Creating a K-16 Environment: Reflections on the Process of Establishing a College Culture In Secondary Schools

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Introduction

The expectations that teachers, parents, and other adults have of students are integral to the decisions they will make about college. Too often, students are labeled early in their educational careers as “college bound” or “non-college bound.” Those labels are persistent and typically have a profound impact on the choices students make, the options they see for themselves, and their ideas about what is realistic (Oakes, 1986).

A student’s decision-making and attitudes about college are affected by both the normative expectations that exist among the students, parents, and faculty of a high school, as well as by anticipated consequences, and what alternatives will be considered or ignored. Not surprisingly, these latter variables are highly susceptible to influence from the school and the individuals who exist within it. This combination of social networks and environment is an individual’s frame of reference for college planning. If the frame of reference and perceptions are congruent, as in the case of an upper-middle class student seeking to attend a “good” college, then there is no dissonance. But, if in trying to choose a college, a student has a frame of reference that conflicts with his or her perceptions of what is available, he or she will filter out choices that are too discordant (March and Simon, 1958). The end result is that the students who are expected to go to college are able, by and large, do so. Those for whom the expectations do not exist are never given the chance to make it to college because they are denied the support, information, and resources necessary to get there. Clearly, we must create environments in our schools where high expectations exist for students from all backgrounds, so that their choices are not limited in ways that are beyond their control.

In this paper we describe and reflect upon current work that is taking place in one group of schools in the Los Angeles area. This work, entitled the “Creating a College Culture” project, seeks to provide students with frames of reference that do not limit their choices but rather expand them. If the work is successful, all students in these schools will see college as an option and have the appropriate information available to them – at all stages of their academic careers – so that they can make appropriate decisions about their futures. The discussion that follows offers a reflection on the process of cultural change in middle schools and elementary schools, as well as on the very process of working collaboratively, as university action researchers, with local schools to effect this sort of change.
Statement of the Problem

Research on college access tells us that having college plans by the tenth grade increases the likelihood of attending by 21%, compared to plans formulated during the senior year (Alexander and Cook, 1979). But college plans do not simply happen. They must be fostered and encouraged through a school’s culture. This does not happen for all students, and not surprisingly, the most stubborn barriers to parity in entrance to college are in social class background (McDonough, 1997). More often than not, students who are at a disadvantage because of their social class background are also students of color.

Despite a generation of concerted policy and programmatic efforts and despite the substantial gains in educational attainment over the past fifty years, African Americans and Latinos remain decidedly underrepresented on the nation's campuses (Nettles, 1991). Most often, Black and Latino students have high career and academic expectations, but the lack of relevant high school programs and school structures tends to doom students to a cycle of failure (Solorzano, 1992a, 1992b). Indeed, the research shows that a school’s culture has a strong impact on students’ aspirations and achievement (Falsey and Heyns, 1984; Alexander and Eckland, 1977).

As institutions like the University of California struggle to maintain diverse student populations in the post-affirmative action era, the experiences of underrepresented minorities in the college preparation process become even more important. These students are primarily first-generation college bound and are constrained by a lack of individual, parental, and school college knowledge and experience, a lack of trained professionals to advise them, and a climate of presumed lack of merit and racial unwelcomeness. These students struggle to get basic information and meet published eligibility requirements in schools without adequate honors and advanced placement classes; they are unaware of the improvised practices of their high-SES competitors (private counselors, SAT coaching, tutors for increased academic performance) and could not afford to engage in these practices even if they knew about them.

Typically, the responsibility for providing students with the necessary information and resources has fallen to college counselors housed within individual high schools. This does not mean, however, that the responsibility is being met. Much of this problem with this model results from the fact that school counselors are grossly overworked: In four of the ten largest U.S. cities, the average high school counselor-to-student ratio is 1:740 (Fitzsimmons, 1991). Some states,
notably California where the counselor-to-student ratio is 1:1,040 students, offer even less advisement than those largest inner city schools. At its best, the national average of one guidance counselor to 325 public high school students does not allow for much personal attention.

Furthermore, over the past three decades, the professional responsibilities of counselors have multiplied and changed. A review of three decades of counseling research, surveys, and professional journals reveals that the relationship between college advising and other counseling tasks has consistently been problematic. The big three tasks of high school counseling today are scheduling, discipline, and monitoring dropout potential (Lombana, 1985; McDonough and Perez, 2000; Monson and Brown, 1985). As part of a larger phenomenon of turning to schools to handle social ills, today's school counselor can also be expected to focus substantial effort on dropout, drug, pregnancy, and suicide prevention, as well as sexuality and personal crisis counseling.

After these needs have been met, public high school counselors may have only limited time for college choice advising. In fact, because of economic hardship, many public high schools have effectively divested themselves of college advisement. Fifteen years ago, researchers found that counselors devoted only 20 percent of their time to college guidance (Chapman and De Masi, 1985). Moreover, to whatever extent college counseling is available in America's high schools, it appears as though students find it less than overwhelmingly useful. According to one survey of undergraduates' college decisionmaking processes, 60 percent of 1993 freshman said that the advice of their high school counselor was not very important to them (Astin, et al. 1993).

Toward the Creation of a College Culture

Clearly, if all students are to receive the guidance and preparation that will allow them to make well-informed decisions about how to effectively prepare for and choose a college, we must bring about changes not only in the structure of counseling but also in the cultures of our schools. Past research indicates that students desperately need basic information about college options, particularly for more selective colleges. Moreover, they need to receive it early enough in their educational careers for them to enroll in appropriate classes and make other necessary decisions. Specifically, students express the need for information about college types, eligibility
requirements, and the subtleties of competitive eligibility. Often, underrepresented students (typically African-American and Latino students) know the most about community colleges and are most frequently advised by teachers and siblings to attend them to remediate, improve grades, and save money (McDonough, 1999). Secondary and even primary schools have an important and irreplaceable role to play in guiding each student’s decision about whether or not a four-year college is an option.

One important piece of this role can be found in parents. Like students, parents need improved access to information and better communication with their children’s schools. Current research shows that parents are an essential partner in any effort to improve students’ college eligibility, admission rates, and yields (Hossler et al. 1999; McDonough, 1999). Research evidence shows that parental support and encouragement is the best predictor of college aspirations and ninth grade students who are most sure of their postsecondary plans talk the most to their parents. Moreover in early stages of college decisionmaking, parental encouragement and support along with good grades are enormously influential upon students’ plans (Hossler et al. 1999).

Despite this importance, past research has highlighted parents’ deeply-felt needs for basic information about college that will help them to understand the salient differences between types of institutions, admissions requirements, and especially standardized exams and financial aid (McDonough, 1999). Historically, schools have not served parents in appropriate and equitable ways. For example, while we might expect that counselors could provide this much-needed information, this same research also reveals that counselors themselves feel desperate for basic and up-to-date information on college types, standardized exams, ever-changing admissions rules, etc.

In families without college knowledge and resources, counselors are often the only available source for advising on appropriate classes, providing basic information on why college is important, and being a sounding board for college choices. Moreover, counselors can be instrumental in helping all students deal with the stresses and pressures that come with pursuing eligibility and competitive eligibility in high school. Many schools will have a designated college counselor, who may be permanently assigned to that job, or may be rotating if a school has counselors staying with a class from freshman through senior years.
Besides the college counselor, there are often four to seven other counselors in that high school, all of whom may be grossly underinformed about college types, college entrance requirements, and other important information. For example in California, non-college counselors often confuse UC with the University of Southern California, with the California State Universities, and sometimes even with community colleges. The institutional distinctions that higher education officials take to be almost sacred are not necessarily understandable, let alone salient, distinctions in K-12 daily lives. Yet, these are the professionals that freshmen, sophomores, and juniors are consulting with for course placement and standardized tests (McDonough, 1999). Unfortunately, it is clear that relying solely on college counselors to communicate appropriate and accurate college messages is neither efficient nor effective. One solitary professional can not carry a school’s college resource infrastructure. The responsibility must reside school-wide.

The Research Context

In 1997, UCLA, together with the non-profit, public interest organization The Achievement Council, formed a partnership with a group of schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). This partnership is an integral part of involving students, parents, administrators, teachers, and community members in promoting academic excellence for students from pre-kindergarten through college graduation. This “Cluster” serves some 25,000 students in 18 elementary schools, five middle schools, and two high schools. The Cluster has strong leadership, a sound academic foundation and has been working steadily to raise academic performance for its students and increase college-going rates, especially to highly-selective institutions like the University of California. The students are ethnically and racially diverse – approximately 44% of the 25,000 students are Latino, 33% are African American, 17% are White, and 5% are Asian American. A large percentage of students in the Cluster are from immigrant families with limited English proficiency. Over 50% of Cluster students are low income.

The partnership emerged from a concern that the numbers of students going to highly selective colleges (such as UC) from LAUSD and this Cluster in particular have been declining steadily in the last decade. Unfortunately, both high schools in the Cluster have high dropout rates and generally low participation by low-income students as well as students of color in
honors and advanced placement courses. Throughout the Cluster, college going rates are far from equitable across ethnic groups and income categories.

The partnership encompasses a variety of activities in the Cluster (including the project being described here), all designed to improve the educational performance of historically underrepresented students. For example, literacy coaches work closely with other educators in 24 of the elementary, middle, and high schools in the cluster. The partnership has also worked to organize college tours, assist the schools in securing funding for special projects that help assimilate students into high school and provide enrichment activities in science, math, and computer skills (for example), as well as enable teachers and administrators to attend conferences, institutes, retreats and workshops. The work described in this paper – the Creating a College Culture project – represents a large piece of the partnership work.

Traditionally, the idea of college has not been significantly present in public schools prior to the high school level. At that point, however, most students have already made up their minds (or had their minds made up for them) about whether or not they are going to attend college. Moreover, college is seen as an option for a very small fraction of a public comprehensive high school students. College aspiration development and college preparation must be present much earlier than high school. For that very reason, “Creating a College Culture” targets all educational levels, from kindergarten through 12th grade.\(^1\) Each of the schools involved in the project has identified the appropriate ways to reach their students and parents to facilitate the creation of a school culture that empowers students to make educated choices about college. This reform is school-based so that the cultural changes are significant to the local school site and are long-lasting. Rather than the all-too-common top-down approach, the individual schools are instrumental in defining and implementing these educational reforms.

A key component of the Creating a College Culture project at the middle school and high school levels has been the creation of a new counseling position, referred to hereafter as the “college coach.” Funded by the school district, this aspect of the project has allowed each of the schools to bring in a person who can assume responsibility for initiating and carrying out activities that will contribute to the college culture. These college coaches were first hired for the 1999-2000 academic year, and the position was interpreted differently at various school sites.

\(^1\) This paper focuses on the work being done at the middle school and high school levels. The elementary schools implemented a wholly different model, deserving of a separate discussion.
All of the three middle schools chose to bring in a new person whose sole responsibility is to foster a college culture within the school. In one of the middle schools, a teacher with over 22 years of experience (13 at her current middle school) was recruited for the position. The other two middle schools brought in novice counselors who were, at the time of their hire, completing their counseling degrees. At the high school level, where college counseling already existed, the models were somewhat different. One high school brought in an additional counselor (also new to the field) who became responsible for the 9th and 10th grade students. (Previously, these students had not received direct college counseling.) She, together with the 11th and 12th grade counselor, worked to foster the college culture. The second of the two high schools opted to hire an additional counselor, decreasing the counseling load of the entire counseling staff, and work to educate the entire department as “college coaches.” In this case, the previously existing college counselor became the “point person” for the project, though the responsibility for spreading a college message rested on others’ shoulders as well.2

This reflective paper draws from interviews with key school personnel to offer insight into the Creating a College Culture project. This work is intended to cultivate a college culture in all cluster schools such that all students are prepared for a full range of college options at the conclusion of high school, regardless of what educational or occupational option they choose to exercise. The initiative is rooted in a theoretical perspective that recognizes the importance of addressing not simply individuals’ beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge (the organizational climate), but also the underlying values, beliefs, and meanings of the organization (or its culture).

Culture and climate are concepts describing a subset of the internal organizational environment. Culture is deeply held, static, and enduring, while climate consists of the current, malleable perceptions and attitudes that are the contemporary manifestations of culture (McDonough, 1998). Peterson and Spencer, in a particularly useful analogy, distinguish between culture and climate by arguing that “culture is the meteorological zone in which one lives – tropical, temperate, or arctic – and climate is the daily weather patterns” (1990, p. 8). If the culture is successfully transformed to the point that all students see college as an option and are able to make decisions about their futures in informed, reasonable ways, then the impact of the program will be long-term and much more profound.

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2 This model – where all members of the counseling department become college coaches – has since been adopted by the other high school for the second year of the project. Data collection took place almost exclusively during the
Research Methodology

As an action research project, the primary focus of this work has been on real and significant change that will benefit the students in the Cluster. A secondary – though still important – emphasis has been data collection, to allow for a greater degree of understanding of how cultural change does (or does not) take place, as well as how actors within a large research university can serve as meaningful partners in this process. As such, the bulk of the data collection has taken place in the context of planning meetings and other scheduled activities. For instance, detailed fieldnotes describing project meetings and gatherings have been created and drawn upon for this paper. Similarly, curricular materials, newsletters, and other similar items generated by the participating schools have also been used as data.

The primary data source consists of interviews with the college coaches (3 high school and 3 middle school) and principals (2 high school and 2 middle school). All of the interviews were conducted by the first author of this paper, who is also closely involved with the ongoing administration and planning of the project. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2000, at the conclusion of the first year of project implementation.

The interviews addressed a range of topics from respondents’ perceptions of and experiences with the project to their understandings of the goals of the work. In all of the interviews, a subset of questions about the project structure and execution were asked. Here, respondents had the opportunity to reflect on the collaborative nature of the project and offer their thoughts on leadership improvement, clarification of goals, etc. These interviews – together with the supplemental data described above – reveal the ways in which an urban, public university can serve as both a partner and a resource in a collaborative, participatory action research project designed to bring about cultural change.

Findings

What is a College Culture?

As noted above, each local school site had the opportunity to formulate a vision for what a “college culture” would look like at their school. Moreover, the very notion of “a college

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3 One middle school principal was not available to be interviewed.
“culture” is relatively new. As such, no strict structure or requirements were put into place at the outset. Instead, a definition of a college culture has begun to emerge through the work itself. This section of the paper provides an overview of our current understanding of the concept (at a macro level) and offers concrete evidence of the emergence of this culture at the participating schools (a more micro level analysis).

Macro-Level Requirements for a College Culture

All of the college coaches undertook different approaches to creating and sustaining college cultures at their schools. Despite the inevitable variation in a project where local control is a primary component, certain themes emerged that create a broad-level perspective on precisely what we mean when we say “college culture.” Specifically, it became clear that in order to establish a college culture, resources and personnel must be dedicated to the cause, a college message must be present in special programs as well as in day-to-day curricula, the message must be communicated at all stages of the educational pipeline, and parents must be involved in meaningful ways. These particular aspects are explained in more detail in this section.

- **Dedicated Personnel and Professional Development:** As described earlier in the paper, responsibility for communicating college-related messages has typically fallen to school counselors. Given their heavy workload and myriad responsibilities, however, the message is typically not communicated effectively. Through the creation of a position entirely dedicated to the creation of this type of culture, the schools involved in this project have begun to explore the ways in which they communicate effective messages to their students.

  College counseling in general must be re-defined to the point all counselors act as college counselors. Moreover, this must extend beyond the counseling office to include teachers, administrators and staff who are all prepared to answer college-related questions and provide college-related support.

- **Resources and Opportunities:** In a similar vein, school infrastructure and policies must be supportive of the college message. This includes providing meaningful opportunities for students to engage in college preparatory coursework, take necessary admissions tests, access college-related resources, and engage in college-related discussions.

- **College Across the Curriculum:** The college message must be communicated not only through special information sessions or workshops, but also through all types of school activities. Most importantly, the notion of “college across the curriculum” – where teachers infuse a college message into their daily lesson plans – must be evident if a college culture is to be present.
• **Vertical Integration:** In addition to the work being done at individual schools, another integral component of the creation of a college culture is collaboration across school levels. For the purposes of this project, “vertical teams,” comprised of a high school, its feeder middle schools, and the elementary schools that feed into those middle schools, were formed so that efforts are consistent. In this manner, students are not presented with isolated activities or bits of information. On the contrary, the messages they receive about college and their options related to college are fluid, consistent and meaningful. Done properly, the vertical teams allow students to be immersed in a culture of college going from the first days of kindergarten through their high school graduation days.

• **Parent Involvement:** Finally, parents – as key partners in the college preparation and selection process – must be closely involved at all stages. Counselors must partner with parents to help students understand their full range of post-high school options. This partnership must consist of meaningful interactions where all parents have the opportunity to be involved. Historically, only a limited number of parents have been able to be involved in this way. A school with a college culture moves beyond this limitation to include a wide range of parents.

These dimensions of a college culture have begun to play out in the middle schools and high schools involved in the Creating a College Culture project. In the section that follows, we offer specific examples of the activities and changes that have taken place in the last year, all of which point towards the beginnings of cultural impact and change.

**Micro-Level Evidence of the College Culture**

The first year of implementation in the Creating a College Culture project has been one of learning and defining. As we have collaboratively come to understand precisely what we mean when we say “college culture,” we have also come to understand what activities and efforts are necessary for that to exist. In this first year, the college coaches and the project staff more broadly have worked to begin making these important changes. This section describes some of what has occurred. The reader should note that while we believe these specific events are indicative of the beginnings of a college culture, our intention with this section is not to be prescriptive. On the contrary, we offer these descriptions as examples of the types of things that might occur as schools seek to create college cultures.

**Dedicated Personnel and Professional Development:**

- Additional funds were provided to each high school and middle school to create a new position (a “college coach”) at each of the middle schools and high schools.
• Counselors in general are more knowledgeable about college preparation and are able to share this information with students with greater frequency.
• The three middle school college coaches have developed an on-going collaboration that allows them to share resources and coordinate their efforts. They have developed a year-long plan to ensure that the impact of their work in the 2000-2001 academic year will be even greater.
• One principal conducted his own “consciousness raising” with his entire faculty to emphasize the importance of strong and consistent resources on the path to college.

Resources and Opportunities:
• College Centers were created at all three of the middle schools (and already existed at the high schools).
• At the middle school level, college coaches are available during homeroom periods, during lunch and nutrition, as well as before and after school. At the high school level, college centers are open throughout the day and all counselors are prepared to talk about college with the students.
• Through newsletters and dedicated space in the school newspapers, college coaches inform students about important deadlines, events, and activities. They also use this space to debunk the common myths about “who can go to college.”
• Across the Cluster, the PSAT will now be offered on Tuesday, rather than Saturday, allowing greater numbers of students to take part in this important step toward college.
• One high school has created “Test Fest 2000” – a single day in October when all students will be involved in testing, including the PSAT. Moreover, funding from the school and the Partnership will cover the PSAT registration fee, ensuring that all 10th graders in the school will take part.
• At the middle school level, students had the opportunity to take part in PSAT preparation classes and to take a practice exam.
• College coaches and College Counselors involved with the project have organized numerous trips to college campuses around the Los Angeles area. Through these trips, students gain a greater understanding of what college life is like. When they talk about college in the classroom, they now have a vivid picture of it.
• All of the schools held events such as College Week, College Night, or Career Week to emphasize the importance of higher education. These events included guest speakers, college dress days, door decoration contests, and other activities designed to expose students to a range of college options.
• College coaches have begun to foster the attitude that all students are “college material” by including all students in college-related activities.
• An essay contest – an important part of the College Fair – allowed students to reflect on the question, “What would you bring to college?” Hundreds of submissions provided insight into students’ excitement about and aspirations toward college.

College Across the Curriculum:
• The college coaches have adapted existing materials and created some of their own to offer to teachers, so that they also have the opportunity to communicate a consistent college message to their students.
Since good study habits are critical to academic success at any level, the college coaches have focused energy on working with students on organizational skills and other strategies.

One middle school college coach is available to students before school to ensure that their homework is completed and that their work is neat and organized. She tells all of these students that they are college bound.

**Vertical Integration:**
- The counseling process has begun to be more fluid, with greater integration of counseling work across levels. High school and middle school counseling staffs are relying on each other to a greater degree and pooling resources to increase the impact of their work.
- Several schools have established and expanded tutoring programs that bring together college students with high school and middle school students. These programs not only help students academically, but also expose them to college students who share backgrounds similar to their own.
- School teams – comprised of principals, assistant principals, counselors, department chairs, and parent representatives – have had the opportunity to meet individually and in their vertical teams to clarify each school’s college culture goals. An all-day meeting provided the opportunity for extended discussion and collaboration within and among teams. Participants learned of current research related to college access, discussed data relevant to their particular schools (e.g., test scores and graduation rates), and met in small and large groups to identify their strategies for creating and maintaining college cultures in their schools.

**Parent Involvement:**
- A year-end “College Fair” involved students, their parents, and teachers from all grade levels in a Saturday gathering at a local community college. Colleges from across the country sent representatives to share information. Workshops addressed topics ranging from on-line college searching to study habits to financial preparation for college. Families were entertained by student performances and saw essay contest winners from all grade levels receive certificates and other prizes.
- College coaches and Counselors at both the middle school and high school level held parent meetings throughout the year to offer information on academic and financial preparation for college.
- Funding has been secured for a series of parent workshops in the 2000-2001 academic year.

As a result of this work, we know anecdotally that students and parents in the Cluster schools have begun to demand more college preparatory math and foreign language classes to ensure college eligibility. Students are more enthusiastic and have begun to ask better-informed questions about college. College coaches often have students waiting outside their doors as early as 7:00 am, eager to discuss the PSAT, UC requirements, or other college-related subjects.

These accomplishments do not reveal the complexity of this process, however. For that, it is necessary to describe the motivations and frustrations that the college coaches, and school
administrations described as they reflected on this process of cultural change. As such, we turn to the interviews conducted with the college coaches and their principals.

Reflections on the Process of Cultural Change

Interviews with the college coaches and school principals brought to light a variety of both positive and negative issues surrounding the project. The interviewees were candid about their successes as well as their frustrations with regard to the process of creating a college culture.

The following discussion is organized around two broad themes: Constraints and Advantages. The first of these, Constraints, refers to the obstacles that have emerged or been identified as we have sought to create college culture. The second, Advantages, refers to the qualities or conditions that have been perceived as helpful and/or necessary to the college coaches and their administrators.

Constraints

While the accomplishments described in the previous section certainly speak to the positive impact of the Creating a College Culture project, this work has not been without frustration or obstacles. Various issues – ranging from the difficulty in understanding what a college culture even looks like to direct resistance from other school actors – have had a role in hindering the project’s progress. Conversations with coaches and administrators alike drive home the fact that they must contend with myriad challenges and pulls on their time. While the creation of a college culture is a priority in many respects, often more immediate needs must take precedence. These and other constraints are described in this section.

Difficulty of Cultural Change

Changing the culture of a school is a long and difficult process. Precisely what this process would entail was not initially clear to many of the college coaches and principals at the outset. This became evident through the comments they made during their interviews. For example, one college coach said, “When I first heard it…I didn’t connect it with anything. It was like kind of a blank. … There was no real idea coming into it.” Another coach, while describing her experience of coming to realize what cultural change would really mean, related an analogy she heard during a separate meeting:
‘There’s this guy and he’s standing at the bottom of the waterfall. He’s catching all these babies and every - that’s falling over the waterfall. And, everyone’s going, ‘yay! He said he was gonna save them.’ And...he keeps doing it, and he keeps doing it, he keeps saving these babies that are falling over the waterfall. And, then finally somebody says, ‘well, why don’t we go up on top of the waterfall and see who’s throwing the kids down there.’ That was like funny. Everybody – ‘okay, yeah, that’s funny, good, good one,’ yeah, you know. A month later it hits me like ‘oh yeah! Why don’t we figure out the cause of this!?’

For some, the realization of the need for and the process of cultural change became evident after they spent a significant amount of time in their schools. For others, it was more directly tied to specific conversations or events. For instance, one high school college coach realized the need after reading a book on the college choice process (McDonough, 1994): “Once I understood that concept, and read that book, I realized that we had to become more like a private school model. I understood personally that I needed to be involved with these students from the ninth grade on. … Now I understand how much deeper I need to dig to get the kids ready for their senior year.”

Closely tied to this difficulty in recognizing just what cultural change entails is the tendency toward student-centered work. Not surprisingly, many of the coaches focused substantial efforts on working with students one-on-one to increase college awareness and preparation. Although individual meetings, focused class presentations, and college-related activities organized by the college coaches were all invaluable in raising students’ college awareness, it is not clear that they actually contributed to cultural change. As explained above, cultural change is more deeply-rooted and longer lasting. As such, our goal with the project is to avoid having college awareness be dependent upon one person. Rather, the college message should be communicated by teachers and administrators across each campus. As a result, one-on-one work – arguably more effective in the short-term – is not the most effective way to bring about significant cultural change.

**Resistance**

Perhaps the most significant obstacle faced by the college coaches – and the project in general – during this first year of implementation was resistance to both the idea of a college culture and the placement of a college coach on the school staff. This resistance was subtle as well as overt, and came primarily from administrators and teachers. This was particularly the
case for the two middle school coaches who were new to their schools. Both struggled not only with resistance to the ideas they were attempting to communicate, but also with what they perceived as opposition on a more personal level. As one explained: “It has been a one-person fight. And I think I’m beginning to lose the battle. That’s what it has resorted to. I had no idea of the politics involved. No idea.”

A good example of resistance at the administrative level can be found in the issue of supervision. A common pull on time at middle schools is supervision responsibility (requiring most school faculty and staff to spend free periods monitoring the school yard or cafeteria). Because one important feature of the Creating a College Culture project is the ability of students to access college information during their free periods, it is imperative that the college coaches remain readily available. As a result, supervision duties directly interfere with the accomplishment of the project goals. Nevertheless, the college coach at one school faced an almost constant battle with her administration:

   There was a little bit of animosity because I wasn’t doing what they wanted me to do, and I kept saying, ‘well, you know, these are the responsibilities that I need to do as a college coach,’ and so that was what the big issue was about supervision. They really needed me to be there for supervision. … It’s been a lot of tension since then with not – ‘What makes you think you don’t have to do supervision?’ That kind of mentality. So, it’s been kind of frustrating.

Resistance on the part of teachers was also difficult for the college coaches to combat. As they struggled to communicate with students and convey important information, they were often faced with roadblocks created by teachers who either felt they already had too many “external programs” or who simply did not think the college message was worthwhile. The principals we interviewed were also quite aware of this resistance. For example, one high school principal noted:

   (I try to) encourage some teachers to allow us to come in and talk with their students. And I can understand why they wouldn’t, because they have a program too and they have to face a lot of interruptions during the day, and some of them might say, ‘oh, here’s another interruption.’ But really trying to encourage them to let us come in and inform them that we’re only going to take a very small portion of their time, their students’ time. That has been an obstacle.

Another acknowledged that “winning people’s trust takes time and I think they knew in their heart of hearts that this is a good thing… Sometimes people want to change, but they’re so
fearful of change ‘cause they don’t know how it might impact their (lives) – it might require that they do more.”

While the principals seem to recognize the important role they have in fostering a supportive attitude among teachers, the college coaches acknowledge the more subtle ways they themselves need to earn their trust. For example, one middle school coach said she approaches the teachers “at nutrition. When they’re standing in line to buy food I hit them one by one and I make the table moves and I try to learn how to become their friend.” Another noted:

Some teachers think it’s really a waste for you to be talking to (the students) so soon. So if you can like maybe have a dialogue with the teachers and, you know, find out what their concerns are, why they feel it’s too early, and what do they think is the most appropriate time to talk, so you can get an idea so that you can build up your support system from them.

**Collaboration**

While the collaborative nature of this project has offered certain benefits (discussed below), it has, in some cases, created obstacles for the college coaches. Most notably, the proverbial “too many cooks in the kitchen” problem was somewhat of an issue for most of the coaches, who occasionally felt that they had too many “bosses” to whom they had to answer. The college coaches naturally felt obligated to follow the instructions of their principals, since they interacted on a daily basis. At the same time, however, the funding for their positions came directly from the district. As a result, there was a sense of allegiance to the district leadership (with whom they were interacting on at least a monthly basis). Finally, the external partners – UCLA and The Achievement Council – were also present at the monthly meetings and those representatives usually had opinions or advice that they passed along to the coaches. Compounding this problem was the fact that the goals were occasionally at odds. Specifically, the long-term goals of cultural change came into conflict with the immediate needs of each school (see the above description of supervision issues, for example).

This problem played out differently depending on the amount of experience the college coach came to the position with. The high school coach with years of experience at her school drew a line for her self. She, for example, put it simply: “How much more am I willing to do? Not much more.” At the other end of the spectrum, a middle school coach who was new to her position expressed a desire for her principal to take a more active role in negotiating the many pulls on her time; She continuously struggled with “the right thing to do.” Whatever the case, it
was clear during the first year that there was uncertainty among the college coaches with respect to whom they ultimately reported.

Another less pervasive problem also emerged from the monthly project meetings. Because the external actors (UCLA, The Achievement Council, etc.) are not involved with the daily work of the college coaches, we asked each coach for an “update” at the start of each meeting. Often, an hour or more was spent simply hearing about what was going on at each school site. It did not become clear until the interviews, however, that many of the college coaches felt that in that process they were justifying themselves and their work. One coach, for example, said she enjoys hearing about what her colleagues are doing but, as she put it, “I want it to be less of a contest.”

**Advantages**

Although various obstacles did present themselves over the course of the first year, so too did clear advantages in the creation of a college culture. At the outset of the project, certain necessities were predictable: We anticipated a need for strong leadership, committed individuals, and dedicated resources. What we did not know was the extent to which any of these variables would bear on the success (or limitations) of our project. Each of these emerged from the interview data, however, and the college coaches’ and administrators’ comments on these topics are summarized in this section.

**Qualities and Skills of a College Coach**

As discussed above, the college coaches came to their jobs with a range of experience levels. Two – one high school coach and one middle school coach – had extensive experience in their current schools before this project even began. The others were not only new to their schools, but also relatively new to counseling in general. Experience and inexperience each offered benefits in different ways. For example, the middle school counselor who had been at her school for quite some time was able to draw upon her existing relationships. She commented:

> I’m pretty respected here. I’m thought of as a pretty hard worker. I take things really seriously. … I’m a team player. … I just think a lot of credibility. Now, I think if I had been a brand new person standing there that they had never seen before, they would have thought ‘Oh,’ you know, ‘more stuff that we have to do. This won’t last.’ You know, just a lot of negative. But because it was me, you know, they thought, ‘Oh, it’s [name]. She’s gonna work really well on this, whatever it is that she wants to do, she’ll get it done.’”
Indeed, the other middle school coaches – who were both new to their environments – encountered resistance in some form (as discussed above). At the same time, however, they were also able to use their “novice” status in strategic ways. For instance, one commented that if she “were a teacher that had been in this environment before” that she would have reacted differently to the resistance. Instead, she was able to “play dumb” and continue to ask for assistance from otherwise resistant teachers – a typically successful strategy for her. As she explained:

> Not having a (district) background is a good thing, I was telling myself. … You’re better off because you don’t have any attitudes associated. And your ignorant attitude about it will make you happy, you know. I was like, this is a true example of ignorance is bliss because when I ask a teacher, ‘can you do this?’, ‘can you do this?,’ ‘can you do this?’ and they tell me, ‘oh gosh, well, we’ve never done that before, we can’t do that, we can’t do that.’ (I say), ‘Really? Well, why not?’ … And I do that play dumb thing. Works like a charm, you know.

In fact, her principal described her as a “breath of fresh air,” saying “she has no previous ties and so she’s just here to do her work, and…she doesn’t have any old history to pull her down.” With an innovative project like the one being described here, this ability has proved invaluable.

Aside from previous experience (or lack of it), commitment and attitude also play an important role in the ability of college coaches to make progress in creating a college culture. As addressed above, this project was not equally well-received by all actors within the schools. As such, the dedication to and passion for the work that all of the college coaches embody was essential in this first year of the project. One coach noted that her work “is not a paycheck for me. … I doubt it ever will be.” Another, who faced significant obstacles in her daily work, told us “The only thing that keeps me here is because I know that I’m making an impact on the students’ lives.”

**Leadership and Collaboration**

Given that none of the college coaches was working in a vacuum, it is not surprising that strong leadership and the additional resources offered by the collaborative nature of the project contributed to the successes so far. Specifically, these elements were important in creating an environment where the college coaches felt supported and effective. They were able to draw upon both to facilitate and enable their efforts, increasing the impact of their work.

A monthly meeting was held for the college coaches and key university, Achievement Council, and Cluster staff. Although it later became clear that the meetings could have been run
more effectively (from the coaches’ perspective), these gatherings did provide an opportunity for college coaches to share what they were doing in their schools and to draw upon the expertise of the external partners. These meetings occasionally served other purposes as well. Specifically, they allowed the coaches to think about their work outside of the context of their own schools.

During this first year of implementation, we learned important lessons about what is useful, vis-à-vis these meetings, and – as is clear from the above discussion – what is not useful. Coaches appreciated the opportunity to share ideas with each other. Additionally, guest speakers (who addressed topics such as college admissions requirements and other university outreach programs) proved to be particularly helpful to the coaches. A true need for concrete information became evident early on in the program, and the meetings became an excellent opportunity to provide it.

In addition to the monthly meetings, the collaboration offered other benefits as well. The structure of our project means that the college coach positions are funded by the district, rather than directly through the schools. As such, the coaches themselves were often able to create a layer of “insulation” between themselves and local school politics. The cluster leadership – representing the district – was able to mandate, for example, that the college coaches not be responsible for supervision, thereby freeing them up to meet with students. (As noted above, however, this did not always occur smoothly.)

The collaboration between the schools, UCLA, and The Achievement Council was also valued by the administrators that we interviewed. For example, one principal believes that “if some principals aren’t as committed to the concept and work, then this collaborative and all the connections kind of keep them on the straight and narrow.” Importantly, the collaboration itself must be significant. In other words, the administrators with whom we spoke characterized the involvement of the external agencies as real and meaningful. One high school principal, for example, talked specifically about the role of a particular university faculty member:

She was much more actively involved (than I expected) and she came to the meetings at the school. She was here more than some District officials have been. And she personally involved herself in what was going on here. And she made a very good connection with my college counselor. And (the college counselor)’s ability to work closely with (the faculty member) was very instrumental in making it more than just one person’s research study or pet project. I think the individuals involved, their engagement with the school, made it more.
The principals typically saw themselves as having a very active role to play in the creation of a college culture. One explained that he believes, “it’s the principal’s responsibility to provide direction. And… it’s my responsibility to get (the teachers) to buy the program, okay? And, if I buy it, and I believe enough in it, they’ll buy it, and they did.” Another explained that she has to “make it a priority in everyone’s minds who are on this campus. … If I can do that, it will grow and it will move.” This support took various forms, ranging from simply providing resources and the freedom to undertake activities to holding small-group sessions with the entire faculty to raise awareness of college access issues.

Other Components

Time: One of the most important components to bringing about cultural change is, quite simply, time. Most of the individuals involved with the project began the work with optimism that change would be quick and dramatic. What has become clear over the last year, however, is that cultural change is slow and evolving. Before any real change can occur, attitudes and ideas about who can and should go to college must be addressed. Individual perceptions do not change overnight. Even when they change quickly, this does not automatically lead to cultural change at the school level.

One high school coach – who had already been working to increase awareness about college issues at her school for several years – noted that at her school, “it has evolved. Absolutely evolved. … A level of trust had to be built.” Another coach who was new to her school pointed out the importance of spending time with teachers to build trust: “They’re coming around more so. … I think the level of acceptance is (growing).” She is confident that with a greater degree of trust on the part of the teachers, she will be able to work more effectively in her role as college coach.

Resources: As has already been alluded to, creating a college culture requires dedicated support and resources. This is certainly true at a symbolic level, where strong leadership is essential. But actual physical resources are also necessary for the project to be seen as worthy of respect and time on the part of teachers and students alike.

Each of the participating schools either already had or created a college center. The college coaches were all quite proud of their centers, calling them “cheerful” and “positive looking.” Indeed, most were quite spacious (at least the size of a classroom), and were typically decorated
with college posters and motivational messages (e.g., “I’m going to college!”). While most of the coaches had principals willing to devote additional financial resources to acquiring materials, at least one spent a good deal of her own money to collect materials that she used with her students.

**Specificity:** Because this project really took shape after it was already put into place (we were “building a ship while it’s in the water,” in the words of one administrator), it is not surprising that many of the college coaches expressed a desire for specificity in the goals of the project. In fact, the first of the monthly meetings (held in February of 2000) was devoted almost exclusively to identifying just what their jobs entailed and what it means to create a college culture.

When asked what advice they would offer another school undertaking a similar project, almost all of the coaches interviewed said they would advise them to “really define what they want that person to do, and the program.” A principal pointed out that “you’ve got to get the roles and responsibilities of each level clearly defined to get, you know, make sure that they will generate enough enthusiasm to get it done.” One of the middle school coaches went a step further and suggested that it would be most useful to “have a mentor like me to go over and sit down. In other words, give a program like this a couple years so that I know what works and what doesn’t work. And then, if it’s going to be started somewhere else, send those people over and mentor them.” In general, there was a sense that the first year was a valuable year of learning, and that any and all lessons learned should be shared – not only internally among the existing group, but also externally with other interested schools and counselors.

**Discussion**

The first implementation year of the Creating a College Culture project has been a learning year. We have had the opportunity to discover a great deal about what cultural change of this nature is, how it can be accomplished, and what inhibits its progression. These lessons can be categorized around five salient themes:

**We have not reached the stage of cultural change (yet):** Because there has been some resistance to the very idea of a college culture, as well as resistance to the creation of a new position dedicated solely to this mission (particularly at the middle school level), in some contexts it has been difficult to reach teachers. As such, the changes that have taken place continue to be largely connected to the actions of a limited group of people. Moreover,
immediate needs in the schools – such as supervision duty or decreasing counseling loads – have often taken precedence over activities that would contribute to cultural change. In order for true cultural change to occur, the message must reach and be embraced throughout the school. School-wide professional development focused on what cultural change is, why a college culture – as a long-term goal – is important, and how this goal can be accomplished is a necessary next step in this process.

**Cultural change takes broad, sustained commitment:** In this first year of implementation, many kinks were identified and some were remedied. The college coaches and school principals gained a greater understanding of cultural change (and its importance). An important component of the project – parent involvement – was not a primary focus in the first year, but will be in the second (and subsequent) years. Similarly, professional development for teachers – the heart of any school reform – will be an important focus in the months to come.

**Cultural change takes strong leadership:** The principals who are participating in this project have a variety of leadership styles, as well as a range of levels of interest in the work at hand. What became readily evident during this first year is the extent to which strong, thoughtful leadership can play a part in helping to facilitate cultural change. Principals who overtly support the goals of the project were also committed to developing faculties who felt the same. Conversely, where that commitment was absent, the work of the college coach was extremely difficult. Without the support of a principal committed to the goal of preparing all students for college, resistant teachers presented greater obstacles and arguably simple tasks – like creating a useful college center – became complicated. This issue points to the broader need for project buy-in from all corners of the school and the vital role of the principal in securing it.

**Collaboration has both benefits and drawbacks:** As a collaborative venture, the Creating a College Culture project was both strengthened and (to a lesser extent) hindered. Involving external partners in school change allowed the college coaches and their schools to draw on resources – financial and otherwise – that would not normally have been available. At the same time, however, the collaboration created confusion on occasion, as coaches struggled to balance the demands presented by working with so many people with different interests and priorities. Nevertheless, the consensus among the participants is that the collaborative nature of the project has led to greater progress and a higher quality project.
**Power issues must be acknowledged and addressed:** Any attempt at cultural change will, by definition, impact the lives of teachers, counselors, and administrators within a school. As such, it is almost inevitable that resistance will arise. If anticipated, this resistance can more effectively be combated. As this project progresses, the college coaches and their administrators have come to more easily recognize resistance on the part of the faculty, for example, and have devised ways to make progress in spite of it. Strong leadership and dedicated personnel are both essential in this process. Additionally, clearly articulated goals are an important part of “de-mystifying” what the project is all about.

**Limitations**

As noted above, the emphasis in this action research project has been on action, rather than research. The interviews from which the findings in this paper are largely derived were conducted primarily to inform the development of the project (rather than to identify more macro-level implications of the project). As such, more data collection is needed if this project is to be better understood. Additional key players – including additional counseling staff at all school sites, assistant and vice principals, other external actors, and, of course, students – should be included in the data set to offer a greater diversity of perspectives.

Moreover, an evaluation plan has been devised and we are in the process of implementation. While the reflections of our college coaches and school principals do offer a good deal of insight into what has been frustrating and what has seemed effective, we will not be able to say with certainty how successful we have been until we collect our evaluation data.

Despite these limitations, however, we believe that it is important to share these preliminary insights into the creation of a college culture. It is our intention that this paper be useful to practitioners and researchers as they struggle with the question of how to increase college access for historically underrepresented students.

**Conclusion**

As more states take action to ban affirmative action and as more courts mandate the elimination of admissions preferences, advocacy groups, individuals, K-12 educational systems, and colleges search for different solutions to improving the college access of underrepresented and low-income students. Despite this intense focus, current research on college access is
narrow; it remains overwhelmingly focused on the individual level. Relatedly – and not surprisingly – that research has been relatively unable to improve permanently or dramatically the college-going rates of underrepresented and low-income students.

Unfortunately, the majority of students spend eight hours a day in K-12 educational systems where teachers are trained in subject matter content and pedagogy but are not trained in how to help their students think about and prepare for college. From available evidence we know that teachers have an enormous impact on students’ aspirations, on their choices of more selective, elite colleges (McDonough and Antonio, in press), and in the fostering of a college-enabling school climate. At the same time, most counselors are trained in adolescent development but not in issues of college eligibility and admissions (McDonough and Perez, 2000). The relatively low number of counselors who are available to work with students only compounds this deficit. Further, principals and other K-12 leaders have – of necessity – characteristically believed that the college mission, though important, should take a back seat to more pressing organizational priorities (safety, scheduling, dropout prevention, etc.). The Creating a College Culture project seeks to take these understandings beyond the traditional boundaries – boundaries that have not served students equitably.

The reflections described in this paper highlight the need for schools to make the college mission a priority and to get teachers, counselors and parents focused on how they each might make it a part of their daily workloads. More importantly, it emphasizes the complexity of this task. It is clear that the cultures of our schools must be the focus of any effort to improve the educational attainment of historically underrepresented groups of students. It is also clear that this work must be carefully thought out and attentive to the particular needs of schools and individuals within those schools. The paper is intended to contribute to that understanding and articulation, by offering reflections, insights, and practical suggestions for how universities and schools can work together to increase the educational success of all students toward more diverse and equitable colleges and universities. If schools are going to be more responsive to college missions, they need to build infrastructure: they need to make the college mission a priority in their schools and get teachers, counselors and parents focused on how they each might make it a part of their daily workloads. In short, through thoughtful, collaborative work, the cultures of our schools must be transformed.
REFERENCES