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Establishing a College Culture in Secondary Schools Through P-20 Collaboration: A Case Study

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Abstract

This case study examines a P-20 action research partnership involving a university, a nonprofit organization, and several middle and high schools with sizeable enrollments of underserved students. The partnership's goals were rooted in a cultural change model designed to encourage college awareness and attendance among largely Latino and African American students. The research reveals the barriers and opportunities inherent in a collaborative model from the perspective of school counselors and administrators.

Resumen

Este caso examina una investigación colaborativa de una universidad, una organización no-lucrativa, y varias escuelas medias y preparatorias con un número amplio de estudiantes apoyados pobremente. Las metas de esta colaboración fueron ancladas en un modelo de cambio cultural designado a fomentar la concientización y presencia universitaria de estudiantes latinos y áfrico-americanos. La investigación reveló las barreras y oportunidades inherentes en el modelo colaborativo de acuerdo a la perspectiva de los consejeros escolares y administradores.

Keywords

collaboration, educational reform, organizational theory/change, school–university collaboration, college access, action research, P-20, P-16, Latino/Hispanic, African American/Black

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Introduction

College access research tells us that having early college plans substantially increases the likelihood of taking a college preparatory curriculum and enrolling in college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). But these plans do not simply happen; they must be fostered and encouraged at every opportunity. For students without parents or siblings who have gone to college—first-generation college students, who are most likely to be Latino or African American (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007)—schools become one of the most important sites for these plans to be nurtured. Indeed, research shows that a school's culture has a strong impact on students' aspirations and achievement (Falsey & Heyns, 1984; Jones, Yonezawa, Ballesteros, & Mehan, 2002; McDonough, 1997; Oakes et al., 2006). Sadly, however, the majority of Latino and African American students spend 8 or more hours a day in K-12 educational systems where far too few teachers and counselors are trained in how to help them think about and prepare for college (Oakes et al., 2006; Pérez & McDonough, 2008).

For better or worse, school experiences have an enormous impact on students' aspirations and on their choices of more selective, elite colleges (Kirst, Venezia, & Antonio, 2004; Perna, 2006). Historically, however, principals and other school leaders have, of necessity, believed that the college mission, although important, should take a back seat to more pressing organizational priorities such as scheduling and dropout prevention. As a result, school cultures may do more to inhibit students' aspirations than to encourage them. This can and should change, and universities and colleges must be partners in the work (Kirst et al., 2004; Noguera, 1998; Yonezawa, Jones, & Mehan, 2002).

In this article, we examine the implementation of one P-20 partnership that sought to improve the college-going rates of students in a group of racially and ethnically diverse schools in the Los Angeles area. This project, titled "Creating a College Culture," brought together a large research university, a national nonprofit organization, and a group of urban public primary and secondary schools. The overarching goal of the work was for all students in these schools to see college as an option and have the necessary information available to them—at all stages of their academic careers—to make appropriate, informed decisions about their futures. To this end, university partners worked closely with teachers and administrators as well as district officials to change the cultures of two high schools, three middle schools, and their feeder elementary schools. In the process, we recorded what took place and how the process affected those directly involved with it. This article presents data from counselors and administrators on this partnership, offering insight into what might and might not work for school personnel when disparate entities come together toward a common goal.

Literature Review

Despite a generation of concerted policy and programmatic efforts and despite the substantial gains in educational attainment over the past 50 years, Latinos and African

Americans remain decidedly underrepresented on our nation's college and university campuses (Perna, 2000, 2006). Often, students have high career and academic expectations, but the lack of relevant high school programs and school structures may doom them to a cycle of failure (Oakes et al., 2006; Solórzano, 1992a, 1992b). For example, underrepresented students are tracked away from college preparatory curricula (Oakes, 2008; Oakes et al., 2006), and those interested in college are most frequently advised by teachers and siblings to attend community colleges to remediate, improve grades, and save money, even though these institutions may not offer a clear path to 4-year institutions (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Oakes et al., 2006; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). It is not surprising, then, that students continue to express the need for information about college types, eligibility requirements, and the subtleties of competitive eligibility (Kirst et al., 2004).

We also know that families are essential partners in any effort to improve students' college eligibility, admission rates, and yields, and past research highlights their deeply felt needs for information (Cooper, Chavira, & Mena, 2005; Horn & Chen, 1998; Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper 1999; Kirst et al., 2004; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Unfortunately, however, some family members may not be comfortable participating in school activities because they feel they lack the necessary knowledge, see themselves as "outsiders," or perceive historical or structural barriers to doing so (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Padrón, 1992; Smith, 2001). Latino parents in particular may be inclined to let school officials decide their children's academic tracks because of a limited capacity to communicate in English, a belief that it is primarily the school's role to determine curricular placement, or a perception that school staff know what is best for the child (Auerbach, 2004; Ceja, 2004; Oliva, 2007). In short, Latino and African American students and their families both need improved access to information and better communication with schools, regardless of their prior experience or primary language (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Jun & Colyar, 2002; Padrón, 1992; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Smith, 2001).

In many schools, counselors may be the only available source for advising students and their families on appropriate classes, providing basic information on why college is important, and being sounding boards for college choices, but the structure of counseling departments in public schools does not always allow them to be effective in this role (Hill, 2008; McDonough, 2005). Whereas some schools do have designated college counselors, counselors in large high schools can carry caseloads of up to 1,000 students (American School Counselor Association, 2008; Fitzsimmons, 1991), and they may be grossly underinformed about college types, college entrance requirements, and other important information (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Compounding the problem is the fact that in recent decades counselors' responsibilities have multiplied and changed, with their primary energies being devoted to scheduling, discipline, and monitoring dropout potential (McDonough, 2005; Perna et al., 2008). In light of these factors, it is clear that a school's college resource infrastructure cannot rest solely on the shoulders of the counseling staff—instead, the responsibility must reside schoolwide.

Extensive empirical evidence exists on how the high school environment—what we identify as the school culture—exerts powerful influences on students' college aspirations and preparation. The courses students are offered, the expectations that faculty and staff have of them, and the resources devoted to college preparation all contribute to the degree to which students see themselves as college bound (Coleman, 1987; Dean & Levine, 2007; Falsey & Heyns, 1984; McDonough, 1997; Powell, 1996). As noted by McDonough (1997), true reform toward equity in higher education must take all these factors into account and approach the problem at an organizational level, through cultural change. 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 reform will be long term and much more profound (Yonezawa et al., 2002).

Higher education has a valuable role to play in working toward these goals (Kirst et al., 2004; Noguera, 1998). Colleges and universities can serve as partners in various capacities, not only in providing access to up-to-date educational research findings but also in ways that attend to the micro-realities of the school setting (McLaughlin, 1992). One such approach is participatory action research, also known as collaborative inquiry, which commonly refers to projects in which traditional boundaries between researcher and community are blurred, where the goals of action and research are intertwined to the point that each one, out of necessity, informs the other (Catelli, 1995; Petras & Porpora, 1993). In the context of educational reform efforts that involve school–university partnerships, great value can be found in the control, autonomy, and ownership afforded to the participants, particularly because more traditional approaches have often resulted in ineffective power imbalances, leading to "distrust, disillusionment, and suspicion" (Valadez & Snyder, 2006, p. 30) on the part of many schools.

Participatory research in general is an approach rooted in relationships, and the success of the project is necessarily tied to the effectiveness of communication between participants and the trust and understanding that must be established at the outset. There must be a sense of shared purpose among all participants—a "two-way flow of knowledge" (Weerts, 2007)—for the work to be effective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Yonezawa et al., 2002), and yet this has not always been the case (Valadez & Snyder, 2006). With notable exceptions (e.g., Jones et al., 2002; Weerts, 2007), explorations of this vital aspect of collaboration are still relatively scarce in the literature (Mason & Boutilier, 1996; Valadez & Snyder, 2006). To address this gap in the literature, this study addressed how counselors and administrators involved in a P-20 collaborative dedicated to creating a college culture perceive opportunities and hindrances to a successful collaborative effort.

Method

This research took place in the context of a partnership between the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); the nonprofit, public interest organization The Achievement Council; and the students,

parents, administrators, and teachers in a group of schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District. This collaboration, established in 1997, emerged from a concern that in spite of strong leadership and a commitment to improving academic performance (as evidenced by their ongoing efforts toward improvement) both high schools in the cluster had high dropout rates (38% and 20% compared with a 14% average for the state of California) and generally low participation by low-income students and students of color in honors and advanced placement courses. In addition, throughout the cluster, college-going rates were far from equitable across ethnic groups and income categories.

At the outset, the cluster served some 25,000 students in 18 elementary schools, 5 middle schools, and 2 high schools. The students were ethnically and racially diverse—clusterwide, approximately 44% of the 25,000 students were Latino, 33% were African American, 17% were White, and 5% were Asian American. A large percentage of students in the cluster came from immigrant families with limited English proficiency. More than 50% of cluster students were classified as low income. The counseling departments at the partnership schools varied: none of the elementary or middle schools had a counselor responsible for college preparation; one of the high schools had a dedicated college counselor, responsible for more than 2,500 students, whereas at the other, the responsibility was shared across the entire counseling staff, all of whom felt the typical pulls in multiple other directions.

A key component of the Creating a College Culture project at the middle school and high school levels was the creation of a new counseling position, referred to hereafter as the "college coach." This aspect of the project was funded by the school district, in exchange for funds from UCLA for another aspect of the project that was also designed to raise student achievement. The college coach component allowed each school to bring in or recategorize a person to initiate and carry out activities that would contribute to the college culture. Each of the three middle schools brought in a new person whose sole responsibility was to foster a college culture within the school. In one of the five middle schools, a teacher with more than 22 years of experience (13 at her current school) was recruited for the position. The other two middle schools brought in novice counselors who were, at the time of their hire, nearing completion of their counseling degrees. At the high school level 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, who previously 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 then worked to educate the entire department to become 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.

Though the goal at the outset of the partnership was to foster a college culture at each of the participating schools, a more fine-tuned understanding of this concept

became an early objective of the project team. Ultimately, based on research evidence, we reached agreement that our goal was to foster certain college preparatory characteristics at each school. Thus, our working definition of a college culture took the form of a highly integrated set of nine principles that highlight the need for college preparation to come in many forms, from numerous sources: *College Talk*, consisting of clear, ongoing communication among students, teachers, administrators, and families about what it takes to get to college; *Clear Expectations*, involving explicit, clearly defined goals, communicated in ways that make them part of the culture of the school; *Information and Resources*, including comprehensive, up-to-date college information and resources, easily accessible to all students, families, and school personnel; a *Comprehensive Counseling Model* that makes all student interactions with counseling staff opportunities for college counseling; college-focused *Testing and Curricula*, including information about and access to "gatekeeping" tests (PSAT, SAT, etc.) and courses (e.g., algebra and advanced placement); active, informed, and meaningful *Faculty Involvement* and *Family Involvement*; *College and University Partnerships* in a variety of forms; and ongoing *Articulation* between counselors and teachers among all schools in a feeder group.

These nine principles, which are rooted in the scholarly literature and discussed in greater detail elsewhere (McClafferty, McDonough, & Núñez, 2002), formed the basis of the college coaches' work. Coaches were provided guidance regarding overall project goals and were expected to meet certain objectives (e.g., PSAT preparation and participation), but they were also given a great deal of freedom to interpret their job descriptions—in collaboration with their principals—as they felt appropriate at their school sites.

At the conclusion of the first year of project implementation, interviews were conducted with the college coaches and principals at the middle school and high school levels. In total, six coaches (three high school and three middle school) and four principals were interviewed (two high school and two middle school).[1] These conversations 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 the interviews, a subset of questions about the project structure and execution was asked. Here, respondents had the opportunity to reflect on the collaboration and offer their thoughts on issues such as leadership improvement and clarification of goals.

One aspect of the coaches' job responsibilities was attendance at monthly, 2-hour project meetings (held either at cluster offices or at one of the schools) that also included representatives from UCLA, the Achievement Council, and cluster administration. Detailed field notes from these meetings and other gatherings were created and drawn on for this article. Similarly, curricular materials, newsletters, and other like items generated by the participating schools were also used as data. These additional sources allowed for triangulation and subsequent validation of the findings that emerged from the interview phase.

Through the duration of the program, an iterative, grounded theory approach was used for data analysis. Interview data, field notes, and other materials were

continuously reviewed and analyzed to identify relevant themes and findings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To ensure the reliability of our findings, we conducted member checks by asking the coaches and principals who participated in the research to review the themes and conclusions of this research. Based on their feedback, we refined our analysis of the findings to more accurately reflect their perceptions on the collaborative process (Creswell, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Results

Instituting the Process of Cultural Change

Of their own admission, the coaches did not immediately understand the broad concept of cultural change, and so they tended toward one-on-one work with students, straying from the cultural model. For example, one college 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 [that are] 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." . . . A month later it hits me like "*Oh yeah*! Why don't we figure out the cause of this?"

As another coach put it, "Once I understood [the concept of cultural change] . . . I understood how much deeper I need to dig." Given the initial confusion they expressed, it is not at all surprising that, when asked what advice they would offer another school undertaking a similar project, almost all the coaches agreed with the principal who pointed out that "you've got to get the roles and responsibilities of each level clearly defined to . . . make sure that they will generate enough enthusiasm to get it done."

The coaches and principals alike described teachers and administrators resistant to both the idea of a college culture and the placement of a college coach on the school staff. This resistance was subtle and overt; it existed at all five schools, but especially at the two middle schools where the coaches were new hires. As one explained, "It has been a one-person fight. . . . I had no idea of the politics involved. No idea." For example, as coaches struggled to communicate with students and convey important information, they were often faced with roadblocks created by teachers who either felt their schools already had too many "external programs" or who simply did not think the college message was worthwhile for their students. The coaches acknowledged the more subtle ways they needed to earn trust and buy-in:

> Some teachers think it's really a waste for you to be talking to [the students] so soon. So if you can maybe have a dialogue with the teachers and . . . 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.

Another said she strategically approached the teachers "at nutrition. When they're standing in line to buy food I hit them one by one . . . and I try to learn how to become their friend."

One particular obstacle arose in relation to supervision duties (monitoring the school yard or cafeteria), which often prevented coaches from being available to students during their free periods. One coach faced an almost constant battle with her administrators:

> 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," . . . It's been a lot of tension since then with, "What makes you think you don't have to do supervision?" That kind of mentality.

Because they had support from district leadership, the coaches were typically able to work around these constraints—though not without significant struggle.

Principals were also acutely aware of the resistance encountered by the coaches and by the project more generally. For example, one high school principal noted the following:

> [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." . . . That has been an obstacle.

Another acknowledged, "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."

The Obstacles and Assets of Collaboration

The college coaches talked at length about the dilemma of having more than one person to report to. Not surprisingly, this problem played out differently depending on the amount of experience the college coach brought to the position. The high school coach with many years of experience at her school felt comfortable drawing a line for herself in terms of how many people she wanted to feel responsible to: "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 as she continuously struggled with "the right thing to do."

Because the external actors (UCLA, the Achievement Council) were not directly involved with the daily work of the college coaches, an hour or more of each monthly meeting was spent hearing about what was going on at each school site. It did not become clear until the end-of-the-year 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 enjoyed hearing about what her colleagues are doing but, as she put it, "I want it to be less of a contest." In spite of these complaints, the coaches indicated that monthly project meetings did provide an opportunity for them to share what they were doing in their schools and to think about their work outside of that context. Additionally, guest speakers (who addressed topics such as college admissions requirements and university outreach programs) proved to be particularly helpful to the coaches by providing much-needed concrete information about core project issues.

Importantly, the administrators with whom we spoke characterized the involvement of the external agencies as real and meaningful. One high school principal talked specifically about the role of a particular university faculty member, highlighting the value of true collaboration:

> 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 [that] 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 [effective].

Another principal explained that the excellent reputation of the partners was a significant benefit, noting, "If some [other] 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."

Committed Individuals and Strong Leadership

Experience and inexperience on the part of the coaches each proved to be advantageous, but in different ways. For example, the middle school counselor who had been at her school for quite some time was able to draw on her existing relationships:

> 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 have] 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."

In contrast, one of the coaches who was directly out of her counseling program called her first year a "true example of ignorance is bliss":

> When I ask a teacher, "Can you do this?" "Can you do that?" . . . and they tell me, "Oh gosh, well, we've never done that before, 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."

The school principals typically saw themselves as having a very active role to play in the creation of a college culture. One explained, "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 every faculty member in order to raise awareness of college access issues.

Discussion

As a collaborative venture, the Creating a College Culture project was both strengthened and—to a lesser extent—hindered by a team approach. Involving the university and other 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. Also, because the cluster, not the individual schools, funded the college coach positions, the coaches were often able to create a layer of insulation between themselves and local school politics. At the same time, however, they sometimes struggled to balance the demands of working with so many people with different interests and priorities, and it was clear that the proverbial "too many cooks in the kitchen" problem was somewhat of an issue. All the coaches said they, at least occasionally, had too many "bosses" to whom they had to answer, leaving them feeling pulled in conflicting directions, particularly when the long-term goals of cultural change were at odds with the immediate needs of the school. Nevertheless, the consensus was that the collaborative nature of the project led to greater progress and a higher quality project.

The experiences of the college coaches and school administrators in trying to combat resistance on the part of their colleagues—resistance rooted in skepticism of the feasibility of preparing all students for college and in weariness from an abundance of educational reform initiatives—made it clear that before any real change in

the schools could occur, widespread attitudes and ideas about who can and should go to college needed to be addressed. This issue, of course, was in direct contrast to the initial shared optimism among coaches and administrators that change would be quick and dramatic. Managing expectations—among both skeptics and believers—and repeatedly communicating the fact that cultural change is a slow and evolving (but necessary) process proved to be an important, ongoing part of the project. Through continuous communication and relationship building (both of which take time), trust and understanding had to first be established, and only then could the college culture efforts become more central to the school organization as a whole. Thus, although many of the challenges faced by the coaches and their principals in this first year of implementation should not be surprising, they must also be seen as integral to any efforts toward change, collaborative or not.

It quickly became evident during the first year of our project that strong, thoughtful leadership was essential to facilitating cultural change. Principals who overtly supported project goals were also committed to developing faculties who felt the same. Conversely, where that commitment was lacking, the work of the college coach was extremely difficult, because resistance was left largely unchallenged. 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 allowing a college coach to make herself readily available to students—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 (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

Strong leadership in collaborative cultural change also requires finding a balance between guiding those who are working in the trenches and allowing them the freedom to discover what works best for them. This balance is an especially important consideration when multiple K-12, university, and external stakeholders are involved. 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. Their comments raised an interesting issue for us, as university partners. Our intention had been to avoid a more traditional prescriptive approach in favor of a fully collaborative model where project goals were designed in partnership with school personnel. This strategy was not entirely comfortable for those who were required to carry out the work, however, because they felt disoriented at the outset, unsure of where to begin and how to proceed. In general, however, 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.

Conclusion

In the time since our data were collected, the formal partnership between UCLA, the Achievement Council, and this cluster of schools has dissolved, yet another victim of

funding cuts, continued district reorganization and redeployment of personnel, and shifting political tides where No Child Left Behind and other accountability initiatives have usurped organizational attention in favor of shorter-term goals. The work lives on, however, as the principles of a college culture that emerged from the partnership continue to be shared with researchers, educators, and counselors both locally and nationally, all within a framework that acknowledges the complexity of collaboration and cultural change. And although some have argued that, given current resource limitations, this professional development approach is the most effective way for universities to be of service to schools (Timar, Ogawa, & Orillion, 2004), we believe this is worthwhile but insufficient. Too many research and policy initiatives related to college access remain narrow, overwhelmingly focused on the individual level; comprehensive interinstitutional partnerships are the exception rather than the rule (Gándara & Bial, 2001; Kirst et al., 2004), and, not surprisingly, most attempts have been relatively unable to improve permanently or dramatically the college-going rates of underrepresented and low-income students (Dean & Levine, 2007; Gándara & Bial, 2001). In the current educational and political climate, it is imperative that advocacy groups, individuals, primary and secondary educational systems, and colleges and universities search together for effective approaches to improving the college access of low-income students and students of color.

The Creating a College Culture project allowed us to draw on the vast resources of all our participants toward the goal of effecting real change for students. Our findings show that each partner has something unique and valuable to bring to the table and that when these resources are combined there is great potential for transformation. There are limitations to our study, however, and these must be acknowledged. First, in 1 year of data collection we were able to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, but we were not able to measure actual cultural change at the school level—the process is too complex and slow. Additionally, because of time and funding limitations, we could not measure how cultural change affected student outcomes with respect to critical college-going indicators such as standardized test scores, college preparatory course taking, and college application rates.

We are also aware that this is a relatively small sample of schools and counselors in one urban school district and that these lessons may apply very differently to other contexts. Although we are confident in the authenticity of our findings, we remain aware that a broader, more diverse sample would reveal additional characteristics of effective collaborations on both personal and organizational levels. To address these limitations, future research should collect longitudinal data from multiple stakeholders and place participant experiences in the broader context of real change (Tierney, Hallett, & Venegas, 2007).

Finally, as already discussed, we know that the role of families is critical in influencing educational trajectories (Cooper et al., 2005; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Moreover, by reaching families, we have the potential for even further impact, as parents and students share the college message with younger siblings—thus, truly creating a more inclusive P-20 pipeline. But there are barriers—both perceived and real—to

true engagement. Any program that seeks to bring about true cultural change must recognize the value of family involvement and include components to foster it. This is particularly true for schools seeking to engage Latino families, who may be more inclined to defer to school officials regarding academic matters, whether because of language barriers or the belief that it is the school's role, not their own, to make these decisions (Auerbach, 2004; Ceja, 2004; Oliva, 2007). Although these factors must be acknowledged in any conversation about preparing students of color for college and family involvement was an aspect of the Creating a College Culture project, it was beyond the scope of this article to address these issues in detail. (See instead, Fann, Jarsky, & McDonough, in press.)

Limitations aside, our case study highlights the importance of learning deeply about the specific environments in which K-12 and university partners interact to effect more successful cultural change. Some have rightly argued that school–university collaborations should remain local (Dean & Levine, 2007) and should create a unique "third culture" (Kezar, 2007) that reflects the combined, evolving perspectives of multiple partners. As this and other research demonstrates, this is best done when partners can share and create working knowledge in a bidirectional manner (Weerts, 2007; Yonezawa et al., 2002).

This study also indicates, however, that creating new cultural norms and practices with a "two-way flow of knowledge" (Weerts, 2007) can introduce ambiguity that may inhibit the effectiveness of the partners, particularly when responsibilities are not initially defined but are instead allowed to evolve. Our study indicates that counselors at times struggled with figuring out their roles in this evolving initiative and that this could easily have become a barrier to effective collaboration. Yet other research indicates that counselors and school personnel can resent and resist school–university initiatives when their roles are prescribed (Valadez & Snyder, 2006; Weerts, 2007; Yonezawa et al., 2002). So, while our study reveals the benefits of mutual engagement among partners, it also highlights the fact that partners must manage the ambiguity inherent in a fresh initiative where power is mutually shared. These findings also underscore that more research, including case study and qualitative approaches, is needed to understand the day-to-day workings of successful partnerships.

Although challenges exist, we can reasonably conclude that collaboration across educational levels is both valuable and manageable. There are inherent obstacles in combining diverse perspectives toward a common goal; they are surmountable, though, and because of them, the importance of a long-term view when approaching this type of work cannot be stressed enough. Of course, having a longer-term view is difficult when funding for such collaborations has such a short time horizon, or the commitment to such projects dries up (Dean & Levine, 2007; Gándara, 2005). But with sustained commitment to the process, these challenges can be used as the basis for advantage. With that in mind, it is our hope that these findings and recommendations will emphasize to other educators and researchers the enormous potential in working together toward the common goal of a more diverse and equitable P-20 system.

Authors' Note

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Note

1. One middle school principal was not available to be interviewed.

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