"Everybody Say They'll Go to College, but Until You Grow Up, You Don't Really Understand":

Examining the Contextual, Relational, and Networked Experiences of College Bound Students

from Traditionally Underserved College-Going Populations

Bernadette Doykos

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Kimberly Bess, Ph.D.

Maury Nation, Ph.D.

Claire Smrekar, Ph.D.

Paul Speer, Ph.D.

To the Doyki, forever my multidimensional support system

and

For Amy D., who reminded me that you can do anything for 20 seconds

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades, various stakeholders, including scholars, practitioners, and politicians, have championed the adoption of a *college for all* norm, which touts postsecondary education as an essential tool for individual and societal advancement (McClafferty, McDonough, & Nuñez, 2002; Obama, 2015). Contemporaneously, schools, youth programs, and federal, state, and local policies have expanded efforts to enhance equity in educational attainment, targeting students from traditionally underserved college-going backgrounds, including first generation, low income, and minority students. These efforts have been affiliated with a significant increase in the absolute number of students who pursue college immediately following high school (Aud, Hussar, Johnson, Kena, Roth, Manning et al., 2012). National data reveal trends of increased postsecondary enrollment across all student subpopulations (e.g., black, white, and Hispanic students; low income and high income students) (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Musu-Gillette, Robinson, McFarland, KewalRamani, Zhang, & Wilkinson-Flicker, 2016). However, there is continuing evidence that students from traditionally underserved college-going backgrounds continue to enroll in and graduate from college at markedly lower rates than their more privileged peers (Aud et al., 2010).

The continued disparities in postsecondary enrollment and graduation suggest that students from traditionally undeserved college-going populations confront barriers on the path to higher education that threaten to obstruct their immediate enrollment (Jacob & Wilder Linklow, 2011; Knight & Marciano, 2013). While many studies identified mechanisms of inequality (e.g., Rosenbaum, 2001), the majority focus on individual-level indicators and obscure the effects of settings and their embedded resources on students' college access outcomes. Therefore, many

questions remain regarding how settings interact with and determine students' proximal experiences as they progress through high school and towards college (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Seidman, 2012). For example, how do settings, such as schools, influence students' college access outcomes via the provision and organization of resources? How do social processes, through the creation of norms, relationships, and roles, enable and restrict students' experiences within settings? Additionally, how do students' leverage different types of support in order to progress through the college access process successfully?

In the present dissertation, I seek to contribute to the college access literature in two ways. First, I revisit existing stage models of college choice and propose an expanded model of college access that more broadly reflects the process-oriented experiences of students from diverse backgrounds as determined by the influence of multiple settings. Second, I examine the role that social contexts play in framing the experiences of college-going students from traditionally underserved college-going populations. Specifically, I investigate the ways in which settings and their embedded resources influence the development of a *college for all* norm and students' experiences throughout the college access process. Additionally, I explore the impact of relational and contextual resources on educational opportunities, support structures, and, ultimately, postsecondary enrollment.

### Changing Economy, Changing Credentials

Whereas college was at one time viewed as an educational pathway reserved for the elite, over the course of the last several decades it is has become touted as the pathway to social mobility (Mettler, 2014). The pursuit of higher education is affiliated with a wide range of economic and personal benefits (Belfield & Levin, 2013). For example, due to the expansion of the "knowledge economy" and other high-skill sectors, the labor market privileges postsecondary

credentials  for employment and long-term job security (Labaree, 1997; Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Hanson, 2012). An astounding 99 percent of the 11.6 million new jobs created since the Great Recession (December 2007-January 2010) require at least some postsecondary education (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). Carnevale and his colleagues (2012) found that individuals with a bachelors degree earn 84 percent more over their working years than those who only had a high school diploma; even an incomplete postsecondary degree yielded a significant earnings bump. Additionally, individuals with a college degree demonstrate better health outcomes, report higher levels of social cohesion, and experience significantly lower rates of incarceration (Asha Cooper, 2008; McPherson & Schapiro, 2006). College graduates are more likely have access to personal and extended networks rich with social, cultural, and economic resources (Ahn, 2010; Farmer-Hinton, 2008). In combination, these findings make a strong case for the centering of postsecondary education as a high priority education policy, due to its promise as a critical tool for economic progress.

### *College for All*: The Emergence of a National Norm

Parallel to the emergent promise of higher education for individual and collective prosperity, the *college for all* norm expanded across public education institutions in the United States. The reframing of higher education as an option for all students, bucks the historical restrictions of college as a "sponsored" outcome, dictated primarily by one's family background, and positions the notion that gaining college access, instead, is a "contest" towards economic and personal stability and social mobility (Goyette, 2008; Turner, 1960). The assumption that "all students can and should attend college" (Rosenbaum, 2001, p. 56) drives *college for all*.

*College for all* is predicated on the assumption that students have uniform access to college preparatory opportunities and the support required to leverage those opportunities,

independent of their backgrounds (e.g., family with college experience) and school characteristics (e.g., a history of college matriculation among alumni, embedded resources) (Oreopolous & Dunn, 2013). Therefore, educational institutions, including schools and youth programs, have been tasked to create opportunities for students that mitigate the potential burden of one's background (Goyette, 2008). Practices to achieve the goals of *college for all* have taken many forms, including the school-level creation of a college-going culture (Knight, Norton, Bentley, & Dixon, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Sokatch, 2006), the expansion of college preparatory curricula for all students (Jackson, 2010; Mazzeo, 2010), and the proliferation of college access youth programs, provided both in and outside of school settings (Ahn, 2010; Perna, 2015). Each of these practices aims to expand students' familiarity with the higher education landscape and the requisite steps to gain admission to a well-matched institutions through repeated linkages of students to relevant social and cultural capital (Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Maxwell, McNeely, & Carboni, 2016). However, the core structures of K-12 education have remained largely unaltered (Rosenbaum, 1999). As a result, students from traditionally underserved college-going backgrounds incur what can be characterized as an "educational debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2013): although nearly all students indicate aspirations towards college early in their high school careers, they encounter repeated obstacles across settings that make them more likely than their more privileged peers to ultimately derail those plans. The threat of potential obstacles highlights the need for ongoing research and practice that focuses on the provision of well-timed, targeted resources and supports to facilitate the journey to college.

**Critiques of *college for all*.** In recent years, many scholars (e.g., Museus, Harper, & Nichols, 2010; Rosenbaum, 1999, 2001) have criticized the limitations of the *college for all* norm in practice. Specifically, these scholars point the ways in which the norm obscures the

impact of institutional barriers that influence students' experience of the college access process. *College for all* frequently fails to account for the deeply entrenched nature of historical disadvantage that frame the settings with which students interact daily (e.g., home, school, and community) and their lasting impact on students' opportunities and outcomes (Duncheon, 2015). For example, efforts by the Chicago Public School System to introduce a mandatory college preparatory curriculum for all high school students fell woefully short (Mazzeo, 2010). The evaluation of this initiative concluded that students from traditionally underserved populations were more likely to struggle academically, reflected in elevated rates of course failure in "gatekeeper" courses such as Algebra I and English I, decreased GPAs, increased dropout rates, and decreased rates of college enrollment. Existing gaps in students' math and English skills at the end of eight grade predicted the negative outcomes. Therefore, forced enrollment did not dismantle the effects of systemic inequalities in student achievement in the early years. Similarly, scholars, including Rosenbaum (2001) and Schneider and Stevenson (1999), argue that *college for all* forced the "decoupling" of high school processes (e.g., course selection, targeted counseling) and postsecondary pursuits. Frequently, shapeless policies remain, which fail to facilitate students' abilities to draw connections between their short-term actions and long-term college and career plans. Thus, at the end of high school, students frequently lack the academic content and study skills as well as the requisite information about the expectations of college-level work required to make the successful transition into college (Conley, 2013). The high rates of college students who require remediation upon entering college (estimated between 40 and 60 percent) reflect this argument (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Southern Regional Education Board, 2010).

**Proximal processes and the creation of *college for all* settings.** Although the expectations of *college for all* are universal, the evidence suggests the way it is enacted via settings determines students' outcomes and that there is extreme variation, dictated by a wide range of variables, including race, class, and geography (Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Farmer-Hinton, 2008). The norm itself is nebulous in nature; there are few, if any, singular practices that produce universal outcomes amongst all students. Therefore, research must address how students' settings impact individual and collective experiences that path the pathway to college access. In order to accomplish this, research must seek to unpack the dynamic processes and resources situated within settings to address the ongoing stratification evident in college access (Seidman & Tseng, 2011; Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

Many studies on college access identify isolated setting-level variables that influence students' exposure to the resources essential for college access (Deil-Amen & López Turley, 2007; Espinoza, 2011; Holland, 2010; McDonough, 1997; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Table 1 summarizes empirical research that isolates the influence of setting-level variables on students' college admission in meaningful ways. However, empirical work frequently fails to capture the nuances of settings considered by ecological theory and how setting-level characteristics promote student outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Specifically, the current college access literature has largely overlooked three key tenets of ecological theory: 1) how students' multiple settings and their embedded resources vary in meaningful ways; 2) how the multiple settings interact with one another and influence students' access to information and support surrounding college access; and 3) the mutual impact of the relationship between youth and their settings (Darling, 2007). As a result, the majority of existing empirical work focuses primarily on individual behaviors and how they inform students' educational outcomes and attainment.

Table 1

*Examples of Multilevel Factors that Influence Students' Postsecondary Orientation and Admission*

| Ecological Setting Level | Relational and Contextual Factors that Influence Outcomes of the College Access Process |
| --- | --- |
| **Family Setting** | • Parental educational attainment (Choy, 2011)<br>• Family income (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997).<br>• Postsecondary messaging (Perna & Titus, 2005) |
| **School Setting** | • School mission (Klugman, 2012)<br>• History of college enrollment (Walton Radford, 2013)<br>• Academic opportunities (Adelman, 2006)<br>• Availability of institutional agents (McDonough, 1997, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2011) |
| **Extramural Settings** | • Availability of out of school time programs (Perna, 2015) |
| **Neighborhood Settings** | • Population-level educational attainment (McCarron & Inkelas, 2008) |

The assumptions of *college for all* obscure the ways in which students' experiences across settings contribute to the development of relationships, exposure to support (e.g., information, assistance), and access to educational opportunities germane to college access (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In combination, the aggregation of information and experiences informs students' pre-college behaviors and subsequent postsecondary outcomes. For some students, the presence of relational and contextual factors that encourage their postsecondary attendance may be abundant, influencing a seamless path to college. For others, even those who attend schools with well-articulated *college for all* missions, the availability of such resources may be limited, especially students from traditionally underrepresented college-going backgrounds (Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Walton-Radford, 2012). Therefore, continued research and practice would benefit from ongoing studies that focus on the

salience of settings and their embedded resources in promoting college access for all students throughout the entirety of the college access process.

## The Present Dissertation

Thus, the present dissertation consists of three discrete papers, which seek collectively to extend the literature surrounding the complexities of the college access process. Specifically, the three papers will investigate the ways in which relational and contextual resources interact with students' settings to influence opportunities and behaviors relevant to higher education. I summarize each of the three papers below.

### Paper 1: Multiple Supports, Multiple Settings: Introducing the Ecological Model of College Access

In the first paper, I examine the foundational theoretical literature that frames college access scholarship and identify the strengths and limitations of existing theoretical frameworks used to investigate college access. Specifically, I ask: What are additional factors not captured by these frameworks that may influence students' success throughout the college access process? I critically assess dominant theoretical models and demonstrate how they collectively perpetuate a restricted understanding of the processes that undergird students' experiences of the college access process—both in and out of school. I rely upon the empirical literature to develop an alternative model: The Ecological Model of College Access. I conclude by discussing the implications of this model for future research.

### Paper 2: Structuring the Scaffold: Students' Experiences with the Multiple Dimensions of Support Throughout the College Access Process

In the second paper, I seek to understand how students leverage relationships within and across settings (e.g., home, school, and community) to access multiple dimensions of support

throughout the college access process. I focus on the following questions: For each phase of the college access process, which types of support are most salient? How does each type of support manifest via students' relationships? In combination, these questions allow a comprehensive analysis of the sources of support that combine to frame students' college access processes. Additionally, the questions focus on the qualities and quantity of support, and examine at which points different types of support manifest as most important throughout the process. To accomplish this, I draw from data from 54 interviews with college-going seniors from two *college for all* high schools in a midsized southeastern city. This study examines student constructed ego networks and corresponding qualitative interview data to explore the specific role relational resources embedded in diverse settings play in the college access process. Cumulatively, this paper helps to expand the concept of support as it relates to college access, highlighting its multiple dimensions, purveyors, and relational characteristics that encourage support throughout the college access process.

**Paper 3: Moving the Ledger Line: Employing Settings Theory to Examine School-Based Approaches to Implementing *College for All***

Finally, in the third paper, I employ Tseng and Seidman's (2007) theoretical framework of settings to explore how students' experiences throughout the college access process are mediated by settings-level factors. Specifically, I ask: What are the salient elements of settings that support the development of a schoolwide *college for all* mission that meets the unique needs of students from traditionally underserved college-going populations? How do the resources, organization of resources, and social processes combine to influence students' experiences throughout the college access process? Is there evidence of there continuing obstacles at the setting level that threaten the goal of universal postsecondary enrollment? I explore how the school setting enables social processes via embedded relationships, activities, and norms that

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foster students' opportunities and experiences germane to the pursuit of higher education (Seidman, 2012; Seidman & Tseng, 2011; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). I also address the ways in which social resources from external settings (e.g., home and neighborhood) influence students' experiences with school-based settings. Using a comparative sample, this paper will highlight differences in *college for all* in action and the findings may help influence the development of future intervention efforts.

## Contribution

In combination, the three papers that make up the present dissertation provide an important contribution to the college access literature. The first paper explores the existing models of college choice and identifies critical shortcomings perpetuated by embedded, flawed assumptions. I propose an alternative model, The Ecological Model of College Access, in which the relational and contextual factors become central to understanding students' experiences throughout the college access process. In the second paper, the findings focus on how college-bound students assemble a comprehensive network of social support as they seek to transition their college aspirations into acceptance and enrollment. This paper will extend support from a singular concept to one that encompasses multiple dimensions, which collectively influences students' attitudes and behaviors and connections to resources to as they seek to gain admission to college. The findings also introduce a temporal dimension, which highlights the types of support that are most relevant to students at different points in the college access process. Finally the third paper investigates how settings influence students' experiences via the embedded resources and their organization and the resulting social processes. The paper takes a comparative approach to demonstrate how settings level characteristics have a differential impact on students' experiences, despite objectively similar efforts to implement *college for all*.

Cumulatively, the findings of the present dissertation highlight the influence of the contextual and relational factors that extend across students' multiple settings, which, in combination, are critical to enhancing students' successful pursuit of higher education. Finally, the findings highlight continuing obstacles that students encounter on the path to college as they manifest within and across their multiple settings.

CHAPTER II

MULTIPLE SUPPORTS, MULTIPLE SETTINGS: INTRODUCING THE ECOLOGICAL

MODEL OF COLLEGE ACCESS


Attending and graduating from college is as an essential tool for social mobility for

students from traditionally underserved college-going populations, including low income,

minority and fist generation college-going families. Yet, despite efforts to promote college

access via the creation of a *college for all* norm in high schools across the United States, there is

evidence of ongoing stratification between students from traditionally underserved college-going

populations and their more privileged peers (Aud, Hussar, Johnson, Kena, Roth, Manning et al.,

2012). Empirical efforts have fallen short in accounting for the causes of the persistent gaps in

college access. This is due, in large part, to the continued use of outdated theoretical models to

ground research (e.g., Hossler & Gallagher's Model of College Choice [1987]), which were

framed by the experiences of predominantly middle- to upper-income, white males (Klasik,

2012). A new theoretical model is necessary to account for the increasing diversity in college

bound populations.

In the present paper, I seek to holistically examine the college access literature. I

introduce Hossler and Gallagher's Model of College Choice (1987) and identify its role in

shaping the empirical work surrounding college access and choice over the last three decades. I

summarize the foundational components of the model, discuss the core assumptions, and

highlight its strengths and limitations as a framework for college access research. I propose the

Ecological Model of College Access in response to the shortcomings I identify in traditional

stage models. The proposed model accounts for a more complex understanding of college access.

Additionally, it highlights how students' multiple contexts influence their exposure to and connections with various kinds of support that facilitate the journey to college. I conclude by discussing implications for future research.

## Existing Theoretical Models of College Access and Choice

Over the last thirty years, concurrent with the expansion of enrollment in higher education, a proliferation of literature examining college access and choice has emerged. Cumulatively, these studies provided robust foundation for understanding the myriad factors that inform students' successful experiences throughout the postsecondary pipeline. These include the pursuit of a college preparatory curriculum (Adelman, 2006), the completion of discrete steps necessary to make oneself college eligible (e.g., maintaining a college eligible GPA and graduating from high school) (Avery & Kane, 2004), and the development of a familiarity with the diverse array of options for higher education (Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). However, few studies examine college access as a cumulative process, spanning both time (e.g., K-12) and settings (e.g., home, school, community) (Klasik, 2012). Instead, students' next steps after high school graduation are considered as byproduct of individual behaviors and choices, ignoring the influence of dynamic contextual and relational factors (Oreopolous & Dunn, 2013). This is due, in large part, to the foundational theoretical models that undergird the college access literature, such as Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice. In the following section, I offer a brief introduction to this model and present a challenge its core assumptions.

### Hossler and Gallagher's Model of College Choice

During the 1980s, there was an observable increase in the literature focused on access and choice in higher education due to the expansion of college opportunity. Prior to this time, higher education widely relied upon market research methods, adopting an institutional lens to

create a broader understanding of enrollment trends (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The majority of research stemmed, primarily, from three scholarly fields: sociology, psychology, and economics (Bergerson, 2009). Sociological studies sought to isolate individual level variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, race, gender, academic achievement) that predicted one's likelihood to attend college. For example, in his study of college selection, Hearn (1984) found a significant effect of academic achievement and socioeconomic status on college enrollment, concluding "the rich become 'richer' while the…'poor' become poorer" (p. 22). Psychological studies (e.g., Nowicki & Duke, 1974) focused on the characteristics of postsecondary institutions (e.g., location, size, cost of attendance) and how these factors predicted student enrollment. Finally, economic studies (e.g., Kohn, Manski, & Mundel, 1976) constructed college selection as a rational choice. This assumed that students conducted a well-informed calculations of the perceived investment require to attend college and the anticipated long-term reward when making their students' postsecondary decisions (Grodsky & Jackson, 2009).

As students began to enroll in higher education at increased rates and the narrative of its role in social mobility became more widespread, the focus of college access research moved away from enrollment forecasting exclusively. Scholars began to develop studies aimed at understanding the steps students needed to complete to secure college admission; several stage models of college choice emerged (e.g., Chapman, 1981; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Kotler & Fox, 1985). The theoretical models built upon earlier empirical work in that they explored how students' background characteristics interacted with institutional variables to inform postsecondary choice. Of these early models, Hossler and Gallagher's College Choice Model (1987) emerged as the most popular and continues to be used widely (e.g., Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011).

Culminating from an extensive review of empirical literature, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a theoretical model that identified three discrete, linear phases that combined to construct the path to college choice: predisposition, choice and search. The authors concluded that the successful completion of each of these steps results in students' matriculation into an institution of higher education following their high school graduation. I summarize each of these phases in the following sections.

**Predisposition.** As the first sequential stage in the model, predisposition lays the foundation for students' postsecondary pursuits. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) define predisposition as "a developmental phase in which students determine whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school" (p. 209). Students are expected to solidify postsecondary predisposition by the tenth grade. Hossler and Gallagher identify a number of factors that may influence students during this phase, including socioeconomic status, the perceived costs and returns of attending college, and academic performance; however, they fail to discuss how these variables interact with their model. Current literature operationalizes predisposition as either students' indication of postsecondary aspirations or expectations, and several studies conflate those two terms (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee,1997; Koyama, 2007; Goyette, 2008).

**Search.** Upon solidifying predisposition towards higher education, students next engage in an active college search. The search phase is defined as the time in which "potential matriculants start to seek more information about colleges and universities" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 213). During the search phase, students receive information about institutions of higher education (e.g., costs, requirements, academic offerings) and begin to make sense of the diverse postsecondary landscape (Bergerson, 2009). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) note that

the search is not a "static process for all students" (p. 214), citing individual level variables as influential during this phase, including parental educational attainment and socioeconomic status. At the completion of the search phase, students should be able to identify a short-list of institutions that best meet their educational and career goals in addition to their academic, social, and financial needs.

**Choice.** Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice culminates in a third and final phase: choice. Choice is the result of "an interaction between students and their attributes and increasingly specific information about institutional quality, net price, and academic programs" (p. 218). More simply stated, a range of factors inform students' postsecondary choice, including their academic performance, financial preparation, and social and emotional readiness to make the transition (Conley, 2008; Hill, 2008; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Smith et al., 2013). The authors positioned choice as both a desirable and a measurable outcome. Over time, practices aimed at increasing equity in postsecondary access have adopted a similar orientation. The over-determination of choice masks the processes that inform students' successful navigation of the path to college.

**The Emergence of the *College for All* Norm**

Following the Great Recession of 2008, nearly all of the 11 million jobs (99.1 percent) developed since the recovery require postsecondary training of some kind (Carnavale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). These trends reflect the increased prioritization of postsecondary credentials by employers in the wake of post-industrialization (Labaree, 1997). In response to the expanded demands of the economy, the majority of high schools across the United States strive to establish a *college for all* norm, promoting postsecondary education as a realistic goal for all students. *College for all* is rooted in the belief that through expanded school missions and

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increased availability of resources related to higher education, students will have uniform access to college preparatory opportunities and support, independent of background and school characteristics (Glass & Nygreen, 2008). It emerged in contrast traditional school based practices, such as tracking, which privileged certain subpopulation of students with college preparatory opportunities (Oakes & Saunders, 2008*).* Many advocate that *college for all* has dismantled the historical barriers to college for students from traditionally underserved college-going populations by bridging gaps in information and opportunity (Obama, 2015).

However, despite its promise, critics point to meaningful variation in students' experiences, even amidst settings that espouse a *college for all* norm, highlighting critical shortcomings in the corresponding practices necessary to enable college preparation and access (Glass & Nygreen, 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001; Rothstein, 2013). In the following section, I discuss how the core assumptions of Hossler and Gallagher's Model of College Choice obscure the impact of these practices, which inform students' opportunities and outcomes related to college access. The limitations evident in the conceptual theoretical frameworks that inform empirical studies of college access overlap with those that guide practices aimed at enhancing college for all. Therefore, in order to enhance opportunities for youth, especially those underserved by traditional systems of education, both research and practice must confront the driving assumptions to maximize population-level outcomes, especially in the wake of an increasingly diverse higher education landscape.

**Limitations of Hossler & Gallagher's Model of College Choice**

While Hossler and Gallagher's Model of College Choice serves as a convenient framework by which to assess students' path to higher education, it vastly oversimplifies the college access process. This is due, in large part, to three assumptions that drive the model: 1)

that college access is a linear process consisting of three discrete steps; 2) that rational choices theory drives students' decisions regarding higher education; and 3) students' precollege experiences are acontextual. Cumulatively, these assumptions mask the complexity of students' experiences, which, in turn, contributes to continued gaps in understanding. For students from traditionally underserved college-going populations, who may have limited access to a network of individuals and institutions that strategically provides support germane to college access, it is critical to unpack these assumptions.

**Assumptions of acontextuality.** Due to increased rhetoric surrounding the importance of college as an essential means to long-term prosperity, students are subjected to powerful messages regarding the importance of higher education. Frequently, a merit based slant frames such messages: independent of all other variables, if one works hard, one will have the opportunity to access and complete higher education and, thus, be eligible for a range of high-skill, high-pay jobs (McClafferty, McDonough, & Nuñez, 2002; Rosenbaum, 2001). However, this ideology ignores students' realities as informed by their settings (Brooks Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Perna, 2006). For example, parental educational attainment, access to high quality schools, and exposure to a college preparatory curriculum each directly impacting how students make sense of educational opportunities and their overall familiarity with the systems that promote college access (Beattie, 2002; Hatcher, 1998; Stanton Salazar, 1997, 2011). The multiplicative effect of context becomes especially clear when considering the diverse backgrounds of students (Walton Radford, 2012). Contexts impact not only the availability of resources, but also social processes that enable students' ability to access and leverage them for the purpose of college access.

Although the majority of extant empirical work focuses singular contexts, in

combination, it suggests students' experiences are extraordinarily complex. This conjures von Bertalanffy's (1968) theory of "equifinality" in open systems, which suggests "as far as [open systems] attain a steady state, this state can be reached from different initial conditions and in different ways" (p. 142). In other words, many paths may lead to the same outcome (in this case, college enrollment), and students' backgrounds and surrounding contexts play a major role in constructing that path. However, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice largely ignores the broader contexts and structural forces that stimulate such decisions and the creation of multiple pathways. The expansion of the college-going population to include more diverse students has drawn increased attention to students' varied experiences and their impact throughout the college access process.

**Assumptions of rational choice.** In addition to the assumption that all students embark on a linear path to higher education, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Model of College Choice is grounded in the assumption of rational choice theory. Rational choice theory posits that "individuals act in ways that maximize the likelihood that their preferences will be satisfied, given the constraints they face" (Grodsky & Jackson, 2009, p. 2364). The model asserts that when individuals make a major decision (e.g., the pursuit of a postsecondary degree), it is the result of a tempered and informed assessment, accounting for all pertinent variables (e.g., short-term financial costs and long-term benefits) (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2007). It also assumes that students make decisions relevant to the pursuit of higher education only after a measured calculation of risk and reward (Plank & Jordan, 2001).

However, the foundational assumptions of rational choice theory fail to account for the range of factors that inform students' educational decisions. For example, students' relationships, including peers, adults, and community members, greatly influence their decisions—both in the

short- and the long-term—and the cumulative impact of these sequential experiences inform students' plans following high school graduation (Beattie, 2002; Valadez, 2008). Students' relationships are embedded within and across settings, which operate via distinct sets of practices and norms and may affect students throughout the college access process. Hatcher (1998) notes that rational choice theory is most often applied in educational studies when considering students' outcomes at a distinct transition point (e.g., whether or not they matriculate into a college). Yet, educational decision-making is informed by "the dense fabric of micro-choice which comprise the everyday interaction between the pupil or student and the institution" (p. 21). I would extend Hatcher's (1998) critique to note that students' "micro-choices" occur both within the walls of schools, as he discussed, and beyond, in the various settings with which students interact every day (e.g., home, school, community). In combination, the accumulations of micro-choices and students' overarching contexts dictate decision-making (Valadez, 2008); postsecondary outcomes are rooted in the interplay between structure and agency.

**Assumptions of temporal linearity.** As presented, the Model of College Choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) takes a linear orientation towards understanding college choice. Each phase is conceptualized as discrete and sequential. However, few students, independent of their backgrounds, experience such a seamless process (Bergerson, 2009; Klasik, 2012). Intersections of geography, race, and class frame students' opportunities as well as their exposure to individuals familiar with higher education who help them draw connections between short-term actions and long-term goals (Dika & Singh, 2002; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). For example, Corwin and her colleagues (2004) found that students from traditionally underserved college-going populations solidified their college going plans very late in their high school careers, highlighting a gap in their pursuit of opportunities to

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enhance their preparation and overall sense of readiness (Conley, 2013). Students' dynamic experiences, as informed by their social ecological contexts, present important differences and suggest that the path to college access is far more complex than three discrete, linear steps.

**Moving beyond the limitations.** The assumptions of linearity, rationality, and acontextuality ignore the essential differences in students' exposure to consistent messages regarding higher education communicated through formal and informal networks (McDonough, 2005; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012; Tuitt, Van Horn, & Sulick, 2011). Additionally, these assumptions mask the effect of meaningful variation in students' pre-college experiences across settings. Many scholars have critiqued of the reductive nature of of stage models, such as Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice (1987). For example, McDonough (2005) concluded.

> The research evidence on college access suggests that students enroll in college through a
> complex, longitudinal, interactive process, involving individual aspiration and
> achievement, organizational structuring of opportunity in high school, and institutional
> admissions. (p. 74)

Specifically, critics highlight the need to align models of college access with the fluidity of students' experiences over time, extending throughout K-12 (e.g., Goyette, 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001).

One such model does aim to capture the interconnected nature of multiple layers of influence on college access, Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Enrollment with Policy Linkages. The author distinguishes four distinct "layers" of influence as a means to identify the meaningful differences in postsecondary outcomes: 1. students and family context, 2. school and community context, 3. higher education context, and social, economic, and 4. policy context. Perna notes that this approach "recognizes the differences in the resources that shape

college enrollment and choice for different groups of students" (with Kurban, 2014). However, the model falls short, as it overlooks the key steps required for students to successfully enroll in higher education. Additionally, the model fails to address the settings level impact on not only the availability of resources to promote college access, but also the mechanisms by which students may leverage those resources to accomplish their personal postsecondary goals. Thus, future empirical work would benefit from an expanded theoretical model that highlights the complicated interplay of variables from across multiple settings that influence students' experiences on the path to college. Such efforts must focus on the availability and access to social capital via social support throughout the college access process.

**Creating Connections: Examining Social Support and Social Capital in the Context of College Access**

One of the most underexplored elements of the college access process is how students' exposure to diverse social networks—and their various forms of social capital embedded within—influence the successful transition to college. A number of studies suggest that students' connections with individuals who have experience with higher education significantly predict postsecondary enrollment (Espinoza, 2011; Harding, 2011; McDonough, 1997, 2005). However, substantially less is known about how gaps in access to supportive individuals may effectively contribute to social reproduction and what aspects of those relationships students may leverage as a means to college access (Noguera & Wells, 2011; St. John, 2000; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005). Therefore, many questions persist regarding how and why disparities continue in college access and enrollment across student populations, especially in the wake of increased efforts to enhance equity.

The veil of equal access to perfect information and opportunities perpetuates the

assumption that students who do not make it to higher education simply fell short in their commitment to the goal. In reality, individuals who appear to have attained success "on their own" often actually do so in "learn[ing] to appear self-reliant, while acting interdependently" (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, p. 240). In lifting the veil of individuality, the complexity of help seeking and support in relation to college access is exposed as a dynamic process situated amidst a multilevel network. Therefore, it becomes critical to understand the foundation of supportive relationships and the social capital and support exchanged through those relationships within the broader contexts in which they occur (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

**Social Capital and College Access**

Social capital is complex, both in its definition and operationalization (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Song, Son, & Lin, 2011). In this paper, I rely on Lin's definition of social capital (1999): "*resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive action*" (Lin, 1999, emphasis in original, p. 35). In order to fully understand social capital, Lin (2002) cautions that one must explore the "mechanisms and processes by which embedded resources in social networks are captured as an investment…[to] help bridge the conceptual gap in the understanding of the macro-micro linkage between structure and individuals" (p. 3). Thus, social capital reflects the resources (e.g., human, physical, social, economic, and temporal) embedded within social ties (Seidman, 2012). Lin (2002) identifies three sequential steps of social capital transmission: "1. investment in social capital; 2. access to and mobilization of social capital; and 3. the returns of social capital" (p. 19). The first step reflects the preconditions of social capital (e.g., socioeconomic status). The second step highlights the consideration that exposure to social capital is insufficient when estimating its impact on individual and collective outcomes and highlights the importance of understanding

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how it is mobilized for individual gain. Finally, the third element allows for an understanding of how social capital assists in conducting cost-benefit analyses of certain actions (e.g., enrolling in college in lieu of entering the workforce). Having a staged understanding of social capital in the college access context helps illuminate the progression from students' exposure to information and support to its activation as a means to enhance the odds of successfully gaining admission to college.

In the context of college access, Hossler and his colleagues (1999) conclude that social capital serves as "the currency students can use to make decisions about going to college" (p. 152). Kirst & Venezia (2005) suggest social capital frames the ways that students are both exposed to and interpret messages regarding higher education. However, the properties of students' relationships with supportive individuals and the settings in which such relationships take place largely determine access to various forms of social capital (Ahn, 2010). Thus, adopting a network-oriented definition of social capital allows one to better understand how students' exposure and access to social capital within and across their multiple contexts dictates a range of experiences that cumulatively influence and guide in their college process. Frequently, supportive relationships facilitate access to social capital. I focus on social support in the following section.

**Social Support and College Access**

Like social capital, social support is complex and dynamic, and can only be fully understood in context. Song and his colleagues (2011) define social support as "the aid—the supply of tangible or intangible resources—individuals gain from their network members" (p. 118). Social support may function both as a type of social capital and a means by which individuals gain access to alternate forms of social capital. Wellman and Gulia (1997) note that

research focused on the topic often operationalizes "support" in a unidimensional way, failing to capture the complexity of the phenomenon and how it manifests in multiple forms and across settings. Students' experiences with social support serves as a critical component of the college access process.

Individuals generate direct and indirect support from their social networks. However, the extent literature largely overlooks the influence of these supportive relationships and their impact on students' opportunities and outcomes germane to college and how they help students to draw connections between how short-term actions impact long-term goals. Throughout the college access process, students develop networks of social support, which facilitate their connection to resources within and across their multiple settings (Bess & Doykos, 2014). Social capital is actualized through those networked relationships (Espinoza, 2011; Hossler et al., 1999). Direct support includes a number of discrete interactions, including fostering students' academic skills, helping complete college applications, and making sense of the financial aid landscape (Avery & Kane, 2004; McDonough, 1997). In contrast, indirect support constitutes students' exposure to couched messages regarding postsecondary education as a realistic option through their families, communities, and schools (Klugman, 2012; Stanton Salazar, 2011; Tuitt et al., 2011). For students embedded in networks rich with individuals familiar with the higher education landscape, indirect support is a commonplace occurrence, woven into everyday interactions; the notion of going to college becomes conceived as a "birthright" (Beattie, 2002).

Students generate social support via a number of different types of relationships. For example, Dominguez and Watson (2003) note that social support is often affiliated with "strong ties," including friends and family members (p. 113). An individual may be more willing to ask for assistance as well as heed advice about certain behaviors, including those required to pave the

path towards higher education, when there is a foundation of trust in the relationship (Tseng &

Seidman, 2007). However, Granovetter's (1973) theory of the "strength of weak ties" provides

an alternative explanation on the role of network connections in complex processes, such as

college access. Granovetter posits that access to new information and opportunities may flow

through "bridging ties" that connect students to external actors (e.g., admissions counselors) and

settings (e.g., a student's school). For students from traditionally underserved college-going

populations, weaker, bridging ties may foster connections to diverse opportunities not otherwise

readily available given the limited supply of resources in the contexts of their immediate

networks (Stanton Salazar, 2011).

Thus, in order to understand students' postsecondary decision making processes fully,

future studies must seek to understand the cumulative impact of how one's educational history,

networks and local habitus[1] interact with educational and career plans. Understanding how

students identify and connect with various individuals, as well as the contexts that serve as the

foundation for those relationships and the types of support mobilized through such connections,

may help to clarify social capital's role in the pursuit of higher education (Wellman & Gulia,

1997).

**Funds of Support: Identifying Students' Supportive Connections Across Multiple Contexts**

The *college for all* norm assumes that students have similar exposure to the resources and

support required to connect aspirations with their desired educational outcomes, independent of

their background. As previously discussed this assumption ignores the complexity of students'

networked lives. Students' social-ecological contexts frame their connections with individuals

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[1] Habitus is defined as the combination of the amount and type of social, cultural, and economic capital that an individual has, as influenced by their multiple settings (Bourdieu, 1986). Habitus constrains individuals' thoughts and actions. It is important to note that one's habitus is not a permanent designation, and is subject to change over time.

and institutions upon which they may rely for support throughout the college access process, including family members (Hamrick & Stage, 2004), peers (Tierney & Venegas, 2006), teachers (Roderick et al., 2011), guidance counselors (McDonough, 1997, 2005), and non-familial mentors (Ahn, 2010; Espinoza, 2011). To date, few studies have examined the qualities of students' relationships or the way that these relationships may reinforce or contradict one another as students' progress towards college. In the section that follows, I draw from empirical work of college access and offer brief examples of how multiple settings may create competing influences on students' college access outcomes.

**Family-level influence.** Families strongly influence academic outcomes (Lareau, 2003; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Rothstein, 2013). Students whose parents attended college are more likely to enroll in and graduate from college than their peers who would be the first in their family to attend (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Families may function as conduits for sustained messaging about college, which directly impacts students' subsequent aspirations and behaviors (Choy, 2001). Thus, students from higher income families are more likely to be embedded in a network saturated with support throughout the college access process, increasing awareness of and facility with the college access process (Kaushal, Magnunson, & Waldfogel, 2012). Walton Radford (2013) found that lower income parents were just as likely to provide their children with encouragement surrounding their postsecondary goals as their higher income counterparts, but offered limited direct support due to lack of familiarity with the process. Myers and Myers (2012) concluded that when parents engage their children in conversations about postsecondary education it affects students' subsequent college application behaviors, including the types of schools to which they apply. In combination, there is powerful evidence of a "home advantage" (Auerbach, 2009), which may translate the development of interconnected strains of social

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capital and expanded networks of support that foster students' postsecondary orientation and progress through the complex process.

**School-level influence.** Schools serve as a central hub where students connect with various opportunities, which undergirds their journey to college throughout K-12. The variation in resources and opportunities observed across students' school settings has meaningful impacts for students' preparation for and exposure to college. However, students' experiences as they relate to securing college admission in schools vary widely, even among those that embrace a *college for all* mission. Klugman (2012) identifies three primary categories of differences observed between schools: programmatic resources (e.g., availability of AP courses), social resources (e.g., access to social capital), and pedagogical resources (e.g., access to high quality teachers).

*Institutional agents.* Within school settings, students develop critical relationships that enable their success throughout the college access process. For many students, especially those from traditionally underserved college-going populations, institutional agents serve as the most important source of ongoing, direct support (Plank & Jordan, 2001; Stanton Salazar, 2011). Institutional agents, defined as supportive adult figures embedded in the formal context of educational institutions—usually teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors—who provide students with a range of resources and opportunities aimed to increase school success and the potential for social and economic mobility (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). Through their relationships with institutional agents, students connect with and make sense of the relevant social, cultural, and human capital, which they may, in turn, leverage to connect with a range of resources and opportunities related to college access (Ahn, 2010; Stanton Salazar, 2011). In combination these experiences aid in facilitating college aspirations into acceptance and

enrollment.

However, despite the promise of connections with various institutional agents, changes in the broader structures and functioning of schools have restricted students' access to them. Despite the expanded numbers of students aspiring towards and enrolling in college, there has been little change in the designated resources (e.g., personnel) within schools to manage the increased demand (Rosenbaum, 2001). For example, across American public schools, guidance counselors are in high demand and short supply. The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (2006) estimates that guidance counselors carry a caseload of 478 students on average, which yields approximately one hour of postsecondary counseling per student. In high-need schools, ratios have been estimated as high as one counselor for every 1,056 students (McDonough, 2005). The role requirements of guidance counselors have shifted over time, further intensifying the burden of heavy caseloads. In addition to the provision of college assistance to students, counselors' responsibilities include scheduling, mental health counseling, and testing coordination (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; McDonough, 2005; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; NACAC, 2006; Perna et al., 2008). In combination, the empirical research suggests that students have varying opportunities to connect with guidance counselors, both within (e.g., high achieving students versus low achieving students) and across schools (e.g., highly resourced schools versus lower resource schools). This is most problemating for students from traditionally underserved college-going populations, who disproportionately rely on institutional agents for support throughout the college access process.

**Beyond schools: Formal funds of support.** Given the competing priorities of schools, students frequently identify external sources for support throughout the college process (Espinoza, 2011; Perna, 2007). For example, there has been a rise in the availability of and

participating in college preparatory programs, hiring private counselors, and connecting with mentors via community based settings (Harding, 2011; Perna & Kurban, 2013; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). Through these external sources of support, students may gain many of the advantages traditionally associated with institutional agents (e.g., opportunities for college tours and ACT/SAT preparation) (Harding, 2011).

In addition to providing a place to cultivate supportive, dyadic relationships ,the social capital and support embedded within institutions strongly influences students' experiences throughout the college access process. Activities, relationships, and norms dictate the functioning of institutional settings, students' experiences, and the subsequent impact on individual and collective outcomes (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). While few studies examine the setting-level influence in college access, similar evidence may be drawn from other sectors. For example, Small (2008) found that the context of the childcare centers provided women with a place that shaped their social networks. Through their affiliation with the childcare center, mothers not only developed relationships with one another around the common issues they encountered as parents, but the childcare center as functioned a broker between mothers and a range of resources relevant to parenting. Therefore, the setting served as a vehicle to enhance access to both bridging and bonding capital relevant to positive parenting (Granovetter, 1973). Thus, future studies must dissect how students' affiliation with multilevel, networked settings may impact their exposure to social capital and support throughout the college access process.

**Neighborhood-level influence.** Individuals, families, and schools are firmly entrenched in the context of surrounding neighborhoods and communities. Many scholars have sought to parse out the effects of the neighborhood on a number of youth outcomes, including educational attainment (Brooks Gunn et al.,1993; Reardon, Yun, & Chmielewski, 2011). In relation to

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college access, the demographic makeup of one's community influences the embedded

resources, including schools and college preparatory programs (Harding, 2011). In communities

where a substantial proportion of the adult population holds a postsecondary degree, students are

more likely to be exposed to both direct and indirect support throughout the college access

process, from setting postsecondary expectations to exposure to particular institutions and

information about the academic requirements of admission (Jacob & Linkow, 2011; Walton

Radford, 2013). Additionally, neighborhood based mentors serve as adult role models who

reflect the long-term payoff of postsecondary education, helping students to assess the costs and

benefits affiliated with attending college (Espinoza, 2011; Valadez, 2008). In sum, students'

neighborhoods dictate their exposure to a wide range of resources and supports throughout the

educational trajectory.

**Examining the Network: Expanding the Exploration of the Role of Social Capital and**

**Social Support in College Access Research**

Students' relationships with supportive individuals and various forms of social capital

manifest at varying points throughout the college access process. Additionally, in aggregate, all

support is not equal support as it related to college access (Aronson, 2008). Therefore, it is

important to understand not only *with whom* students connect for information pertinent to college

access, but also the qualities of those relationships and the settings in which they take place.

Future studies must examine how students leverage support and social capital within and across

their multiple settings in a way that allows researchers and practitioners to understand the various

structural forces that facilitate and impede students' trajectories towards higher education, from

aspirations to enrollment. In the following section, I propose a new model that accounts for the

complexity of students' experiences throughout the college access process.

**Spanning Time, Spanning Settings: An Ecological Model of College Access**

The social capital and support embedded in students' social networks and across settings is a key predictor of success in navigating the college access process. However, to date, the flawed assumptions of theoretical stage models (temporal linearity, perfect information, and acontextuality) downplayed the intersection of students' experiences across settings and their collective influence on the successful pursuit of higher education (Manski, 1993). Thus, I propose the Ecological Model of College Access (Figure 1).

The Ecological Model of College Access expands upon Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice. Whereas, the original model identifies three discrete phases that culminate in college *choice*, the proposed model takes a process-oriented approach at understanding the various components that lead to college *access*. This shift allows for scholars to consider the dynamic impact of students' experiences within and across social ecological contexts on the development of pre-college behaviors via embedded resources and social processes. In the sections that follow, I break down the three primary elements of the model—the social ecological model, the college access process, and the typologies of support—and discuss how they combine to build upon the stage model, thinking about college access as a complex phenomenon.

## College Access and The Ecological Model

In order to fully understand the trajectory towards higher education, one must consider myriad variables that span the settings framing students' day-to-day experiences. Proximal processes between individuals and their immediate environments directly influence development and progression towards a goal (e.g., college access) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Social processes
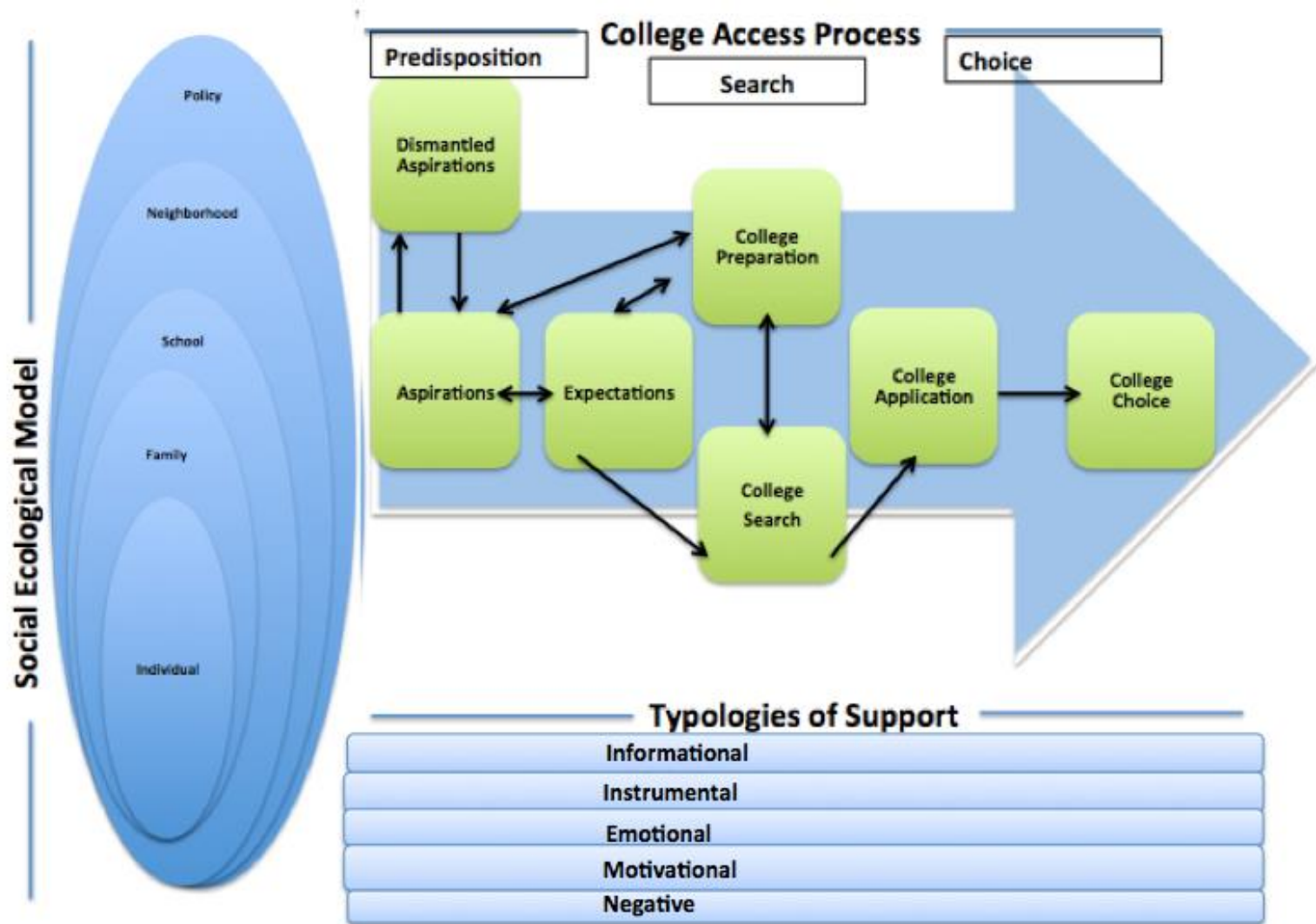
*Figure 1*: The Ecological Model of College Access

embedded within settings mediate students' access to and opportunities to leverage resources, and the subsequent impact on intended outcomes (McDonough, 1997; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Thus, I summon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological model, as depicted by the concentric ovals on the left side of the proposed model.

The application of the social ecological model to The Ecological Model of College Access builds on Perna's (2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Enrollment with Policy Linkages, which considers the cumulative role of four distinct layers on students' successful postsecondary enrollment. Specifically, the present model challenges the assumptions of rational choice to highlight the multiple levers of influence that frame individual students' opportunities and outcomes. Perna and Steele (2011) note, that "assessing the multilevel influence of students' situated contexts casts a light on the availability of resources and structures that define and delimit college-going opportunities for students" (p. 899). Thus, taking a systems approach introduces the simultaneous force of higher order impacts, including policies, neighborhoods, families, and schools, on individual students' pre-college experiences (Foster-Fishman, Foster Nowell, & Yang, 2007).

**Dimensions of Support**

The notion of "support" is intimately tied to students' social contexts and the individuals and institutions with which they connect. Several studies have examined the role of specific elements students' relationships and support systems on their postsecondary outcomes and how they influence their pre-college experiences (Espinoza, 2011; McDonough, 1997; Walton Radford, 2013). However, the conceptualization of "support" as it related to college access is limited in three ways. First, many studies focus exclusively on the importance of individual, dyadic relationships, such as with an exceptional mentor or counselor (e.g., Espinoza, 2011,

McDonough, 1997), ignoring the way that such relationships are embedded as part of students' broader networks. Second, many studies are bound by individual settings, such as a school (e.g., Farmer-Hinton, 2008). These studies ignore the comprehensive experiences of students that span multiple settings, each of which has a compounding impact on individual outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Perna, 2006). Finally, the extant literature reduces support to a unidimensional concept, ignoring the complex ways in which it manifests throughout the college access process (e.g., academic pursuits, financial aid navigation, and social circumstances that affect educational attainment) (Bess & Doykos, 2014; House, 1987; Lin, 1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1997). In combination, these continued oversights perpetuate gaps in the understanding of how students experience the college access process via exposure to and leveraging of support.

The model highlights four core dimensions of support that are essential throughout the college access process: emotional, information, instrumental, motivational, and active. Enhancing the conceptualization of support to include multiple dimensions as an essential part of the model allows for an expanded understanding of students' exposure to a complex array of resources across their multiple settings throughout the different stages of the college access process. Table 1 aligns extant college access literature with each dimension of support included in the model, guided by House's (1987) expanded theory of support. Due to the process orientation of the proposed model, it lends the opportunity to unpack when such experiences of support may manifest and by whom. For example, many studies suggest that although students who will be among the first of their families to attend college may not be able to secure instrumental support from their parents (e.g., application completion), they do rely upon them immensely for emotional, motivational, and financial support (Auerbach, 2007; Knight et al.,

Table 1

*Aligning House's Dimensions of Support with the College Access Literature*

| Category-House (1981) | House (1981) Definition | Empirical Examples in College Access Research |
|---|---|---|
| **Emotional** | Esteem, affect, trust, concern, listening | Given the intensity of the college access process, providing student with emotional support throughout the application and selection process (e.g., someone student could talk to after a trying experience, someone to whom student may relay exciting news). <br> • *Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013* |
| **Appraisal** | Affirmation, feedback, social comparison | Providing student with encouragement that s/he could be successful in postsecondary education. <br> • *Kimura Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009* |
| **Informational** | Advice, suggestion, directives, information | Providing student with the information essential to understanding the academic requirements of higher education (e.g., picking out courses, creating an academic vision, relaying the importance of the GPA) <br> • *Adelman, 2006; McDonough, 1997, 2005* <br><br> Providing student with information to make sense of the higher education landscape (e.g., distinguishing 2- and 4-year institutions; creating an understanding of what was required to apply; helping student set a list of schools to which s/he would apply) <br> • *Avery & Kane, 2004; Smith & Fleming, 2006* |
| **Instrumental** | Aid in kind, money, labor, time, modifying environment | Providing student with assistance in completing the college application process (e.g., completing applications, editing essays, writing a recommendation) <br> • *Espinoza, 2011; Plank & Jordan, 2002* <br><br> Providing student with assistance in securing financial aid or establishing a plan to pay for college (e.g., helping to complete the FAFSA; exposing to information about scholarships; helping complete applications; providing cash assistance) <br> • *Bettinger, Terry Long, Oreopolous, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012* <br> Helping student develop the academic skills required to be college ready (e.g., providing essential feedback on quality of work; offering rigorous instruction). <br> • *Walton Radford, 2013; Oakes & Saunders, 2008* <br> Student becomes agent of support to another individual during the college access process (e.g., provided information about particular schools; helped peer with essay, etc.) |

of postsecondary aspirations and expectations and to influence the ways in which students

prepare for, apply to, and enroll in college.

**Developing a Process-Oriented Model of College Access**

As previously discussed, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Model of College Choice

adopts a time-bound, deterministic orientation. However, the limited parameters restrict its

application, especially with students from traditionally underserved college-going backgrounds.

The proposed model challenges the assumption that all students have a uniform, linear

experience throughout the college access process. Additionally, it acknowledges how settings

may inform the dynamic nature of each phase, through their determination of activities, norms,

and relationships (Tseng & Seidnman, 2007). Therefore, the third component of the proposed

model expands upon the three phases of college choice, Table 2 offers a glossary of the terms

included in the model and aligns them with the Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three phases.

Table 2
*Glossary of Terms: Ecological Model of College Access*

| Corresponding Phase from Hossler & Gallagher's Model of College Choice | The Elements of Ecological Model of College Access | Definition |
|---|---|---|
| Predisposition | Aspiration | Indication of students' intentions for education following high school graduation |
| | Dismantled Aspirations | Reconsideration of postsecondary plans in light of individual and context-specific factors |
| | Expectations | Reflection of students' commitment to pursuing higher education as a realistic option. Extends students' Expectations "reflect not only a hope, no matter how fervent, but also some genuine element of prediction and commitment" |
| Search | College Preparation | Assessment and selection of opportunities, both at school and beyond, that combine to prepare students to apply to, enroll in, and succeed in college |
| | College Search | Exploration of the higher education options (e.g., 2- and 4-year options, urban and rural) and pursuit of a deeper understanding of the requirements for application and admission |
| Choice | College Application | Identification of a discrete set of institutions to which to submit completed applications. Reflects the assessment of which schools will meet the social, financial, and academic needs of students. |
| | College Choice | Selection of the school to which a student will attend |

**Expanding "Predisposition."** The gap in the proportion of students who aspire towards college and that which enrolls immediately after high school (97 percent and 67 percent, respectively), highlights the limitations of predisposition as conceptualized by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Traditionally, predisposition is considered as a static concept. However, a number of variables combine not only to influence students' postsecondary orientation, but also their commitment over time (Boxer et al., 2011), including parental encouragement (Perna & Titus, 2005), exposure to adults across their multiple settings who have successfully completed college (McCarron & Inkelas, 2008), and the presence of a college-going culture at the school level (McDonough, 1997). Social contexts greatly influence students' development of college-going aspirations and expectations.

The first two boxes of the model represent an expanded concept of predisposition, which consists of two distinct elements: aspiration and expectation. I introduce time-related arrows that reflect students' evolving postsecondary plans throughout their high school career (e.g., aspirations that never transition to expectations or aspirations and expectations that emerge later in the high school experience). I use an arrow to demonstrate that, for some students, developing postsecondary aspirations and expectations is mutually reinforced by their surroundings, which may have a direct impact on students' subsequent engagement with various resources germane to college access (Boxer et al., 2011; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In the following sections, I highlight the ways in which aspirations and expectations differ from and reflexively build upon one another, providing the foundation of students' college access process.

*Aspirations.* In the proposed model, aspirations serve as the principle step towards college access, orienting students towards the long-term goal of enrollment. Goyette (2008) defines aspirations as: "indicators of the level of education students would ideally like to attain

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or desire to attain" (p. 466). Although students ostensibly should express college aspirations by the tenth grade, research suggests for some students, especially those from traditionally underserved college-going populations, aspirations emerge as late as senior year (Avery & Kane, 2004; Holland, 2010). Aspirations are dynamic and may change given the influence of students' social contexts and the erratic nature of adolescent development (Marcia, 1980). The extant literature does little to examine how and why aspirations develop, and even less on how they may dismantle over time (Bell et al., 2009). Further research is needed to understand the development of aspirations as a process in order to help identify potential barriers and facilitators.

*Expectations*. Developing postsecondary orientation is more complex than simply expressing one's hopes to attend college (i.e., aspirations); thus, I introduce the concept of expectations as the second element of the expanded model. Glick and White (2004) distinguish expectations from aspirations noting that they "reflect not only a hope, no matter how fervent, but also some genuine element of prediction and commitment" (p. 278). In contrast to aspirations, which are rooted in the more nebulous idea of "hope," expectations reflect students' interpretation of their stated postsecondary goals as realistic ones (Goyette, 2008). There are many ways in which expectations differ from aspirations, but the two concepts are often conflated. As students convert their aspirations into expectations, they become increasingly connected with various opportunities to help transition their postsecondary plans into reality (Glick & White, 2004; Goyette, 2008). For example, students who demonstrate postsecondary expectations are more likely to receive information and instrumental support as well as actively connect with resources in order to promote their goals (Beattie, 2002; McDonough, 1997, 2005; Valadez, 2008).

**Expanding the College Search.** Upon the successful development of postsecondary aspirations and expectations, students engage in an active search process. According to the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice (1987), the search concludes with an audit of all relevant college options (e.g., two- and four-year; private and public; large and small), which is dependent on a sophisticated understanding of the higher education landscape (Mettler, 2014). Although Hossler and Gallagher (1987) acknowledge that the search is not a "static process for all students," there is limited discussion of how students' multiple social contexts dictate their experiences and how this variation results in meaningful differences in access. Understanding variation is especially important in light of the expansion of postsecondary options (e.g., two- and four-year, nonprofit and for-profit).

I argue, the orientation of historical stage models of college *choice* obscure the complimentary processes experienced by students as they relate college *access*. In the proposed model, I seek to connect how students' opportunities, decision-making, and performance throughout K-12 education (college preparation) frame postsecondary exposure, understanding, and, ultimately, opportunities (college search). To do this I conceptualize a "dual search" represented by two stacked boxes, during which students pursue experiences and support corresponding with both "college preparation" and a "college search." The concurrent experiences influence one another reflexively, as evidenced by the bidirectional arrow that connects the two search elements (e.g., opportunities secured through college preparation that may inform a student's exposure to specific postsecondary options or, the inverse, students' interest in a particular institution may dictate their academic pursuits in high school). During this time, the powerful influence and support experienced across social ecological contexts guides students' opportunities and outcomes.

*College preparation.*  While in high school, students execute a complicated set experiences germane to college preparation. Students must conduct a localized and immediate search of various opportunities that help establish the skills and resources required to be viable applicants to college (e.g., course selection). However, youth from traditionally underserved college-going populations encounter a range of potential obstacles during this phase. For example, there is meaningful variation in the availability of rigorous, college preparatory curricula in schools that serve predominantly low income and minority students (Oakes et al., 2002; Oseguera, 2012). Additionally, parents may inform students' educational opportunities, including enrollment in rigorous courses (Crosnoe & Muller, 2014). When students draw connections between their short-term goals and long-term educational and career plans, they are most likely to be successful (Deil-Amen & López Turley, 2007; McDonough, 1997).

The diverse nature of settings meaningfully influences students' exposure to formal and informal funds of support germane to college access. The assumptions of *college for all* mask the institutional disparities that may limit pre-college opportunities for youth from traditionally underserved college-going backgrounds (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). The cumulative experiences that constitute "college preparation" prove to be essential in cultivating a competitive profile for admission, while simultaneously amassing information about postsecondary options and what constitutes college readiness (Boxer et al., 2011; Conley, 2008; St. John et al., 2005).

*College search.* Contemporaneous with college preparation, students must engage in a comprehensive college search. In the proposed model, the college search encompasses students' efforts to streamline the daunting number of postsecondary options to a manageable list of realistic options. During this phase, students attempt to make sense of the complicated postsecondary landscape and identify a subset of options that best meet their academic, social,

and financial needs. Understanding how students choose the schools to which they ultimately enroll becomes a critical piece of the college access puzzle, especially in light of an intensifying tiering of students in postsecondary institutions by background (Mettler, 2014). Students from traditionally underserved college-going populations are more likely than their more privileged peers to be misinformed about how much college costs, the academic requirements of college and how those may differ by school type (Alvarado & Turley, 2012; Avery & Kane, 2004). Additionally, they are more likely to conduct a more restricted search and follow the feeder patterns of postsecondary enrollment of their schools and communities, regardless of their personal qualifications (Smith et al., 2013; Walton Radford, 2013). These trends perpetuate disparities in students' college enrollment and success.

In the present model, I isolate college preparation as a distinct but contemporaneous phase, constituting a critical component of the college access process. With the expansion of the model to include a dual search, it becomes easier to understand how to best prepare students to engage in the final steps of the college access process in a more informed way. The interconnected nature of the dual search is a critical element of the overall college access process, as one's high school record may make one eligible for criterion-based scholarships, making selective institutions more realistic financial options (Ficklen & Stone, 2002). The bidirectional arrow connecting college preparation to students' aspirations and expectations demonstrates that students who aspire and expect to go to college actively engage with high school preparatory opportunities (Oakes et al., 2002). However, the model also highlights how students' engagement in standard high school activities (e.g., a rigorous school-wide college preparatory curriculum, exposure to an influential teacher or guidance counselor) may help to frame and confirm students' aspirations and expectations. The model also connects college

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preparation to the corresponding postsecondary search. This suggests that students' experiences while in high school—both in school and beyond—may inform their exposure to and understanding of the postsecondary landscape.

**Expanding College Choice.** The process of choosing a college from a seemingly infinite pool of postsecondary options serves as the capstone of the K-12 experience. Therefore, the final two phases of the proposed model, college application and college choice, represent students' engagement with institutional selection. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) note that college choice is the result of "an interaction between students and their attributes and increasingly specific information about institutional quality, net price, and academic programs" (p. 218). More simply stated, a range of factors inform postsecondary choice, including a student's financial, academic, and social and emotional preparation to make the transition (Conley, 2008). By this definition, the choice phase also reflects students' understanding of college as a realistic option for their personal and professional development.

Thus, I argue that, similar to "search," the choice phase consists of two distinct, but related steps that must be understood in concert with one another. The first choice results in a curated set of postsecondary institutions to which students submit a completed application. This reflects students' completion of a postsecondary search, and reflects their understanding how such institutions may satisfy their academic, social, and financial needs. Second, once students submit applications and admissions decisions have been received, students must select where they will enroll from the offers of admission. A range of variables (e.g., parents' expectations, financial standing, students' previous academic performance) inform students selection decisions and, without developing a comprehensive understanding of these diverse variables and how they

interact with one another, research may unwittingly perpetuates inequality (Harding, 2011; Perna & Kurban, 2013).

*College application*. As students determine the postsecondary institutions to which they will apply, they take several variables into consideration. St. John and his colleagues (2005) discuss the "diverse sets of patterns of choice" (p. 558) that contribute to students' ultimate choices about postsecondary education. The choice set reflects the students' experiences in the preceding parts of the college access process, such as academic preparation, financial need, and the determination of long-term educational and career plans (St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005). As previously discussed, social networks greatly inform the institutions to which students apply and ultimately enroll (Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Perna, 2000; Walton Radford, 2013). Through these networks, students have varying exposure to institutional contacts with whom they have engaged prior to their application, acquired via college visits, information sessions, and access to institutional representatives (Avery & Kane, 2004; St. John et al., 2005). Thus, it is important to make sense of the intricate, staged series of choices that lead students to their selection of which institutions to apply and ultimately enroll.

Students' exposure to information alone is insufficient in helping them to make postsecondary choices; rather, they require direct support from a range of individuals, including family members, teachers, counselors and peers, to facilitate the navigation of the college selection and application processes (Hill, 2008; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Smith et al., 2013; Stanton Salazar, 2011). Access to such assistance is also greatly influenced by the "social, economic, and policy context that the student inhabits" (Bell et al., 2009, p. 671). A critical component in understanding college access as a process is creating a more in-depth awareness of how individual level variables, such as socioeconomic status and parental educational

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attainment, individually and collectively frame students' decisions surrounding the institutions to which they select to apply.

*College choice*. The final stage in the proposed model of college access, college choice, manifests as a choice informed by the preceding, interconnected experiences (St. John et al., 2005). A number of scholars have examined the influence of students' multiple settings on their postsecondary selection and suggest that individual performance is only one part of the college choice formula (Long, 2004; St. John, 2000; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005). In combination, these studies highlight the multiple variables that compete with individual merit to impact students' college selection. For example, various studies have found that, all else being equal, the price of tuition was the most critical factor for low-income students in selecting a college and that their application set of schools reflected the application behaviors of individuals to whom they were either directly (e.g., family members) or indirectly (e.g., school alumni) connected (Carter, 1999; Long, 2004). Engberg and Wolniak (2010) suggest that the strongest student-level predictors of enrolling in a four-year school included academic achievement, the aspirations of family and friends, and college-linking activities (e.g., connecting short-term behaviors with long-term goals, including course selection). However, all of these individual level indicators are entrenched in the interconnected settings of their social ecological contexts. Through these connections, students' own networks meaningfully expand. By leveraging the resources embedded within and across these networks, students are able to make comprehensive sense of the college choice process (Adelman, 2002; McDonough, 1997, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001).

Finally, the overarching impact of policy dictates individual's institutional choice. Many scholars highlight the interrelated policies made in isolation from one another (Darling Hammond, 2006; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Kirst & Venezia, 2005). Nowhere is this more

evident than in the observed disconnect between K-12 and higher education policies (Kirst & Venezia, 2005). For example, with the rise of high stakes testing and sanctions-driven education reform, the gap between the requirements for high school graduation and college readiness has emerged. Future research must examine how the "policyscape" combines to create and derail opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds as they select their institution of higher education (Mettler, 2014).

## Considering the Future of College Access Research

As the global market becomes more competitive, demanding increased numbers of high skilled, college educated workers, instituting measures to enhance college access has emerged as a major equity measure. However, with historical numbers of students enrolling in college, there remains evidence of continuing stratification in both college access and graduation. These gaps call for an updated approach to both research and practice that accommodates for the diverse experiences of students from traditionally undeserved college-going populations. In combination, the extant literature provides a critical foundation for identifying, in part, how students connect the dots between the various stages of the college process. Klasik (2012) notes that there are extraordinarily few studies that explore the college application process as a dynamic, longitudinal phenomenon involving many individuals and spanning multiple settings.

The Ecological Model of College Access allows for a more dynamic understanding of the college access process than existing theoretical models, which are limited in their capacity to capture the complexity of systems (Foster Fishman et al., 2007). The updated model challenges scholars and practitioners to account for the temporal and contextual variables that influence students' outcomes, as well as the multidimensional role of support throughout the college access process. As a result, it highlights the ways in which students' access to formal and informal

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support helps make sense of the myriad messages and available resources regarding higher education, and, ultimately, helps to guide students' behaviors and choice. In order to advance the field, I argue that future empirical studies must seek to integrate students' multiple settings when considering the processes of gathering information about, applying to, and selecting the best postsecondary option to best fit their academic, financial, and personal needs.

In the papers that follow, I employ parts of the model to examine two specific questions. First, I seek to understand how college bound students from traditionally underserved college-going populations leverage support throughout the college access process. Additionally, I seek to understand how contexts and their embedded relationships inform students' experiences with support. Second, I zoom in on how settings influence students' experiences securing support and accessing resources necessary to navigate the path to college successfully. Cumulatively, studies of this variety help to shed light on the complexity of students' experiences of college, even under the collective umbrella of *college for all*.

CHAPTER III

STRUCTURING THE SCAFFOLD: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE MULTIPLE

DIMENSIONS OF SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THE COLLEGE ACCESS PROCESS


The path to college is complex. In order to enroll in to a well-matched postsecondary institution, students must develop aspirations and expectations, college preparatory skills, conduct a comprehensive college search, and apply to and select an institution that meets one's academic, social, and financial needs. The intersection of information, opportunity, and participation serves as the crux for success, and students' networks of support provide the foundation needed to develop these connections (Dika & Singh, 2002; Small, 2008). Therefore, to help them navigate requisite steps to successfully transition to college, students benefit from experiences of support from a network of diverse stakeholders.

Supportive relationships expose and engage students with a range of activities that prepare them to make the transition to college successfully (Beattie, 2002; Stanton Salazar, 2011). To date, the majority of research has focused on students' dyadic supportive relationships with individuals, such as mentors (Ahn, 2010), guidance counselors (McDonough, 1997), and family members (Perna, 2005). Students from traditionally underserved students, including low income, minority, and first generation college-goers, often have restricted access to well-resourced relationships throughout the college access process, making them more reliant upon school-based sources of support then their more privileged peers (Stanton Salazar, 2011). Substantially less is known about the interconnected nature of support throughout the college access process, such as how students aggregate support and strategically leverage embedded

relationships within their social networks at distinct points to complete the college access process.

In the present paper, I examine students' dynamic accounts with support and the combined influence of support on students' experiences while navigating the path to college, from aspirations to college choice. I analyze ego network and interview data from 54 college bound high school seniors who attend two high schools in a midsized Southeastern city. Both schools espouse a *college for all* mission, as championed by the school district. However, the two schools implemented distinct practices to advance this mission. I examine the following questions: Who do students identify as critical actors in their social networks, as it relates to providing support related to college access? What types of support do students leverage from these relationships to facilitate their experiences throughout the college access process? Do students prioritize different types of support during the different phases that constitute the college access process? Traditionally, the concept of support is presented as unidimensional and all encompassing; however, the complexity of the college access process suggests students benefit from different dimensions of support (e.g., informational, instrumental, emotional, motivational). Therefore, in the present study, I seek to understand support as a multidimensional phenomenon throughout the college access process.

## Literature Review

Over the last several decades sweeping changes in the economy encouraged a shift towards a *college for all* norm, enacted in multiple forms and reinforced by school, local, and federal policies and practices (Carnavale & Strohl, 2013; Rosenbaum, 2001). Three primary assumptions drive these efforts: students have access to perfect information, their experiences sequentially lead them to college without interruption, and contexts exhibit limited impact on

student outcomes. The K-12 educational experience aims to expose students to the academic, social, and financial information and resources necessary to prepare for and transition to college (Harper, 2008; Lee, 2012; McDonough, 1997, 2005). However, the continuing stratification of postsecondary enrollment suggests foundational flaws in the guiding assumptions of efforts to expand college enrollment, especially for students from traditionally underserved college-going populations (Musu-Gillette, Robinson, McFarland, KewalRamani, Zhang, & Wilkinson-Flicker, 2016).

Amidst the expanded research efforts investigating the mechanisms of ongoing disparity in higher education, a number of questions remain, specifically as to how students connect with supportive individuals within and across settings. For example, little is known about the processes of support, as examined via students' experiences with different purveyors (e.g., guidance counselors and family) and the qualities of support embedded within the relationships that make up students' social networks (e.g., access to information or discrete assistance) (Dika & Singh, 2002). In the following sections I consider college access as a social process, present the existing literature surrounding social networks and social support and their role in enabling college access. I present outstanding questions of interest regarding how students develop social networks of support and leverage them throughout the college access process.

**College Access as a Social Process**

The social and ecological experiences of students influence opportunities, behaviors, and outcomes related to college. Relationships are embedded within broader settings, such as home, school, and neighborhood, and dictate the proximal processes that influence students' development as it pertains to college access and readiness (Bess & Doykos, 2014; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Small, 2008; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Thus, it

is important to consider "the ways in which the social environment and social structure contribute to and can alleviate [social] problems" (House, 1981, p. xiv). Settings inform the types of support available for students and the social processes that mediate opportunities to leverage them to achieve individual and collective gains (Seidman, 2012; Seidman & Tseng, 2011).

Individuals frequently develop relationships in response to goal orientation (Trickett, 2011). Accordingly, a number of supportive individuals, including parents, teachers, and peers, reinforce messages pertinent to postsecondary education while also providing students with relevant support pertinent to college access (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Museus, Harper, & Nichols, 2010). Collectively, these dyadic relationships constitute students' social networks. However, Seidman and Tseng (2011) note that "beyond dyadic relationships is an important, larger web of social relationships that unfold within and outside of the setting" (p. 16). Developing an enhanced understanding of social networks offers essential insight insight as to how "micro-level interactions" connect to "macro-level patterns" (Granovetter, 1973, p.136). Differences in network size and make-up directly impact the availability of social capital available to students throughout the college access process (Elizondo, Allen, & Ceja, 2012; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Massé, Perez, & Posselt, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

**Social Capital, Social Networks, and Social Support**

The qualities of students' relationships within their social network inform access to the information, support, and resources germane to college access. Social networks foster students' exposure to both social capital and social support that may help them to navigate the complicated path to college. Lin (1999) defines social capital as, "resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions" (p. 35). In the context of college access, Hossler and his colleagues (1999) define social capital as "the currency students can use

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to make decisions about going to college" (p. 152). Throughout their K-12 educational careers, students are frequently exposed to messages regarding higher education across settings (Kirst & Venezia, 2005). However, not all social capital is equal, nor is it necessarily positive in nature (Portes, 2000). Students may encounter social capital via their relationships that may dissuade the pursuit of postsecondary education (Valadez, 2008) or may supply them with misinformation which may derail their aspirations (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009).

Across the United States, students nearly uniformly express postsecondary aspirations by the tenth grade (98%); however, only about two-thirds of students enroll following their senior year (Conley, 2008). Evidence of universal aspirations highlights the effectiveness of messaging surrounding the importance of higher education as a tool for social mobility (Tuitt et al., 2011; however, the gaps in enrollment, especially for students from traditionally underserved college-going populations suggests continuing disparity in support that perpetuate meaningful differences in enrollment. Students from traditionally underserved populations are less likely than their more privileged counterparts to be situated within an extended network of adults with postsecondary experience, which may directly impact the corresponding familiarity with the higher education system (Espinoza, 2011).

Even amidst networks that are densely saturated with social capital relevant to the pursuit of higher education, one's exposure to social capital alone is insufficient in predicting postsecondary enrollment outcomes; students must not only have access to social capital through their social relationships, but also be able to mobilize to meet their personal goals (Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 2000; Small, 2008; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Social support facilitates the conversion of social capital to enhance student outcomes by enabling supportive relationships to meet particular goals. Song and his colleagues (2011) define social support as "the aid—the

supply of tangible or intangible resources—individuals gain from their network members" (p. 118). Borgatti and Halgin (2011) note that empirical work employing social network analysis must consider both the "processes and functions" that inform the development of students' support networks and the flow of various forms of capital (p. 11). This may be understood via examinations of experiences of support.

Traditionally, "support" is operationalized in a unidimensional way, failing to capture its complexity in practice (Wellman & Gulia, 1997). Informed by supportive relationships, students convert more passive forms of social capital related to higher education (e.g., information exposure) to the actions required to secure access to an appropriate postsecondary institution for their interests and needs (e.g., enrolling in a rigorous, college preparatory curriculum or securing recommendations) (Dika & Singh, 2002). Thus, social support emerges both as a type of social capital and a means to the acquisition of alternative varieties of social capital.

In practice, social support manifests in multiple forms. House (1987) identified four broad classes of support: emotional support (e.g., encouragement), appraisal support (e.g., feedback and affirmation), informational support (e.g., access to information), and instrumental support (e.g., money and assistance). Table 1 aligns House's typologies of support with the complimentary examples of support in the context of college access. Therefore, it is important to understand not only *with whom* students connect for information pertinent to college access, but also *for what* purpose, developing a better sense of the qualities of those relationships, the types of support, and the contexts in which they take place.

One must understand support as a dynamic concept that manifests via an individual's social network in order to assess its influence over students' outcomes throughout the college access process (Larson & Angus, 2011). In spotlighting the complexity of students' experiences

Table 1

*Aligning House's Dimensions of Support with the College Access Literature*

| Category-House (1981) | House (1981) Definition | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Emotional** | Esteem, affect, trust, concern, listening | Providing student with emotional support throughout the application and selection process in order to mitigate the intensity of the college access process (e.g., someone student could talk to after a trying experience, someone to whom student may relay exciting news).<br>• *Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013* |
| **Appraisal (Motivational)** | Affirmation, feedback, social comparison | Providing student with encouragement and motivation that s/he could be successful in post secondary education.<br>• *Kimura Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009* |
| **Informational** | Advice, suggestion, directives, information | Providing student with the information essential to understanding the academic requirements of higher education (e.g., picking out courses, creating an academic vision, relaying the importance of the GPA)<br>• *Adelman, 2006; McDonough, 1997, 2005*<br><br>Providing student with information to make sense of the higher education landscape (e.g., distinguishing 2- and 4-year institutions; creating an understanding of what was required to apply; helping student set a list of schools to which s/he would apply)<br>• *Avery & Kane, 2004; Smith & Fleming, 2006* |
| **Instrumental** | Aid in kind, money, labor, time, modifying environment | Helping student develop the academic skills required to be college ready (e.g., providing essential feedback on quality of work; offering rigorous instruction).<br>• *Walton Radford, 2013; Oakes et al., 2002*<br><br>Providing student with assistance in completing the college application process (e.g., completing applications, editing essays, writing a recommendation)<br>• *Espinoza, 2011; Plank & Jordan, 2002*<br><br>Providing student with assistance in securing financial aid or establishing a plan to pay for college (e.g., helping to complete the FAFSA; exposing to information about scholarships; helping complete applications; providing cash assistance)<br>• *Bettinger & Long, 2007* |

with support, it becomes evident that all support is not equal support (Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013; Walton Radford, 2013).

**Existing Empirical Exploration of Social Networks and College Access**

Students' experiences with support are, undeniably, an essential part of the college access process. Existing studies focus disproportionately on the ways in which students leverage isolated relationships, including family members (Perna & Titus, 2005) and peers (Sokatch, 2006), to facilitate their experiences that lead to college admission. Additionally, Stanton Salazar (2011) found that students from traditionally underserved college-going background relied disproportionately upon school-based "institutional agents" to access resources and opportunities aimed to increase school success. Institutional agents are defined as supportive adult figures in the formal context of educational institutions—usually teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors (Stanton Salazar, 2011). Cumulatively, the findings suggest that students from traditionally underserved college-going backgrounds benefit most from frequent contact and sustained relationships with institutional agents, as they have limited access to individuals familiar with higher education in their homes or communities. When overburdened, institutional agents may supply students with insufficient or negative support (Kimura et al, 2009; Rosenbaum, 2001). Therefore, additional attention is needed in order to examine how to maximize students' connections with institutional agents in a way that does not overtax the capacity of settings, yet also meets the needs of students.

Although many scholars have identified various points of support critical to the successful pursuit of higher education, to date only a few existing studies use a social network oriented approach to explore students' experiences throughout the college access process, and its impact on the acquisition of social capital. For example, Ahn (2010) employed ego networks to

examine the social networks of college access mentors at a college preparatory program. She concluded that the mentors had extended personal networks of highly educated individuals, with which students may connect to engage and leverage social capital. The study highlights the ways in which students' affiliation with a college access setting may increase their potential pool of social capital, but does little to explicate how this actually impacts their processes. Similarly, Wohn and her colleagues (2013) used survey data to explore how high school students employed in-person and online networks to foster postsecondary aspirations and confidence in their ability to complete the application process. The authors found that first generation college-going students acquired both informational and instrumental support from their online networks, and suggest that online networks may expand first generation students' networks in a meaningful way, enhancing their overall sense of self-efficacy when applying to college.

Collectively, these studies show that students' experiences may be enhanced by the presence of supportive relationships and the embedded resources and qualities of support present within one's social network. The college access literature frequently overlooks students' exposure to and mobilization of supportive relationships and the corresponding social capital. Thus, several questions remain regarding the complexity of social support—both in concept and delivery via students' social networks. In combination, students' social-ecological contexts directly inform their access to, understanding of, and exposure to opportunities to leverage the various elements of support required to navigate the path to college (Dika & Singh, 2002). With increased clarity surrounding the multiple dimensions of support, one may create a broader understanding of what types of support may matter most at which phases of the college access process.

**Research Questions**

The present study investigates college-bound students' retrospective narratives of their experiences and perceptions throughout the college access process. Specifically, the research examines the quality and quantity of support, as well as ongoing obstacles to college enrollment that students characterize within and across settings. In combination, the study allows for a comprehensive analysis of the sources of support that combine to frame students' experiences as they prepare to apply to and enroll in college. Additionally, it introduces awareness of the temporal alignment of different types of support to match the needs and expectations of the interconnected phases that constitute the college access process. Three research questions guide this study. First, who do students identify as critical actors in their social networks of support, as it relates to college access? Second, what types of support do students leverage from these relationships to facilitate their experiences throughout the college access process? Finally, do students prioritize different types of support during different phases of the college access process?

**Methods**

**Study Context and Participants**

The sample includes college-bound high school seniors who attend two high schools in a midsized southeastern city, Teal River High School (TRHS) and Bridgeport STEM Magnet High School (BSMHS). Each school offered targeted postsecondary support services, reflective of district-level commitment to increasing college access and success. TRHS hosted a centralized College and Career Center (CCC) staffed by licensed guidance counselors. All students were strongly encouraged to engage with the CCC, offering college access services such as one-on-one counseling and organized activities (e.g., trips to citywide college fairs, consultation on

applications). Additionally, the CCC hosted open houses and information nights, open to parents and caregivers. In contrast, the guidance staff at BSMHS designated the majority of formal college-related activities to the postsecondary transition staff at Excelerate, an afterschool program operated by a neighborhood-based human service organization. Excelerate opened at BSMHS in Fall 2010 in a space on the top floor and provided students with academic support, enrichment programming (e.g., music production), and college and career readiness services. The Postsecondary Transition Staff (PTS) consisted of three individuals, including one full-time (Ms. Knowles) and one part-time postsecondary transition coach (Mr. Carter) and one Americorps volunteer (Ms. Parks). All three members of the College Room staff had extensive experience in college advising; however, they did not possess "official" counseling training or credentials. In partnership with another youth service program, Postsecondary Progress, there was an additional college mentor (Mr. Marshall) who worked with the staff two days per week. Postsecondary Progress provided supplemental college access services to 17 schools across the district. It is important to note that TRHS declined services from Postsecondary Progress at the program's inception, as the administration felt that they would not make a substantial contribution to the schools' college access capacity.

To participate in the study, students had to be seniors and have applied to at least one college at the time of data collection. At both sites, a staff member assisted in sample selection, handing out study fliers to potential participants. To begin our meetings, I verbally described the study to participants, and ask them to complete an informed consent form. As students completed the administrative paperwork following the completion of their interviews, I told them that they could refer anyone who they knew matched the participation criteria to participate in the study. By using a snowball sampling approach, I was able to include students who were not part of my

primary school-based contacts' lists (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Browne, 2005). This allowed

for increased diversity in the sample. In accordance with research that has noted the importance

of monetary incentives to potential participants' willingness to take part in studies, all

participating students received a $25 Visa gift card at the conclusion of the research activity

(Capaldi et al., 1997; Guyll et al., 2003).

The final sample consisted of 54 students, 27 from each participating school. Twenty-two

percent (n=6) students from TRHS were headed to a two-year and 74 percent to a four-year

college (n=20), and one student was undecided between a two and a four year. At BSMHS, 37

percent (n=10) planned to attend to a two-year and the remaining 63 percent (n=17) a four-year

college. Eighty-five percent (n=23) and 81 percent of (n=22) of students from BSMHS and

TRHS, respectively, would be the first in their families to attend college. All students selected a

pseudonym by which they are referred throughout the findings.

**Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of two distinct but interrelated steps. First, each participant

completed a social network activity. Students constructed an ego network, through which they

explore the presence of and connections between listed supportive individuals, within and across

settings (DeJordy & Halgin, 2008). First, participants were asked to generate a list of the

individuals upon whom they relied for support throughout the college access process (Knoke &

Yang, 2008; Lin, 1999). I asked participants to provide attribute data for each person listed,

including their age, highest level of educational attainment (in the case of similarly aged peers,

whether or not the student plans on going to college), how they knew the individual (e.g. family

member, teacher, coach), and whether or not the person lived in their neighborhood. I

encouraged participants to add anyone they felt they had forgotten at any point throughout our

time together (Knoke & Yang, 2007). (See Appendix B for the data collection tool).

Once students exhausted their list of supportive individuals, I asked about the specific types of support that the listed individuals provided to the student. The categories used during this step relied upon a typology of support rooted in the existing literature (House, 1981). I asked students to indicate which individuals provided which types of support. I also included active support, moving the participant from a role as a passive recipient to an active agent of support (Bess & Doykos, 2014; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). I asked students to identify who they identified as being the three most important purveyors of support. Finally, I asked students to indicate who knew who among their network.

Upon completing the social network analysis activity, students completed an extended semi-structured interview to assess in further detail their experiences throughout the college access process. The interview allowed students to recount their college access experience in their own words (Fine, Torre, Burns, & Payne, 2007). The interviews focused on a range of questions, which examine a number of themes, including how students secured information and support relevant to their college access process within and across settings, what types of support they received from their social networks, challenges that they encountered during the college access process, and their sense of overall preparation to transition to college In addition to gathering information about *who* students relied upon for support and for *what kind*, this interview served as an opportunity for participants to retrospectively assess the process of applying to college. (Appendix A includes the interview protocol.) All interviews were conducted in a private space at both schools.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analyses occurred in multiple steps. First, I read each transcript carefully, marking comments regarding the data and potential emergent codes (Seidman, 2013). Second, I employed Dedoose to code the data (SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC, 2016). I developed a thematic coding process—coding data by the types of support discussed by the participant, the type of alter that provided support, the point of time in the process when instances of support were offered and leveraged, and the setting in which the participant connected with that individual (Saldana, 2009; Seidman, 2013). In addition to thematic coding, I employed an open coding approach through which I captured emergent themes not otherwise included by the thematic schema (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Via the open coding efforts, I sought to understand how students' experiences of support occur within and across their multiple settings (Charmaz, 2014). This multistep analysis process allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the roles of individuals, settings, and time on students' experiences as they prepared to make the transition to college as well as the multiple dimensions of support.

<div align="center">

**Conceptual Framework**

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Throughout the analysis, I use The Ecological Model of College Access to identify trends in the most salient types of support as they manifest in each phase of the college access process (Figure 1). The model includes interdependent phases, which lead to college access; however, unlike previous stage models (e.g., Hossler and Gallagher's Model of College Choice [1987]), it seeks to capture the complexity of students' experiences across settings and their influence on subsequent opportunities, decisions, and behaviors throughout the college access process. Additionally, unlike other stage models, the Ecological Model of College Access takes into consideration the role of students' social ecological settings in framing students' experiences

throughout the college access process. Finally, it factors in the multiple dimensions of support. The data from student interviews in the present study introduce an additional layer of specificity to the model, as the findings demonstrate the ways in which students prioritize different types of support to accomplish tasks related to each phase of college access. Collectively, the findings identify trends in how students rely upon their social network to complete college access process.
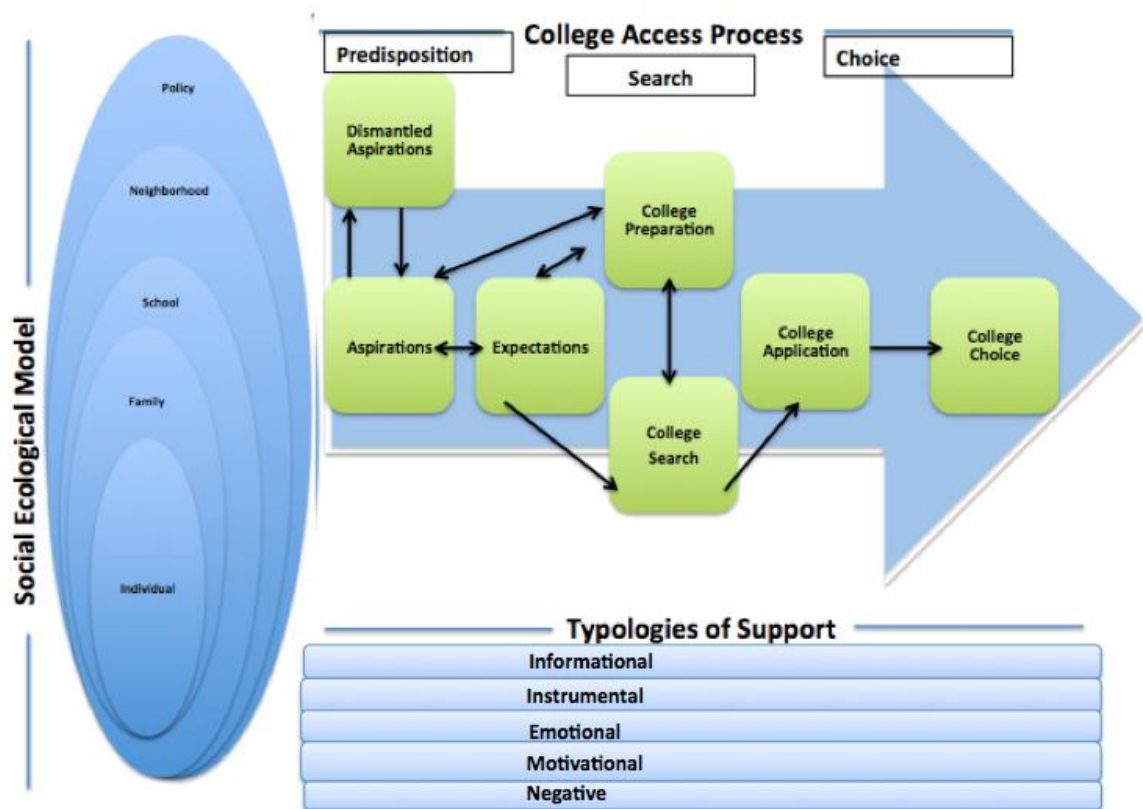


*Figure 1:* The Ecological Model of College Access

## Findings

In order to facilitate the process between developing postsecondary aspirations to choosing a college to which they planned to enroll, students documented varying individual experiences even when embedded in settings that espoused the importance of *college for all.* The findings highlight the dynamic nature of support as it emerged over time in its multiple forms.

The analysis of interviews suggests that students did not seek all types of support from each of their relationships but rather strategically gathered support from across their social networks, spanning several settings.

In the sections that follow, I focus on students' accounts of their experiences and relationships as they related to support. Specifically, I examine students' accounts of how they leveraged informational, instrumental, motivational, and emotional support. Across categories of support, I also investigate how students envisioned their role, at times, as an active provider of support to those around them, including family members and peers. I include students' accounts of negative support that they discussed in the context of college access.

**Constructing Social Networks of Support**

Students' acquired support from diverse stakeholders throughout the college access process. Overall, participants' networks highlight trends in how they drew support from across settings. On average, participants included approximately eight individuals in their networks (range of 3 to 21). Table 2 summarizes the data from students' networks by relationship type. Participants drew support from family members, including both those who had postsecondary experience and those who did not, at similar rates (BSMHS=2.88, TRHS=2.74). In addition to family members, students identified peers as a consistent source of support (BSMHS=1.04, TRHS=1.22), most frequently including the individuals they labeled as their best friends. A very small number of participants included a higher education representative in their network, and those who did exclusively planned to attend a four-year college. Participants included similar numbers of individuals affiliated with extracurricular programs, both in school and beyond, who provided them with essential support throughout the college access process (BSMHS=0.52, TRHS=.96). These included coaches, church-based mentors, club leaders, and personnel from

Table 2

*Average Number of Supportive Alters by Type*

| **Alter Type** | **BSMHS** | **TRHS** | **Overall** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Family | 2.88 | 2.74 | 2.81 |
| **School-based** | | | |
| Teacher | 0.88 | 1.37 | 1.11 |
| Guidance Counselor | 0.00 | 1.44* | 0.72 |
| School Administrator | 0.44 | 0.30 | 0.37 |
| | | | |
| College Preparatory Program Staff | 2.96* | 0.07 | 1.44 |
| | | | |
| Peers | 1.04 | 1.22 | 1.13 |
| Higher Ed Representative | 0.04 | 0.15 | 0.09 |
| Other* | 0.52 | 0.96 | 0.74 |
| Total | 8.72 | 8.11 | 8.41 |

*Examples include church-based mentors, personnel from previous
 schools, and non-college extracurricular program leaders/coaches*

previous schools (e.g., middle school mentors).

Although, overall, participants included similar numbers of supportive alters in their social networks, there is evidence of meaningful differences across the two schools, as dictated by their formal approaches to college access. Perhaps most alarming, none of the participants from BSMHS included a guidance counselor in their ego networks. Additionally, participants from the two schools included significantly different numbers of individuals affiliated with the formal college access resources within their schools (BSMHS=2.96, TRHS=1.44). This suggests that although the two schools adopted an objectively similar approach to the provision of formal resources for students during the college access process, their differences in staffing impacted the number of individuals within those settings with whom students could connect for support.

In combination, there is evidence of variation in both the overall size of students' self-

constructed networks of support and of the types of individuals who they relied upon for support throughout the college access process. These findings confirm the ecological nature of students' experiences of support. In the following section, I examine students' narratives as a tool to expound upon the role of support in greater detail. I focus on the multiple dimensions of support and examine how students' leveraged relationships for different types of support at different phases of the college access process. Students' narratives reveal the ways in which they depended on their social networks that spanned multiple settings.

**Unpacking the Types of Support: Examining Student Narratives**

Participants' retrospective narratives highlight the complex nature of the college access process, revealing the dynamic role social networks and their embedded relationships play in fostering and at times obstructing students' path to reaching their postsecondary goals. Specifically, there is evidence of trends in the types of support upon which students depended at different points in the college access process.

**Informational.** Students' social networks of support served as the critical foundation for students to acquire information germane to the college access process and college readiness. Stanton Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) describe information support as "guidance related to academic tasks, career decisions, educational and job opportunities, crisis intervention, and the utilization of community services" (p. 117). Participants highlighted the importance of informational support; however, their narratives suggest it was particularly critical during the college preparation and college search phases. Information support also plays a role in the concluding phases of the college access process (from college search through choice); however, information becomes more ancillary at those points to more targeted instrumental support.

*Aspirations & Expectations.* From doctors to lawyers, engineers to entrepreneurs, students identified a wide array of intended professions; however, a college degree was a core requirement of each. Participating students repeatedly linked the development of postsecondary aspirations and expectations with their intended career paths. As students began researching a desirable career for themselves, they frequently aligned educational prerequisites. Students repeatedly identified a difference between a job and a career, and cited a postsecondary degree as the key to ensuring a career.  France reflected this distinction, saying, "People say a job is just a job, but a career is a long-term thing." She also discussed how her desired profession, engineering, spurred her to investigate postsecondary options that may support that goal: "You have to know what [you] want to do five years from now, ten years from now. Like sit down, get your goals." Similarly, Sophie discussed how college was an essential step to her goal of becoming a doctor,

> I decided to go to college ever since I was in ninth grade and I started researching different doctors, which one I wanted to be. And then I also looked at the requirements and that's when I knew that to graduate high school when I still go to college and then attend medical school also.

As students establish clarity surrounding long-term aspirations, they identified college aspirations as a key element of those plans.

Students' frequently discussed how they acquired more specific information about the requirements for their intended careers through their relationships. Brandon discussed how a connection with a fellow churchgoer exposed him to extensive information about the path to becoming a nurse anesthetist. He said,

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[A] lot of my time is spent at church. There's a nurse anesthetist there…and he's kind of laid it all out for me, and he's like, 'You need to take this exact route or you're gonna be screwed for the rest of your life.' I was like, 'Great. I'll write that down.'

Although Brandon did not include this individual in his social network, he stressed the importance of the information as a crucial part of his successful progression towards college. Specifically, this information shared through this connection linked his actions in the short-term (e.g., establishing concrete postsecondary expectations) with his long-term plans (e.g., pursuing a career in nursing). Like Brandon, several other students recalled similar experiences emphasizing the ways in which they framed college aspirations and expectations, laying the foundation for the remaining steps of the college access process.

*College preparation.* Traditional models of college choice frequently overlook students' experiences as they prepare for college, gathering the academic, study, and socioemotional skills required to make the transition successfully. Through the college preparatory phase, students begin to link the ways in which short-term actions (e.g., course selection) influenced long-term goals. Students' narratives revealed how they relied upon supportive alters, including teachers, college access professionals, and family members, to provide them with information. For example, Ally recalled how her stepmom, both a college graduate and an employee at TRHS, served as an influential source of information. She recalled, "My stepmom especially [helped me], because she has graduated from college and she works at the school as well. She knew about the process, about how to get in school, and, like, what all I needed to do." Ashely echoed a similar experience when discussing why she went to Excelerate to get information about college. She discussed her trust in the staff, saying, "Mr. Carter, Ms. Parks, and Ms. Knowles stood out more [than my teachers or guidance counselors]…They knew more. They've been to

college. That sorts of stuff… [T]hey work in an educational place, so they like knew what they were doing right off the bat." Students indicated that they relied disproportionately on individuals who had personal experiences with college and a corresponding familiarity with the process for information. Often, students discussed the exceptional nature of such connections in the context of the broader settings, which presented challenges..

Information support was especially useful to students when they trusted the source. When discussing the transmission of information, participants often included a qualifier of trust. For example, Pablo discussed why he continued to interact with the PTS throughout the college access process. He said, "I look at Mr. Carter and them, they actually want to see people succeed in life, and they help and help and help people get into a college that they really wanna go to." Participants frequently characterized trust as a spark for investing in particular relationships, identifying two critical ways in which this occurred. First, students had to trust that their personal investment in the system and its stated goals (e.g., high school) would result in an eventual return (e.g., long-term economic stability). Second, students had to show trust in individuals, which was often characterized in a reciprocal tie and demonstrated that the supportive alter had an investment in and care for the student. Additionally, participants attached a qualifying credential to the people that served as a source of information—for instance that they had been to college themselves. As a result, students' depended on trusted relationships to help them make decisions around college preparation as well as leverage them to actively identify resournces, within school and beyond, that may help them to prepare academically, financially, and socially for college. In the preliminary steps that mark the pivot towards college, these instances of trust proved to be critical, as they laid the foundation for subsequent success, as evidenced by the ways that they linked students with critical opportunities and resources.

*College search*. During the college search, students sought assistance in identifying potential schools of interest, making sense of their offerings, and determining whether or not it would be a quality match. To do this, students sifted through extensive information, in helping to establish a refined list of schools to match their personal needs with the help of supportive individuals. Given that the participants were predominantly the first in their families to enroll in college, many studnets characterized this phase as arduous and revealed that they were dependent on extensive information to support their search of potential institutions, as well as financial aid options that may make those choices economically feasible. Martha captured the various resources for and types of information that she got from the CCC staff, saying,

> They told me [the websites] I could go get scholarships from…They told me the
> requirements for most, like for most colleges in [Samuelson County] or in [across the
> state] period. The ACT range, you know, the sub scores. How to fill out my application,
> the deadlines, how to meet my deadlines, and what I should have in the little essays some
> colleges would require. They gave me a lot of information and it was really helpful.

When examining the wide range of postsecondary options, a range of institutional variables, including location, size, and academic offerings, frequently framed students' searches. Similarly, students recalled how they developed an awareness of the application process and its requirements and the variation across institutions throughout the college access process.

Oftentimes, students leveraged informational support from different individuals, including family members, college representatives, peers, and formal college access staff, and used that information to drive their own efforts. For example, Stanly noted that throughout the college search, "Ms. Hobbes and Ms. Hill [at the CCC], they keep me on top of my game." They did this by providing him with information about particular websites that he could look at for

institutional information. As a result, he recalled, "I started going on, like, college planning sites, and making profiles, and just looking at what colleges were out there." Similarly, Brandon recalled the way his best friend, Lynn, helped him connect with resources to aid his research, "She gave me a lot of information just in general, what websites to go to." Students' exposure to information about particular resources not only helped extend clarity to the postsecondary landscape, it also empowered their own efforts to find colleges that best fit their needs.

In addition, students also discussed experiences connecting with representatives from postsecondary institutions. Sometimes these encounters happened in the context of formal events, such as college visits or college fairs; other times, students contacted schools directly to acquire specific information. Frequently, formal college access staff from the CCC or Excelerate facilitated or encouraged these interactions. For example, Miguel discussed connecting with a representative from a culinary institute at a college fair that took place at BSMHS: "I went up [to the representative]. Ms. Knowles told me to go over there to their booth and talk to them about it and get information about them." In addition to encouraging and facilitating interactions, students credited college access staff with creating opportunities through which such connections could be made through which they could secure more personalized information about particular schools.

Given students' backgrounds, the cost of college was a major factor guiding their search. Previous studies highlight the complexity of the financial aid process and financial concerns as a primary gatekeeper to students' postsecondary plans (Bettinger, Long, Oreopolous, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012). Participants from both schools recalled that college access professionals organized financial aid workshops for students and their families to help them navigate the minutiae of the process. Additionally, students relied upon school-based personnel to supply

tailored, one-on-one guidance about the financial aid process. Participants depended on supportive individuals to provide them with information about the specifics of financial aid, specifically the FAFSA and scholarship opportunities. Latraya discussed the importance of her interactions with Excelerate staff in providing clarity regarding financial aid, saying, "I wouldn't know nothing about the FASFA if I didn't have help from Excelerate." Similarly, Angela summarized her experience, saying, "Ms. Knowles has told me about financial aid. She told me before the stuff came, what I might need for it." Students had to proceed with their scholarship and FAFSA submissions on a sensitive timeline; thus, they depended on the timely delivery of information to make them eligible to maximize their financial aid opportunities.

Participants' narratives reflected many ways in which that access to well-timed and in-depth information not only framed their experiences of college preparation and college search, it also encouraged them to take ownership of their college search. Students' sense of trust mediated students' experiences of information support.

**Instrumental.** From academic assistance to application completion, students relied upon various instances of instrumental support while navigating the path to college. House defines instrumental assistance as "aid in kind: money, labor, time, modifying environment" (p. 27). The data highlight how students leveraged their social networks for instrumental support, specifically in the form of tailored assistance to complete specific tasks, to meet their needs for college preparation, search, and application.

*College preparation*. At both TRHS and BSMHS, participants discussed variation in their academic experiences within the school, and highlighted ways in which it impacted their overall sense of preparation and relationships with teachers. Routinely, students characterized exemplary teachers as fostering a classroom environment that "was not a game" and guiding

such classes in a way that reflected that they "did not play." For example, Latrya compared her AP English teacher, Mr. Pfeiffer, with her other teachers, saying:

> The other classes I could just turn in anything and I would get an A. Like, it was crazy as hell…[B]ut in Mr. Pfeiffer's class, that was a no-no…He shocked me. I had to learn that the hard way that Mr. Pfeiffer does not play.

Alexander Strong echoed Mr. Pfeiffer's high expectations, saying, "He actually gives us college work. He doesn't dumb it down or break it down to us. He actually gives it to us like a college professor would." At TRHS, Abigail summoned similar language when discussing how her AP Literature teacher, "She just, the way she teaches us is the way college professors teaches us. Like, she doesn't play any games with us. She tells us to get the job done." Students drew connections between rigorous class expectations and the role it played in preparing them for college. At both schools, teachers who held their students to high expectations were characterized as exceptional when compared with their overall academic experiences.

In addition to setting high expectations, students frequently indicated that the teachers who provided instrumental support, preparing them for college, demonstrated an investment in students' growth and success, which they characterized as care. When discussing one teacher that she believed exhibited a exceptional investment in her students, Ashely said,

> She cared about where her students were going. Like, she wants to stay updated with her students anyways. And make sure that they're out there, where they need to be… [S]ome of the other teachers, they just don't care. They're like, I'm not here to talk to you, I'm here to make money.

The contrast between individuals who cared for them as compared to those that did not repeatedly emerged. With high expectations and a demonstrated investment in students' success,

participants credited a minority of their schools' teachers with providing them with the academic and study skills that they believed prepared them for college. Exemplary teachers created a modified classroom environment marked by the prioritization of challenging work and caring relationships, which provided students with instrumental support.

*College search*. Throughout the college search, participants repeatedly cited formal college visits as an important tool to help them to make sense of the diverse array of postsecondary options. As opposed to basic information gathered from a third party source (e.g., website, guidebook, college access professional), the college visit repeatedly manifested as a key experience. Students visited colleges with a range of individuals, including family members, friends, church groups, specific classes, and extracurricular groups. Participants frequently cited college visits as a pivotal part of their search. For example, Alicia recalled the first time that she visited the Christian campus, saying,

> It was…for my cousin's graduation and I was like, "Wow, this school is so pretty."…So I looked into it, found out about the programs and stuff and that's what drew me in…So it's just like I can see myself being there better than I could anywhere else and I'm just comfortable being at a school like that.

College visits presented students with a tailored experience that catered to their particular academic and social interests, in addition to exposing students to more general information. For many students, like Alicia, the college visit spurred increased interest in a particular institution, as it introduced a more layered experience than a website or guidebook might convey.

*College application*. As students entered the application and choice phases, they sought out instrumental assistance from a range of individuals to help them complete the administrative work affiliated with applying college. From composing essays to paying for and submitting

completed applications, students leveraged instrumental support from a range of individuals across settings. As with informational support, students' cited frequent experiences in which they leveraged instrumental support to complete financial aid applications, from the FAFSA to scholarships, as well.

As with previous studies, participants indicated that they frequently secured instrumental assistance when applying to college from institutional agents (e.g., Farmer-Hinton, 2006; Stanton Salazar, 2011), most frequently via formal college access staff at their respective schools. Jacob applied to one school, County Community College. Reflecting on the application process, he said,

> So many times this school year, Mr. Marshall came down to get me, come get me to fill
> out my FAFSA and stuff, like he was really big, main part of [applying to college]…He
> had a list of seniors…and I was one of 'em…and he just kept having to come find me and
> then he'd be at [another youth service organization in town], and from there he just been
> helping me ever since with college and stuff.

Jacob's comments signify the characteristics of his relationship with Mr. Marshall, and how it contributed to his experiences of instrumental support. Although his original connection with Mr. Marshall initiated as part of a list of responsibilities, both parties showed an investment in the relationship. Through that connection, they were subsequently able to work together to complete concrete tasks throughout the college access process.

In sum, throughout the college access process, students relied upon relationships that were characterized by care and investment when identifying and connecting with sources of instrumental support. These experiences were critical to students' success, as they helped them complete the concrete tasks affiliated with college access, such as the development of academic

skills through engaged teaching practices, visiting college campuses, and completing college applications.

**Motivational.** Given the extended temporal process that it takes to apply to college, participants characterized the importance of ongoing motivation that they received via their social networks as an essential component of their success. Cumulatively, participants' narratives reflect the combined importance of internal and external motivation drawn from their day-to-day experiences on their eventual success (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Experiences of motivational support spanned the college access process, from aspirations to expectations through college application. The importance of motivational support manifested as particularly important during the aspiration, expectation, college preparation, and college search phases.

*Aspirations.* Repeatedly, students placed themselves and their goals in direct opposition their observations of their homes, schools, and neighborhoods through the creation of a motivational counternarrative. Participants discussed the ways in which they drew motivation from their surroundings, both directly through individuals who championed their postsecondary plans, but also in the desire to do whatever it took to achieve a different life for themselves and their families. As it pertains to the former, Kesha said, "Neither one of my parents went to college so they always talked to me about it; they always told me it was important to go to college." Similarly, QD discussed when he first realized he would go to college, saying, "I always kind of figured I knew that I was going to take that route because I always had people who were pushing me to go that way."

Participants echoed a quest for "something else" when discussing why they decided they decided to pursue college. For example, Spring recalled:

Well, negative things really just motivated me. Seein' my mom on drugs for so many

years and then my dad was in and out of jail for drugs. My sisters—I have six other

siblings…well, they all dropped out and had kids. So I basically looked at their lives and

I was like, oh, I don't want to do that.

For Spring, like so many others, college manifested as a means to escape, to be exceptional.

*Expectations.* As aspirations turned to expectations, participants' narratives reflected an

important shift in their postsecondary orientation. This shift can be characterized as a distinct

turning point. A number of participants noted how individual teachers and parents encouraged a

postsecondary message for as long as they could remember; yet, students did not commit to the

idea themselves until later. Keisha characterized this shift, saying: "[E]verybody say they'll go to

college. But until you grow up you don't really understand that college is important until you get

into high school." Similarly, Candice discussed her transition to high school, "[M]y mom, I

didn't feel like she knew me so I didn't feel like she knew what was best for me. But, you know,

eventually I started realizing, I started coming to my senses and growing up." As with Candice,

many students discussed the way that continuous encouragement that they received across

multiple relationships enabled their concrete plans for college enrollment. With the development

of expectations, support collided with a sense of agency, and students' actions frequently often

reflected a shift, connecting their immediate efforts in high school to their postsecondary plans.

*College preparation, college search, and college application.* As students pursued the

more concrete phases of the college access process, there is evidence of an emerging balance of

participants' ongoing efforts to motivate themselves and the sustained motivational support that

they received from individuals in their networks as key elements of success. JT captures this,

saying, "It's like I have to basically motivate my own self into doing what I'm doing. I motivated

myself to do it." But he immediately followed this statement, saying: "Well…I say that people

need motivation; they need support to get through what they're doing to get through school if they want to go to college. It's all about motivation." Motivation was tied to both staying focused on a particular goal, but also connecting with particular resources that may promote that goal. Alexander Strong offered a comprehensive snapshot of who motivated him and how: "Teachers, people at the Excelerate, just everybody…Um, every time I really wanted to give up, they'd be like, if you give up, you're going to regret it for the rest of your life. They just kept pushing me." Students' narratives revealed the way that motivation paired with agency, keeping them continually focused on the various steps towards college.

From developing postsecondary aspirations to acquiring the information and assistance required to apply to a college in which to enroll, students identified the ongoing importance of motivational support throughout the college access process. Participants cited family members—both with and without college experience—as being the most frequent source of motivational support; however, school-based college access professionals followed closely behind.

**Emotional.** Emotional support manifested as a means to buffer challenges that they encountered throughout the college access process. Participants' narratives reflected two discrete points where the availability of emotional support proved to be particularly important: in response to the stress of academics and to make it through the college application and choice process. Students drew support from a range of individuals including family members, college access staff, extracurricular leaders (e.g., band directors and coaches), and peers. Emotional support proved to be supplementary to more direct forms of support. However, it was essential to students' success.

*College preparation.* As previously discussed, in order to be prepared for college, students must acquire a wide range of information and skills to apply and transition successfully.

Looking back on their social networks, participants cited the emotional support that they received from their relationships as critical to their success, especially during the college preparation phase. Lora captured this, saying:

> My mom…always encouraged me to try my best, like, she always encouraged me…and whenever I needed help, she was always the one I turned to. She would like help me, like as far as school-wise, but there's also the emotional part of school, too, that she helped with.

Given that the majority of participants were the first in their families to enroll in college, their families could not provide them with instrumental support with the arduous process of applying to college. However, students routinely cited their family members as their emotional cornerstones throughout the process. For example, Lora said:

> Like if I'm stressed out or if I'm overthinking anything, they will say the same thing: to calm down. Obviously…my parents don't speak English. Ms. Williams knows that I don't have anybody I can talk to at home with my schoolwork because nobody in my family actually graduated from high school, so she knows I struggle..[S]he can tell if my facial expression so I have to hide my facial expression [and she will help me out].

Similarly, Miley characterized her experiences with the Excelerate staff, saying, "Ms. Parks, I go to her crying when I can't take, like school is stressful for me and all that. And Ms. Knowles, when I'm excited, I'm sad, I'm moody; it's like she knows it and she's ready to help." When speaking about emotional support, there was a level of familiarity, care, and trust that student characterized as embedded in these relationships that enabled students to depend on them for emotional support.

Although participants indicated that their peers occasionally served as distractions to their pursuit of success, they also recalled instances in which they relied upon their peers for emotional support and encouragement. Zubari captured this, saying

Over the last years, [my friends have] grown really close. They are really good friends…when someone needed something, we were always there for each other. Since we're seniors, it was around college things. They supported me. I supported them. Like, you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours…When it came to college, we've always been peas in a pod, we always knew how to help one another out. Best friends always influence you in some kind of way or not.

Frequently, instances of emotional support among peers, such as that characterized by Zubari, were rooted in a shared experience they confronted as students at the same schools. The shared experience of the college access process provided a foundation of emotional support among peers.

The combination of academics, extracurricular activities, and the general stress of adolescence can, at times, feel overwhelming to youth. Students' narratives highlight the ways in which having access to a diverse range of supportive relationships in different settings allowed for them to leverage such relationships to meet and fill gaps.

*College application & college choice*. Due to the fact that many students were among the first in their families to attend college, many students indicated that they were not prepared for the stress they would eventually encountered throughout the process. For example, in hindsight, Roman reflected, "[I wish someone had told me] how stressful [the application process] will be; the emotional breakdowns that come with it, and the eagerness to get your acceptance letter." Similarly, France reflected on her high school years, saying, "[I]t made me realize that you have

to have help. You have to ask for it. You can't do everything by yourself." This became especially clear when she got rejected from her first choice college. She continued,

> I didn't apply to no other colleges…So when I got my rejection letter back, it hurt me and
> I wanted to give up…But Ms. Hill and Coach Blue and my mom had to tell me, 'You
> can't give up. Life is going to throw you curves, and you have to catch it and roll with it.'

The well-timed administration of emotional support from a range of individuals fueled France to continue with the college process, and resulted in her acceptance to a four-year institution.

Throughout each of these examples, in instances where students were both the recipients and the contributors of support, students' narratives relayed a quality of care, trust, and connection that enabled the provision of emotional support.

**Negative support and ongoing gaps in the college access process.** Students at both schools identified gaps in access to all dimensions of support at various points throughout the college access process. Additionally, participants cited specific negative experiences with individuals, which, in retrospect, they felt impacted their progression through the process in various ways. These instances highlight the shortcomings of the assumptions of linearity across students' experiences; encountering obstacles may fundamentally set students back in a way that threatens their postsecondary plans. In the following section, I focus specifically on students' negative experiences pertaining to aspirations and college preparation, as it highlights how gaps in support directly impacted students' ability to succeed.

*Dismantled expectations.* As previously noted, students recalled experiencing repeated messages regarding the importance of college for their future well-being throughout their K-12 education. However, a few students indicated that despite believing they would go to college when they were in middle school, they temporarily abandoned postsecondary plans at some point

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in high school. For example, Apris aspired to college throughout middle school; however, upon enrolling at BSMHS in ninth grade, her aspirations temporarily derailed. She recalled:

> I felt like college was going to be pointless cause I was like, here it is, I go to a school like BSMHS. And then I'm like, none of these people that can go to college, and when they do they don't, I mean they don't do anything with their lives. And then I was just like, I just felt like my surroundings I wasn't gonna make it because people look at what school I came from. Then I was just like, it's gonna be stupid in a way, because none of my friends ever went… I don't know, when I came here I really lost the, like, strive to just go to college.

With shifting expectations, students not only changed their post-graduation plans, but also tended to disengage from high school course work. In Apris' case, her GPA dropped by the time she recommitted to the idea of college and made firm her expectations, limiting the number of viable colleges to which she was eligible to apply. What resulted was a toxic combination of negative experiences with support across settings, as well as the emergence of gaps in overall support influenced students' disengagement from high school during the critical time encapsulated by the college preparation phase.

*College preparation*. Both schools included in the study espoused a *college for all* mission, yet the evidence suggests that students experienced meaningful gaps in support from their teachers and administrators that adversely affected their sense of college preparation. Participants encountered a number of challenges with school-based individuals, including low levels of rigor, a lack in engaging materials, and, at times, teachers' tenuous grasp on the material. Even though the expansion of AP courses are an oft cited as an equity measure for college access (Adelman, 2006; Mazzeo, 2010), the data highlight inconsistency even among

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high level courses. Alexander Strong described a similar experience, saying, "[The teachers] would give us a worksheet that was so simple that I know for a fact that I'm not going to get in college." When pressed for a specific example, he mentioned his AP Calculus course, "I figured that if I take the class and if I take the AP test, I can get that class out the way for college. Wasn't the case." Ericka offered a similar struggle in one of her AP courses at TRHS, "Like, I'm in one AP class right now and we're still in Chapter 1 of the book…So we still be doing stuff from like two years ago that we're supposed to have been through it." These experiences highlighted negative experiences of instrumental support via instruction, which not only resulted in restricted learning opportunities in the short-term, it impacted students' overall sense of preparation for the transition to college and restricted opportunities to get a head start.

In addition to general experiences in their classes, some students indicated negative personal encounters with school-based personnel that, in hindsight, they believed negatively impacted their overall progress through the college access process. For example, Spring, looking back on her high school experience, discussed one regret that she had, saying, "I would have been more respectful to my teachers even though they didn't respect me cause it kinda put a bad name towards the end. I would not have brought my problems from home to school." She went on to explain one particular incident that not only resulted in disciplinary action, but also made her struggle to trust and connect with her teachers. She said,

> I had a confrontation with my pre-Algebra teacher. I had actually felt comfortable enough
> to tell her that I was goin' through stuff at home and she actually said it in front of the
> whole class. And I called her the B-word and told her to mind her own business and I got
> suspended for that.

Given that students repeatedly identified the importance of trust and care as essential characteristics of a supportive relationship, incidences such as these, no matter how infrequent, shape students' experiences as they pertain to college access.

**Discussion**

The path from college aspirations to admission and enrollment requires students to have access to well-timed, scaffolded support from a range of individuals across settings. Through the relationships embedded within their social networks, students accessed direct and indirect types of support, which provided them with the information, skills, and opportunities to help them complete the steps towards college access (Dominguez & Watson, 2003). The data highlight three major findings regarding students' experiences with support throughout the college access process. First, students' narratives revealed an ecological experience of support related to college access, which extended across multiple settings, including their homes, schools, and neighborhoods (e.g., churches and youth programs). Second, the data highlight students' scaffolded experiences with support throughout the college access process. Specifically, students prioritized different dimensions of support in accordance with the requirements of each phase of college access. Finally, students' discussed characteristics of relationships that encouraged students to invest in them and enable an exchange of support. Relational characteristics includes, care, connection, and trust. In the following sections, I examine each of these findings in detail.

**Ecological Experiences of Support**

Zooming out on students' experiences with support over the extended college access process allows for a broader understanding of how of relationships serve as the foundation of individual college-going behaviors and decisions. The findings of the present study build upon previous research, which spotlight students' pursuit of support as it relates to the college access

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process (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Stanton Salazar, 2011). However, previous studies focused primarily on the dyadic nature of exceptional relationships (e.g., Espinoza, 2011). Individual relationships, when considered in isolation of others central to students' social networks, mask what Valadez (2008) refers to as the "duality of structure and agency" (p. 839). To understand students' experiences leading towards college, one must consider the interplay between social forces (e.g., relationships and relational characteristics) and the decision-making processes, which serve as the foundation of students' development of college-going behaviors.

Table 3 focuses on an example of narratives from students from each schools. Jojo and Ally demonstrate the ecological and multidimensional nature of their experiences with support throughout the college access process. Ally was headed to Waves University, a public, four-year in another state; Jojo planned to enroll at County Community College and then hoped to pursue a four-year degree thereafter. However, despite differences in their stated postsecondary plans, both students accounted for the support provided to them from a wide range of stakeholders (in bold). Additionally, the two quotations highlight how they depended on each relationship for various dimensions of support (in italics). These exemplar quotations highlight themes observed across the data: students relied on scaffolded experiences of multidimensional support that they aggregated from individuals who crossed the physical boundaries of settings. These experiences helped college-bound students piece together the requisite support to facilitate the accomplishment of their college access goals.

Table 3

*Snapshots of Support*

| Jojo, BSMHS, County CC | Ally, TRHS, Waves University |
|---|---|
| **Ms. Knowles**, at first…*I wasn't even thinking about going to college, but [she] was like, "You need to go to college"…***Mr. Carter** is the one *that helped me fill out the applications to County CC* and **my mom** *helped me fill out the one to City U.* And **Mr. Heart** [church mentor]*helped me with City U a lot*, and he was like, "It's a good school." He was like, "…I'm successful, and it's a good school for you"…And **Ms. Stern** just told me, *"You need to go to college," and she gave me information about it*, and she was like, "If you don't go to college, then you won't, you won't, you know, be successful."…And **Mr. Amir**, he just, you know, he used to tell me, *"Go fill out some applications," or, "Have you, did you hear about this college," or, "Have you found any colleges around music?"* Because they know I love music and I can sing. So, they was, so, they showed me a lot of schools with music programs. | Well, **my counselor** helped me, obviously, with *the application process* and *wrote me the letter of recommendation, gave me information about financial aid, about what school would be the best fit, and gave me encouragement about the schools*…My **stepmom** and **father** obviously *provided financial supports,* as *well as some insight into college, and like what's gonna to be best for me*. Although I may not have always taken their advice. My **stepmom** especially, because she has graduated from college and she works at the school as well. *She knew about the process, about how to get in school, and like what all I needed to do. And she kept me on track, like if I wasn't filling out scholarship stuff or if I wasn't getting my applications done, she would always make sure I was staying on that kind of stuff. She also, like, she kept in touch with my counselors to see how everything was going.* And my **father**, he doesn't really know much about college and stuff, but *he's always encouraged me*, you know, like, wherever you go to school, I'm proud of you**.** And we're both big fans, so that kind of added to it. And he *provided most of the financial support*. All the three people [includes stepmom, father, and **boyfriend**] who I starred *as far as financial support paid for one application.* |

| Supportive Individual | Affiliation | Types of Support | Supportive Individual | Affiliation | Types of Support |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ms. Knowles | Excelerate | Motivation | Ms. Hobbes | Guidance Counselor | Information Instrumental |
| Mr. Carter | Excelerate | Instrumental | LC | Stepmom | Information Instrumental |
| Mr. Amir | Excelerate | Information Motivation | KC | Father | Motivation Emotional |
| Ms. Stern | School Administrator/Former Teacher | Information Motivation | MW | Boyfriend | Emotional Information |
| Mr. Heart | Church-affiliated Mentor | Motivation Information Instrumental | | | |
| Mother | Mother | Instrumental | | | |

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The findings of the present paper draw attention to participants' social experiences of support, enable via their social networks. Previously, Ahn (2010) used social network analysis to demonstrate the potential capital to which they had access through college mentors. Although such findings address the *possibility* of students' networks, the present study provides a more concrete analysis, in that it highlights the ways in which students draw support from their social networks. Specifically, the social network data highlight that students depend on their relationships with supportive alters in various ways. Students whose parents graduated from college themselves are more likely to acquire synchronized support, manifested in its multiple dimensions, from their homes (Auerbach, 2009). In the present study, participants were more likely to have access to individuals who provided them with informational support throughout the college access process, as compared to instrumental support. Identifying gaps in experiences of support across settings early in the college access process may be essential to providing students with well-timed intervention as they progress through the college access process.

**Unpacking the Dimensions of Support**

The social experiences of education ground students' progress towards higher education, both inside and beyond the walls of schools. In order to convert postsecondary aspirations to enrollment, students must complete a number of steps, which settings and the embedded resources may be facilitated and obstructed via their experiences across settings (Klasik, 2012). Trends in postsecondary enrollment signify that students from traditionally underserved college-going backgrounds confront potential obstacles to their progress with greater frequency than their more privileged peers (Aud et al., 2012). In the present study, students prioritized different dimensions of support in order to support to help satisfy the requirements of different phases of college access. These findings introduced an additional layer of complexity to understanding

students' experiences with support throughout the college access process, highlighting the temporal orientation and its influence on which students relied upon their networks for support. Figure 2 aligns the different types of support with the most relevant phases of college access.

**College Access Process**

Predisposition — Search — Choice

Dismantled Aspirations

College Preparation

Aspirations ⟷ Expectations

College Application → College Choice

College Search

Informational
Instrumental
Emotional
Motivational
Negative
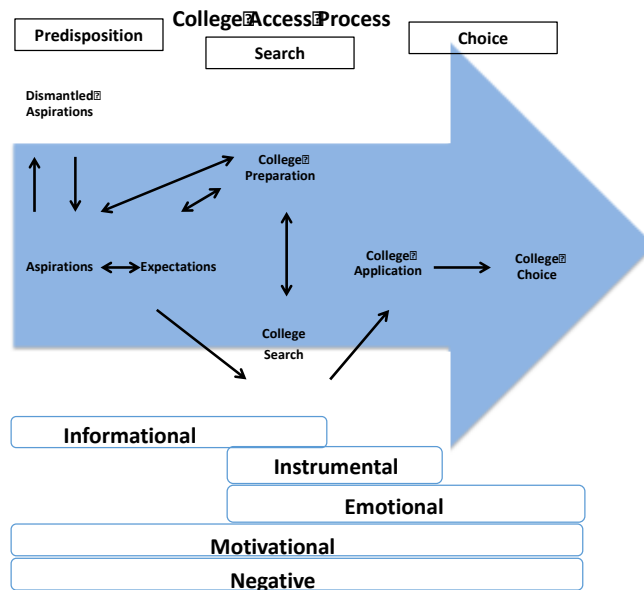
*Figure 2:* The temporal alignment of support

Ideally, each relationship in a students' network would be saturated within each category of support to ensure that they complete all of the necessary milestones while en route to college; however, the findings suggest variation in the nature of embedded support. Variation in the dimensions of support that students relied upon from the individuals in their networks raises interesting questions about the alignment of support with different phases that lead to college access. For example, the category with the largest number of average supportive individuals was informational support. Information is a vast category of support and manifested in many ways, including anything from information about specific universities or scholarship opportunities, the importance of higher education in the context of career planning, or basic information as it

related to discrete events, such as a college visit. Students' relied on support through the initial phases of the college access process, from developing aspirations through the college search.

The temporal model of support shows the critical intersection of informational and instrumental support during the college preparatory and college search phases. These intermediary phases of college access inform both students' overall preparedness for college enrollment, while molding the list of postsecondary institutions to which they plan to apply. Aligning students' preparation and search, aided by experiences with informational and instrumental support, helps students not only secure the skills necessary to succeed in college, but also successfully navigate the expanded postsecondary options that have emerged in response to the expanded demand for higher education (Glass & Nygreen, 2008). The disconnect between information and instrumental support through the core part of the college access process is a presents a potentially high-yield area for intervention.

In the final phases of college access, application and selection, students rely disproportionately on instrumental and emotional support. Previous studies suggest that submitting a completed application is a critical cutpoint for students, and that students from traditionally underserved backgrounds are more likely than their more privileged peers to fall short in this penultimate step (Avery & Kane, 2004; Klasik, 2012). Some students' narratives suggested that in the application phase they were tempted to give up, due to the stress of the process. Thus, it is critical that supportive individuals provide not only the procedural assistance required to complete applications, but also the emotional support to keep students on track.

Finally, throughout the entirety of the college access process, students relied upon the continuous motivational support provided by individuals in their social networks. These individuals provided students with the ongoing inspiration to remain the course to higher

education. Independent of postsecondary pursuits, adolescence is a dynamic developmental stage (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Youth constantly recreate their identities, and the provision of motivational support helps students in aligning with college-going as a critical part of their perceived and portrayed identity (Marcia, 1980). Thus, students' "who were always the college-going type" remain so, even in the face of distinct challenges. Students reported that they generated support from their families. However, they also drew motivation in their desire to create a counterstory to their surroundings; college served as an essential step to the long-term stability that they hoped to achieve.

In opposition to the continuous role of motivational support throughout the college access process, students in the present study discussed the continuous threat of negative support to their progress. Sometimes support came directly through their social networks, and others it manifested via one's surroundings. Regardless, these experiences influenced both discrete experiences and the messaging that students' received regarding college access.

Finally, the data highlight the ways in which evidence of gaps in support, especially those experienced in school-based settings, present a critical obstacle to the goal of instituting a *college for all* norm. Harper (2008) notes that "low expectations from their K-12 teachers follow students into college, thus, they often find themselves overwhelmed by the academic rigor of their courses and insufficiently prepared to meet their professor's expectations" (p. 700). The findings build on the critiques of Rosenbaum and his colleagues (2001, with Ahearn, Grant, Becker, & Rosenbaum, 2015): when not implemented strategically in practice, *college for all* threatens to dilute the students' preparation to make the transition to college. Additionally, the findings highlight that students' experiences of support towards the goal of college access result from more than lesson plans alone.

**Characteristics of Supportive Relationships**

Finally, students identified distinct characteristics of the relationships that they leveraged strategically for support throughout the college access process. Dika and Singh (2002) note that, as it pertains to education, the *availability* of social capital and social support fails to predict students' outcomes. Rather, they encourage a shift towards considering how and why students mobilize their supportive connections to meet their educational goals. In this study, although both schools operated via a *college for all* mission, the findings highlight continuing gaps in practice that impacted students' experiences germane to college access. The findings highlight the importance of relational characteristics in engaging students through each phase of the college access process. Specifically, students cited care, trust, and respect as core elements of supportive relationships. With these relational traits, students became more likely to connect and engage with individuals across settings, developing meaningful relationships on which they relied for support.

## Limitations

The present study offers an important set of findings; however, it is important to note existing limitations in the research. First, college-bound students from two public high schools in a midsized city in the South were eligible to participate in this study. Despite powerful trends evident throughout the data gathered at both schools, the restricted nature of the sample compromises the generalizability the findings for all high school students nationwide. For example, the district in which both high schools are located adopted policies and practices aimed at enhancing the college enrollment rates. Therefore, higher order variables dictated students' experiences as observed in the present study. Additionally, given the tiered nature of postsecondary institutions, future research would benefit from a more comparative study that

examines the college access process of students bound for two- versus four-year institutions.

Second, the sample was restricted to college-bound students. Therefore, the findings do not capture the experiences of students who did not plan to enroll in college in the fall after their senior year. Despite these limitations, I believe that the prominent themes that emerged from the data from college-going students from both schools supports the findings presented here.

**Conclusion**

From family members to coaches, teachers to peers, complex experiences of support across settings facilitate students' successful navigation of the path to college. At times, support was tangible and direct, such as assistance in developing academic content mastery and skills and completing and submitting an application. Other times, it manifested in an indirect nature, but proved to be no less important to their experiences germane to college access, such as through the provision of motivation and emotional support during difficult times. Students attributed their successful pursuit of college, in large part, to the well-timed administration of each dimension of support. However, relationships must be built upon a core foundation of care, trust, and mutual respect.

The findings of the present study introduce a temporal dimension of support, which helps to envision strategies to scaffold support in a way that corresponds with the tasks presented in each phase of the college access process. Although there are areas of overlap between the types of support as they align with the college access process, understanding when different types of support should be extended relevant to different phases of the college access may help to inform the development of future college access interventions When students lack a "home advantage," they are more likely to rely upon formal experiences of scaffolded support that they encounter across their multiple settings. With strategic delivery of support, students are not only able to

maximize the embedded resources available within their social networks, but also utilize the

dimensions of support to connect their short-term actions with their long-term college and career

goals. In Chapter 4, I shift the focus to students' schools in order to examine how settings may

enable and restrict students' experiences of support throughout the college access process.

CHAPTER IV

MOVING THE LEDGER LINE:

EMPLOYING SETTINGS THEORY TO EXAMINE SCHOOL-BASED APPROACHES TO

IMPLEMENTING *COLLEGE FOR ALL*


Across the United States, the majority of high schools have adopted a *college for all* mission, which positions postsecondary education as a realistic outcome for all students independent of their background (Glass & Nygreen, 2008; Rosenbaum, 1999, 2001; Rosenbaum, Stephan, & Rosenbaum, 2010). The shift in institutional priorities comes as the result of economic changes across the nation, including deindustrialization and the rise of the knowledge economy, that have increased the demand for postsecondary credentials to secure long-term, stable employment (Carnavale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). Students from traditionally underserved college-going populations, including low income, minority, and first generation college-goers, rely disproportionately on their high schools to supplement the limited pools of formal college access resources and support embedded within their home and community settings (Stanton Salazar, 2011). Yet, *college for all* differs from other education reform initiatives, in that, beyond the designation of a common goal and serving as a "catalyst for action" (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007, p. 198), it fails to provide high schools with extensive guidance as to proposed school-based interventions and practices that may assist in meeting that goal. Therefore, in order to understand the effectiveness of practical efforts to enhance *college for all* via schools, additional research is required to assess how the espoused norm translates into effective practices at the setting level, specifically in schools, and the

characteristics of settings that may enable or restrict students' success in pursuing higher education.

Over the last several decades, high schools have employed a range of strategies aimed at increasing the college-going rate for all students. These efforts include the expansion of a college preparatory curriculum for all students (Mazzeo, 2010; Oakes & Saunders, 2008), the increase in the number of institutional agents, including guidance counselors, to which students have access (McDonough, 1997; Stanton Salazar, 2011), and the development of college access workshops for students and their families (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). The continuing stratification in college enrollment across student populations reflects the limitations of *college for all* policies (Musu-Gillette, Robinson, McFarland, KewalRamani, Zhang, & Wilkinson-Flicker, 2016). To create sustainable change, high schools must stimulate systemic modifications within settings through the creation of norms, activities, and relationships catered to promoting college access.

In the present paper, I employ settings theory to investigate how, in response to a districtwide shift towards *college for all*, two high schools enable school-based change to foster students' opportunities and experiences relevant to the pursuit of higher education (Sarason, 1972; Seidman, 2011; Tseng & Seidman, 2007, 2011). I draw from interviews with 54 students from two high schools in a midsized southeastern city to investigate the following question: What are the salient elements of settings that support the development of a schoolwide *college for all* mission that meets the unique needs of students from traditionally underserved college-going populations? Specifically, how do the resources, organization of resources, and social processes combine to foster students' success and are there continuing obstacles evident at the setting level that must be addressed to meet the goals of universal postsecondary enrollment? The findings of the present paper add to the conversation regarding how high schools may

address continued gaps in college access through the creation of setting-level change efforts to enhance postsecondary opportunity for all students.

## Literature Review

Individually and collectively, youths' settings (e.g., home, school, and community) serve as the foundations for development towards educational goals (Maton, 2008; Seidman & Tseng, 2011; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Sarason (1974) defines a setting as "two or more people coming together in new and sustained relationships to attain stated objectives" (p. 269). In combination, settings determine students' access to diverse resources via the social connections embedded within them (Lin, 2001; Maton, 2008). Examining settings allows for a deeper understanding of social problems and subsequent behaviors in context (Maton et al., 2011). A distinct set of norms, relationships, and activities dictated setting processes and outcomes (Small, 2008). The ways in which individuals tap into and leverage social networks depends largely on the context in which they are embedded. Therefore, developing a more refined understanding of settings allows for an enhanced ecological perspective of students' experiences throughout the college access process (Darling, 2007). To accomplish this, Seidman and Tseng (2011) introduced a theoretical framework of social setting action that identifies three interactive components that collectively make up settings and inform outcomes: social processes, resources, and the organization of resources (Figure 1). The framework applies a system lens to studying how settings influence individual and collective outcomes (Foster Fishman et al., 2007). Additionally, it extends traditional approaches to research of college access by drawing attention to the interactions between setting-level variables and individual behaviors and outcomes (Maton et al., 2011). The following sections break down each of these components as they relate to college access.

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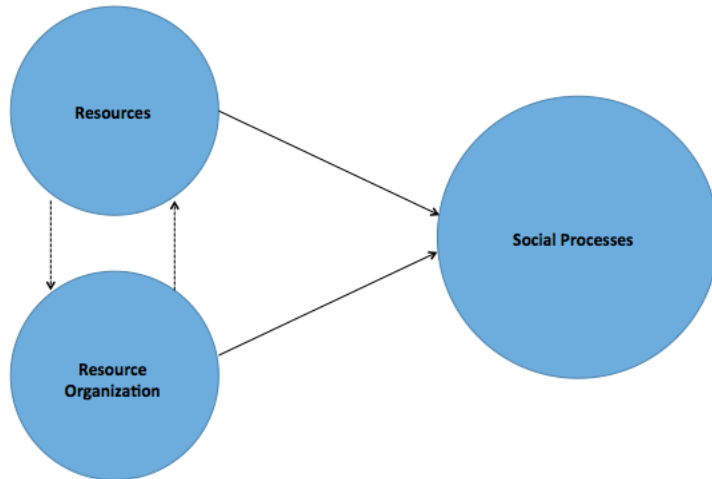
*Figure 1*: Seidman & Tseng's Framework for Social Setting Action (2011)

**Resources**. Throughout K-12 education, schools serve as a central hub for students to connect with myriad resources designed to enhance academic preparation and skills, which, in combination, pave the path to college. The majority of school-based efforts to enhance college access rates aim to increase the number of resources available that may help students to navigate the path to higher education. Resources take many forms, including human, physical, economic, social, and temporal (Seidman, 2011; Seidman & Tseng, 2011). However, the characteristics of resources (e.g., the staff's education level, social network properties), as well as their availability and accessibility within the school setting mediate the impact of resources on students' outcomes (Ahn, 2010; Seidman, 2011). Klugman (2012) identified three primary categories of observable differences in available resources across school settings: programmatic (e.g., college preparatory courses), social (e.g., social capital), and pedagogical resources (e.g., high quality teachers). However, efforts to modify in the provision of resources does not alone ensure comprehensive, setting-wide change.

**Organization of resources**. In addition to observed differences in the quantity and quality of school-based resources aimed at increasing college access, students' success is also

dependent on the organizational properties that dictate students' opportunities to engage with and leverage them in order to accommodate their emergent needs (Seidman, 2011). Resource organization may impact the accessibility of resources for different groups of students, both within (e.g., high achieving students versus low achieving students) and across schools (e.g., highly resourced schools versus lower resource schools) as determined by the school structure and the embedded supports there within (Avery & Hoxby, 2013; Stanton Salazar, 2011; Trickett, 2009). Thus, the organization of resources directly influences not only students' access to particular resources essential to the college access process, but also the ways in which social processes unfold. Together, resources and their corresponding organization manifest as the "structural features of settings" (Seidman & Tseng, 2011, p. 19); they dynamically reinforce one another and dictate the ways in which social processes unfold.

   **Social processes**. In order to create change at the setting level, efforts must exist to change the social regularities of the setting. Therefore, the third--and debatably most important--element of settings theory is the social process (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Social processes are defined as, "ongoing transactions between two or more people, shaped by individual roles in the setting, which have a temporal quality wherein behaviors, recalibrated based on feedback, become patterned or regularized over time" (Trickett, 2009, p. 404). This is reflective of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory that proximal processes between individuals and their immediate environments directly influence developmental outcomes. Social processes manifest as norms, relationships, and participation in activities, and determine individual and collective outcomes (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Setting outcomes are unlikely to change if an intervention fails to target the social processes that dictate students' day-to-day experiences (Seidman & Tseng, 2011).

Therefore, to meet the goals of *college for all,* schools must not only introduce enhanced resources to meet students' needs throughout the college access process, but aim to adjust the routines that dictate the proximal processes that guide students' development (Seidman & Tseng, 2011; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). For example, in Chicago, the district-wide implementation of a "College for All" curriculum fell short in its efforts to prepare all students to make the academic transition to college (Mazzeo, 2010). Despite evidence of higher rates in the proportion of students enrolled in Algebra I and English I in their first year of high school, students had lower grade point averages and increased rates of course failure by their senior year. While changing the resources or organization of resources may lay the foundation, efforts to create meaningful change hinge on a shift in social processes.

**Gaps in the literature: Examining settings**

*College for all* seeks to equalize exposure to support germane to college access for all students, independent of their background (McClafferty, McDonough, & Nunez, 2002). However, intervention efforts to increase college enrollment frequently fail to affect the dynamic properties of school settings, which dictate students' day-to-day experiences (Foster Fishman et al., 2007; Trickett, 2011). As a result, students from traditionally underserved college-going populations are more likely than their more privileged peers to have fluctuating postsecondary aspirations throughout their high school careers (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009), have restricted access to individuals upon whom they may rely on for information and assistance (McDonough, 1997, 2005), and begin taking practical steps towards college admission later in their educational career (Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004). Despite the expansion of *college for all*, several questions remain regarding the continuing gaps in college access across student populations.

Taking a settings-level approach to research extends traditional efforts at intervention research, highlighting the ways in which the dynamic processes embedded within contexts influence individuals' opportunities, experiences, and development (Hatcher, 1998; Tseng, Chesir-Teran, Becker-Klein, & Bardoliwalla, 2002). Additionally, studying settings "contextualizes the individual into a social setting nested within and affected by other settings and systems" (Seidman, 2011, p. 4). In the absence of a settings-level framework, research examining school-based approaches to increasing college access may inadvertently displace blame on students who do not enroll in college by masking the setting-based disparities that influence opportunities for youth (Foster Fishman et al.; 2007; Maton, Seidman, & Aber, 2011). Individuals who appear to have attained success "on their own" often do so in "learn[ing] to appear self-reliant, while acting interdependently" (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, p. 240). Lifting the veil of individuality reveals the complexity of how students leverage resources for support throughout relation to college access, exposing the dynamic processes that stimulate students' progress towards college (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

Few studies have examined how settings—and their embedded resources—inform students' varied experiences throughout the college access process. This is due, in part, to the shortcomings of traditional theoretical models, which fail to capture the complexity of students' experiences within and across settings (Foster Fishman et al., 2007). For example, stage models of college choice (e.g., Hossler & Gallagher's Model of College Choice [1987]) guide the majority of empirical work to date. Scholars developed these theoretical models based upon research involving predominantly white, middle to upper income subjects. Such models are rooted in assumptions that college access is a step-wise, linear process in which students have perfect information across all contexts. Theoretical models that drive college access research

frequently obscure the process orientation and contextualized experiences that dictate students'

realities. Given the increased diversity of college-going populations, as well as expanded efforts

to foster postsecondary enrollment for all, such models have become outdated. Thus, empirical

studies focused on college access are limited in their ability to account for the complexity of

settings and the ways in which they impact students' outcomes.

**The Present Study**

The present study shifts towards a more ecological understanding of college access,

which seeks to unpack the role of school settings and their embedded resources on guiding

students' experiences throughout the college access process. To guide this research, I draw data

from interviews with 54 college-bound seniors from two high schools. The two schools adopted

a different approach to increasing college access for its students. Thus, the paper takes a

comparative approach and focuses on the similarities differences in resources and their

corresponding organization, and their combined impact on the social processes germane to

college access.

Specifically, I ask: Amidst schools that promote a *college for all* mission, what are the

salient elements of settings required to support the college access process for students from

traditionally underserved college-going populations? Specifically, how do the resources,

organization of resources, and social processes combine to foster students' success and where, if

evident, are there continuing gaps at the setting level that must be addressed to meet the goals of

universal postsecondary enrollment? I acknowledge that schools are only one of a continuum of

settings that influence students' paths to college. However, *college for all* manifests most

directly in the contexts of school settings.

**Methods**

In the present study, I focus on the efforts of two high schools to enhance postsecondary access to assess the facilitators and barriers to setting level changes and outcomes. Studying settings contextualizes individuals' experiences into a social setting nested within and affected by other settings and systems (Seidman, 2011; Small, 2008). Additionally, in adopting a settings lens to guide the investigation, the resulting data may clarify the impact of contexts on individuals' opportunities and behaviors, moving away from victim blaming, and identify the multilevel influences that inform individual and collective outcomes (Tseng et al., 2002).

**Study Context and Participants**

In 2010, the Samuelson County Public School District, located in a midsized southeastern city, instituted a districtwide commitment to enhancing college-going rates. The goal of this shift was to "ensure that every high school graduate is prepared for, applies for and attains postsecondary education via advanced certifications or community and four-year colleges" (Alignment Nashville, 2010, p. 16). However, despite the decree of a districtwide priority of increasing postsecondary enrollment, there was minimal guidance as to the specific policies and practices that schools should to achieve this goal. Therefore, I recruited participants from two high schools in the SCPSD, Teal River High School (TRHS) and Bridgeport STEM Magnet High School (BSMHS). In 2013, TRHS and BSMHS reported a nearly identical average composite ACT score, placing them in the bottom four performing schools in the district. Only nine percent of seniors at TRHS and seven percent of seniors at BSMHS scored over a 21 on the ACT, the minimum threshold of college readiness and the indicator for graduating with Honors in the district (Clough & Montgomery, 2015). Finally, the college matriculation rate for the two schools was 46 and 52 percent for TRHS and BSMHS respectively. Table 1 summarizes the

Table 1
*Setting Demographics*

| | Teal River High School (TRHS) | Bridgeport STEM Magnet High School (BSMHS) |
|---|---|---|
| **Total Student Population** | 909 | 660 |
| **Percent of African American Students** | 83.7% | 69.0% |
| **Percent of Students on Free & Reduced Price Lunch** | 80.5% | 84.0% |
| **Average Composite ACT Score** | 15.8 | 15.4 |
| **College Readiness Rates (21+ on the ACT)** | 9.0% | 7.0% |
| **Class of 2013-College Enrollment Rates** *Of college bound students*     **4-year**     **2-year**     **Tech School** | 46.1% 64.9% 31.2% 3.9% | 52.0% 63.2% 26.5% 10.3% |

demographics of each school.

In the present study, I focus primarily on formal college access settings at the two schools, the College and Career Center at TRHS and Excelerate at BSMHS. Following the districtwide shift in priorities, these two spaces became the designated area within each school to secure support throughout the college access process. TRHS hosts a centralized College and Career Center (CCC). At BSMHS, Excelerate opened in Fall 2010 and provides students with academic support, enrichment programming (e.g., music production), and postsecondary transition services. Shortly after opening, the guidance counselors at BSMHS met with Excelerate's postsecondary transition staff to turn over the college counseling responsibilities informally. At both schools, all students are encouraged to engage with the services offered (e.g., one-on-one college counseling), as well as participate in the various events that the formal

college access centers provide (e.g., trips to city-wide college fairs, consultation on applications).

**Study Eligibility and Recruitment**

To be eligible for study participation, students had to be seniors who, at the time of the interview, had applied to at least one postsecondary institution (two- or four-year college or professional training program) and planned to enroll in the fall following high school graduation. The final sample included 54 students, 27 from each participating school. Twenty two percent (n=6) of participating students from TRHS planned to enroll in a two-year college, 74 percent (n=20) to a four-year, and one student was undecided between a two- and a four-year. At BSMHS, 37 percent (n=10) were going to a two-year and the remaining 63 percent (n=17) planned to enroll in a four year. Eighty five percent (n=23) and 81 percent of (n=22) of students from BSMHS and TRHS, respectively, would be the first in their families to attend college. For their participation, all students received a $25 Visa gift card at the conclusion of the research activity (Capaldi, Chamberlain, Fetrow, & Wilson, 1997; Guyll, Spoth, & Redman, 2003).

**Data Collection Methods**

The analyses focus on the qualitative data gathered from interviews with each participating student, which were part of a broader data collection process that also included a social network mapping activity. The interviews focused on a range of questions, which examine a number of themes, including how students secured information and support relevant to their college access process within and across settings, challenges that they encountered during the college access process, their sense of overall preparation to transition to college, and their participation in particular precollege activities. Collectively, the data offer a settings-level examination of how strategic attempts at change influence not only individual behaviors and outcomes, but also the social processes that serve as their foundation (Small, 2008).

To begin the interview, students selected a pseudonym by which they are referred to in order to protect their identities. The interviews employed a semi-structured protocol (Appendix A), which allowed the flexibility to probe students about particular experiences pursuant of their individual responses (Patton, 1990). Through the semi-structured interview, participants recounted their experience leading to their college acceptance in their own words (Fine, Torre, Burns, & Payne, 2007; Harper, 2009). Given their successful navigation of the college access process, the participants had invaluable information that shed light on the their experiences via settings. A qualitative approach is especially valuable to examine the experiences of students from traditionally underserved college going backgrounds, as it prioritizes "the voice of marginalized groups" (Maton et al., p. 5) and allows for an enhanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between settings and individual behaviors (Trickett, 2009; Tseng et al., 2002). Interviews took place face-to-face in a private location within each school and lasted approximately 30 minutes to an hour.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using Dedoose (SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC, 2016), I developed used a thematic coding approach. Initial inductive coding highlighted key points, themes, and reflections regarding the data (Patton, 1990). I, then, employed open coding techniques to further clarify major themes that arose (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Next, I identified sub-themes pertaining to individual-, school-, family-, and neighborhood-level influences on students' experiences throughout the college process. This additional layer of analysis allowed for the examination of the cumulative impact of students' settings—and the resources embedded within—on their pre-college experiences (Charmaz, 2006). After organizing and consolidating initial codes into thematic categories, I

used focused, theoretical coding to explore each of these themes further in relation to the conceptual model presented above. Finally, I employed multiple measures to ensure the credibility of the interpretation of the data, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). I performed quality checks to ensure reliability (Sandoval, Lucero, Oetzel, Avila, Belone, Mau, et al., 2012). At least two coders were used, and after attaining inter-rater reliability of 90%, defined as the number of agreements divided by the number of agreements plus disagreements of all data was coded.

## Findings

High schools across the country have with the overwhelming task of establishing and promoting a *college for all* norm. The success of schools in implementing and executing a *college for all* mission is frequently measured by postsecondary enrollment rates; however, focusing exclusively on student outcomes obscures the practices and processes that dictate students' individual and collective success (Maton et al., 2011). In the following sections, I examine students' accounts of their experiences at two high schools in the Samuelson County School District, each of which adopted a distinct approach to spearheading efforts to prepare all students to apply to and enroll in postsecondary education via the creation of a *college for all* norm. Specifically I focus on the resources upon which students relied throughout the college access process, the organization of those resources, and the social processes that both facilitated and obstructed their progress towards postsecondary education. Despite evidence of some similarities, there are meaningful differences emerged in students' illustration of the setting-level characteristics and their subsequent impact on students' experiences connecting with and leveraging school-based resources to meet emerging needs throughout the college access process.

**Identifying College Access Resources**

Throughout the college access process, students relied upon a wide range of resources for both formal and informal support. Participating students at both TRHS and BSMHS cited the formal college access settings as the primary driver of college access at their respective schools. Table 2 offers an overview of the physical, human, temporal, economic and social resources available to students via the CCC and Excelerate.

**Physical resources.** Both the CCC and Excelerate operated in a designated space in the respective school settings. These settings provided a sanctioned area where students could access materials relevant to higher education, such as college brochures, financial aid forms, and scholarship applications. Spring summarized the resources available to students through Excelerate: "Tutoring. They helped us with application processes, financial aid. They had a lot of, what am I looking for? They had a lot of opportunities to like get out and experience more; so, like field trips [to college campuses] they went on and the pizza parties." Similarly, when asked what types of resources she accessed through the CCC, Kat responded: "Applications, financial aid information, FAFSA information, stuff like that." Both spaces showcased a diverse range of postsecondary options, including two- and four-year, in- and out-of-state, and private and public colleges with its internal decor. Additionally, calendars that reflected critical dates for the application and selection process (e.g., open houses, application deadlines, and financial aid deadlines) covered the walls. Finally, both rooms openly celebrated students' individual accomplishments. For example, at Excelerate, the staff framed students' acceptance letters, lining the hallway leading into the space. The CCC posted news of students' college acceptances on the external facing windows, for all of the TRHS community to see.

Table 2

*Unpacking College Access Resources at TRHS & BSMHS*

|  | College & Career Center (TRHS) | Excelerate (BSMHS) |
|---|---|---|
| Physical | • Centralized office, located adjacent to the school cafeteria<br>• Common room containing a library of resources and computers<br>• Contained offices for staff | • Postsecondary Transition Room, located on the top floor of the school<br>• Common room containing a library of resources and computers<br>• Staff have desks located in open space |
| Human | College & Career Center Staff<br><br>• Ms. Hill, Director<br>• Ms. Hobbes, Counselor | Postsecondary Transition Staff<br>• Ms. Knowles-Postsecondary Transition Coach<br>• Ms. Parks-Americorps Volunteer<br>• Mr. Carter-P/T Postsecondary Transition Coach<br>• Mr. Marshall-Postsecondary Progress Mentor<br>General Excelerate Staff<br>• Ms. Bocelli-tutor<br>• Mr. Amir-tutor |
| Temporal | Traditional School Hours<br>• Drop in<br>• By appointment<br>• Workshops | Afterschool Program<br>• Drop in<br>• By appointment<br>• Workshops<br>• Digital communication |
| Social | • College fairs<br>• Financial aid workshops | • Northside Neighborhood Center<br>• Postsecondary Progress<br>• College fairs<br>• Financial aid workshops |

**Human resources.** Beyond the provision of a designated space, the CCC and Excelerate

facilitated connections between students and professionals who provided targeted support

throughout the college access process, especially the search, application, and selection phases.

Two licensed guidance counselors served as the primary staff of the CCC. At Excelerate, the

college access staff consisted of three members, including one Americorps volunteer (Ms.

Parks), one part-time transitional coach (Mr. Carter), and one full-time postsecondary transition

coach (Ms. Knowles), each of whom had extensive experience in college advising, however, they did not possess official counseling credentials. In partnership with another youth service program, Postsecondary Progress, an additional college mentor (Mr. Marshall) worked directly with students at Excelerate two days each week. TRHS declined services from Postsecondary Progress at the program's inception, as the administration felt that they would not make a substantial contribution to students' needs or the organizational capacity as it related to college access.

At both schools, the college access staff provided students with scaffolded support to complete the myriad tasks affiliated with college access. For example, Jacob described the types of support he received from the Excelerate staff, saying, "They know about all the scholarships and mostly about all the schools and what type of programs they have to offer…They can tell you what schools you might wanna look into…Excelerate, like, they [are] the best at stuff like this." Similarly, at TRHS, the CCC staff served as a comprehensive college access resource. Jalie said: "[The CCC staff] helps us, like, if we need to go get some college applications, or we need to go look up some information about a college, or financial aid and stuff like that, or fill out ACT." Both the CCC and Excelerate functioned as one-stop locations where students could depend on the fact that assistance would be available at various points throughout the college access process.

The staff of both the CCC and Excelerate served as an antidote to the overwhelming responsibilities confronting other guidance counselors at TRHS and BSMHS, as seen in public schools across the country (McDonough, 2005; NACAC, 2006). Students distinguished between the roles of the guidance counselors and the college access professionals with whom they connected through the CCC and Excelerate. Ally captured the difference between the assistance

that she experienced with the CCC staff and the other guidance counselors at TRHS, saying, "[E]verybody was really involved with Ms. Hill about college… [M]y other counselor is more for changing my schedule and, like, the technical aspects of [school and scheduling]." Similarly, at BSMHS, Latrya observed: "Ms. Boulder [the school's college counselor] was always busy so she really didn't help me… [she helped other students with] their A Plus [credit recovery], make sure that they're on track [to graduate], that kind of stuff." Therefore, the provision of additional staff dedicated exclusively to the provision of college access support was an essential step towards the creation of a school-based environment that aspired towards *college for all*.

**Temporal resources.** For students, time spent in the CCC and in the postsecondary transition room at Excelerate functioned as time dedicated to supporting the college access process. The key difference observed between the two schools was the fact that TRHS embedded the CCC as part of the primary school setting, aligning its hours of operation within the traditional school day. In contrast at BSMHS, Excelerate was positioned as an afterschool program; however, students' narratives revealed that the hours of operation blurred into the school day and beyond. For example, Mishale Renee recalled how the Excelerate staff tracked her down during lunch at school to give her information for a particular scholarship for which she may be eligible. She said, "Ms. Knowles or Ms. Parks, you know, they called me up there, see me at lunch, and hand me some papers." Later, I discuss how the differences in the temporal organization of both programs influenced students' experiences and opportunities connecting with the college access staff.

**Social resources.** Both the CCC and Excelerate operated as part of a larger web of settings—both within and beyond the schools—that supplemented the goal of encouraging all students to pursue postsecondary education (Rogoff & Altman, 1987; Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

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Students became aware of and connected with the services provided by the CCC and Excelerate via various individuals, including administrators, teachers, peers, and family members. For example, Amber recalled how a school administrator informed her about Excelerate. She said, "Ms. Waters would say, 'Did you hear about the scholarships?' I'd be like 'No,' and she'd say, 'Well, go to the Excelerate!'…She told me about 'em and I came up here." Similarly, Alicia, who started coming to the program upon encouragement from her mother after the staff helped her brother, noted, "When they make announcements [over the loud speaker] in school, they're always like, 'Excelerate is doing a such and such.' So I would just come up here and check whatever was going on." Despite the fact that Excelerate was only in its third year of operation at the time of this study, students' narratives reveal that it had been woven into the fabric of the school, positioning itself as a key resource throughout the college access process.

In addition to connecting with the formal college access resources and support available within the physical settings, students leveraged the CCC and Excelerate staff to connect with additional points of support both within the school and beyond. At BSMHS, Excelerate staff facilitated connections between students and a number of opportunities, due to the fact that they had expanded internal capacities beyond college counseling (e.g., academic tutoring, enrichment programming). Additionally, students from both schools recalled connecting with representatives from particular institutions of higher education. For example, Alexander Strong recalled meeting Mr. Fox, a transition counselor from State, saying, "I was at the Top Floor, just doing stuff on the computer, and then he walked in and was talking to Ms. Knowles and she actually told us who he was and I introduced myself." Alexander Strong developed a relationship with Mr. Fox, which was dually reinforced through the scholarship he ultimately received. At TRHS, Candice discussed how the CCC linked her with representatives from a variety of colleges, "They got me

to State. And also another one is Ms. Hobbes here she brought the Central admissions guy here, and he gave me his card and I was able to e-mail him whenever needed." The CCC and Excelerate functioned as brokering agents both within the schools and beyond, connecting students with supplementary resources relevant to the college access process (Small, 2008).

At BSMHS and TRHS, Excelerate and the CCC signaled a common message to students about the importance of postsecondary education and offered students different types of relevant support via a combination of physical, human, temporal and social resources. The resources available through these settings aimed to facilitate students' opportunities to leverage support, converting postsecondary aspirations to reality. In the following sections, I highlight how the organization of college access resources influenced the social processes in meaningful ways. Collectively, the resources embedded in the formal college access settings influenced students' experiences throughout the college access process and the creation of a *college for all* norm throughout both schools.

**Organization of Resources**

At both schools, students' narratives reflect evidence of targeted efforts to enhance the opportunities for direct support throughout the college access process through the creation of the CCC and Excelerate. The organization of those resources—and their intersections with other policies and practices at the school—impacted students' opportunities to address their needs at different points in the college access process. Previously, the data reflected similarities in the types of resources offered by the two schools; in the present section, I examine the organizational patterns that influenced students' opportunities to access and leverage those resources. Specifically, I focus on the flexibility—and lack thereof—of resource organization, and how it impacted students' experiences as they related to college access.

While some students attended Excelerate earlier in their high school careers for academic tutoring and enrichment programs, the vast majority of participants began to utilize the program on a regular basis specifically for college related assistance. For example, prior to her senior year, Keisha indicated that she had informally dropped in to Excelerate a few times; however, the staff actively sought her out as the college process intensified. She recalled this experience, saying, "Uncle Carter—that's not my real Uncle—he had me in the cafeteria. They gonna chase, they gonna call. They do not play about not coming up here." The staff's active pursuit of students triggered a sense of connection and care, which provided an important foundation for the subsequent development of relationships. I will explore the emergence and qualities of student-staff relationships in greater detail a later section.

The Excelerate staff was committed to meeting students where they were. Ashely captured the availability of the staff that extended beyond any formal program hours, saying, "They're always there to help you, you can reach them at almost any time of the day, anywhere. And they're like, just glad to have you and happy to help you in any way you need them." Although the program was officially located in an isolated corner of the school building, students recalled many instances where the staff sought them out in the school during the school day—or outside, leveraging digital communication to ensure that students completed relevant tasks. For example, Alexander Strong credited the staff with his acceptance to State, noting that he had the tendency to "get lazy and procrastinate," threatening the success of his application. He explained,

> Ms. Knowles, she's constantly pushing me. Every time I'm not here, like, I went through a time for about a month where I didn't really come up here because I was tired about thinking about college, but she was still texting me like, do I have this done? Do I have that done? And Ms. Parks would be doing the same thing, and constantly texting me to

tell me to come to Excelerate to get this thing done, to do this scholarship, and all this

stuff, and it's just really helped me.

Like Alexander Strong, many other participants from BSMHS characterized the Excelerate

staff's active pursuit of students throughout the college access process. It did not end with an

initial connection; instead, it only intensified in a personalized manner as students progressed

through the college access process. The staff relied on multiple forms of communication to

pursue students.

In contrast, at TRHS, participants' narratives highlighted the school's stringent focus on

discipline, which, at times, precluded efforts to engage with college access resources, such as the

CCC. Students' perceptions of displaced emphasis on discipline was due, in large part, to an

evident shift in schoolwide expectations and practices following an administration change. Keno

illustrated a stark comparison between the old and new principals, saying,

[The former principal] Mr. Leber, he actually walk[ed] around the school. [Shook] your

hand. Asked, "How them grades doing?"…[H]e tried to have a relationship…with most

of his students. You don't see Dr. Daniels. He just be in his office and you hear him over

the intercom, you see…It changes it a lot because I like, he don't care.

Students' day-to-day experiences across settings throughout the school reflected Dr. Daniel's

approach to leadership. Flossi summarized this, saying, "My principal, he's very strict…it's good

if he's strict, but at the same time, we have to live…I just feel like that's not making us grow up.

That's just making us feel like we're in daycare, basically." Students discussed ways that the

administrative priorities trickled down into the schools' day-to-day practices as they related to

opportunities to engage with and secure support germane to the college access process at TRHS.

Discussing her experiences with the CCC, Lora said, "We're limited to a lot of things, like

during lunch [if] we have to have a note to go to a counselor…We can't always get a note to go to a counselor during lunch." These comments reflect a perception of overinvestment in overregulation of students' actions, which dictated the overall school culture and, at times, adversely impacted discrete opportunities for students to connect with staff at the CCC. Ashely D. summarized this, saying, "[TRHS] should focus more on education than discipline."

The two schools organized their resources in meaningfully different ways, which impacted students' opportunities to connect with and leverage relevant resources to achieve their goals throughout the college access process. The differences between how students interacted with the two spaces may be attributed, in large part, to their place within the school organization and physical geography. The way that Excelerate ran allowed the staff to supplement the school-based efforts supporting students on the path to college, but also afforded the staff enhanced flexibility due to its positioning as an afterschool resource. In contrast, the CCC adhered to the more traditional, authoritarian organizational expectations of schools. Tseng and Seidman (2007) note that observing the availability of resources embedded within settings is insufficient without also considering the approaches to engagement and the quality of relationships. In the following section, I examine how resources and their organization influenced students' accounts of the social processes that emerged.

**Social Processes**

A passive observer may conclude that the formal college access settings at TRHS and BSMHS were nearly identical due to similarities in the types of resources each made available; however, adapting a settings lens reveals essential differences in the social processes and the way that they informed school-wide efforts to enact the *college for all* mission. Students relied extensively on the resources affiliated with the CCC and Excelerate as they searched for, applied

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to, and selected the postsecondary institutions that best met their academic, social, and financial needs. However, the data reveal key differences in the social processes that guided these settings, impacting students' experiences and the development of a schoolwide *college for all* norm. In the present section, I discuss how social processes are dynamically related to one another, as reflected by the relationships, participation, and norms of the setting and students' experiences throughout the college access process.

**Relationships.** A key element of establishing large-scale change includes adjusting the core structures of a setting in order to facilitate changes in the qualities of relationships to support progress towards a common goal (Sarason, 1974; Seidman, 2011). Changing settings through the provision of enhanced opportunities to develop relationships—and the qualities of those emergent relationships—which may modify the nature of students' experiences and opportunities as they relate to college access. In the present study, there is evidence of both similarities and differences in how students developed relationships with the staff at the CCC and Excelerate and what that meant for students' experiences.

First, nearly uniformly, participants cited their relationships with the staff at both programs to be a key component of their success in navigating the college access process. As previously discussed, students leveraged these relationships for various types of support aligned with their personal needs at different points in the process, from developing college aspirations through college choice. For example, Cornelius recalled his relationship with Ms. Knowles, saying,

> She just kept me up and running and told me that I'm smart and don't give up and stuff. When I felt like I couldn't do it, she just told me keep going…she kept me up here even when I wanted to leave by making me stay, calling my mom.

Jojo echoed a similar experience: "Ms. Knowles and Mr. Carter, they was influential 'cause they was pushing me not to slack off with filling out applications and talking to representatives and stuff." Both of these examples highlight the personalized nature of students' relationships with Excelerate staff. Given the foundation of familiarity—and what many students labeled as "care"—students and staff developed dynamic relationships that centered around the common goal of college access. This foundation allowed students and staff to connect continuously throughout the entirety of the process.

In contrast, at TRHS, the CCC served as an indispensible resource; however, they students were predominantly responsible for creating and sustaining connections with the staff and pursuing direct assistance throughout the process. Additionally, the CCC staff restricted their interactions with students to the school day, with the exception of occasional workshops on special topics (e.g., financial aid). Martha summarized the nature of her relationship with the CCC staff—and the corresponding resources that she gained from their interactions. She said:-

> Not like specifically, but they always tell us, you know, make sure you apply and meet all your deadlines, you know, the basics of applying to college. None have really actually like gave me, you know, just a stack of papers telling me, you know, this is a good college for you for this unless I tell them. Like, Ms. Hobbes, she helps me out…That's basically it.

The nature of the support that Martha and her peers received from the CCC was unidimensional. Students' narratives repeatedly reflected the ways that they internalized the messages of individual responsibility, as echoed by Jalie, who said: "TRHS has done it's duty to me and it's my duty to find out other kind of information also, so I can just take all the information I can take for college." Participants' illustrations of their connections with the CCC staff suggested more traditional, authoritarian, and less dynamic relationships (Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

In order to secure more specific information, it was up to the students to approach the staff and make their particular situations and postsecondary plans known. Upon reflecting on her relationships with the CCC staff, Lora recounted how she revealed a particular health condition only very recently and wished, in retrospect, that she had discussed it earlier when the staff informed her she may have been eligible for specific scholarships due to her condition. She said,

> I learned [I should have] open[ed] up…I wish that I started talking to Ms. Hill freshman year, it would have been a much better help. She would've known more about me than she does and she could help me. Like the connection would be better if you know them longer.

However, students only accessed the CCC during their senior years, essentially prohibiting that relationships from developing until well into the college access process.

Second, the Excelerate staff created a number of opportunities for students to take on leadership-type roles throughout the college access process. For example, each time they hosted a college fair, they assigned students to serve as site liaisons to the admissions representatives. Mishale Renae recalled her experience of serving this role: "When [Miss Knowles or Miss Parks] have…the little colleges come up there [for a college fair]…They'll see me, and they'll be like, 'Go up there and work your magic.' I was like the little helper for one college that time." The staff assessed students' postsecondary interests, including major, location, and financial need, when orchestrating matches between students and admissions personnel. Through these instances, students had the opportunity to serve as the local expert on the school, as well as create a personal connection with admissions representatives at a school that could be a good match for students.

The majority of participants in the present sample connected with Excelerate in their senior year; however, moving forward, Excelerate was committed to connecting with students earlier on in their high school careers. In order to accomplish this, Ms. Knowles led academic workshops for underclassmen that introduced the requirements for admission to different types of postsecondary options. She relied upon college-bound seniors to help her deliver that message. Angela recalled this experience, saying:

> I had done a seminar with Kelli for the freshman students talking about the GPA, talking about how it's the foundation of your high school life…I gave them advice how to keep their GPA up, how to get scholarships, and how to get into college to be successful.

Experiences such as these introduced a recursive element to relationships between students and the Excelerate staff, introducing opportunities for students to not only passively secure support from the staff, but also to contribute to creating a more dynamic college preparatory environment for themselves and their peers.

Participants' narratives highlighted important operational differences within the settings that contributed to the observed variation in the qualities of the relationships that students' developed with adults. Relationships do not manifest without effort. In the present study, students highlight the reflexive role of trust and demonstration of care in creating a foundation for a relationship within the college access settings. Given the increased nature of flexibility due to the organizational location of Excelerate, students and staff were able to establish relationships that shifted dynamically in accordance with students' needs and with staff's in-depth understanding of the college access process. In combination the reflexive nature of students' relationships with Excelerate staff and the corresponding resources, students developed an

increasing sense of familiarity and corresponding agency throughout the college access process (Maton, 2008).

      **Participation.** At both schools, participation with Excelerate and the CCC framed the majority of students' formal experiences engaging with and leveraging resources to promote college access. As previously discussed, students' access to Excelerate and the CCC differed due to the organization of the physical, human, and temporal resources within each school, which impacted their opportunities for participation. A closer examination of the nature of students' participation in those spaces and the ways in which students maximized and mobilized resources highlighted the distinct ways that social processes dictated students' experiences and outcomes, both individually and collectively.

      *Engage.* From the first point of engagement, there is evidence of meaningful differences in students' experiences with the staff at Excelerate and the CCC. For starters, the staff at the CCC took a passive approach to engaging students, thus placing the onus on students to connect with the staff in order to secure resources relevant to their personal college access process. Candice captured many participants' experiences, saying, "If we went and asked them for [specific help during the college process], they could help." France extended this comment, saying, "It's up to you if you take the advantage of [the CCC]." In order to develop relationships with the CCC and ensure that they leveraged the connections to cater to their process, students required extensive internal motivation. When asked what advice he may extend to individuals who wanted to go to college, JT concluded: "Basically, I say that people need motivation; they need support to get through what they're doing to get through school if they want to go to college. It's all about motivation." His comments reveal that throughout his own process he

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came to understand the value of support; however, he identified personal drive as the key to success.

In contrast, at BSMHS, Excelerate staff actively pursued students from the first point of engagement through graduation. Keisha discussed how the staff's persistence in getting her engaged proved to her that they were committed to her success. She said,

> I knew of Excelerate. And they told me to come up here millions of times, but I didn't come up here until I actually seen how they really wanted to help me. And how they help with college and stuff. Cause I wanted to be able to do this by myself. [Looking back,] I don't think I would be able to do this [alone].

As a result of their repeated efforts to get her involved with the program, Keisha credited them with her success—a full scholarship to a local private university. The temporal organization of the CCC, which restricted when students were able to connect and participate greatly influenced students' experiences and opportunities as they related to college access.

*Leverage*. Once engaged with the program, students' ongoing interactions with staff yielded diverse experiences based upon their personal goals and corresponding needs. As previously discussed, the CCC and Excelerate served as critical centralized resources, through which students could leverage resources and support. Participants at both schools developed relationships that helped them make sense of the complex requirements of college access. Collectively, students' narratives revealed that upon connecting with both the CCC and Excelerate, they identified gaps in their understanding of what was required to secure admission and enroll in college.

Understanding the bidirectional, dynamic nature of relationships and participations helps to avoid disproportionate placement of onus of participation and resource seeking on students

alone. Given the fact that the majority of students in the present study were among the first in their families to attend college, they frequently lacked a robust network of support throughout the college access process beyond the school. Therefore, the creation of settings in which students and staff interacted with one another created a shared sense of investment and responsibility in students' individual and collective outcomes. Students' participation in a number of college preparatory opportunities resulted from the social norms conveyed across the school and absorbed by students.

**Norms.** Across both schools, students illustrated an evolving school-wide commitment to college-going. This occurred in two primary ways, through a notable school-wide increase in expectations for postsecondary enrollment and the standardization of practices that led students to succeed in securing postsecondary enrollment and making the transition. Students developed their own networks of support within the schools that communicated information about the college access process.

*Expectations.* In order to manipulate schoolwide norms, such as *college for all,* efforts must directly aim to stimulate the beliefs of all stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administrators, institutional agents, students) about the reality of the vision that all students may succeed in their pursuit of postsecondary education. At the core of "expectations"—at both the individual and collective level—is a sense of "prediction and commitment" (Glick and White, 2004, p. 278). Students at both schools portrayed the gradual process of change that preceded the creation of a school-wide college-going norm via the standardization of expectations at the school level.

Participants recalled how both TRHS and BSMHS had long-standing negative reputations in the community, which contradicted their personal experiences. For example, Apris discussed how her pre-existing perceptions of BSMHS initially derailed her aspirations to go to

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college, saying, "I go to a school like BSMHS…None of these people that can go to college."

However, given her experiences at the school—and especially with Excelerate—over time, her personal expectations changed, as did her perception of the school. Similarly, Lynn described what she perceived as antiquated perceptions of TRHS in the community:

> I don't like the whole stereotype of TRHS…[W]hen you see TRHS on the news, they kind of like stereotype us as being terrible people who don't care. But when you actually come into the school, you're actually really surprised. Like I gave a campus tour to a lady who came here from North Carolina. She had never heard of TRHS. She just came, she's looking around the area, and she had her son, and she was actually very impressed. And then she came back and she was like I've heard a lot of bad things about the school, but I don't see bad things. And it's kind of like I don't think people who like have heard the bad things about here have been inside the school and have seen us work.

Similarly, Alexander Strong discussed his hesitation before transferring to BSMHS for his sophomore year. He said,

> Before I got here, people said [BSMHS] was rowdy. I heard rumors that somebody got shot. I heard that there were fights every day…But when I actually got here…it wasn't half as bad as what people said. Like, it was actually a pretty good school. It had some cool people and some of the teachers actually cared.

The disconnect between personal experience at each school and historical reputations signified to students that they were part of an important shift in the school's culture and the expectations. Additionally, students' narratives reflected a change in the expectations of the capacity of students' potential and ability to succeed in college.

Frequently, participants distinguished themselves and their college-bound peers from previous graduates of their respective high schools. Roman characterized this emerging change in the student body at TRHS, saying,

> [W]e were kind of the change of TRHS. When we first came in…[TRHS] was like on the verge of extinction…because the test scores were so low and the graduation rate was so low that when we came in, we had to change…So we were the kind of the ledger line between what was and what is now.

His comments reflect the gradual process of change in schoolwide norms of which students observed themselves as an active part during their four years at the school. Yet, students frequently accounted for extensive variation in the expectations of their peers.

*Practices.* In order to facilitate expectations into outcomes (e.g., college acceptance and enrollment), both schools sought to increase the capacity to cater to the emergent and diverse needs of an inexperienced college-going population. Accordingly, the CCC and Excelerate became woven into the fiber of each school, each becoming synonymous with the practices required to gain admission to college. At BSMHS, Rasta captured students' perceptions of Excelerate and its role in the college access process succinctly, saying, "If you want to go to college, go to Excelerate." Similarly, at TRHS, Ericka credited the CCC staff with her success, saying, "They really have helped me out a lot because if I didn't have them, I probably would go crazy." The two school-based resources, with their unique strengths and limitations, enabled the standardization of practices—from informing the college search to facilitating the completion of applications and scholarships—necessary for students to complete on the path to college. The effectiveness of these practices depended on students' experiences developing relationships and

leveraging those relationships to meet individual and collective needs throughout the college access process.

**Ongoing Challenges to Implementing *College for All***

Participants identified ongoing challenges that they encountered across settings, both within schools and beyond, that threatened schoolwide efforts to create a *college for all* norm. Frequently efforts to spark setting-wide change (e.g., creation of a *college for all* norm) target just one aspect of a setting (e.g., the provision of additional institutional agents), which is anticipated to have a domino effect, triggering change throughout. Critics of *college for all* point to the extensive gaps in the declaration of expectations that all students should pursue postsecondary and resulting gaps in practice to facilitate those goals (Glass & Nygreen, 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001). Previously, I have discussed some elements of the settings, that participants indicated deterred opportunities to effectively leverage school-based resources to meet their needs throughout the college access process. However, it is important to note that both the CCC and Excelerate were embedded in the broader system of public education, which in some ways encouraged and reinforced postsecondary goals for students and in other ways posed obstacles to students' success. In this section, I highlight some of these ongoing challenges.

Temporal contexts informed both schools, dictating the historic rates college access outcomes and present efforts at stimulating change. Historically, there is evidence of stratification of opportunity for students from traditionally underserved college going backgrounds, both within and across schools (Avery & Kane, 2004; Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Participants reflected on the ways in which the broader system of education, at times, limited their opportunities throughout the college access process. Reflecting

on the stratification of educational expectations and opportunity available to students at TRHS, JT discussed the influence of broader, systemic issues, endemic to public schools. He said,

> In public schools…they don't really prepare [for college] you unless you go to a magnet school or private school. It's just that they expect a certain type of score [to prove you are college ready], and some of the score's impossible because as a person you might not be prepared…It's just the education system.

His comments reveal the complex formula of variables, including school types and variation in the embedded resources and opportunities, that affected students' individual and collective preparation for college and subsequent success. France, who transferred to TRHS from Malcolm X, a top performing, selective magnet school in the district, reinforced JT's observation. Comparing the two schools, she said,

> I knew off the top [when I transferred] that TRHS is a different community [than Malcolm X] and I have to just adjust to it. And knowing that this school don't offer the same opportunities Malcolm X does, which means I have to work ten times harder. Which means I have to make sure that I'm on my P's and Q's. I cross my T's and dot my I's.

Her experiences with both schools revealed meaningful gaps in what was available to students and what that, in turn, meant for their path toward college. Lexi echoed the disparities between the selective high schools in the district and TRHS, saying, "At Deray (another high achieving magnet school) and Malcolm X, they push their students to make sure that everything is on time, meeting deadlines and everything. Here they'll tell you, and that's it, you're on your own; it's every man for themselves here." These comments reflect evidence of critical differences in the organizational expectations and capacities between the schools, which not only influenced students' individual outcomes, but the processes that facilitated or obstructed their success.

**Discussion**

Although the goals of *college for all* are universal, previous studies highlight a wide range of practices adopted across settings with the common goal of increasing college-going rates across all student populations (Mazzeo, 2010; Stanton Salazar, 2011). In the present study, students' narratives reflect their experiences at two schools in a district that had recently made increasing postsecondary enrollment a priority for all students. An in-depth assessment of the social processes germane to college access reveals key similarities and differences between the two schools. The findings highlight a number of settings-level factors that dictated the quality of students' experiences throughout the college access process. Additionally, the findings suggest that even in the wake of a schoolwide endorsement of *college for all*, students continued to confront a number of challenges to their successful pursuit of higher education. Figure 2 revisits Seidman and Tseng's (2011) Model of Social Setting Action, and, using the findings of the
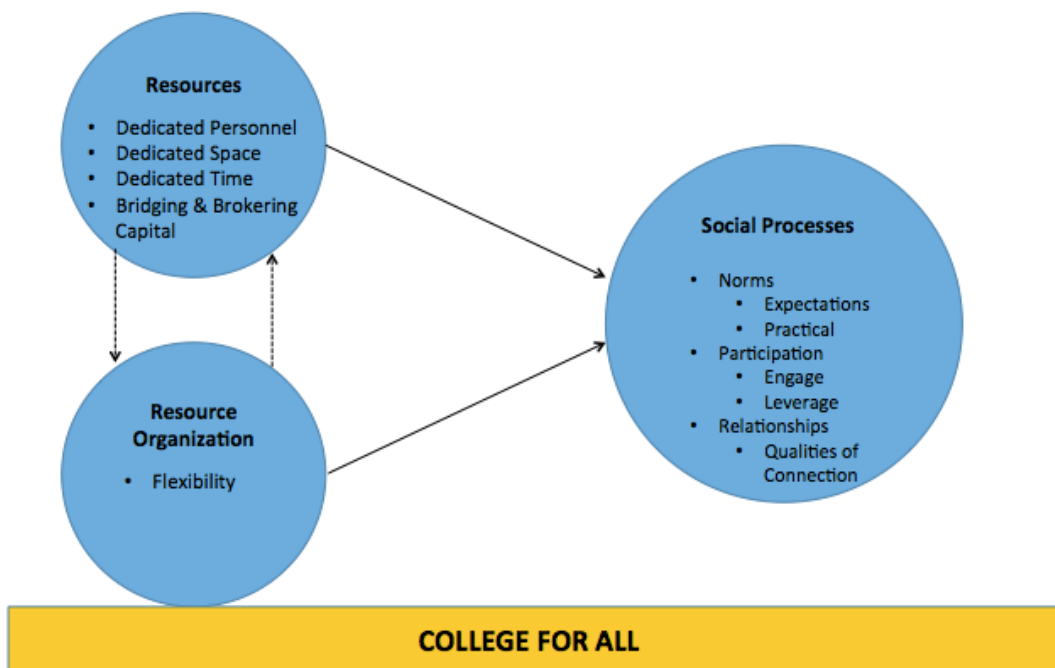


*Figure 2*: A *College for All* application of Seidman & Tseng's Framework for Social Setting Action (2011)

present study, aligns the characteristics of settings pertinent to consider in the development efforts aimed at establishing a *college for all* norm.

In the present study, there are objective similarities in the provision of formalized resources targeted at increasing postsecondary enrollment for all students at both schools. At the surface, students at BSMHS and TRHS had access to a similar range of human, physical, and temporal resources. Both schools contained a designated space—Excelerate and the College and Career Center, respectively—within the school that encouraged college access through the provision of targeted support to aid students throughout the college access process, especially during students' senior year. The findings of the present study confirm previous research, which highlighted the importance of students' access to institutional agents embedded in school settings (Espinoza, 2011; McDonough, 1997, 2005; Stanton Salazar, 2011). In addition to providing site-based support, students discussed how connecting with the formal college access resources at their respective schools introduced the potential to enhance networks of resources and social connections to facilitate the college access process. The social resources proved to be bidirectional: diverse stakeholders, including family members, teachers, and administrators, connected students with the college access program and the programs themselves connected students with external resources and networks, including community organizations and representatives of postsecondary institutions.

Despite evidence that all participants planned to enroll in a college in the fall following graduation, their personal accounts of the college access process revealed variation in the resources, opportunities, and experiences that framed their journey to college. Settings theory emphasizes that, in the absence of more systematic changes, the provision of resources fails to create population-wide change intended by such intervention efforts as those that aim to

reinforce the goals of *college for all* (Maton et al., 2011; Seidman & Tseng, 2011; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). The organization of resources in the context of the school setting influenced the ways in which students had the opportunity to access and mobilize them in order to meet specific needs throughout the college access process. Specifically, the findings suggest the impact of enhancing flexibility in settings, in order to accommodate the diverse needs of students. At BSMHS, flexibility in the organization of resources took a number of forms, including the staff's multi-faceted roles—as college counselor, family member, and friend—and the blurred nature of the physical and temporal boundaries of the program. As a result, students and staff were able to connect, not only for the purpose of tailored support, but also to create reflexive relationships that informed students' experiences throughout the college access process. The temporal resources dictated when students had access to the formal college access supports in their schools, but also reinforced patterns of behaviors within those particular spaces as they related to college, developing the foundations of a *college for all* norm (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). These findings are in line with previous studies, which conclude that youth programming that occurs beyond the organizational boundaries of schools is more likely to build networks for students through which they may access an array of resources relevant to their individual and collective goals (Larson & Angus, 2011).

The effectiveness of the settings-level approaches to implementing *college for all* may be assessed via their impact on the social processes embedded within the settings. Multiple social processes, including relationships, participation in activities, and norms, dictate setting functioning (Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Norms develop through stakeholders' worldview and are reinforced by the norms of other settings and the broader social ecological context (Seidman, 2011; Trickett, 2009). In the present study, students' perceptions of

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changes in norms at the setting level suggest that school-based efforts were effective in enhancing students' expectations for postsecondary education. However, the data suggest a gradual process towards the creation of the broad reach, settings- and systems-wide changes required to provide all students with the information, opportunities, and skills necessary to transition to college successfully. There is evidence of a misalignment between the expectations *for* students (e.g., desire to enroll in college) and the expectations *of* students (e.g., participation in relevant activities). Both schools have continued work to do to ensure that students connect with the relevant resources and opportunities to facilitate their progress towards higher education.

As previous critiques highlight, sweeping declarations of *college for all* often fail to inspire sweeping changes in operations that facilitate a seismic shift in students' experiences (Rosenbaum, 2001). In fact, efforts to implement change that stimulates higher rates of college enrollment via preparation and support may inadvertently displace blame on students from traditionally underserved college-going populations if one ignores the influence of setting-level variables on students' outcomes. Evidence of the disconnect between was reflected in students' narratives, especially at TRHS, who concluded that students who failed to leverage the CCC for support throughout the college access process simply did not try hard enough. This conclusion ignores the various challenges that obstructed many students' pathways to college.

Ultimately, the goal of *college for all* is to shift norms—through the creation of universal expectations and a schoolwide shift in practices catered towards enhancing students' experiences as they prepare for, apply to, and transition into college.

### Limitations

The present study presents an important set of findings; however, it is important to note

existing limitations in the research. First, participation was limited to college-bound students from two public high schools in a midsized city in the southeast. Although the data highlight important trends in the setting-level processes that dictated students' experiences at each school, nature of the sample compromises the generalizability the findings. Additionally, given the tiered nature of postsecondary institutions, future research would benefit from a more comparative study that examines the college access process of students bound for two- versus four-year institutions.

Second, the sample was restricted to college-bound students. Therefore, the findings do not capture the experiences of students who did not plan to enroll in college in the fall after their senior year. Despite these limitations, I believe that the prominent themes that emerged from the data from college-going students from both schools supports the findings presented here.

Finally, the study focuses on the targeted efforts to enhance *college for all* via formal school-based settings. These findings cannot be extrapolated to settings beyond those parameters. To inform practice that extends beyond the school's physical boundaries, additional studies should explore how settings within schools interact to reinforce one another—and existing gaps that may still exist. Additionally, such studies should examine how connections may be made across settings to streamline the support of students' pursuits of postsecondary education.

**Conclusion**

The findings of the present study highlight the settings level factors that influence students' success in pursuing postsecondary education amidst emerging efforts to stimulate *college for all*. Taking a settings-level approach allowed for a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of school-based characteristics that combined to both facilitate and obstruct their

paths to college. This information introduces for nuanced assessment of how educational stratification continues to manifest even amidst settings in which. Collectively, the findings reveal that efforts to create a school environment saturated by the *college for all* norm, the practice-based norms must also change, shifting students' opportunities and experiences as they relate to college. Given the increased diversification of the student population who desires to attend college, schools must work to identify and fill gaps in support otherwise not experiences by more privileged counterparts.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

A college degree is the surest ticket to the middle class. It is the key to getting a good job that pays a good income -- and to provide you the security where even if you don't have the same job for 30 years, you're so adaptable and you have a skill set and the capacity to learn new skills, it ensures you're always employable. And that is the key not just for individual Americans, that's the key for this whole country's ability to compete in the global economy.

- President Barack Obama, 2015

**General Summary**

With expanded efforts to increase access to college occurring across the United States, endorsed across sectors from the schoolhouse to the White House, there is evidence of a corresponding increase in the diversity in the college-going population. There are historic rates of low income, minority, and first generation college-going students enrolled in higher education; however, there is ongoing evidence of stratification in both college access and college success (Musu-Gillette, Robinson, McFarland, KewalRamani, Zhang, & Wilkinson-Flicker, 2016). The path to college is laden with a complex series of academic, financial, and extracurricular decisions that cumulatively serve as the foundation for postsecondary eligibility, acceptance, and success (Klasik, 2012; McDonough, 2005). Sweeping policy efforts often obscure the influence of students' collective experiences, both within school and beyond, on informing postsecondary outcomes. Students from traditionally underserved college-going populations have unique experiences within and across multiple settings (e.g., home, school, community) as compared to students from more privileged backgrounds, which meaningfully influences behaviors and outcomes.

This dissertation contributes to the extant college access literature in several ways. First in Chapter 2, I summarize the college access literature and introduce a new theoretical

framework, the Ecological Model of College Access. The updated model seeks to synthesize the

multilevel factors that may influence students' successful pursuit of higher education by

assessing the dynamic nature of the college access process over time and across settings.

Additionally, it introduces a multidimensional concept of support that serves as the foundation of

students' experiences throughout the process. With the introduction of the Ecological Model of

College Access, I consider the impact of the complex, interactive experiences of youth

throughout the college access process. In Chapters III and IV, I employ aspects of this complex

model to drive empirical studies examining students' experiences of support throughout the

college access process and the influence of settings in determining the success of efforts to

expand practices aimed at implementing a schoolwide *college for all* norm. I summarize the

findings of each chapter in the following sections.

## Expanding the College Access Framework

As efforts to expand postsecondary education for all students have emerged, research

efforts have exposed the limitations of existing theoretical models (e.g., Hossler & Gallagher,

1987). Existing theoretical models were developed using data that focused, nearly exclusively,

on empirical efforts that examined the experiences of white, middle and upper class men. As a

result, three assumptions embedded in previous models limited the applicability to increasingly

diverse college-going populations: acontextuality, linearity, and access to perfect information.

The Ecological Model of College Access, presented in Chapter 2, introduces a more dynamic

understanding of the college access process. The updated model accounts for additional factors

that may influence students' success throughout the college access process. Additionally, it

allows scholars and practitioners to adopt an enhanced understanding of support as a complex

phenomenon. The model highlights the ways in which students' access to formal and informal

support helps them to interpret myriad messages and connect with resources pertinent to the pursuit of higher education. The expanded lens of the model draws attention to the multilevel factors that influence students' behaviors and choice related to college. Although the model is complex—consisting of the interrelated elements of time, place, and support—it forces one to reexamine the primary assumptions that traditionally drive research and practice—and are essential to understand the experiences of diverse college-going populations.

## Summary of Evidence

Next, I present the major findings of Chapters 3 and 4, which empirically examine students' experiences throughout the college access process. Specifically, I highlight the types of support that emerged as the most salient throughout each phase of the college access process and the ways that these instances of support manifested via students' relationships (Chapter 3). I also illustrate the elements of settings that support—and at times obstruct—the development of a schoolwide *college for all* norm (Chapter 4). Using a settings theory lens (Tseng & Seidman, 2007), I examine how resources, their organization, and the ensuing social processes combine to influence students' experiences throughout the college access process. Both chapters used the data from 54 college bound, high school seniors who attended two schools in the same district, which had recently adopted an increased commitment to expanding college access and readiness for all students.

### Scaffolding Support Throughout the College Access Process

In considering the path to college as a series of interdependent steps, students relied on the multiple dimensions of support in order to successfully convert college aspirations into college admission and plans for enrollment. The findings highlight the need for a scaffolded approach to supporting students throughout the college access process. In creating a temporally

sensitive approach to support, one is able to meet students where they are and help to construct a process orientation towards the college access process that connects students' short-term actions with their long-term college and career goals.

However, students prioritized relationships that were built on a core foundation of care, trust, and mutual respect. With the presence of these qualities, students were more likely to engage with and leverage relationships within their networks to access relevant resources and support. Thus, the findings presented herein highlight the importance of the qualities of students' relationships in addition to their potential embedded resources and support. Settings proved to influence students' opportunities to build meaningful relationships, especially as dictated by the embedded norms

**The Mediating Effect of Settings on Evolving *College for All* Norms**

The findings of Chapter 4 confirmed previous studies conducted in educational settings, which suggest that in order to stimulate higher order change, intervention efforts must take into consideration the settings in which they are implemented. Specific efforts to increase college enrollment may take a number of different forms within a school setting. The findings highlight that increasing the availability of personnel whose sole professional responsibility centered around college access may initiate change. However, in order to maximize impact, intervention efforts must consider the organizational placement of those resources and the embedded social processes that may engage or obstruct students' participation. Students' experiences at the two schools highlighted differences in experience that may occur based upon the organization of resources in context and the resulting social processes. Collectively, the findings reveal that in order to create a school environment saturated by a *college for all* norm, the practice-based norms must also change, integrating students' opportunities and experiences as they relate to

college into the fiber of the school's functioning. The data suggests that increasing the flexibility of formal college access spaces and the roles of the operating personnel enhances opportunities to enable a settings-level norm, but also cater to the varied needs of students.

Given the increased diversification of the student population who desire to attend college, schools must work to identify and fill gaps in support otherwise not experienced by more privileged counterparts. The findings focus, specifically, on school-based, formal settings for college access; however, collectively, they demonstrate the importance of accounting for setting-level factors when planning for efforts to expand college access. Taking a settings-level approach allowed for a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of school-based characteristics that combined to both facilitate and obstruct their paths to college (Foster Fishman et al., 2007).

### Implications for Future Intervention, Policy, and Research

As more students aspire to college than ever before, schools must work in partnership with other relevant stakeholders in order to coordinate the provision of resources and skills required to make the transition successfully. Previously, critics of *college for all* have pointed to meaningful gaps in practice that disproportionately affect students from traditionally underserved college-going populations (e.g., Rosenbaum, 2001). The findings of the present dissertation highlight the complexity of the college access process and the potential influence of students' diverse networks that span social ecological settings. Traditional approaches to enhancing college access, such as implementing universal college preparatory academics frequently fall short due to students' diverse skill levels and limitations in the support structures required to promote success (Mazzeo, 2010). As postsecondary education continues to be touted as the key to social mobility, policies and practices must address the complex needs of students in a holistic way that eschews assumptions. The focus of policies and practices must shift from individual

students to developing and sustaining settings that foster their development towards college.

**Implications for Future Intervention & Policy**

The findings in the present dissertation highlight the need for updated approaches to creating a *college for all* norm that not only fosters universal expectations, but provides students with scaffolded opportunities that help facilitate their goals. A decree of *college for all* is limited in its capacity to alter students' experiences in meaningful ways. Instead, schools must consider college access as an interconnected process that cumulatively prepares students to apply to and succeed in college, as opposed to a series of discrete events.

Additionally, the empirical studies highlight the antiquated nature of the traditional guidance counseling model and its role in college access. Due to competing responsibilities, counselors are often forced to triage their caseloads, and, as a result, students frequently suffer. As schools commit to building a *college for all* norm, they must go beyond traditional approaches and create alternative spaces within or adjacent to their schools that supply students with the timely delivery of support throughout the college access process. The findings suggest that schools would benefit from identifying internal resources to supplement current practices and engaging local assets, including community programs and churches, with which to forge organizational connections and link students.

Ultimately, students must have access to settings that have embedded resources and opportunities relevant to the pursuit of postsecondary education. Streamlining support, as such, will facilitate the process for students, providing a setting in which to develop meaningful relationships, exposing them with timely information and assistance, and buffering potential obstacles from across settings as they arise. Comprehensive approaches must aim to inspire students' sense of personal agency to fuel success throughout the college access process while

providing the structures to enable success via scaffolded support. Within a current "policyscape" (Mettler, 2014) that expects schools to adopt many approaches to educational change simultaneously (e.g., proficiency based education, block scheduling), *college for all* must be presented as corresponding—not competing—policy priority.

**Implications for Future Research**

While the present dissertation makes a meaningful contribution to the literature with the expanded examination of students' experiences on the path to college, it fails to address a second emergent gap, that between college access and college success. Despite historic rates of postsecondary enrollment across all student populations, the proportion of students who graduate from college has remained stagnant over time. Future research would benefit from an increased focus on the wraparound resources that facilitate students' postsecondary journey. Castleman and his colleagues (2012, 2014) have identified promising practices in encouraging students to matriculate in college in the fall after graduation, stemming what they termed the "summer melt." These include broad reach, low touch interventions, such as digital messaging, tailored around important deadlines that increase students' likelihood of enrollment (e.g., course selection, tuition payments). Future research should seek to build on these promising findings, and their potential role in buffering risk of dropout, especially early on in the college experience. Continued efforts are required to examine how students' experiences with support across settings influence their short- and long-term success, following college admission. To date, the majority of studies fail to bridge students' high school and college experiences, therefore, longitudinal studies would significantly strengthen the field.

Additionally, across the United States, many states, including Tennessee, Oregon, and Rhode Island, have implemented initiatives to make community colleges free for recent high

school graduates. Although such efforts may have an important impact on the absolute numbers of students enrolling in higher education, additional research will be required to understand students' experiences throughout the college decision-making process and their success in pursuing both two- and four-year degrees. While "free college" initiatives are aimed at increasing equity in enrollment through the provision of low-cost postsecondary options, critics note that they may add to the intensive tiering in postsecondary admissions, which reinforces the historical enrollment patterns of highly selective, predominantly white institutions (Avery & Hoxby, 2013; Reardon, Baker, & Klasik, 2012). Future studies must adopt a settings-level lens to investigating postsecondary selection and performance, in order to examine the effect of equitable intentions of such initiatives.

**Conclusion**

In the United States, a postsecondary credential serves as a key tool for future economic success and social stability. By the tenth grade, nearly all high school students aspire to enroll in college; yet, approximately two-thirds go on to enroll, with students from traditionally underserve college-going populations doing so at substantially lower rates than their more privileged peers. This dissertation illuminates a range of factors that manifest within and across settings that combine to influence students' progression towards higher education. The Ecological Model of College Access highlights the multi-level nature of college access. Students from all backgrounds benefit from well-tailored, scaffolded support as they connect their college aspirations to enrollment. In order to enhance equity in postsecondary access, intervention efforts must aim to change settings-level norms and practices, such that students are able to maximize opportunities to leverage assistance throughout the process. Additionally, policy efforts to enhance *college for all* must emphasize essential shifts in not only the provision of resources

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targeted at enhancing college access, but their organization and administration within school settings and beyond, such that they modify the social processes that undergird students' preparation to make the transition to college.

# Semi-structured Interview Protocol

**Social Network Analysis Protocol**

1. Have you decided what you will be doing after graduation?
   a. How did you make this choice?

2. When did you decide you wanted to go to college?
   a. Probe this question extensively. Who has been important in encouraging college aspirations and making them seem like a realistic opportunity? How did s/he/they do that?
   b. Why do you want to continue going to school after high school?

3. How far would you like to go in school? (AA, BA, Masters degree, Professional degree [JD, Ph.D., MD])

4. Envision your life when you're 30, describe it to me.

5. Has anyone in your family gone to college?
   a. Have any other important people in your life attended college?
   b. Do you have any friends who are currently in college?
   c. Have you spoken with them about their experiences at all?

6. Since you've been in high school, have you participated in any college preparatory programs?
   a. If yes, probe extensively. Where? When? What kind of activities? How did you find out about the program? If no longer involved, why not?

7. While you were deciding where you wanted to apply to and go to college, did you…
   For these questions, if yes, when? With whom?

   a. Attend a college fair?
   b. Speak to representatives from colleges? (be specific)
   c. Visit a college in Tennessee?
   d. Visit a college outside of Tennessee?
   e. Take a practice ACT?
   f. Take an ACT preparatory course?
   g. Attend a college prep program?
   h. Used college guidebooks?
   i. Looked at college's website?
   j. Attended a financial aid workshop?

8. What are most of your friends doing after high school graduation?

a. If attending most will also be attending college, probe about if they shared information throughout the process at all? If they influenced one another? If yes, how so?

9. Do you believe that your high school prepared you to make the transition into college?
    a. Probe this question extensively? How so? How not? What would you change?
    b. Are there any particular teachers who were helpful? How so?
    c. Are there any places in the school that you could go to secure information about college? (i.e. guidance counselor's office)

10. When you applied, did you have a dream school?
    a. If yes: Why was this school it?

11. How did you determine which schools to apply to? Where did you apply?
    a. Probe this question extensively. Did they visit the campuses? Speak to a representative? Check out the website? How did they capitalize on these opportunities? Was there anyone who helped you make those decisions? How so?
    b. How did you pay for your applications (parents, vouchers, other)? Did application fees impact your decision as to where you applied?
    c. Where did you get into?
    d. How did you decide which college to go to?

12. What do you wish you had known about applying to college before you started?
    a. Follow up: if you were to give the younger students advice as to what they need to do to be sure that they are successful in applying to college, what would you say? (probe specifically: to a freshman? To someone who is going to be a senior next year?)

13. What are you most excited about for college? What are you most nervous about?

14. Who do you think you will reach out to for support in college?
    a. Probe this question. Different types of support: instrumental, informational, emotional.

15. Did you complete a FAFSA?
    a. If yes, where? Who helped?
    b. What was the outcome?
    c. How will you pay for college?

16. Did you apply for any scholarships?
    a. Which ones?
    b. How did you learn about them?

17. Do you plan on working when you are in college?
    a. How will you try to find a job?

APPENDIX B

**Social Network Analysis Protocol**

In this activity, we are going to explore the people who helped you or provided you with support throughout the process of learning about, applying to, and selecting your post-graduation plans. I am going to ask you a number of follow up questions about each person.

1. List the names of all of the people who helped you or provided you with support throughout the process of learning about, applying to, and selecting your post-graduation plans.

    a. For each person list their **relationship to you, age, race**

    b. Place a **red star** next to each person who you go to school with or who is associated with your school in any way (teachers, coaches, counselors, etc)

2. For each person who has gone to a postsecondary institution (college, graduate school, community college, technical school, etc) or for your friends who are your age and are *planning* on attending a postsecondary institution draw a **blue star** next to their initials (if the person has graduated, **please circle the star**)

3. For each person who lives in your neighborhood, place a **green star** next to their initials

4. Connect a **red line** from your self to each person who provided you with information about college

    a. Probe about the specific activities (websites, guidebooks, took on college visit)

5. Connect a **green line** from yourself to each person who provided you with assistance in applying to college (completing applications, editing essays, writing a recommendation)

6. Connect a **purple line** from yourself to each person who provided you with assistance in securing financial aid (helped to complete the FAFSA, told you about scholarships, helped complete applications, etc)

7. Connect an **orange line** from yourself to each person who provided you with assistance in picking which schools to apply to.

8. Place **a yellow star** next to the people who helped you decide on which school you will be attending.

9. Connect a **pink line** from yourself to each person who provided you with emotional support throughout the application and selection process.

10. Connect a **brown line** from yourself to each person who provided you with any other types of support or assistance.

    a. Be sure to clarify what that was.

11. Draw a **blue line** from yourself to any person to whom you provided any type of support.

    a. Probe what that was

12. Of all the people that you've listed here, select the **three most important/influential/helpful** people who helped you throughout the process.

    a. Probe why these three?

13. With the **black marker** connect all of the people that you listed on the sheet who know each other.

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