed. [education], ESL (English as a Second Language), culinary, health science." His intent was to include "a big variety so that way we kind of are talking to the whole student body but with a smaller group." He shared the information gathered from the advisory team with the teachers as well. Mr. Avery had seen this type of advisory team formed before while serving as a school leader in an organization in the city. "We did that with a group of kids this year from around the city. What I found was that it was very eye opening...it was very interesting coming from a kid's perspective."

Discussion and Implications

This study highlights the significant role that a principal at a comprehensive high school serving a majority of students of color and a large number of low-income students can play in developing a college-going culture and improving college readiness. Little empirical research exists in this specific area, as previous studies on the role of school leaders and school culture have taken a more generalized approach (Deal & Peterson, 1990, 1999, 2010; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011), while studies on the development of college-going cultures have de-emphasized the role of the school leader (College Board, 2006; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Jones, et al., 2011; MacDonald & Dorr, 2006; McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Núñez, 2009; Schneider, 2007). Yet this study attempted to bridge this gap by specifically utilizing a conceptual framework that draws on both literature bases and by providing a rich, thick description of the types of strategies Mr. Avery utilized in his approach. Findings suggest that such a conceptual framework is applicable, but additional research could expand upon what was learned.

For instance, participants' narratives suggested that the three key elements necessary for a principal to improve a school's culture in general (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011), ensuring excellent instruction within the classroom, establishing core values and norms, and building trust among stakeholders, was evident through Mr. Avery's practices as he took on the role of principal. He also contributed the following principles of a college-going culture: engaging in college talk, providing clear expectations for students and other stakeholders regarding postsecondary education, and ensuring faculty involvement (McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Núñez, 2009; MacDonald & Dorr, 2006). Less evident and/or clear, however, was Mr. Avery's role in helping establish and/or sustain other college-going culture principles: *access to college*

information and resources, and college-focused testing and curricula, adopting a comprehensive counseling model, involving family, establishing college and university partnerships, and ensuring ongoing articulation between Foundation's counselors and teachers and those from feeder schools (McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Núñez, 2009). This is not to say that these other aspects of a college culture were not evident at the school, or that Mr. Avery did not contribute to these other college culture principles in indirect or direct ways. However, given that this study drew on a portion of data from a larger qualitative case study that examined the college-going culture of three high schools in general, the role of the school leader in such efforts was not the sole focus. Thus, this study's findings are limited in this capacity. Yet future research could expand on these findings to determine how school leaders can or do contribute to all nine guiding principles of a college-going culture, whether directly or indirectly.

What was explicit in this study was how Mr. Avery invested great time and effort to understand the existing school culture and immanent needs of the students and staff when he arrived at Foundation prior to implementing any major initiatives to improve student success and establish a college-going culture. Even though he sought to establish trust and credibility in this process and utilized best practices in his approach (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011), according to some participants and Mr. Avery himself, his efforts were met with some resistance and were not always immediately successful. However, his ability to remain optimistic, student-centered, innovative, and collaborative helped him improve the culture of the school so that an increased college-focus was evident. Teacher participants also revealed how they felt more empowered and equipped to provide relevant, rigorous curriculum to students (Conley, 2007) given Mr. Avery's leadership, and this subsequently impacted student achievement and the college-going culture. By establishing PLCs, he enabled teachers to have collaborative experiences during which they

worked to ensure a consistent curriculum for students and build a collective commitment to building a college-going community (Bausmith & Barry, 2011; MacDonald & Dorr, 2006). Mr. Avery also retained existing programs that were proven to be successful in building a college-going culture and increasing college readiness among underserved students, as in the case of AVID (Huerta, Watt, & Reyes, 2013; Watt, Huerta, & Alkan, 2011). However, he recognized the capacity constraints of Foundation's AVID program, and purposefully focused on expanding its reach through the integration of AVID strategies in non-AVID courses. Student participants also recognized and appreciated the increased expectations for postsecondary pursuits that trickled down through Mr. Avery's leadership.

All of these findings have implications for current policy and practice in the field of school leadership, as well as the preparation of school leaders. In particular, findings highlight the required investment that school leaders must make in relationship building. School leaders in general, and those in schools serving students from diverse backgrounds, must be knowledgeable in this area and should continue to seek professional development on how to build and maintain relationships, trust, and motivate their staff, students, and families (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999). This should be a major focus for a school leader that wants to build a caring and college-focused environment. This expectation must also then be held for teachers and staff, so that teachers and staff are equipped with the knowledge of how to build and maintain such relationships with diverse students and families. Being that Mr. Avery is African American, it is possible that his own racial/ethnic background contributed to his knowledge and ability to build relationships with the diverse school community. However, additional research would be necessary to determine the extent to which his identity and cultural proficiency contributed to college readiness efforts and the college-going culture of the school.

School leaders must also build leadership capacity of others in the school to empower them and strengthen instructional practice so that a rigorous, college level curriculum is provided to all students (Conley, 2007). While Mr. Avery utilized PLCs to do this, there are other strategies that have proven useful such as the use of small learning communities (Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999). Such initiatives however, require not only a change in practice, but policy. For instance, school level policy changed when Mr. Avery began requiring each PLC to fill out a form and submit it to him for review after they had met during their weekly meetings. At the same time, it is important to consider how existing school or district policies might impede a school leader's ability to build leadership capacity in particular, or establish a college-going culture in general. Although state mandated assessment policies often tend to deter or impede a school's ability to create a college-going culture (Welton & Williams, 2015), future studies could delve further in this area to help determine if or how some district or school-level policies might restrict college readiness efforts.

Cultivating innovation and embracing continuous school improvement also matters in the process of building a college-going culture and improving students' college readiness. For this reason, current and future school leaders must be willing to consider new initiatives and approaches that are truly in the best interest of students. This requires staying abreast of the latest research-based practices to find out what is working in other schools, and regularly considering input from students and staff through new or established practices. Mr. Avery implemented a few new strategies to garner student feedback on the school's college readiness efforts, as well as teacher needs. His ability to consider this input and then use it to inform school policy and practice was vital to school improvement efforts.

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