

## **Case Study: Hope College Prep Academy Developing a College-Going Culture in a Middle School**

Su Jin Gatlin Jez

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### **Overview**

While nearly all eighth graders aspire to finish some sort of postsecondary education, only between five and eleven percent of them actually do. Research consistently points to a high school's college-going culture as a key factor in postsecondary success with most of this research focused on high school, even though this research indicates that much of a student's pathway has already been shaped by the time he or she enters ninth grade. This study examines the development of a middle school college-going culture, finding four key components upon which the development hinged: a project-based curriculum that develops student motivation, academic behaviors, cognitive strategies, along with college and academic content knowledge; activities outside of the classroom that motivate and teach students about college; a college counselor focused on building the college-going culture; a strong dialogue with students' families, building their college knowledge as well as the child's.

### **Problem statement**

Postsecondary aspirations are high in the U.S., but few high school students reach their post-high school educational goals. Nearly all eighth grade students indicate that they plan to complete college, yet only 75 percent of public high school freshmen will receive a high school diploma<sup>1</sup> (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008b). Approximately two-thirds of high school graduates will start college immediately after graduating from high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008a), and of those who begin college, only between 10 and 25 percent, depending on the degree, will have completed a degree within five years of starting<sup>2</sup> (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004a). These statistics taken together indicate that while nearly 90 percent of eighth graders plan to finish

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<sup>1</sup> The percent is the number of graduates divided by the estimated count of freshmen four years earlier, converted into a percent.

<sup>2</sup> Approximately 25 percent will have completed a bachelor's degree, ten percent will have completed an associate's degree, and twelve percent will have completed a vocational certificate.

college (Hu, 2003), only between five and 11 percent of eighth graders will actually do so in a timely manner.

The statistics for low-income and low-wealth students, first generation college-goers, and many students of color are even worse (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-08). The percentage of black and white twelfth graders that did not expect to receive any further education past high school was 5.0 and 4.7 percent, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). However, blacks are more likely to drop out of high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008d), less likely to immediately enroll in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008c), and are less likely to complete a two- or four-year degree five years after starting their postsecondary educations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004b).

While aspirations, or intent, are notoriously difficult to measure accurately, given this nation's relatively open access system of postsecondary education, the disjuncture between aspirations and postsecondary completion likely indicate that there are many obstacles that hinder students' progress.

Many factors have been cited as barriers in the diminishing student pipeline, including a lack of preparation, supports, and finances. Much is known about the strongest predictors of college success based on characteristics students demonstrate in high school. Students who are most likely to complete a post-secondary degree have the following traits: strong academic backgrounds (Adelman, 2006) and non-academic traits that support the development of academic, social, and life skills (Conley, 2005). These traits are found to be developed and affected by the school and non-school supports that shape students' attitudes and knowledge about the college readiness and choice processes (McDonough, 1997).

Creating a school culture conducive to realizing high levels of academic achievement and structured to promote the attitudes and behaviors necessary to help students stay focused on their educational goals is an essential component of creating an environment that fosters the necessary knowledge and skills. This environment is captured in the term “college-going culture”<sup>3</sup> (McDonough, n.d.). Creating a college-going culture in high schools has been recognized as an important component in supporting students in achieving their post-secondary educational aspirations; especially important for traditionally underserved students who are not exposed to college cultures in school, at home, or with their peer groups. Two prominent studies of high schools, their students, and college success found that the school culture profoundly affects students (McDonough, 1997; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, and Moeller found that school culture is the most important factor – more important than home – in predicting college success (Roderick et al., 2008). McDonough studied the impact of a college-going culture and its separate factors in the high school environment, finding that how schools support or discourage college-readiness greatly affect how a student navigates the college choice process (McDonough, 1997).

But how do schools develop, shape, and foster the traits that are known to contribute to secondary and postsecondary success? And when, ideally, should families and educators begin working with students to be engaged in a college readiness process? This is crucial, given research indicates traditionally college-bound students consistently state that they always intended to attend college and can not think of a time in their lives when they

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<sup>3</sup> After decades of discussion and development, the concept of a high school college-going culture is still being refined. McDonough (n.d.) indicates that the following nine principles of college culture are present at schools with effective college-going cultures: college talk; clear expectations; information and resources; a comprehensive counseling model; testing and curriculum; faculty involvement; family involvement; college partnerships; and articulation. While some high schools have fully articulated college-going culture practices, other high schools’ college-going cultures may only extend to the hanging of college banners on the wall or a day of the week when teachers wear their alma mater’s apparel.

did not aspire to complete college, compared with traditionally underserved students who state that they started to think about college somewhere between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades (Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio, 2003). Starting to think about and plan for college between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade is too late because students who find themselves off-track will not be able to catch up and take courses that prepare them for the rigors of postsecondary expectations.

Research has consistently indicated that the college-going process begins before students step foot onto a high school campus and start thinking about college applications (Finkelstein & Fong, 2008; Smith & Fleming, 2006; Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005; Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio, 2003). Students often end up in curricular tracks before they enter high school, with low-income and minority students disproportionately placed in tracks that do not prepare them for college (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, & Camp, 1990; U.S. Department of Education, 1997). In order to best affect student preparation for some kind of post-secondary education, research must look earlier in students' careers to examine practices and policies that shape their later academic attainment, motivation, and self-efficacy. This most immediate step would be to analyze what is happening to students in middle school, their transition from middle school to high school, and then follow those students into college to determine what affects their college-going and success rates.

However, research and policy have been slow to respond to the mounting evidence indicating how early students should start preparing for post-secondary education in order to be successful in college. This may stem from the paucity of middle school data available; the inability to connect middle school, high school, and post-secondary data; and problems at the policy level with focusing on something that will not present results for years to come – much longer than the typical political term. As such, this study draws from literature that

focuses on older students even though the issues for middle school students may be different than those of high school students.

This study developed in 2007 out of technical assistance work with the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation's network of Early College Schools, a network of middle and high schools focused on creating a college preparatory environment for their traditionally underserved students through the implementation of a comprehensive plan of dual enrollment courses<sup>4</sup> and supports. Aiming to assist the school in developing this culture at the middle school level, the paucity of research, data, and supports became apparent. This study aims to assist in building a literature on the college-going culture at middle schools.

The following questions explore how a middle school's faculty and staff aims to create such a culture for its students:

1. How do faculty, staff, and students describe the school's current college-going culture?
2. What are the faculty and staff's goals for the school's college-going culture? What have they identified as key components of an ideal college culture?
3. What are the barriers to implementation of the components, as perceived and cited by faculty, staff, students, and parents?

The next section discusses the conceptual framework in which this study is grounded, followed by the study's methods, findings, conclusions, and contributions to policy, practice, and research.

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<sup>4</sup> Dual credit courses allow high school students (and occasionally middle school students) to take college courses and receive both high school and college credit. For more information on early college high schools, see [www.earlycolleges.org](http://www.earlycolleges.org)

## **Conceptual framework**

This study utilized two streams of educational research to frame how the middle school's culture develops: 1) college access and success, and 2) school context. From these realms of research, a clear picture of what affects students' college choice process and their ability to be successful in college emerges, albeit much of the research uses high schools to further theory.

College access and success literature points to the ways in which a student's upbringing interacts with his or her schooling environment to shape college choices, which in turn affect the student's postsecondary success. This literature highlights a few key aspects that are influential in shaping this relationship: the school context that supports college-going attitudes; development of college knowledge; strong, consistent signals from both K-12 and postsecondary institutions regarding college expectations and readiness; a rigorous academic preparation; parent and community support; and development of emotional, psychological, and social maturity and resilience.

This overlaps with school context literature, which focuses on the role of the school environment on student success. This research points to several factors of a school's context that affect college enrollment: a curriculum that focuses on preparing students for college; high academic standards that convey college expectations; the supports students need to meet these raised expectations; school faculty that is focused on supporting students in achieving their post-secondary aspirations; supportive relationships between school staff, students, and students' families; and a focus on college advising and ensuring that students attain the knowledge necessary to navigate the college application process.

This study is embedded in both theoretical structures, utilizing both lenses through which questions are asked, analyzed, and interpreted. The protocols used for the interviews,

focus groups, and the parent and student surveys ask questions to unearth how a student's upbringing interacts with his or her school environment to shape college choices and probes specifically on how the school environment influences student success. The questions were more specifically based on nine components of a college-going culture, as developed by Patricia McDonough. The development of the protocols is discussed in further detail in the Methods Section.

### **About the school**

Hope College Preparatory Academy (HCPA) is a charter school serving sixth through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. This study focuses solely on the school's sixth through eighth grades, which are located in a separate building from the high school's ninth through 12th grades. Both the middle school and high school are served by the same principal and staff, and faculty roles often blend across the grade levels.

HCPA is an early college school. Early college schools are small public schools partnered with local colleges and universities to provide a coordinated, seamless transition from middle or high school through college for students from high-need districts: students who are low-income, first in their family to go to college, students of color, and others traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Early college schools provide students with both college-prep and college courses in a coordinated curriculum that leads to a high school diploma and the opportunity to earn one to two years of college credit. Importantly, the early college model demands that schools and their partner colleges provide students with the support they need to be successful.

HCPA is located in a large city in California, in a predominantly black and Latino neighborhood that was one of the city's first black working-class neighborhoods. But since

the 1980s, the area has been overrun with drug-related violence. In a painting on the basketball court at a nearby park (which was fenced off by city workers in 2002 due to the amount of drug activity), 38 neighborhood gang members who died in gang-related incidents are memorialized. HCPA, however, stands out as a modern, well-kept facility in the midst of a neighborhood struggling with the violence that threatens its residents every day.

HCPA enrolls 60 students in each of its middle school grades, with a total enrollment of 500 students in sixth through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. HCPA's student population is 91 percent Latino and 7 percent black<sup>5</sup>; the principal estimates that nearly all of the Latino students' parents speak only Spanish. More than a quarter of HCPA's students are English Learners, 80 percent qualify for free/reduced-price meals, and 97 percent participate in compensatory education<sup>6,7</sup>. Most of the students at HCPA come from a nearby, affiliated charter elementary school.

Like many urban schools, HCPA struggles with retaining its teaching staff. The principal estimated that 85 percent of HCPA teachers are in their first or second year of their teaching careers. Seventeen of HCPA's 27 teachers are fully credentialed, six are interns, and four have emergency credentials.<sup>8</sup> HCPA has also had a significant amount of principal turnover, with 3 principals in the past 3 years.

Students in each middle-school grade are broken into two groups of 30. While all students in each grade take the same classes, each group of 30 moves together on the same

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<sup>5</sup> Racial, ethnic breakdown is for grades six through 12. Source: Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation

<sup>6</sup> Data for grades six through 12. Source: [www.ed-data.org](http://www.ed-data.org)

<sup>7</sup> Compensatory education is defined by [www.ed-data.org](http://www.ed-data.org) as: the students at the school participating in the federal Title I and/or the state Economic Impact Aid/State Compensatory Education (EIA/SCE) program. Title I is a federal program that provides supplementary services to low-achieving students from low-income families, and EIA/SCE is a state program that provides funds to low-achieving schools with high proportions of transient, low-income or English learner students. The goal of both is to improve student achievement in reading and mathematics.

<sup>8</sup> Staffing figures for entire school. Source: [www.ed-data.org](http://www.ed-data.org)

schedule. The school day ends with a 35-minute advisory period. Advisories are comprised of approximately 15 students of the same gender and are led by a staff member of the school, such as a teacher, security staff member, and the office manager. One day a week, students have a shortened day that ends at the lunch period, and staff spend this afternoon working on lesson plans and professional development.

## **Methods**

To study the development, implementation, and execution of a college-going culture in HCPA, researchers conducted interviews with middle school staff and student focus groups, and surveyed students and their parents. The interviews, focus groups, and surveys were developed largely based on the nine components of a college-going culture, as developed by (McDonough, n.d.):

- College Talk: A college culture includes clear, ongoing communications with students about what it takes to get into college, so that they understand what is required and expected of them if they want to stay on a college path. Faculty and administrators share their own experiences and discover their own assumptions about their roles in preparing students for college. Through this College Talk, a college culture becomes clearer and the college preparation process becomes more effective. (pg. 10)
- Clear Expectations: All students are to be prepared for a full range of post-secondary options. The goals of this preparation must be clearly defined, communicated, and a part of the daily culture of the school, so that students, family, teachers, administrators and staff recognize the role that each goal plays in preparing students for college. (pg. 12)

- **Information and Resources:** Students must have access to information and resources related to college. This information must be comprehensive, up-to-date and easily accessible. Although counselors are likely to have the primary responsibility for collecting and maintaining resources, school faculty should be aware of what's available and incorporate it into daily classroom practices. (p. 14)
- **Comprehensive Counseling Model:** In a school with a successful college culture, all counselors are college counselors and are informed about college issues. All student interactions with counseling staff become opportunities for college counseling. All decisions about students' coursework and careers are made with all post-secondary options in mind. (p. 16)
- **Testing and Curriculum:** Standardized tests like the PSAT and SAT are critical steps on the path to college. Students must be knowledgeable about these tests and be aware of testing dates. Moreover, the school must make a commitment to providing the resources necessary to ensure both that students are prepared for the tests and that testing fees are not a barrier to any student taking the tests. This includes ensuring access to preparatory coursework, like algebra and geometry; and access to coursework that ensures their eligibility to apply to college upon graduation. (p. 18)
- **Faculty Involvement:** School faculty must be active partners in the creation and maintenance of a college culture. They should be kept up-to-date on important information related to college knowledge (such as admissions requirements and types of institutions) and be provided with ongoing professional development so they can play an active role in preparing students to aspire to, apply to, and attend college. This should include integrating college information and the very idea of college into

- **Family Involvement:** Parents and/or other family members must become informed partners in the process of building a college culture. They must be provided with opportunities to gain knowledge about the college planning process, and be made aware that their children are “college material.” The counseling staff must make themselves available to family members to answer any questions and help make decisions about students’ academic futures. (p. 21)
- **College Partnerships:** Forming active links between the school and local colleges and universities is vital to the creation of a college culture. This facilitates the organization of college-related activities, such as field trips to college campuses or college fairs, and the provision of academic enrichment programs, all of which raise awareness of and aspirations toward college. (p. 24)
- **Articulation:** Students should have a seamless experience during which a college message is communicated from kindergarten through 12th grade. As such, there must be ongoing communication between counselors and teaching staff among all schools in a feeder group. Work being done at each school site should be coordinated with activities at other levels. (p. 25)

All thirteen middle school teachers, four administrators, and five staff members who work closely with the students and their families were interviewed. Interviews with the middle school’s faculty and staff provided a nuanced view of what they felt students needed in their middle school years to be successful in college; what the school had previously done

with this goal in mind; what it was doing at that point; what it should look to do in the future; and how well things were being done.

A sample of middle school students (n=79) were surveyed to reveal a baseline understanding of how they experienced the college-going culture the school aimed to create. Originally, all 180 middle school students were to be surveyed, but low consent form return rates led to a redesign. Instead of surveying all middle school students, certain advisories were targeted. Included advisories were those that had at least one student return a consent form. This also worked out to include at least one boy and one girl advisory from each grade level. This selected sample may bias results, as students who had returned a consent form likely are different than those who had not. These differences may include students' organization, their relationship with their parents, and their advisor's interest in the study (which may relate to the advisor's interest in providing a college-going culture for his/her students).

Eight focus groups of students were conducted to better understand this experience. Each focus group had approximately ten students, stratified by gender and grade level. The school counselor selected the advisories from which the focus group participants were drawn based on convenience of room arrangements. As students are randomly assigned to advisories, there should not be much bias in the focus groups outside of the influence of their advisor over the past school year.

Parent surveys were attached to the student consent forms in the original distribution of the student consent forms, and 54 parents returned completed surveys. In further attempts to have parents return the student consent forms, parent surveys were not included with the goal of minimizing the amount of paperwork for parents to read and fill out. Survey responses shed light on parents' expectations for the school and their children, along

with information about who they talk to about college and what they perceive to be the barriers that their child may face on the path to college.

Administering the survey and conducting interviews and focus groups with different stakeholders at the middle school provided a comprehensive picture of how the college-going culture at the school is shaping students' academic futures. As previously mentioned, not all students or parents were surveyed as was the goal. This may lead to bias in the results, with those who participated in the study being those more focused on the college-going culture of the middle school.

## **Findings**

Faculty, staff, and students largely described the college-going culture of the school similarly. Faculty and staff expect all of their students to attend college and reinforce this in conversations with students; teachers consistently commented that they tell students it is not *if* they attend college but *when* they attend college. Students and their families understand this expectation; in fact, nearly all students and their parents expect the students to complete some level of higher education – most expecting to complete at least a four-year degree. While the surveys and focus groups indicated that many of the students and their families may have chosen HCPA and its feeder elementary school for its college-going mission, the focused, clear, and consistent message likely is reinforcing students' and their parents' goals and expectations.

Most of the college-going experiences middle-school students have at HCPA stems from being exposed to the college-going culture the administration deliberately provides for its high school students. The shared spaces of the campus are well-decorated with college-going materials. In the auditorium, banners proudly declare HCPA's perfect four-year

college acceptance rate. Important college vocabulary are defined in a playful display across from the principal's office, and teachers' college banners hang over their classroom doors. The three halls of the school are named Division I, Division II, and Division III in deference to the collegiate sports divisions. HCPA has a motto: "College for certain!" With this cheer, students are often brought to attention by a staff member shouting "College!" to which the students respond "For certain!"

Throughout the academic year, HCPA holds four weekend seminars for students and their families. The topic of these seminars varies each year and is chosen to target the needs expressed by students and parents. One of the weekend seminars this year brought back HCPA alumni currently enrolled in college. The alumni spoke about their experiences in college, and students and parents were able to talk to alumni about their questions and concerns. The faculty and staff interviews and the student focus groups revealed that this seminar was eye-opening to students, their families, and the faculty and staff at HCPA. Students had the opportunity to ask questions that teachers often do not have the time to cover in class – like, what's it like to live in a dorm? Parents could discuss their concerns with alumni, like the safety of their daughters living away from home. Faculty and staff were encouraged by the feedback and high levels of interest demonstrated by students and families, highlighting their thirst for more information about college.

While faculty and staff at HCPA realize that creating a college-going culture for its middle school students requires deliberate, continual, and multi-faceted strategies, they have not yet focused on providing such a college-going culture for middle-school students beyond the casual implications that all the students will attend college and the middle-school students being able to attend the events more focused on the high school students.

Faculty and staff all recognized that they fell short in many ways, citing too little time to work on building a college-going culture and also their lack of knowledge and training in knowing what they should be doing, even if they had the time. They did, however, identify key components of a college-going culture that they felt were missing, which they aimed to develop in future years. The components consistently mentioned were developing a curriculum that supports the college-going culture; providing activities that excite, motivate, and introduce students to facets of the college-going process; more fully-integrated and robust college counseling; and better connections to students' families.

*Curriculum.* All teachers interviewed feel that they should be doing more to promote a college-going culture from a curricular perspective for the middle-school students. They want to create a project-based academic curriculum that develops students' motivation, academic behaviors, and cognitive strategies, along with building students' content knowledge. However, they are unsure what such a curriculum would look like and are struggling to put together lesson plans that would teach students the state standards. The faculty at this school, many of whom were new, were not given curricula to use or from which to base their own. Instead, they worked long hours to stay a day or a week ahead of the current lesson plan, piecing together a curriculum as they went along. Their focus in planning lessons was on the more immediate – teaching the standards that would result in higher scores on the state accountability tests. Teachers indicated that they were barely getting by with this, and that they did not have the time to create the curriculum that they would really want to see implemented in their classroom – a curriculum that is more project-based, engaging for students, and not only teaches students the state standards, but also builds students' social and emotion maturity and develops their cognitive skills.

Teachers also noted that starting to build students' knowledge of the college application process and what college life is like is an important component of developing a college-going culture for middle school students. Many noted that this would be a good use of the advisory period and discussed the usefulness of developing a comprehensive, sixth through eighth grade advisory curriculum that covers what middle school students should know at this point – ranging from discussions about what college life is like (the food, living away from family) to discussions about financing college, as this was a high anxiety point that consistently came through in the student focus groups.

As an early college high school, HCPA has an explicit connection to two postsecondary institutions (a community college and a four-year university). Teachers noted that this connection should make conversations that build college knowledge more approachable yet they had not taken advantage of this connection in building students' college knowledge. Teachers did note, however, that having a handful of eighth grade students taking a college course has proven to be exciting and motivating for their whole class. The students are clearly proud of their classmates for taking the college courses and understand the financial benefit of being given this opportunity. While the enrollment of these middle-school students in early college courses was not planned (the students petitioned the administration to take the course), HCPA's administration has recognized the motivational, academic, and financial benefits of promoting such opportunities.

*Activities.* Teachers and students alike noted the lack of activities that motivate and teach students about college. The weekend seminar that brought HCPA alumni back to campus to discuss their experiences in college was a highlight that was repeatedly mentioned in interviews and focus groups. Veteran teachers recalled a time when HCPA would hold town hall sessions, where a teacher would talk to the students about his or her path to

college. This gave students a sense of the many ways that students prepare for and get to college, and exposed them to the many types of colleges that exist. Moreover, having teachers reflect on their college experiences was beneficial in that teachers could relate to students the things they would have done differently and also forced faculty to think more deeply about their college-going process and connect it to their students.

At the same time, a number of teachers noted that having anyone outside of HCPA talk to the students would be helpful in reinforcing what the faculty and staff try to communicate to the students; they note that the students become numb to teachers' words, while at the same time noting that they have not had the time to seriously contemplate the most effective way to communicate their expectations and knowledge with students.

While most students had been to a college campus, they also noted that they wanted to visit colleges as part of a school trip.

*Counseling.* The HCPA administration hired its first college counselor a few months after the start of the school year. This college counselor serves both the middle and high school – she is clearly stretched thin and her work with the middle school so far has consisted of meeting with off-track students and their parents. However, she has spent time thinking about what she would like to do for the middle-school students to promote the college-going culture, including Saturday school focused on building college knowledge.

*Connecting family.* HCPA staff frequently contacts parents to keep them aware of campus happenings. They mail home a newsletter regularly and have an automated phone messaging system to send voicemail to parents. One teacher mentioned that she emails parents every day with the students' assignments and has frequent email conversations with them. Keeping parents connected to the campus is essential. Teachers and staff indicated that they felt HCPA should be doing more; specifically, that they should be teaching the

parents about the college-going process (since most either did not attend college or attended college in another country) and teaching parents how they can help their students with homework and with the college-going process.

## **Conclusions**

HCPA is an example of one school dedicated to promoting college success for traditionally underserved students. This case study highlights how difficult developing a college-going culture in a middle school can be even when given resources that many other schools may not have – including a self-selected population, an institutional connection to postsecondary institutions that brings college courses to the school, a modern, well-kept campus, and a self-selected faculty and staff. HCPA wrangles with the same issues that other urban schools face, including a lack of resources, inexperienced teaching staff and leadership, and students' lack of motivation.

The lack of resources played out in several ways at HCPA. First, the largely new teaching staff is a result of the school's inability to pay higher wages and recruit more experienced teachers. While this may not be the only reason the school's teaching staff was predominantly in their first and second years of teaching, it was a factor cited during the case study. Second, like many urban schools, the textbooks were often not the ones needed. For example, the math textbooks were text heavy even though most of the students were struggling to read in English, their second language. Additionally, to maximize their funding, the school kept teachers' prep time to the bare minimum, as HCPA could not afford to hire additional teaching staff, allowing teachers more prep time. Finally, the many roles played by each faculty and staff member at the school underscored the lack of funds to have staff in a dedicated role. For example, the newly hired college counselor played the role for the

middle *and* high schools, but for the middle school students, she was forced to play more of a guidance counselor role by counseling off-track students.

The inexperienced teaching staff was balancing their own growth as new teachers with the high demands of their students. As previously mentioned, teachers were responsible for creating a brand new curriculum, often without relevant textbooks, and with minimal planning time and no group planning time. Teachers noted that they worked long hours – up to 80 hours each week. Many of them were additionally taking courses after school to complete their teaching credential.

Teachers often noted that they struggled to engage students and to build in them a motivation to excel in school. Accordingly, developing the intrinsic motivation to care about college in middle school students, and creating a genuine interest in understanding what being ready for college means may likely be more difficult. A teacher at HCPA noted that getting students to care about college is like trying to get her to care about planning for retirement – she knows she should do it and that it is important, but it seems so far away to worry too much about now. This is reflected in the student focus groups and surveys – students recognize that getting an education beyond high school is important to their future and realize that to be successful in college, they will need to work hard now and later; yet they consistently complain about the amount and difficulty of the homework. If HCPA is going to be able to implement an effective college-going culture, it will need to develop creative ways to motivate students.

Not only are middle school students far away from college, time-wise, but middle schools do not have organizational connections with colleges. While many high schools do not have college connections either, high schools that want to create a college-going culture can generally forge that relationship, which is difficult for middle schools to do because they

lack traditional leverage points, such as dual enrollment. HCPA is exceptional in that it is an early college school and has institutional connections with both a four-year university and a two-year community college. While the relationship with the four-year university seems to be non-existent (only one teacher, who was the early college coordinator for the high school, knew of this relationship), the relationship with the two-year college persists. The two-year college sends adjunct faculty to the campus to provide a couple of early college courses, one of which enrolls a handful of middle school students. The principal is motivated to ramp-up this relationship in future years to have more classes provided and to require all of the high school students to take a certain number of early college credits to graduate.

The case study of HCPA shows just how difficult creating a college-going culture can be for urban schools that are struggling with staff retention and limited resources. Most of the teachers at HCPA already work 80 hours each week to put together lesson plans that meet the state standards. The administration ensures teachers focus on students' performance on state tests through weekly meetings where the principal checks to see if the lesson plans adequately cover the state standards and sample test questions. For this reason, the school has relatively strong test scores, but its alumni return to HCPA reporting that they did not feel prepared for college.

Likely a key to successfully developing a college-going culture at this middle school is to support faculty in their role in the process. This means giving teachers capacity to develop and integrate a college-going culture in their schools. Capacity-building includes training teachers and developing in them the professional skills they need to successfully create and implement college-going cultures in their classrooms, along within their school as a whole and reaching out to students' families. Teachers also need more capacity with regards to their time. The demands on their time must be lessened in order to give them

time to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective purveyors of the college-going culture. This could be done by providing teachers with a curriculum on which they can build and customize, give more time for prep (e.g. two prep periods rather than one), and instructional aides to assist in the classroom.

If the teachers had the time and knowledge to weave a college-going culture into their curricula and conversations with students and their families, many of the aforementioned barriers, such as a lack of student motivation, might collapse.

HCPA shows that creating a college-going culture for a middle school requires that school leadership must focus on creating this culture as much as they focus on raising test scores. Faculty and staff must be supported in creating this culture in their classrooms. This requires the training to understand how to integrate a college-going culture into their curriculum and the time to reflect on how students are grasping the lessons. The college counselor needs to be able to focus on college counseling – not guidance or academic counseling, which is what she was focused on with the middle school students. If students are coming from families without knowledge of the college-going process, families must be engaged in the college-going process also. Parents need to be given information about college and also need to learn how they can best support their child. Finally, an important factor in engaging students is making college fun and real. This may involve field trips to college campuses and visits from college students.

### **Contributions to policy, practice, and research**

College readiness starts early. Students who are traditionally college bound often state that they always knew they were going to college and, moreover, have always

“prepared” for college. This needs to be made the case for all students in order to truly prepare them for college.

As pressure mounts to prepare all students for some form of postsecondary education, and as the failure of the public education system to meet this goal becomes clearer, practitioners and policy-makers must step back and rethink educational reforms. Research and practice consistently indicate much of students’ path to college is set the moment they enter high school. Moreover, the importance of the school environment and supporting students’ educational aspirations must be at the heart of the educational experiences, especially for those who are not supported in these goals at home – whether because of a disabling home environment or a family’s lack of knowledge of the college-going process.

Together, these findings indicate that research should focus next on the college-going culture at middle schools (and, next, elementary schools). This study identifies key barriers in the development of middle school college-going culture, as identified by a school grappling to develop them. Faculty, staff, and students note the barriers they face in developing and implementing them. While these areas have been brought to light, future research needs to examine whether other middle schools have similar experiences, hone in on the details of the components (such as, what would a college-going advisory curriculum look like for middle-school students, and what would be the differences between sixth and seventh grades?) and effective strategies to overcoming the barriers (like how can overburdened, under-resourced teachers find the capacity to integrate the development of college knowledge into their curricula?).

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