

**CAN HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATORS BRIDGE THE GAP?:  
THE ROLE OF TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS IN IMPROVING MINORITY  
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION VIA EFFECTIVE  
MESSAGE CONSTRUCTION**

A Thesis

by

ALEXANDRA NATALIA NICOLE SCHUUR SOUSA

Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Chair of Committee, J. Kevin Barge  
Committee Members, Srividya Ramasubramanian  
Patricia Lynch

Head of Department, J. Kevin Barge

August 2016

Major Subject: Communication

Copyright 2016 Alexandra Natalia Nicole Schuur Sousa

## **ABSTRACT**

The central aim of this thesis is to explore the types of messages that high school educators construct and whether or not they are appropriate for minority student groups. Appropriate in this instance is assessed by whether or not teachers and counselors address the relevant needs and barriers of their diverse student bodies. This topic was explored through three in-depth case studies of high schools in central Texas. Teachers and counselors from three school districts were interviewed to learn more about their perceptions regarding their students' barriers to higher education and how messages about college are designed to combat them.

Results of the individual case studies revealed interesting themes regarding message source, content and initiation, as well as contextual factors that impact message production and reception. High school educators tended to promote colorblindness and lacked recognition of intersectionality when it came to the barriers faced by their diverse student bodies, which impacted the messages they disseminated about higher education. However, most teachers and counselors also tended to favor messages that were individualized to each student, as opposed to one-size-fits-all. Educators saw their role as giving both informational and motivational messages about college, although how this manifested itself in each school district varied. A comparison of the three case studies led to the design of a practical model for message design and recommendations for future research.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION.....	1
The State of the Education System .....	2
Barriers to Higher Education.....	6
Creating Meaning Through Messages .....	10
Research Questions .....	14
Rationale and Significance.....	15
Roadmap of Thesis.....	17
CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW.....	19
Minority Achievement .....	20
The Role of Teachers and Counselors in the High School Context.....	23
Ogbu’s Cultural-Ecological Theory .....	35
Social Constructionism .....	48
Conclusion .....	51
CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY.....	53
Qualitative Methods and Researcher Positionality .....	53
Defining Key Terms.....	56
Study Design and Data Collection .....	58
Data Analysis .....	67
CHAPTER IV DISTRICT A .....	71
Research Site.....	72
RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies? .....	75

RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do the messages make? .....	85
RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about college to diverse student bodies? .....	95
Discussion .....	99
CHAPTER V DISTRICT B .....	110
Research Site .....	111
RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies? .....	115
RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do the messages make? .....	124
RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about college to diverse student bodies? .....	132
Discussion .....	138
CHAPTER VI DISTRICT C .....	145
Research Site .....	146
RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies? .....	150
RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do the messages make? .....	165
RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about college to diverse student bodies? .....	171
Discussion .....	177
CHAPTER VII DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	184
Case Study Comparison .....	185
A Practical Model for Message Design.....	200
Implications and Future Research .....	208
Limitations .....	214
Conclusion .....	216
REFERENCES.....	218
APPENDIX A .....	229
APPENDIX B .....	231

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1 Ogbu’s Cultural-Ecological Theory .....	38
Figure 2 A Proposed Model for the Design of Messages About Higher Education for Underrepresented Groups.....	206

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1 Demographic Information for School Districts.....	61
Table 2 Demographic Information for Participants .....	63
Table 3 Key Themes for District A .....	74
Table 4 Key Themes for District B .....	113
Table 5 Key Themes for District C .....	148
Table 6 Case Study Comparison .....	186

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The higher education system is an arena for contestation, particularly in regards to issues of diversity. Although student bodies are slowly becoming more racially diverse, schools typically remain internally segregated (Muller et al., 2010, p. 2). As Muller et al. (2010) explain, "This indicates not only that minority students are being given fewer opportunities to learn, but also that they are subject to institutional messages about the different academic roles and expectations that pertain to them" (p. 2). Such an environment discourages individuals who don't fit the mold for the type of students the system is designed. Student perceptions of the higher education system form early in life, with the high school years being an important time for receiving messages about college that inform serious decision making about their educational futures. Factors such as alienation, minimal encouragement and lack of knowledge about the college selection processes muddle these decisions (Elam & Brown, 2005). If minority students receive messages that are unfit for combatting these barriers, they may see college as an unrealistic and unattainable dream.

The purpose of my thesis is to analyze the role that high school teachers and academic counselors play in promoting the collegiate aspirations of minority students. This topic has been covered thoroughly in other fields, particularly the field of education, as the importance of a positive interpersonal relationship between teacher and student has been well documented (Thijs & Fleischmann, 2015; Maulana et al., 2013;

den Brok et al., 2004). However, relatively little is known about the specific communication processes that occur between teachers and students or counselors and students and how their discourse about college impacts students' perceptions and ambitions regarding the higher education system. Therefore, my specific focus is on the *types of messages* teachers and counselors construct about college for diverse student bodies and their appropriateness and effectiveness. Appropriate and effective messages are those that address the barriers to college that students experience by helping reduce uncertainty about the process of applying and attending college (Hammer et al., 1998).

My goal is to determine how high school educators may construct messages about college and how these messages can play a positive role in bridging the gap between minority students and the higher education system. If appropriate and effective messaging is found to be an important tool for teachers and counselors to help reduce their minority students' uncertainty about the higher education system, then college may not seem so unreachable to students and more would take the leap and apply or attend.

### **The State of the Education System**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), as of Fall 2012, 49% of students enrolled in a public elementary or secondary school were racial/ethnic minorities. Hispanic students are the most prominent of minority groups, constituting 24% of the population, followed by Black students at 16%. Asian/Pacific Islanders, American Indian/Alaska Native and/or those who are of two or more races



comprise about 9% of the student population. The number of minority students enrolled in public elementary or secondary schools is expected to increase as minority students are projected to become the majority, constituting 54% of the student population, in less than 10 years (NCES, 2014).

The increasing diversity of student populations makes it important for educators to create learning environments that are meaningful and supportive for minority students seeking a higher education. Latino and Black students particularly have some of the highest dropout rates because they feel alienated by the education system. The prospect of higher education seems bleak even for those who make it through high school. High schools are often the only sources of information about college for minority youth and are essential for "academic preparation, social support, access to information, parental involvement and knowledge about college and financial aid" (Martinez & Klopott, 2005, p. 5). If these resources are not provided to students of color, their motivation to seek a higher degree diminishes. Martinez and Klopott (2005) recognize that high school students not only need access to a rigorous and competitive academic environment, but one that also provides additional supportive resources that help meet the needs of students from different backgrounds in order to foster success. However, these needs are rarely being met for minority students.

Providing minority youth these kinds of experiences is not only beneficial to the students, but to the education system in general. As our world becomes increasingly globalized and interconnected, we need to foster graduates and professionals who are more culturally and racially sensitive and informed. As Elam & Brown (2005)

emphasize:

All students who enter institutions of higher education must be prepared to excel in a diverse, global and inter-dependent society. They must understand, appreciate, and value contributions of different peoples from divergent backgrounds...Colleges and universities should be equipped to provide such multicultural educational opportunities, and bring students of diverse backgrounds together for discourse and interaction. (p. 15)

Making the higher education system more inclusive has important national and global implications. As Brustein (2007) boldly claims, “It is time to sound the alarm for ‘internationalized’ education at U.S. institutions of higher learning” (p. 382). Stewart (2007) points out that most major companies have overseas interests and today’s workforce needs to be more internationally competent. And that begins by creating a curriculum expands world knowledge and global competence. She also adds that changing demographics in the U.S. makes this educational shift necessary because “knowledge of other cultures will help students understand and respect classmates from different countries and will promote effective leadership abroad” (Stewart, 2007, p. 9). Brustein (2007) agrees that the world has changed rapidly and adds, “Without global competence our students will be ill-prepared for global citizenship, lacking the skills required to address our national security needs, and unable to compete successfully in the global marketplace” (p. 382).

High school achievement and the pursuit of a college education are valued highly in the United States and research consistently shows that high school educators can play

a positive role in counteracting racial and ethnic barriers of minority students. However, Sosa and Gomez (2012) found in their study of Latino students that "these supports are often absent from students' experiences in their schools and communities, leaving them to cope on their own with added challenges of institutional and systemic barriers" (p. 883). Research from the late 1980s recognized that "teachers' beliefs about the abilities of ethnic minority children were generally lower than were ability beliefs for majority children" (McKown & Weinstein, 2002, p. 161). Differential perceptions of students can negatively impact teachers' engagement with minority groups, which can be incredibly detrimental to the academic experiences and achievement of minority students.

Minority children from immigrant families (a considerably growing population in the United States) have their own unique set of barriers and face an even more difficult struggle in school. Beyond linguistic barriers, immigrant students are confronted with problems regarding formal curriculum, legal status, and an anti-immigrant climate within schools (Hilburn, 2014, pp. 675-676). And focusing on linguistic barriers alone (including an emphasis on ESL programs) only accounts for part of the problem (Hilburn, 2014, p. 655). Riegle and Warsame (2012) contend, "The curriculum must present authentic opportunities to learn about and from those cultures and groups who historically have been marginalized and constructed as 'Other,' while concurrently problematizing the reality of structural determinants" (p. 5). Teachers need to adapt to the many needs of underrepresented students.

## **Barriers to Higher Education**

John Ogbu began his study of minority student achievement in the 1970's and originally spent his time researching differences between students from minority and dominant groups. This work led him to the conclusion that differences in achievement were based on "the treatment of minority groups in society at large and in school, as well as by the perceptions of the minorities and their responses to school due to such treatment (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 155). Eventually, he started to recognize not only patterned differences between dominant and minority students, but also between different minority groups. Ogbu's *cultural-ecological theory* recognizes that minority achievement in school is not only dictated by the education system ("the system"), but also influential "community forces" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 156). Societal and cultural experiences combine to create novel experiences for each minority group and all play a role in how students perceive and adjust within the education system.

“Community forces” account for minority students’ perceptions and beliefs about school and are influenced by community factors, including parents. “The system” consists of treatments of minorities in school, societal educational policies and practices, and societal rewards for educational accomplishments. These three factors also provide a strong framework for articulating and examining the barriers minority groups face when accessing higher education.

### ***Treatment of Minorities in School***

Because I am interested in the communication that occurs between high school educators and their diverse student bodies, many of the barriers that become relevant for this study are those that limit minority students *within* schools. As Ogbu and Simons (1998) contend, “the treatment of minorities in the wider society is reflected in their treatment in education” (p. 161). Discrimination within schools can take several forms and is more likely to occur in schools with greater ethnic diversity (Benner & Graham, 2011). In their study of Latino adolescents’ experiences with discrimination in high school, Benner and Graham (2011) found that discrimination can be overt, but can also manifest itself more subtly “in such practices as academic tracking, retention in grade, and teacher expectations” (p. 509). Unfortunately, they also found that discrimination can lead to negative perceptions of the school’s climate and can impact minority students’ educational outcomes (Benner & Graham, 2011).

Educators, as important sources of information, have the overwhelming task of understanding how structural and cultural barriers coalesce, in order to combat them in a way that makes education more equitable. Although Ogbu's theory is not pedagogical in nature, he has made recommendations as to how teachers can help improve minority student achievement by building trust and creating a more culturally responsive curriculum that "explicitly deal[s] with opposition/ambivalence," creates high standards and expectations for all students, and finds ways to involve parents and the community (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, pp. 180-182). Current literature has also highlighted the role that

peers and parents can play in academic achievement. These factors, however, put even more responsibility into the hands of educators who to some extent must also manage these additional relationships.

The ability for teachers and counselors to create a set of conditions to encourage students of underrepresented groups toward higher education becomes even more complex when one recognizes that "the system" that Ogbu identified also may not be giving them the necessary support. Teachers and counselors often have to work within certain constraints mandated by the education system and this could potentially impact the effectiveness of the relationships they build with their diverse student bodies.

### ***Societal Educational Policies & Practices***

The education system in the United States also places constraints on students, particularly those from marginalized groups, and teachers. What becomes particularly salient for this study is state standardized tests and postsecondary preparedness requirements. Standardized tests have long been criticized for being unfit measures of intelligence and aptitude, especially for minority students. As Phillips contends, "Standardized tests are biased" (p. 52). Biases such as sex, race, and wealth should not affect test scores, but this is exactly what happens in our current system. She adds, "For the most part, standardized multiple choice tests are culturally biased in favor of the culture toward which the test is directed- the mainstream White culture" (Phillips, 2006, p. 52). Au (2009) agrees and argues that little change has been made in standardized

testing since No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Research continues to point to the fact that “standardized testing increase achievement gaps in education rather than close them, and thus contribute to increased educational inequality” (Au, 2009, p. 65).

This also affects teachers and the curricular liberty they have in the classroom. With an overemphasis on standardized testing, teachers are often limited to teaching core material that will be tested on (Au, 2009). As Au adds:

Since multicultural, anti-racist perspectives and content are not deemed legitimate by the tests, the end result is that, within high-stakes testing environments, multicultural, anti-racist perspectives and content are not being included in the curriculum. (p. 66)

Standardized testing is limiting the topics and material that can be covered in class and to some extent, takes the creativity out of teaching. Achievement gaps will continue to persist if testing is not reformed (Phillips, 2006). What is taught in the classroom may also continue to suffer.

### ***Societal Rewards for Educational Accomplishments***

Societal rewards are those that “society gives to minorities for their school credentials, especially in employment and wages” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 161). And while there are documented differences between those given to minority groups, as opposed to dominant groups, it is the impediments to secondary education that are important in this study. If motivated minority students do not advance to higher

education, it eliminates the opportunity for any societal rewards and seriously deters employment opportunities. There have been shifts within our society that have made a college education an "important stepping stone for reaching and maintaining a middle-or upper-class lifestyle" (White & Ali-Khan, 2013, p. 24). The menial jobs typically reserved for the undereducated are also continuing to decrease, leaving minority youth in a compromising position, even for those who aren't currently considering a college education (Fallon, 1997).

These three major factors combine with “community forces” to impact achievement and social adjustment of minority students. Although Ogbu’s theory does not serve as a formal theoretical framework within this study, it’s a very important reservoir of information that is beneficial to understanding the position of minority students within U.S. schools and assessing whether the messages received and disseminated by high school educators reflect and address the barriers that stand between minority students and the higher education system.

### **Creating Meaning Through Messages**

A high school functions as an *organization*, which the Cambridge Dictionary defines as “a group of people who work together in an organized way for a shared purpose” (“Organization”). Schools have a clear hierarchy of members, with administration at the top and students at the bottom, and hold the shared purpose to educate and be educated. Communication becomes an essential tool for maintaining



these organizational goals. Conrad and Poole (2005) view organizational communication as strategic discourse and define it as “a process through which people, acting together, create, sustain, and manage meanings through the use of verbal and nonverbal signs and symbols within a particular context” (p. 4). Falkheimer (2014) adds, “Communication is the foundation for all organizations and their activities” (p. 125). Teachers and counselors are considered leaders within the high school context and become important sources of information for students. However, educators need to make conscious decisions about what information to give, how to give it, and when to give it.

Educators need to be conscious of these factors because creating a comfortable environment is not only important for students academic success and enjoyment, but also their ease in approaching superiors for help. Creating strong relationships with students is also important for educators. Falkheimer (2014) cites the work of Weick and Giddens who emphasize the importance of communication on formal and informal interpersonal relationships and the social structure of organizations. The interpersonal relationships between teachers/counselors and students within high schools becomes particularly important for this study and have the potential to change the communication choices educators make when disseminating messages about higher education.

However, having a racially and ethnically diverse organization complicates communication. As Allen (1995) explains:

Stereotypes and expectations based upon others’ race-ethnicity may impede effective interaction; and, differences in value systems and cultural norms may influence attitudes, expectations, perceptions, and language behaviors. (p. 148)

As high schools become increasingly diverse, educators need to adjust their communication tactics. In order to construct effective messages, it's important to consider the different values and backgrounds of those who they are intended for.

### ***Messaging and Social Constructionism***

Miller (2005, p. 104) explains, "There is little doubt that the processes involved in producing messages are central to communicative interaction" and research on communication has continued to emphasize the importance of messaging. Petrovici (2012) adds, "The message is the core of all human communication, because it represents the meaning and the significance that are being conveyed between the source and the receiver" (p. 1023). Therefore, communication is more than just transmitting a message; it is what allows us to create meaning of our environment (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Burr (2015) contends, "It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated" (p. 4). Educators and students likewise create meaning through their interactions with one another and messaging becomes a central part of this relationship.

There are different theoretical perspectives from which to assess messaging and its relationship to meaning making. Social constructionism is particularly relevant to this thesis, as it helps to explain how people make sense of their world and collectively make meaning. Allen (2012) explains, "Social constructionists assert that meaning arises from social systems rather than from individual members of society" (p. 35). From an

organizational perspective, Miller (2015) adds that social constructivism “argues that reality (and an organization, for instance, as part of that reality) is not an objective thing but is, instead, an intersubjective construction created through communication” (p. 83).

As Burr (2015) concludes:

It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world. It therefore opposes what is referred to as positivism and empiricism, epistemological positions that are characteristic of the “hard” sciences such as physics and biology. (p. 2)

Because it emphasizes social interaction, “it is unsurprising that social constructionism recognizes the fundamental role of language and communication” (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, p. 174). Language does not describe reality; it constitutes it (Allen, 2005; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Burr, 2015). It is the communication in the form of messages within social interactions that help individuals make sense of their environment. Through the process of constructing messages with each other, teachers, counselors, and students makes sense of their complex roles and create frameworks for understanding what is possible in the future and what is not.

## **Research Questions**

Existing literature has confirmed that high school educators play an important role in the successes of their minority students (Li & Hasan, 2010; Williams, 2011). Effective communication between these two groups could also potentially have an important impact on achievement for these students, yet little research in the communication discipline has tackled this topic. Taking an in-depth look at the messages about college that teachers and academic counselors construct for their diverse student bodies will help us to learn more about the barriers they perceive students facing and what kinds of messages they feel may be appropriate and effective to combat these barriers. It's also important to consider the impacts the education system has on the educators themselves and whether there are certain constraints or a lack of resources that influence the way teachers and counselors can communicate about higher education to their students. In order to evaluate these problems, this study is informed by three research questions:

RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?

RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do these messages make?

RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about colleges to diverse student bodies?

## **Rationale and Significance**

This study extends earlier work by looking at the communication that occurs between high school educators and their students, in order to determine the effects of message construction on minority students' perceptions of the higher education system. This relationship has been studied extensively in other fields, including communication. Previous research has touched on the importance of supportive communication within the home and school for “at-risk” students, discourses of parental involvement, and strengthening communication between schools and homes (Rosenfeld & Richman, 1999; Barge & Loges, 2003; Musial, 2014). Strom and Boster (2007) conducted a meta-analysis about the relationship between supporting messages and educational attainment that suggests parent participation in school, parent-child interactions and student-teacher interactions about school have notable effects on school completion. However, research has not yet looked at how communication can be used by teachers *and* counselors to address the barriers experienced by minority students and how culture, community and the education system interact to form or deter aspirations regarding college. Specifically, the purpose of this thesis is to explore the role that high school teachers and academic counselors can play in creating a more equitable learning environment through message construction.

Many resources about postsecondary education exist in high schools, yet the importance of dialogue and message construction is currently being overlooked as a tool for helping marginalized students apply and attend college. Teachers and counselors are

a central resource for this type of information, but they also play quite a few other roles within the high school system. They provide critical information to students (even beyond the curriculum), manage communication between the school and parents and are also responsible for managing relationships between students and their peers.

Communication plays a central role within each of these contexts and because these tasks are so critical to creating an effective learning environment, research should strive to learn more about the communication processes that occur and how they shape the meaning making process.

However, it should also be noted that teachers are not solely responsible for what happens within the classroom and research. It is important to consider the way context may influence the way they construct messages about higher education. In educational contexts, there are a variety of resources such as training materials and constraints such as local educational policies that may influence the kinds of messages that teachers and academic counselors construct. As a result, it is important to analyze the types of training and materials teachers are given to help them teach and interact with diverse student bodies. Evaluating these resources would shed light on many important aspects of the role of the teacher, including expectations from schools/administration, teachers' perceptions of their students and how teachers approach their jobs and interact with minority students. Investigating minority students' need for teacher support within the communication discipline will give us a better understanding of the types of interactions that cause teachers and minority students to form certain perceptions about each other and more importantly, the education system.

Educators have already instituted some unique programs to address the specialized constraints of minority students, but there are still ample holes in the literature left to be filled. Although the fields of education, sociology, anthropology and psychology have tackled these issues extensively and in the study of communication to a certain extent, the research will remain incomplete until we understand the role that communication and messages from teachers and schools play in the postsecondary ambitions of diverse student bodies. Dialogue creates an environment that promotes trust and strengthens the relationships within an organization (Farrell, 2015, p. 303). Communication plays an equally important role in educational settings. Understanding the communication processes that occur within this system will open up more opportunities for making it accessible, especially to minority groups that have been historically discriminated from it. This study has the opportunity to extend this literature by looking at educator's message construction about higher education.

### **Roadmap of Thesis**

This thesis begins with a review of literature in Chapter 2 that includes an overview of existing research on the role of high school educators as a resource for minority students, Ogbu's Cultural Ecological Theory and its contemporary applications, strategic communication and framing, and the importance of effective message construction in the dynamic between educators and diverse student bodies. In Chapter 3, my methodology is outlined, including my research questions, the purpose for the study,

and my decisions regarding data collection and analysis. Chapters 4 to 6 presents my analysis of three case studies that explore the message construction processes in three different kinds of school districts:

- (a) District A was chosen because its largest student group was a minority group, Hispanics.
- (b) District B is considered a “majority minority” high school, but its largest student group is still White.
- (c) District C’s Hispanic population is also the largest, but its African American students are a sizeable group and comparable to the White students in the district.

Chapter 7 presents a discussion that compares key themes from each case study, and outlines implications for research, theory and practice, as well as the study’s limitations.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Scholars within the fields of education, sociology, anthropology, and child development have long documented the important role that high school educators play in the academic success of students from minority groups. However, this line of research has largely been ignored by communication scholars, leaving us with potential knowledge gaps about the barriers that these students face and even more importantly, the communicative strategies that educators may use to help combat them. Therefore, this review of literature serves several purposes. First, it analyzes the current literature on minority student achievement and the role that high school teachers and counselors play in improving these students' achievement in school and perceptions about going to college. Second, it presents Ogbu's (1998) *cultural-ecological theory* to explicate the many different factors that impact the achievement of diverse student bodies and the role that each play within "the system." Third, the role of parents and peers will be explored in order to provide a more complete picture of the factors that dictate minority students' decisions about college. Finally, the literature on messaging and social constructionism will be discussed in order to provide a theoretical foundation for examining the communication among teachers, counselors, and students from underrepresented groups regarding post secondary education.

## **Minority Achievement**

High school achievement and the pursuit of a college education are valued highly in the United States. However, the opportunity to succeed and progress academically is not universal and students from minority groups often struggle within an education system that was not built with them in mind. Certain social changes within the United States, which are also reflected in the organizational structures of colleges and universities, have led many people to criticize the higher education system for failing to meet the needs of diverse student bodies (Fallon, 1997). Obiakor (1993) describes this experience as minorities having to play a "political 'game'" and one they are ill prepared for. Unfortunately, the ripple effect is significant, limiting minority groups' access to upward social mobility (Obiakor, 1993). Unfortunately, these pitfalls of the education system have not garnered sufficient motivation or change within colleges and universities. However, a more inclusive education system has widespread benefits not only for marginalized groups, but also for the education system itself, which aims to prepare its students to be productive members of society. Colleges and universities need to adjust in order to create culturally competent graduates that can compete on the global stage (Brustein, 2007; Stewart, 2007). As the higher education system becomes an arena for people of increasingly diverse backgrounds, only those that embrace and manage this change can "acquire competitive advantage and increase profitably" (Meric et al., 2015, p. 72). Colleges and universities are organizations after all and if social responsibility

doesn't encourage them to address issues of diversity within the education system, impacts to their "bottom line" should.

Unfortunately, the discriminatory effects of the higher education system do not just manifest themselves once students enroll in college. It is during high school, when serious decisions about college are beginning to be made, that barriers to attaining a higher degree arise. Some researchers suggest that college counseling should begin as early as middle school, especially for students from minority groups and first-generation students (Fallon, 1997). Lack of knowledge about college and financial aid, misinformation, and hesitancy about the application process are only a few of the problems faced by underrepresented minority groups (Monahan, 1993; Holland, 2015). When you compound these issues with minority students' academic unpreparedness and low scores on standardized tests and entrance exams, it's not surprising that we see lower enrollment in college from these groups (Monahan, 1993; Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). Morale and motivation inevitably decreases for those students who are cognizant of the fact that they are not receiving equal or appropriate resources to help them prepare for college.

Even for those students who have high aspirations for going to college, "less advantaged students, who are disproportionately minorities and first-generation college students, are less likely to realize their college goals compared to their more advantaged peers" (Holland, 2015, p. 244). Disempowerment of minority students in college is also the result of "discourse norms" in high school that don't prepare them for the higher education context (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). Discourse norms are the dominant cultural

and social messages that predominate within a certain system and dictate how to participate within that system (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). In college, these norms are typically formed by majority groups' values and can influence who succeeds within the education system. High schools should be a support system that provides this information to all students, but messages and resources about college are not necessarily being constructed for diverse student bodies. If high schools are not willing to make positive changes, these barriers can continue to negatively affect academic achievement for minority students and ultimately, their perceptions of higher education and whether or not they decide to pursue a college degree. Even for those minority students who do make it to college, "high minority attrition" remains a significant barrier to success, the result of high schools and college preparatory courses not teaching these students the necessary cultural capital to achieve (White & Ali-Khan, 2013). Students from minority groups also need to balance "family demands, financial concerns, and cultural considerations, in addition to the social and academic adjustments faced by all college students" (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013, p. 6). They are a unique group of students, with a unique set of needs. High schools are an important resource for underrepresented minority youth, yet if they do not adjust their approaches to teaching and provide resources to an ever-diversifying student body, they are leaving students intimidated and unprepared to enter college. Even worse, they may be helping to deter some students from even applying at all.

## **The Role of Teachers and Counselors in the High School Context**

Teachers and counselors have the complex task of creating both a *supportive* and *challenging* environment within schools. This is particularly true for linguistic or cultural minority students, but is not a simple task. As Hammond (2006) explains, “A clear understanding of the nature of the curriculum challenges faced by [these] students is necessary to provide the context in which effective support becomes possible” (p. 271). Understanding the particular set of challenges faced by these students is essential for providing the correct support. Vygotsky, who is well known for the development of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), also emphasizes the importance of support within the learning environment (Hammond, 2006). In the simplest terms, ZPD argues that what we teach “should be slightly too hard for students to do on their own, but simple enough for them to do with assistance” (Wass & Golding, 2014, p. 672). Provide a challenge, but also the support necessary to conquer it. Hammond (2006) recommends “both high challenge and high support” for diverse learners (p. 269). This becomes important for the current study, as messages that high school educators construct and/or receive can reveal whether underrepresented students are receiving the necessary challenges and support for academic success and ambitions about higher education.

### ***Teachers***

Teachers are some of the most important sources of information for students in

high school, especially for those students in minority groups. Because they interact with these students on a regular basis, they have the opportunity to consistently disseminate positive and helpful messages about college. Researchers in education have long established teachers as significant figures in influencing minority students' perceptions of the higher education system. Martinez and Welton (2014) recognize the opportunity for teachers to become "institutional agents" that help minority students prepare for the college context (p. 807). According to *social capital theory*, "individuals draw on their relationships, or networks, and the information and resources embedded within these relationships [help them] to navigate society's institutions." When students foster these relationships with educators, teachers become key agents that can help them acquire the right information about college and navigate the education system (Martinez & Welton, 2014, p. 807).

Blanchard and Muller (2015) also recognize teachers potential to act as "gatekeepers of the 'American Dream'," especially for recent immigrants and language-minority students (p. 263). Although the sentiment of the "American Dream" is a bit outdated and problematic, the significance of education as part of the path to success is an important notion to recognize. Teachers are seen as having an influential role in promoting the academic achievements of minority students and educators need to be more aware of what this role entails as their student bodies continue to diversify (Blanchard & Muller, 2015).

Hemmings (1994) notes that teachers can successfully inform student bodies if they meet the needs expressed by their students and "provide them with information

needed for mainstream educational activities, to acknowledge their social identities and cultures in curriculum and instruction, and to invite them to explore multicultural perspectives” (p. 1). Students from minority groups do not respond to mainstream curricula and expectations in the same way that students from the majority do and in order not to threaten the teacher-students relationship, high school educators need to remain culturally responsive (Hemming, 1994). As student bodies become more racially, ethnically and culturally diverse, teachers will need to adapt their teaching styles to fit a heterogeneous classroom.

Along with helping students to prepare for and apply to college, high school educators must also prepare students to cope with an inherently discriminatory campus climate and the "codes of power" that dictate what is expected of students in the predominately "White" college environment. As White and Ali-Khan (2013) explain, not only do educators need to focus on challenging underrepresented students in courses and guiding them through the application process, but they also need to teach their students the appropriate "academic discourse" they'll need when they get to college. Doing so means "devot[ing] significant attention to helping those students understand the culture of college...Of paramount importance is good communication between instructors, counselors and the students themselves" (White & Ali-Khan, 2013, p. 34). Many power structures are in place within the higher education system that teachers at the high school level need to recognize in order to help minority students become successful once they enter college or their chances of success still diminish. White and Ali-Khan (2013) add, "Teaching academic discourse while ignoring the numerous power dynamics that take

place within it only serves to perpetuate inequality. It is tantamount to an act of hegemony" (p. 37). In order for high school teachers to be the best resources for their diverse student bodies, they need to be transparent with their students about how the education system is structured and provide them with the knowledge base to help them overcome the barriers that are inherent within it.

That being said, it should also be noted that teaching diverse student bodies isn't an easy task. Although teachers are crucial in promoting achievement in their classrooms and are oftentimes willing to do so, teachers are limited by "their ability to understand who their students are and [how] to connect with them" (Blanchard & Muller, 2015, p. 262). Blanchard and Muller (2015) suggest that teachers will understandably have trouble relating to student from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds and this may impact their abilities to be effective motivators. Teaching students from multiple and different backgrounds requires teachers to learn more about their students and consciously keep themselves from developing certain stereotypes about their minority students that could unconsciously impact their ability to be helpful college decision-making resources. As students from underrepresented groups make post-high school plans, "how their teachers perceive them may be especially crucial for shaping their academic outcomes just prior to the transition to college" (Blanchard & Muller, 2015, p. 265). But, this responsibility does not fully fall into the hands of educators themselves. If the education system and school districts are unable or unwilling to provide teachers the resources necessary to adapt, only negative effects can be expected.



The education system places constraints on teachers who have a difficult time balancing the many roles they have to play. One of these restraints is the emphasis the education system places on *standardized testing*. Teachers are often left to "teach to the test," instead of developing curriculum that is appropriate for diverse student bodies. In their study of "high-minority," high-poverty secondary schools in Texas, Martinez and Welton (2014) found that the move towards high-stakes testing forces teachers to "focus more on preparing students to pass the state exam than imparting a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for college" (p.805). This becomes particularly detrimental to racial or ethnic-minority students, who perform significantly worse than their majority counterparts. Standardized tests promote "a narrowed curriculum, outdated methods of instruction...they also assume all test-takers have been exposed to a white, middle-class background" (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1992, p. 3). Unfortunately, this can also cause teachers to develop lower expectations for underrepresented students (Martinez & Welton, 2014), which could in turn impact the perceived effectiveness of high school educators as advisors for the college application process. Standardized achievement tests also tell teachers very little about the best ways to teach effectively and do not adequately evaluate the learning needs of diverse students (National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 1992).

Another problem is that the most experienced, high-quality teachers are often assigned to advanced placement classes, which have low enrollment of minority students. This means that students of color, in lower level courses, are being taught by low-quality teachers and "it stands to reason that these students will not be prepared for a

rigorous college-level curriculum and will likely be less prepared to take college entrance exams, potentially limiting their postsecondary options and outcomes" (Martinez & Welton, 2014, p. 804). High-quality teachers are also less likely to be found at "racially isolated schools." O'Connor et al. (2009) explain, "Given how race and class segregation marks U.S. society, Blacks and Latinos are more likely to find themselves in racially isolated schools that suffer with inadequate resources, particularly with regard to access to more rigorous courses and lower quality teachers" (p. 24). Success for minority students in these environments becomes even bleaker, as teacher quality is inextricably linked to student success and reducing gaps in achievement. High-quality teachers are needed to challenge *all* students academically, prepare them for the rigor they will face in college classrooms, and help improve disadvantaged students' perceptions of the higher education system.

Teachers are often very willing to be more accessible to their students and helping them get the necessary information about college, but they often feel inadequately trained to do so (Martinez & Welton, 2014). It's also common for high school educators to be confused about how to balance their many roles in the classroom, impacting achievement and test scores of their students. Griffin (1978) notes that teachers often have contradictory pedagogical goals and unfortunately, also lack the professional development programs needed to balance these expectations. This lack of teacher resources becomes even more detrimental for educators as student bodies become more diverse and student needs become more varied.

Recent changes in federal legislation are also changing the educational landscape nationally, potentially placing additional pressures on teachers to adjust. Last year, in 2015, President Obama signed the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* into effect. The bill extended the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, which was established 50 years ago and replaced the highly criticized *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* of 2002 (U.S. Department of Education 2). However, the new act has itself been criticized because it has moved a significant amount of the power over education to the state and school district-level. In particular, civil rights groups are concerned because, historically, the federal government has been essential in affirming the interests of underserved groups (U.S. News, 2015). At the state level, House Bill 5 (HB5) was passed by the Texas Legislature in 2013, which reduced testing requirements and substantially changed high school graduation requirements (TASA). Although such legislation is geared towards increasing graduation rates and college attendance, especially for underprivileged and underrepresented groups, it places new constraints on teachers, which has the potential impede the communication and relationships built with students.

While extensive research has covered the role that teachers play in aiding minority student achievement and creating an environment that promotes interests in higher education, the literature has yet to address the importance of communication between educators and students. Effective communication is critical in building strong relationships and can also be used to meet the expectations of students, yet many questions are left unanswered until this is explored further. In the context of this study, it

is important to look at the types of messages that teachers construct about college in their classrooms. Are teachers constructing effective messages about the college decision-making process? Do teachers tailor messages to minority students? Have minority students expressed certain barriers to going to college while engaging in dialogue with their teachers? If so, do the messages that teachers construct address student concerns regarding these barriers? Are these messages pointing students in the right direction and to the right resources? All of these questions are important to answer if researchers want a complete picture of the ways in which we can combat the barriers within the education system that are preventing students from pursuing a college degree.

### *Counselors*

School counselors also play a critical role within the high school context and can act as "linking agents" between disadvantaged students and the higher education system (Fallon, 1997). Schaeffer et al. (2010) recognize that "through their professional roles and responsibilities, [counselors] are in a unique position to advocate for increased college access for underrepresented students" (p. 4). The importance of school counselors is also evident in the fact that the American School Counseling Association, the College Board, and the ASCA National Model have mandates and expectations for the roles they must fill (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). Research consistently shows that they can truly empower their students if they take the time to connect and build strong relationships with students from diverse backgrounds. However, in order to fulfill this

role successfully, high school counselors must also "take action, mobilize resources, and recognize they are embedded within larger structures that may be working against the empowerment of minority and low-income students" (Holland, 2015, p. 246). The same counseling strategies necessary for students from disadvantaged backgrounds may not necessarily coincide with those from majority groups. Unfortunately, if these diverse needs are not met and counselors do not attempt to establish bonds with students, the presence of a counselor becomes almost irrelevant because students, especially those from minority groups, are hesitant to seek out college-related information themselves. Lack of trust is often cited as the most important barrier that keeps students from seeking the help. And without trust, Holland (2015) explains:

Students may be less likely to meet with school counselors, ask questions, and take their advice regarding the college process. This may be particularly detrimental to less advantaged students who cannot access this college knowledge from their parents. (p. 245)

High school counselors are undoubtedly important college-planning resources for those students, but the relationship must be reciprocal. Although counselors have to take the initiative in disseminating information about college and help in the preparation process, uncontrollable restraints within schools limit their ability to do so on their own. Students too have to take responsibility and take part in constructing the student-counselor relationship.

While teachers often have to contend with other curricular responsibilities, counselors have a more direct look at academic decisions that students are making

*outside* of the classroom, for the future. Academic and developmental counseling, college planning and administrative support all fall under counselors' multi-faceted job description (Fallon, 1997). But, their roles are not limited to pragmatic decision-making about college. From an emotional standpoint, counselors also often feel the need to provide empathy and advocacy for students who don't feel as if they are receiving these forms of supports in other contexts, in school or at home (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013; Schaeffer et al., 2010). They become an important resource for minority students learning how to navigate the complexities of social capital (Holland, 2015), as this becomes particularly important when students enter college and have to navigate a prescribed campus climate. At the conclusion of her study of urban public high school students, Malone (2013) asked participants to make recommendations as to how counselors could improve their access to college information. The students cited gaining access to college-based information earlier in their high school careers, teaching students more about different "post-secondary paths," better test preparation, offering personalized guidance, and instilling personal initiative in students to seek their own information about higher education as ways to strengthen the role that counselors played in their academic lives (pp. 25-26). Unfortunately, counselors are often given far too many roles than can be reasonably managed. As Holland (2015) explains, school counselors face an almost impossible task as they "experience multiple and conflicting roles—they are tasked with college counseling; course planning; scheduling; facilitating communication between students, teachers, and parents; and acting as mental health counselors" (p. 247). Counselors in school are also required to do administrative work as

part of their position, potentially impacting the amount of time they can spend with students planning for their higher education future.

Academic counselors face many other limitations in reaching underrepresented students. For starters, students (especially students of color) don't often take the initiative to seek out counselors in college planning, although they also feel that counselors should be doing more to help them with the decision-making process (Fallon, 1997; Schaeffer et al., 2010). However, counseling diverse student bodies is inherently more difficult, which is why change within schools at every level has been slow to adapt to changing demographics. In her study, Holland (2015) found:

The diversity of the student population led counselors to feel pulled in opposite directions. More advantaged students and parents demanded personalized attention, whereas less advantaged parents and students were difficult to get in touch with and required more assistance. (p. 257)

Although counselors try to manage the different publics that rely on their guidance (parents, students, teachers, and administrators), it can quickly become a losing game. Inevitably, this hurts the counselor-student relationship for many (Holland, 2015). This is often beyond the control of counselors themselves.

Counselors are also severely outnumbered, making it hard to provide the necessary resources for those students who are in need. There are often significantly fewer counselors than teachers in schools and therefore, they are often responsible for advising hundreds of students, deterring their efforts. In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education reported that the average counselor to student ratio was 460:1, even though

the *maximum recommended average* was 250:1 (Department of Education). This is also a problem that students are cognizant of (Malone, 2013). Along with the minimal access to counselors in general, the time distributed for counselors to address college preparation needs was also very limited. Although counselors are an important resource, there simply may not be enough of them to meet the needs of all students. Therefore, we can't fault the counselors themselves, as it may be the education system that is not recognizing the important role that counselors play in schools or is failing to allot the appropriate counseling resources in high schools. Malone's (2013) study revealed that school counselors recognized that "their schools could do more to target underrepresented populations, to emphasize diverse post secondary paths, and to offer more customized services; however, limited resources prevented [the schools in the study] from expanding upon the existing strategies" (p. 26).

The counselor-student relationship is already understudied (Holland, 2015). Moreover, although the importance of creating strong relationships between students and their counselors has been established, along with the expectations that counselors must provide information about college, little is known about the communication that is most effective for establishing these relationships or the specific types of messages that students are expecting about the higher education system. Being more aware of how effective message construction plays into their role as college-based resources can help counselors do their jobs more efficiently, in hopes of reaching more students.



## **Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Theory**

Because this study involves the education system, it is not only important to look at theories within communication, but also within the field of education. And although other applicable theories can be pulled from education, none seemed more fitting as the base for this project than *Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Theory*, rooted in anthropology. This theory focuses specifically on minority student populations and the influences/barriers to their academic achievement, which makes it particularly appropriate.

Early in his influential career, John Ogbu recognized that "minorities were historically denied *equal educational opportunity* in terms of access to educational resources, treatment in school, and rewards in employment and wages for educational accomplishments" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 157). His theory not only accounts for barriers within the education system that become a detriment to minority student achievement, but also considers community-based factors, which also impact students' motivation and perceptions of academic success. As McKown (2013) explains, "Direct influences on racial-ethnic achievement gaps may unfold at home, in school, with peers, and in neighborhoods" (p. 1122). Malone (2013) adds that students rely on "close family, school counselors, and peers for most of their college information; and they do not have extensive college preparatory experiences" (p.18). It's important to consider both of the systems that Ogbu recommends, as their impacts can manifest themselves in students' message reception and dissemination regarding college.

Ogbu spent over three decades researching and writing about educational anthropology and in particular, found himself fascinated by minority groups' status in education.

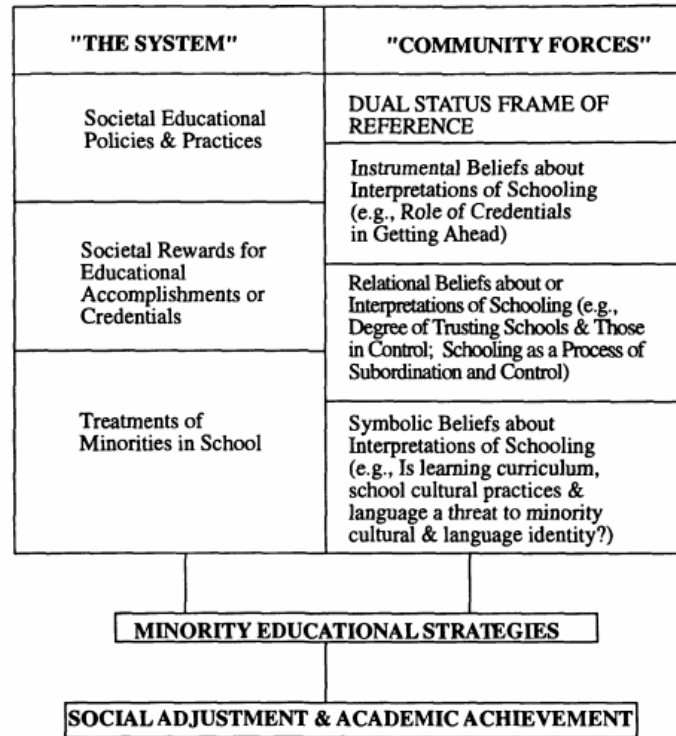
In the first phase of his research, he focused on comparing minority performance with that of their majority counterparts. He classified these minority groups as *voluntary* (those that chose to relocate for a better opportunity) and *involuntary* (those who has been conquered, colonized or enslaved) (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Refugees, migrant workers, undocumented workers, and binationals are also considered a distinct group and have a unique set of attributes in regards to their achievement in and perceptions of education (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Each group has a different orientation and attitude toward society, influencing their "community forces" and experiences within "the system." There are of course always exceptions to the rule and experiences should be seen as being on a continuum, not finite and fixed (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Because immigration is currently a contested issue in the United States, the lines between voluntary and involuntary immigrants becomes blurred. In particular, if we consider immigrants from Mexico, although many do come for more opportunity, they are faced with an excessive amount of opposition from the native population, which could impact their perceptions of their experiences in ways that Ogbu had not identified in the latter half of the 20th century.

Ogbu spent part of his later career comparing minority groups' experiences to one another and it was then that he developed his *cultural-ecological theory*. The theory can be broken up into two parts, "the system" and "community forces," which interact to

dictate minority student performance. The system accounts for "the way the minorities are treated or mistreated in education in terms of educational policies, pedagogy, and returns for their investment or school credentials," while community-based factors explain "the way the minorities perceive and respond to schooling as a consequence of their treatment, [which is] also affected by how and why a group became a minority" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 158). Conversations about diversity within higher education, and particularly with affirmative action, have also recognized this issue has two components, "one of which is the individual needs and qualifications and the other one is institutional needs and obligations " (Meric et al., 2015, p. 75). Ogbu's paradigm recognizes that minorities face discrimination within the education system, which could directly impact their achievement, but he did not ignore the fact that "even within the context of systemic discrimination, there was room for minority agency" (Foster, 2004, p. 371).

The three rungs of "The System" (*illustrated in Figure 1*) are particularly important for the role of teachers within the education of minority students. The third level, treatments of minorities in school, encompasses "level of teacher expectations [and] teacher-student interaction patterns" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 161). Although the model does not reference academic counselors, they most likely hold a similar role within the school and develop their own expectations of and interactions with students. It's also important to note that these factors do not happen independently of the other components of "The System" and combine to reflect "the treatment of the minorities in the wider society" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 161). Teachers and counselors are

confined with the educational policies and practices in place and their impact on student achievement help dictate the “rewards” they receive for their academic success or lack of it.



**Figure 1**  
Two parts of “the problem of minority” schooling.

Figure 1. Ogbu’s Cultural-Ecological Theory (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p.156)

Recent scholars have begun to revisit Ogbu's theory and have even applied it to the context of counselor and teacher roles in student success. In their study of high-achieving, female African American high school students, Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2012) found that "caring teachers were integral to their academic success"

(p. 215). In contrast, teachers and counselors' unequal treatment of minority students, including discouragement about college, could negatively impact their chances of college admittance (p. 201). The students in the study "stressed the need for equal-access to college-related information" (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2014, p. 214). Along with these systemic factors, the students also cited strong family support as crucial to their success, confirming the interactive nature of Ogbu's theory.

There are of course limitations to Ogbu's *cultural-ecological theory*. The theory doesn't properly account for gender differences. As voluntary and involuntary immigrants orient themselves physically and psychologically within their communities, culture and the education system, gender becomes an important determinant, especially for minority women.

Another limitation concerns the distinction between involuntary and voluntary minorities. Foster (2004) recognized that while it has been useful to think about the distinction between involuntary and voluntary minorities in current educational research, "some [scholars] have presented circumstances where the situation ultimately proved more complicated than [Ogbu's] initial conception" (p. 377). Ogbu's classifications of minority type may no longer be as applicable present day, especially with the recent influx in immigration, but different groups (cultural or racial) should still exhibit different patterns of school structures and community forces. That being said, it would not be surprising if some patterns between and within minority groups manifest themselves. Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2014) also criticize CE theory for not

properly describing the experiences of high-achieving minorities and their "determin[ation] to dismantle widely held stereotypic perceptions" (p. 215).

A third limitation centers on pedagogy. Although Ogbu did not consider issues of pedagogy in his work, as he was an anthropologist, not an education scholar, he did outline a few implications for teachers. They include:

- (a) Building trust;
- (b) Incorporating culturally responsive instruction into the classroom;
- (c) Explicitly deal with opposition and ambivalence towards minority students;
- (d) Setting high standards for all students;
- (e) Trying to involve parents and the community. (Ogbu & Simons, 1998)

Foster (2004) recommends that future scholars who apply CE theory must "(1) operate with a complex and dynamic notion of culture as negotiated and always in process, both within and among groups, and (2) notice the ongoing and dynamic interplay between community and system forces" (p. 379). Ogbu's theory provides an excellent framework for the current study, but it may not manifest itself in the same way he applied it to his own research. It's useful because it allows researchers to consider the many complex constructs that play a role in minority education and also the role that high school educators not only play in connecting "the system" to the outside community, as well as the bridge between students and the higher education system.

As with the other research that has looked at minority student achievement, this thesis has the opportunity to extend communication literature with the help of Ogbu's *cultural-ecological theory*. "The system" and the community that Ogbu's theory

identifies as important factors in shaping minority student achievement are composed of groups that regularly interact and communicate with one another. Yet, little research has tackled how communication-based interactions shape the relationship between these two systems and how improved dialogue and communication channels can make the education system more supportive for prospective college students from minority groups. Although this study will not look specifically at the communication that occurs between the school system and outside groups, exploring the effectiveness of message construction in promoting minority student achievement will have implications for these forms of interaction as well.

### ***The Role of Parents and Peers***

Parents and peers play an important role in the college-based decisions of underrepresented students. These two groups are quite present in Ogbu's *cultural-ecological theory* and are important to consider when looking at the role that high school educators play in promoting the higher education system, as minority community structure are sometimes just as important as societal values, schools, and classrooms (Ogbu, 1992). Support from parents and peers or lack thereof can play an integral role in the effective messaging strategies teachers and counselors employ to help minority students seek help in the college decision-making process, especially if the students themselves identify parents and peers as barriers to their beliefs about the higher education system.

Family support plays an essential role in the success of minority students academically, with parents and guardians at the forefront. Parents become an influential voice in "issues such as the selection of an institution, its location, living arrangements, and cost are heavily determined by parents" (Fallon, 1997, p. 386). However, if parents themselves have not attended college, their role can be rather ambiguous, ineffective and even harmful to the potential of their children. Monahan (1993) recognizes that low enrollment of minority students into college has been recognized by some researchers "as being directly related to a lack of parental understanding and/or involvement in the process of postsecondary education" (p. 22). However, this lack of parental support often does not stem from parents unwillingness to offer help or values that do not prioritize education, but because parents do not have the expertise or experience to be valuable resources for their children. As Holland (2015) explains, "Despite wanting to assist their children, many parents who have not attended college find it difficult to provide concrete information" (p. 244). Unfortunately, parent's education level is correlated with a student's own decisions to pursue a college education and this becomes incredibly detrimental for minority students, particularly those that are first-generation college attendees (Fallon, 1997). As Wimberly and Noeth (2004) note:

While parents expect their children to graduate from college and have professional careers, many, particularly those who have not attended college, may neither know the key postsecondary planning steps nor have the skills to assist their children with early postsecondary planning. (p. 2)



High school educators should consider the important role that parents play in the college decision-making process. Although parents alone may not have the resources to help their children on their own, teachers and counselors can employ their help when considering how to best reach out to their diverse student bodies. Counselors have articulated that they value contributions from parents and families and have "viewed family empowerment as integral to an increase in college access" (Schaeffer, 2010, p. 14). Monahan (1993) adds that educators should make a point to meet with parents of minority students to "develop a cooperative and coordinated effort" (p. 72). Ogbu's theory recognizes that these key factors should interact to improve minority student achievement and therefore, teachers and counselors should not ignore parents as a tool to motivate students and create a support system for underrepresented groups that makes the higher education system more approachable.

Peers also become an important factor in achievement. As Hamm and Faircloth (2005) explain, "If ethnic minority youth lack intimacy in school-based friendships, these relationships may not serve to psychologically bond teens to their schools" (p. 305). Without these connections, students can disengage from school and are at a higher risk of dangerous behavior and poor achievement. In their study of social engagement of immigrant adolescents, Cherng et al. (2014) highlight that students who lack peer networks "are prone to a variety of negative outcomes, including engagement in risky behaviors, poor academic performance, poor mental health, a greater risk of suicide, and missed opportunities to interact informally with peers" (p. 4). These serious

consequences warrant further research on the topic of improving academic environments for diverse student populations.

Research about the influence of peers is still largely incomplete and contradictory and the direct impact these relationships have is still unknown. As McKown (2013) explains:

It remains largely an open question what peer influences most strongly influence achievement at what age, whether those influences are present in different amounts among children from different racial-ethnic groups, and overall, how much peer influences contribute to the achievement gap. (p. 1124)

Again, future research is warranted on this topic because high school educators can also use peers as part of a comprehensive strategy to attack achievement gaps and the barriers that keep minority students hesitant about applying for college.

Parent and peer support systems may foster or deter achievement and it is possible that these factors may be identified in the messages that students express to their teachers and counselors about their hesitations regarding the higher education system. This is another reason why we need to spend time studying the types of dialogue that occur between minority groups and high school educators. Unknown barriers and solutions to the education system may manifest themselves in the messages that educators and students exchange.

### ***Messaging and Social Constructionism***

Existing research on the role of high school educators in minority student achievement and college decision-making, as well as that on Ogbu's *cultural-ecological theory*, all point to the need to extend research on this topic via the discipline of communication. In particular, the examination of message construction in this context will give us a better understanding of how communication can potentially help educators better communicate with their diverse student bodies about higher education.

Petrovici (2012) explains, "Communication and understanding processes are significant needs in any educational community" (p. 1023). Effective communication helps to build an environment where relationships can be built. This is especially true within the school context. Communication can be used to create a positive climate based on supportiveness, trust, and openness (O'Hair et al, 2007, p. 39). This becomes particularly important for educators who wish to build relationships with students. Students need to feel comfortable with their surroundings and the leaders within their school, so they are confident enough to seek information about higher education. If they are intimidated by the high school context and communication is ineffective, it can have a damaging effect on academic achievement and aspirations to further their educational experiences.

In particular, didactic communication becomes extremely important within educational settings and takes a comprehensive look at the types of communication that occur between educators and students. This orientation also prioritizes the need for clear

messages between sender and receiver and focuses on the quality and significance of information exchange (Petrovici, 2012). Standardized "college-for-all" messages that are prevalent in schools have been found to be ineffective "in reaching all high school students by detailing how many low-SES and underrepresented minority students suffer the consequences of educational dynamics that limit university information and assistance" (Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2015, p. 4). Messages that are not tailored for ethnically or racially diverse student groups may not address the needs of these students. The dominant message about college "can influence the agency students enact in preparing for college and self-assessing their college readiness" (Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2015, p. 5) and if diverse student bodies are only receiving the same narratives about college designed for majority groups, messages about higher education may be incomplete and inapplicable. Diversifying messages about college and giving teachers and counselors the necessary training to communicate effectively with their students about college with certainly help to bridge achievement gaps.

In their study of Latino high school students, Martinez and Deil-Amen (2015) found that when students from low to mid-SES schools received messages that depicted high school as their "terminal educational goal rather than [a part of] postsecondary educational pursuits," they reconsidered their post-graduation paths and non-college pathways (p. 17). Not only can messages be effective in prompting motivation, but the opposite is also true. Teachers have to be cautious of the potentially negative messages they are disseminating. Petrovici (2012) contends that it's important for teachers to

consider how to properly convey instruction and knowledge to their students, but in order to facilitate effective communication:

The construction/structure of the didactic message, the students' knowledge, the choice of favourable content for one's lessons, lesson planning, displaying an attitude indicative of direct communication, an active reception of the students' answers, [and] permanent adaptation to communication circumstances" must be considered. (p. 1026)

Although these suggestions are geared towards teacher instruction in general, this list of factors is very applicable and important to consider in the context of minority student achievement and higher education ambitions.

Although the limited research on message construction within education is valuable, it falls short in analyzing the specific content of the messages that educators construct, especially those about college. Because teachers and counselors can play such a pivotal role in the success of minority students and their higher education ambitions, it is an important topic to explore further. Ogbu's *cultural-ecological theory* also identifies many factors within "the system" and minority communities that need to be considered as we draw conclusions about how educators form messages. For example, students may identify the influence or lack thereof of family and peer support in their decisions regarding college and these things need to be considered if messaging is going to be considered as a tool to combat barriers that minority students identify during the college decision-making process.

## **Social Constructionism**

Social constructionism is an interesting theoretical lens to evaluate the way in which teachers and counselors make meaning of their roles within schools and what impacts their decisions regarding message construction. According to social constructionists, “it is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated” (Burr, 2015, p. 4). Through social interaction, we create meaning and this knowledge influences the way in which we act. Allen (2005) adds, “Scholars who take a social constructionist stance claim that anything that has meaning in our lives originates within ‘the matrix of relationships in which we are engaged’” (p. 35). Therefore, truth cannot be studied objectively. Instead, “there can be multiple realities that compete for truth and legitimacy” (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, p. 174).

Social constructionism is influenced philosophically by Kant, Nietzsche, and Marx and by symbolic interactionism and phenomenology (Burr, 2015; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Berger and Luckman’s book *The Social Construction of Reality* really solidified this research orientation (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Berger and Luckmann’s argument is built on the assumption that “human beings together create and then sustain all social phenomena through social practices” (Burr, 2015, p. 15).

Allen (2005) outlines several important assumptions of social constructionism:

(1) It takes ‘a critical stance towards taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world (including ourselves)’ (Burr, 1995, p. 3);

(2) Knowledge is historically and culturally specific;

(3) Social processes sustain knowledge. Among these processes, language is fundamental. We use language to produce and reproduce knowledge as we enact various roles within various contexts;

(4) Knowledge and social action are interconnected. (pp. 37-40)

As Allen outlined, language is a key component of the research perspective and has its roots in structuralism. Fairhurst and Grant (2010) explain, “Most social constructionists adhere to the belief that language does not mirror reality; rather it constitutes it. Seen in this light, communication becomes more than a simple transmission; it is a medium by which the negotiation and construction of meaning takes place” (p. 174). Burr adds, “Language itself provides us with a way of structuring our experience of the world and ourselves and that the concepts we use do not pre-date language but are made possible by it” (pp. 53-54). Quite simply, “When people talk to each other, the world gets constructed” (Burr, 2015, p. 11). Communication is essential to this framework and makes it fitting for this study. Teachers and students constantly interact with one another to make sense of and construct their learning environment. Language processes also have important “ramifications for identity development” (Allen, 2005, p. 35), which becomes relevant for students who are still in the process of negotiating who they are and where they are going.

Another essential tenet of social constructionism is that it identifies the historical and cultural impacts of how we construct knowledge. Burr (2015) explains, “Social constructionism argues that the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the

categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific” (p. 4). She adds that what we regard as truth “may be thought of as our current accepted ways of understanding the world. These are a product not of objective observation of the world, but of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other” (Burr, 2015, p. 5). This also allows researchers to consider the sociocultural context in which people interact. As Allen (2005) explains, social constructionism also helps to “detect relationships between communicative practices and dominant discourses about social identity groups and to illuminate recursive relationships between larger discourses and organizational micropractices” (p. 41). Educational discourses have been historically exclusive and constraining to minority groups and this could find its way into how teachers discuss student achievement and construct messages about higher education.

In organizational communication, social constructionism “has come to be known as the communicative constitution of organization- often abbreviated CCO. CCO scholars reject seeing the organization as a thing or as a container that bounds communication processes. Instead, CCO theorists try to understand the complicated processes through which our interactions create, re-create, and change organizations” (Miller, 2015, pp. 83-84). In the context of this study and from this perspective, schools are not simply places in which people interact and communicate with one another. It is the interaction among administrators, teachers, students and the surrounding community that create a unique and changing organization.



## Conclusion

High school educators are in an interesting position within schools and can help bridge the gap between minority students and the higher education system. Not only do they provide instruction and information about college, but they can also be pivotal in helping to change the system. As White and Ali-Khan (2013) explain:

There can be no doubt that the academic discourse community is linguistically exclusive; it privileges one form of knowing and being over all others. In so doing, it excludes myriad diverse and divergent voices, thus hindering true many new forms of knowledge. As the makeup of the participants in the academy begins to change, so can the language of the academy. (p. 38)

Counselors can also do their part by "address[ing] systemic issues by utilizing data, examining and challenging unfair policies and procedures, and offering professional development for faculty on college access" (Schaeffer, 2010, p. 25). And while there has been pushback from the system to institute necessary changes, demographics of secondary school and college populations continue to diversify.

There are of course things that teachers, counselors *and* students can do to improve their educational environments and connect the two important systems ("the system" and community forces) that Ogbu outlined in his theory to facilitate the social adjustment and academic achievement of minority students. One key suggestion that Malone (2013) outlined is for students and counselors to involve families more in the college decision-making process, which can be done by sending information about

college home with students and "informing families of the resources available to them" (p. 20). Because family support is a critical factor in the pursuit of a college education, especially for first-generation students, expanding the communication between schools and parents/guardians is an important step to making the higher education system more approachable for all parties involved. Along with parents, high school educators can also utilize peers as a means to promote achievement and progress in diverse student bodies. Because teachers and counselors often have many different roles within schools that are hard to balance, it's important to consider all of the factors that can help them teach and inform in the most efficient and effective ways possible. This is also the biggest reason to extend this line of research into the discipline of communication and in particular, explore how effective message construction can be utilized to help educators provide the most useful information about college to their diverse student bodies.

As Meric et al. (2015) explain, "Diversity in education is an intellectual work and it entails imaginative thought, critical analysis, and careful study" (p. 75). There are so many aspects of the relationship between the higher education system and issues of diversity that have yet to be explored. This is particularly evident in the field of communication, which has yet to study this topic. Communication is an integral part of building strong and meaningful relationships, from an organizational and personal standpoint, and to not have considered how these crucial processes play a role in helping minority students close achievement gaps leaves many possible solutions to this problem undiscovered.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Teachers and academic counselors play a unique role within the high school context. As a resource for students, they can be a wealth of information about the higher education system and the process of applying to college. Students from minority groups can especially benefit from supportive relationships with these adult figures, since such students may be more hesitant about the application process and the prospect of postsecondary education. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to shed light on the role that high school educators play in bridging the gap between diverse student bodies and the higher education system. A more in-depth understanding of the kinds of messages that high school educators use when talking to students about higher education opportunities will allow researchers to identify barriers that exist for these groups of students when accessing higher education and potential strategies for managing them. This chapter provides an overview of my general research orientation, my researcher positionality, the research questions, and the data collection and analysis process.

#### **Qualitative Methods and Researcher Positionality**

Many researchers within the evidence-based community have long criticized qualitative research because there are no standardized measures of data collection and analysis (Denzin, 2009, p. 140). However, the education system is a complex

organization that cannot be captured completely with quantitative data alone. Qualitative research allows for a more contextualized look at certain phenomenon. In the context of education, qualitative research “can be used to capture the complexities involved in teaching, learning and schooling” (Denzin, 2009, p. 145). Anderson (1987) adds, qualitative research “emphasizes inductive, interpretive methods applied to the everyday world which is seen as subjective and socially created” (p. 384). As Miller (2005) explains:

Interpretive theory grew out of dissatisfaction with post-positivist theories, when many scholars saw such theories as too general, too mechanical, and too detached to capture the intricacies, nuances, and complications of human interaction. Interpretive theorists seek an understanding of how we construct meaningful worlds through interaction and how we behave in those worlds we have created. (p. 51)

Qualitative methods align with the key assumptions of the interpretive research paradigm. Ontologically, interpretive theorists believe that reality is social constructed (Miller, 2005) and in the context of communication, organizations such as high schools and school districts “are products of the communication practices of their members” (Deetz & Eger, 2014, p. 546). Interpretive theorists also promote a “subjective epistemology,” which “proposes that there are no universal laws or causal relationships to be deduced about the social world” (Miller, 2005, p. 58). The role of values, axiology, becomes particularly important in interpretive research. Theorists do not separate values

from scholarship because “personal and professional values are [viewed as] a lens through which social phenomena are observed” (p. 58).

The interpretive research paradigm is appropriate for this study, as my goal is to articulate how educators make sense of their roles as evidenced through the communication they use and the messages they construct. My goal is not only to understand the interpretive processes that educators use to build their relationships with students and inspire them toward higher education, but also to understand the power dynamics that are associated with these relationships. As a result, I also situate myself within critical theory. Critical theorists “feel a responsibility not to simply represent the social world, but to work as agents of reform and radical change” (Miller, 2005, p. 66). The results of my study may not directly lead to change, but I hope to influence future research that can help generate best practices models that can improve communication between educators and their diverse student bodies.

My researcher positionality is influenced primarily by my dual role as both an instructor and a member of two distinct ethnic groups. Although I’m a novice researcher, this gives me a unique appreciation of the subject matter that informs this study. Because of their experience and position as role models, it may be easy to blame educators for a breakdown in their relationships with students. However, this dynamic is far more complex. As both a student and an instructor, I am aware of the joint responsibility of both educators and students and attempted to enter this study without a preconceived notion as to what I would find. Because I also identify as a member of both a dominant and minority racial group, I’ve personally been able to compare the types of discourses

that occur about education in both contexts. While I was inundated with messages about higher education on the side of the family that is composed of White, educated Americans, the types of conversations happening as a first-generation American member of a Portuguese family were much different. My decision to focus my research on minority student groups comes from a personal recognition that each group has different cultural and academic needs, most of which are often ignored in our current education system. There are many complex factors that impact the motivations and expectations diverse student bodies have with the notion of higher education. It is my intent to continue to learn more about these variables through this and other research projects, in order to make college more accessible for all who are interested in attending. This research is not important for creating strategies for developing student access to and success in high education, it also personally important given my own academic journey.

### **Defining Key Terms**

Ramaga (1992) defines a *minority group* as one that is “numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members – being nationals of a State –...show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity’ toward the preservation of its ethnic religious, or linguistic characteristics” (p. 104). This is a very broad term that encompasses many different groups and can be based on religion, ability, sex, race and/or ethnicity. For purposes of this study, I choose to focus on racial and ethnic minorities. These groups have been historically discriminated against in the

education system and have often been treated differentially (Obiakor, 1993; Fallon, 1997; Elam & Brown, 2005; Muller et al., 2010). Within the education system, this treatment is typically *negative* and serves as a basis for research how we address making higher education more approachable and the college application process more positive.

*Intersectionality* is also an important concept that becomes relevant to my study. The term was introduced in the 1980s as “a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 787). Intersectionality “addresses the question of how multiple forms of inequality and identity inter-relate in different contexts and over time, for example, the inter-connectedness of race, class, gender, disability, and so on” (Gillborn, 2015, p. 278). Because this study is concerned with the experiences of minority students who are also in low-SES districts, it will become very important to consider how these two classifications interact in postsecondary education decisions and impact the role of high school educators in helping diverse student bodies combat various barriers.

For the purposes of this study, *effective message construction* will be understood as the ability of high school educators to construct and disseminate messages that appropriately address barriers to college that students have and reducing their uncertainty about the higher education process. Ineffective messages are those that fail to fulfill these goals.

## **Study Design and Data Collection**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the role that high school educators play in bridging the gap between their diverse student bodies and the higher education system, via effective message construction. As sources of information about college, teachers and counselors can help to alleviate some of the anxieties that minority student groups have about going to college. Because this research is informed by a communication perspective, its focus is on the messages that educators create about postsecondary education. This study is driven by the following research questions:

RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?

RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do these messages make?

RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about colleges to diverse student bodies?

### ***Sample***

The target population was high school teachers and counselors in small, central Texas school districts. Smaller schools were chosen because existing literature suggests that interpersonal relationships between educators and students are typically more



positive and teachers are more likely to adapt and differentiate their instructional styles to match student needs (Cotton, 1996, p. 13). Therefore, it may be more likely for educators to adjust their messaging regarding post secondary education. Three independent school districts in central Texas were ultimately chosen for this study. About 15 school districts were contacted originally via e-mail to participate. Of the nine that responded, four districts agreed to participate in the study. Before sampling participants, approval was received first by the superintendent of the school district and then by the high school principal where teachers and counselors were sought. Unfortunately, one of these four districts unexpectedly experienced some public, administrative turmoil during the course of the study and was not able to continue. Districts were chosen based on two inclusion criteria. First, each of the schools had significant minority student populations (at least 25%), although the specific demographic makeup of each was slightly different. It was also important to choose at least one school where the largest student group was of minority status to see if differences in messaging could be identified from predominately White schools. Minority groups needed to be sizeable enough for teachers to (potentially) identify achievement and postsecondary advancement differences between races/ethnicities. Second, the location of districts was also important because it had to be possible for the researcher to visit participants in their respective towns, if necessary.

Demographics for each of the three districts were drawn from the most recent publically available data published in 2014 (*See Table 1*). District A was composed of close to 2,000 students, grades K-12. Over 46% of students identified as Hispanic, about

35% White, and approximately 17% African American. High school graduation rates exceeded 90% and unfortunately, 70% were classified as economically disadvantaged. The high school itself had approximately 400 students, with comparable percentages of Hispanics, Whites and African Americans (44%, 37% and 19% respectively) as district-wide reports. District B has over 2,000 students district-wide. Almost 44% identified as White, over 32% as Hispanic and 21% African American. 73% identified as economically disadvantaged, with a graduation rate nearing 100%. At the high school level, there are approximately 600 students enrolled. 46% identified as White, 33% as Hispanic, and 21% as Black. Finally, District C, the largest of the districts studied, reported over 3,000 students. Over 47% of students in the district identified as Hispanic, while comparable populations identified as African American and White (25% and 27%, respectively). Over 50% of students are classified as economically disadvantaged and the graduation rate is over 90%. Again, demographics for the high school were very similar. There were approximately 700 students in total and 48% identified as Hispanic, 29% as White, and 23% as African American.

Table 1

*Demographic Information for School Districts*

	<b>District A</b>	<b>District B</b>	<b>District C</b>
<b># of Students</b>	Approx. 400	Approx. 600	Approx. 700
<b>% of White Students</b>	37%	46%	29%
<b>% of Hispanic Students</b>	44%	33%	48%
<b>% of African American Students</b>	19%	21%	23%

(Approximation of student populations due to maintain confidentiality)

The participant sample, composed of high school teachers and counselors, was created using convenience and purposeful sampling (networking) strategies (Tracy, 2013). Some superintendents and principals offered helpful suggestions for which teachers and counselors to interview. If no suggestions were made, teachers and counselors were contacted directly as per procedures approved by IRB using publically available e-mail addresses published on school district websites. Every high school counselor was contacted, as well as every teacher within core subjects. Core subjects include math, science, history, and English. These subjects were chosen because they require passing state tests in order to graduate high school and advance to postsecondary education. Some contact directories were incomplete or outdated, but every available, relevant educator within each district was contacted if possible. Follow-up calls were made if necessary. Those who responded and were willing to participate were chosen.

Once several interviews were conducted within each district, participants were asked to recommend other faculty within their school that might be particularly helpful in learning more about this topic and these teachers were then recruited to participate in the study. For the most part, teachers interviewed were within the core areas of study (math, science, English, and social studies). However, depending on the willingness of teachers to participate in this study and faculty recommendations, a few outside of core areas were also interviewed. Along with collecting demographic information about the general student body of each school, demographic information was also collected from the teachers and counselors. The demographic variables collected were *sex*, *race*, *age*, and *years of experience*. This information was collected in order to assess if these factors have a potential effect on how educators perceive differences within diverse student populations and their role of bridging the gap between minority students and the higher education system.

Demographic data was also collected for participants (*See Table 2*). In District A, 6 teachers and 1 counselor were interviewed. Two were men and five were women and the participants ranged from 35 to 58 years of age and had between two and 33 years of experience teaching. All participants self identified as White. Five teachers were interviewed in District B, along with one of the school's two counselors. All participants were women and were between 35 and 48 years of age. Years of experience ranged from nine to 22 years and all but one participant identified as White with remaining participant self-identifying as Hispanic. There were 10 participants from District C, including seven teachers and three counselors. All but one participant was female and

ages ranged from 31 to 53 years and teaching experience between five and 21 years. Every teacher and counselor identified as White, except for one female teacher who identified as Black.

Table 2

*Demographic Information for Participants*

	<b>District A</b>	<b>District B</b>	<b>District C</b>
<b># of Participants</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>
<b># of Male Participants</b>	2	0	1
<b># of Female Participants</b>	5	6	9
<b># of White Participants</b>	7	5	9
<b># of Black Participants</b>	0	0	1
<b># of Hispanic Participants</b>	0	1	0
<b>Age of Participants (in years)</b>	35-58	35-48	31-53
<b>Experience of Participants (in years)</b>	2-33	9-22	5-21

*Interview Protocol*

At the completion of the study, 23 interviews were conducted with high school teachers and academic counselors in central Texas. Each interview lasted between

approximately 25 minutes to 1 hour. Interviews were conducted in-person, over the telephone and via Skype. Because of serious time constraints, one participant had to answer questions via e-mail. In order to maintain the integrity of the interview process, interviews were audio-recorded to maintain accuracy and several methods were used to maintain validity, including verbatim transcriptions, peer review, research reflexivity, and low inference descriptors (Fraenkel et al., 2015; Johnson, 1997). The researcher also attempted to hide any personal or research biases in the construction of interview questions and created a comfortable interview environment to the best of her ability. Participants were allowed to choose which interview method they were most comfortable with and interviews began with informal conversations us to get to know one another and for me to get a sense of their conversational styles. Teachers and counselors were also reassured that they didn't have to answer any questions they didn't want to and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Based on the research regarding high school educators and their important role as sources of information about college, the questions on the interview guide were framed to parse out several key ideas: the frequency and content of messages about higher education, the types of relationships formed between educators and students, and using Ogbu's framework, the potential barriers (internal and external) and resources that exist for students pursuing a postsecondary education. Example questions include:

- (a) When you talk to your students about higher education in class, what do you talk about? What messages are you hoping to send to your students?

- (b) What types of barriers do students identify when they are talking about their college plans? Do these barriers ever cause you to adjust your messages about college?
- (c) Reflecting on your answers to the previous questions, do you notice any racial differences in the types of questions students ask or the barriers to college they identify?
- (d) In what ways do you tailor your messages to students to better communication to a diverse student body?

A semi-structured interview guide was used (Appendix A). Having some structure was helpful for me as a novice researcher and made comparing the participants at different districts a bit easier. However, questions also needed to be fairly open-ended in order to fully capture educator perceptions of their students and messages about higher education. This is also in line with the interpretive paradigm's emphasis on meaning making and allowed participants to elaborate on how they make sense of their role within schools.

The interviews were also set up in two parts. The first part of the interview was used to talk about the experiences of educators, the general types of conversations that happen about college and the barriers that exist for students. This was done in order to orient participants to the topic and see which experiences/perceptions stood out to them the most, without prompting them specifically about minority students. Race and ethnicity were not incorporated into the first set of questions because it was important to see if these factors became salient without educators being prompted. However, if race

did not come up during the first half of the interview, the second set of questions explicitly asked about these constraints and if they impacted the types of messaging that occur about postsecondary education. Finally, the interview questions touched on the effectiveness of messaging and resources at the high school-level and areas for improvement.

A semi-structured interview format allowed for a more natural conversation to occur with participants and if certain questions were not appropriate or relevant to the present interview, they were skipped and more time was spent discussing other important details of the research topic. The use of a semi-structured interview guide also allowed for follow-up questions to be answered after scheduled interviews, if clarification was needed on any of the participants' responses. However, because the interview guides were semi-structured, they did present some problems for me in my role as a novice researcher. Without the structure of a more formal questionnaire, reading nonverbal and verbal cues and framing relevant, follow-up questions was a learning process and one that certainly improved as more interviews were conducted. During the process, some interview questions became particularly important to the interview process and more time was spent in subsequent interviews to parse out more detailed answers to them. As time went on, I became much more comfortable with the process and was able to be more assertive with my questioning (but, appropriately so) and utilized silence and pauses more effectively, allowing participants to answer fully and thoughtfully.



## **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process began with verbatim transcriptions of all interviews. Interview notes were also taken during interviews and through the duration of the study, in order to record the researcher's independent thoughts, feelings and attitudes. These notes were used to verify aspects of the interview transcripts, but were also useful in helping to maintain research reflexivity and identify when personal biases could affect the data analysis process. Because there is such a personal tie between myself and this research, verbatim transcripts and subsequent notes allowed me to create some distance with the material and report findings that were in line with participant interviews and not overshadowed by researcher voice.

Although the interpretivist approach to data analysis is varied, there are criteria for effective qualitative research. It must "provide evidence of an involved and committed study," use inductive analysis to explain the natural constructions and interactions that occur in an organization, provide sufficient evidence for claims and allow for a "continuous and reflexive movement between explanations and data" (Taylor & Trujillo, 2014, p. 183). The case study approach and thematic analysis used for this study moved iteratively between the explanations and codes I created to capture the messaging practices in the three districts and the data..

A case study is defined as "an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment" ("Case Study"). Case study research has received a lot of criticism, including that it

cannot be generalized and practical knowledge is not as valuable as theoretical knowledge. However, case studies provide a rich narrative that give us greater understanding of certain phenomenon, which quantitatively-based research cannot (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In regards to thematic analysis, it allows “the researcher to combine the analysis of the frequency of codes with the analysis of their meaning *in context*, thus adding the advantages of subtlety and complexity of a truly qualitative analysis” (Joffe & Yardley, 2004, p. 57).

First, the three different school districts chosen for this study were analyzed thematically as separate case studies, in order to identify the individual and unique themes that characterize each high school. Although other premises and contradictions were found within the data, I was cognizant of the following themes during data analysis:

- (a) Teachers and counselors’ messages about college, both frequency and content;
- (b) Barriers and opportunities to students’ postsecondary choices;
- (c) Cognizance of racial/ethnic differences in students;
- (d) Whether messages are consciously constructed for diverse student bodies;
- (e) Resources offered to teachers and academic counselors by their school districts to educate and inform diverse student bodies.

Then, a comparative analysis was be completed to compare the three districts with one another, in order to highlight similarities and/or inconsistencies in the messaging that occurs about higher education within small school districts in central Texas. Conducting separate analyses for each school district allowed for a more in-depth breakdown of each

“case” and its particular constraints, as well as lent itself to a more accurate comparison of the different ISDs.

The analysis of each case study (A, B, and C) was fairly straightforward. After interviews were transcribed, they were coded inductively for important and recurring themes, using social constructionism and Ogbu’s theory as inspiration. Inductive coding allows for themes to emerge from the data itself, as opposed to existing theoretical ideas. As Joffe & Yardley (2004) explain, “Coding in content and thematic analysis research is taxing and time-consuming because there are generally no standardized categories” (p. 59). However, that does allow for more flexibility and for coding to match the purpose of the study. Several pre-set codes were used to start the process based on the relevant themes above. However, dozens of other emergent codes were identified that were used to test original assumptions and themes. Approaching the coding process in this way allowed for the analysis of individual case studies to be guided by the research questions and highlighted major findings as they pertained to the study design. However, other nuances and themes were allowed to emerge and discussion included any important deviations from major findings. Coding memos were also kept throughout the coding process as a way to keep track of important themes, ideas, and personal thoughts about the interviews. The case studies themselves were also organized using the research questions. They served as major headings and allowed for a more intuitive organization of applicable themes. Each case study ended with a discussion that reviewed important findings and considerations for future research. Following the case studies, a short

chapter discusses important comparisons between the three school districts, outlines future research and implications for practice.

The analysis of these three cases help us better understand the role that high school educators play in bridging the gap between diverse student bodies and the higher education system, particularly in regards to messaging. Although extensive research in other disciplines has identified the importance of high school teachers and counselors for students' success, the role of messages can be further analyzed to give researchers a better sense of how communication can impact this relationship and students' postsecondary goals.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISTRICT A**

This chapter presents data from District A, a high school located in a small community in central Texas. The school is comprised of significant populations of White, Black, and Hispanic students that are mostly classified as low-SES. The educators are dedicated to student success and recognize the many different postsecondary paths exist for students. As a result, messages from teachers and counselors about college remain very individualized. The following case study revealed a variety of themes about how student achievement was perceived by teachers and counselors and the types of resources that are geared to readying students for college.

The results from the data analysis for District A are organized by the study's research questions:

RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?

RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do these messages make?

RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about colleges to diverse student bodies?

I begin by describing the research site, in order to provide the reader with a sense of the local community and academic environment within which the high school exists. Then,

the analysis will be presented corresponding with each of the research questions. Key themes and quotations will be identified within each of these sections to provide support for important findings. I conclude with a discussion section evaluate key findings, highlight important connections to the literature, and identify areas for future research.

## **Research Site**

District A is situated within a small community in Central Texas. It is among the original municipalities in Texas and prides itself on its family-centered values and opportunities for living and working within a prosperous rural environment. Its local high school shares many of these same commitments and reinforces these important community-centered ideals to students. Many faculty members highlighted the close-knit nature of the surrounding community, particularly for disciplinary reasons. Students are constantly encouraged to think carefully about their behavior because it's easy for information to make its way around town and to their guardians (Website of District A Town).

The high school in District A places high value on academic achievements, as well as athletics and band. This has earned them various distinctions, including repeated football, baseball and track State Championships, along with a distinguished recognition of their honor band. The school is composed of a relatively diverse student body.

Roughly 44% of the students are Hispanic, followed by followed by White students at 37%, and Black students at 19%. It's teaching staff is far less diverse, with about 90% of

faculty identifying as White. It's also important to note that the school is also over 60% low SES, a characteristic that is true of many small school districts in the area. Because of this, the school provides various forms of support to help students overcome inherent obstacles, including a free breakfast and afterschool meal program, tutoring services, and access to social workers (Website of District A Town, n.d.).

Conversations about college happen on a regular basis for most students, particularly juniors and seniors. Overall, teachers make a very cognizant effort to incorporate post-high school discussions into the classrooms and the counselor's office is recognized as a very important source for such information. Messages about higher education take very different forms and are dictated by factors such as grade-level, subject, class composition (age and race), teacher's experience, student initiative/interest, and time. Teachers recognize that students' postsecondary paths are very diverse, with seniors headed toward traditional four-year institutions, two-year schools, trade schools, the military, and some directly into the workforce. Because of this, school-wide message about college are quite varied and take on both general and individualized qualities.

For District A, the school's academic counselor and six faculty members were interviewed. Participants all identified as White and were between 35 and 58 years of age. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 33 years and a multitude of teaching perspectives were represented in the sample. As a whole, counselors and teachers in District A displayed a lot of passion and care about their jobs. All of those who participated in the study recognized their critical role in helping to advance the education

of their students, although this mentorship did take many different forms. The key themes identified in District A are outlined in *Table 3*.

Table 3

*Key Themes for District A*

<b>THEME</b>	<b>THEME DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?</b>	
<i>Socioeconomic Status (SES)</i>	The impact of students' economic class and family income on academic achievement.
<i>Family Support</i>	The role of family support (present or absent) on students' academic achievement and aspirations to attend college.
<i>Student Expectations and Initiative</i>	The extent to which students have a realistic outlook on their academic potential and the drive to make it happen.
<b>RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do they messages make?</b>	
<i>Generalized v. Individualized Messages</i>	Generalized messages are those that designed for the student body as a whole. Individualized messages are designed for each student, based on their specific needs.



Table 3 Continued

THEME	THEME DESCRIPTION
<i>Message Initiation</i>	When students are first introduced to messages about higher education in school.
<i>Informational v. Motivational Messages</i>	Informational messages outline the finite aspects of the application process and what students can expect in the college classroom. Motivational messages are used to encourage students to pursue a college education.
<i>State Pressures &amp; Classroom Balance</i>	The extent to which state mandates/expectations interfere with teachers' ability to give students necessary information about college in the classroom.
<b>RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about colleges to diverse student bodies?</b>	
<i>Types of Resources</i>	Formal and informal resources within the school designed specifically to help students with postsecondary education needs.

**RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?**

Student achievement was the most important goal for educators in District A. State pressures have led to increased accountability which has required an effort by the school district to raise test scores and increase admission into postsecondary institutions.

However, faculty views differed on the appropriateness of such pressures and while some welcomed the additional surveillance, others viewed state mandates as constraining to the learning and teaching process. The welfare and success of each student remains at the forefront for most teachers within the school. Throughout the interviews, “achievement” not only referred to grades, but also encapsulated the understanding that the notion of achievement included whether or not students had the intention of furthering their education after high school.

At the high school level, the faculty perceived the demographic breakdown in slightly different proportions than reported by the Texas Education Agency. Some reported that White, Hispanic, and Black student groups were actually quite comparable in size, while other interviewees equated White and Hispanic students and said that Black students were a somewhat smaller group. The interviews did not suggest that this impacted the way that teachers viewed student achievement differences. However, when it came to the high percentage of students who could be classified as low-SES, this was emphasized as an important barrier and became an important theme.

While most faculty members recognized some achievement differences among students within the school, the reasons for such discrepancies differed quite a bit. Teachers and counselors identified several factors that influenced the ability of students to succeed academically, including socioeconomic status (SES), family support, and student expectations and initiative.

### *Socioeconomic Status*

While a few teachers cited structural barriers to the higher education system for some students, socioeconomic status was seen as a more important influence on academic success, as opposed to race/ethnic classification, which created a homogenizing effect among the student body. Most teachers recognized the diversity within the school and their classrooms, but it was not often seen as something that differentiated students, in regards to achievement or postsecondary education inquires and goals. As Jessica, a relatively new teacher in the school district explained:

I have so many students in my class that are just racially mixed and I don't think that the conversations are really any different and I think one of those reasons is, I don't look at them any different...I don't think it has anything to do with race more than it has to do with each individual student and what their goal is at the end of the day. And whoever and whatever that consists of is certainly what I'm going to focus on.

Most faculty members did not recognize *intersectionality* and the compounding effects of low SES and minority racial status, although existing literature has firmly established this relationship, even in the context of education (Nelson et al., 2015; Gillborn, 2015; Becares & Priest, 2015). This lack of recognition of the potential influences of low SES and minority racial status was reflected in faculty impressions of students' post-high school plans. Some participants exhibited a "colorblind" mentality and stated that they did not see color, as it pertained to the demographic of the study

body or student achievement. For example, when asked if she noticed a difference between the types of questions students from certain racial groups ask, Robin, a veteran teacher in the school district answered, “I don’t really notice...attaching what color a child is to which questions they ask...Because more than I see students in ethnic groups, I see them in economic groups.”

Instead, a student’s background and their family support (or lack of) seemed to take precedence over the notion of race as a reason for achievement disparities. As Vince, a relatively experienced science teacher explained:

I don’t think it’s anything racial or ethnic.... I think it’s a background kind of thing... It could be the same reason that someone roots for the Dallas Cowboys or something because their mom or dad does, you know what I mean, kind of thing. If they never had anybody in the history of their family go to college or anything, it doesn’t really exist in their lives, so you know, that’s where the gap it I think.

The school counselor did not differentiate between racial groups either and also highlighted SES as a main determinant in the achievement of students. When asked if she noticed differences in the conversations or questions certain groups asked, she replied, “No, not really. Not really.”

Because faculty were very cognizant of the effects of socioeconomic status, it was not surprising that they cited finances or money as the biggest obstacle for many students to overcome on their way to higher education. In response, the school has created a very strong scholarship program, which ensures that every senior can leave

with at least a little money in their pocket to help with future educational expenses. Almost all faculty members interviewed during the study highlighted this resource, in connections with the recognition that a significant amount of their student population can be classified as low-SES.

Two teachers within District A identified racial discrepancies in academic achievement and which groups are more likely to take which postsecondary path. What is notable about these two faculty members is that they also served as athletic coaches. This becomes relevant because they have an extended interpersonal connection with many students and their relationship exists not only in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom. Denise, a teacher of over 15 years, recognized that Hispanic students have more hesitancy towards higher education and connects it to the different “home situations” that they experience, including increased pressures to have families, care for siblings, and go to work to increase the household income. Denise even went on to suggest that improving mentoring programs to better connect with these students was an area that the school could improve on. Another coach and teacher, William, also recognized a disparity with Hispanic students, but in a way that highlighted the progress that this group has made in his ten years of teaching. As he explained:

I guess ten years ago when I first came, very few Hispanic students even talked about college. I noticed that over the last decade, we have a more Hispanic population in Honors classes, trying to challenge themselves, not just trying to get by. That was almost the attitude of a lot of the Hispanic population.

It is the male, African American population that needs more attention in his view. Along with recognizing racial differences, William was the only faculty member in District A to introduce the notion of gender, noting that differences not only exist within racial groups, but also between the two genders within those groups. This was the only recognition of *intersectionality* within the interviews.

### ***Family Support***

Family support was identified as the most important barrier across to higher education by faculty in District A, although other barriers were identified. Teachers felt that having a supportive family dictates whether or not students apply to colleges and universities and if they succeed once they start higher education. These findings are not surprising when we consider that Ogbu and Simons (1998) recognition of the importance of “community forces” on achievement, which include issues of familial support. If parents do not have positive beliefs about schools, social adjustments and academic achievement suffer (p.156). However, Ogbu’s research on this topic focused specifically on minority groups, while the faculty who participated in this study did not. In this case, family support was seen as important to *all* students regardless of race. For many faculty members, family support was important because it meant that certain students had access to information about postsecondary education at home. The following quote by Robin, an experienced teacher in the school, is a good reflection of the general sentiment about parents and their role in students’ pursuit of higher education. As she explained:

You know, if their parents have gone to college and they want their kids to go to college and those conversations are happening at home and they have those goals...But, in a lot of places and a lot of situations where those conversations aren't happening at home, I think a lot of those kids want to go to school, but they really have no idea how to make that happen.

The school counselor, Sherry, noticed a similar pattern for those who do not have support at home. She noted that parents without college experience put a lot of faith in the school to guide students through the college process, but "there is some anxiety attached to that because it's the *fear of the unknown*." It's not that parents do not want their students to go to school. It's that they lack that personal experience and don't know how to be a support system for their own children.

Denise, both an experienced coach and teacher, was one of the few faculty members who mentioned familial support in relation to race and her view painted a very grim picture for some of her Hispanic students. As she explained:

Sometimes I think they feel like they're just kind of trapped and don't see that, you know, there's more to what they could be doing, that kind of thing... A lot of them don't have parents that have gone to college, so they don't see the benefit in it.

Because of the location of this district in central Texas, immigrant populations are quite high, especially from Mexico and South America. Teachers in District A recognized that many of the students in this school were first-generation college students. Therefore, they may not have the necessary support or guidance at home when it comes to making

these decisions. One teacher, William, noted that it might only take a sibling to break through and seek higher education. As he noted, “Sometimes, it’s taken older siblings to get out into the world.”

William also highlighted that family support is crucial for “borderline students,” those he described as knowing they should go to school, but don’t necessarily have the individual motivation and/or family support to do it themselves. As he explained:

The students that know, “I probably need to look at a career path that would involve some sort of post-high school education,” but they don’t have that push from home or that encouragement from home, or just encouragement that’s the big thing, they sometimes fall by the wayside.

There are instances in which parents genuinely did not want their children to go to college in any format and this was thought to happen for many reasons. For example, having one’s child go to college can adversely affect family finances. As William highlighted, “Their family depends on them too much for them to move away for school and that sometimes is an excuse for them not to pursue any other education.” And unfortunately, students don’t typically know any better themselves and don’t think they are in a place where they can question their guardians’ authority.

In some cases, certain parents viewed college and the prospect of their children going very negatively due their concerns about how it will affect their child’s identity and act harshly when the topic is brought up. Sherry, the school counselor gave an example of an ambitious student whose mother chastised her decision to go to Texas A&M. As she explained:



I had a student last year that came in, she was graduating third in her class and had worked really hard on obtaining scholarships and was headed to A&M and when she got accepted and this was all kind of starting to fall into place for her, she came in upset and indicated that her mom had been really ugly to her and said that, “Well, you’re just going to go off to school and turn into a snob and, you know, forget about your family”... We talked about the fact that mom had never been to school, so she really didn’t know what to expect and didn’t know what her daughter was going to experience or how that was going to change her life.

Family support can be an important influence for students, especially for those who may lack individual motivation. However, if parents don’t support their children or don’t know how, even the most motivated students can fail to reach their academic and postsecondary goals.

### ***Student Expectations and Initiative***

While it might be easy to place blame solely on educators for discrepancies in student achievement, students also need to put forth the proper initiative to obtain their postsecondary aspirations. It is clear to most faculty members in District A that students often have unrealistic expectations about the requirements of higher education and are not quite sure what it is they want to do after high school. According to Vince, at least 50% of students had “no clue” about what they want to do. As Robin added, “Most of

the time, they have no idea what they want to study. Sometimes, they know where they want to go, but they don't really understand the requirements to get there."

As the school counselor, Sherry, explained, many students have been primed to have unrealistic goals regarding the Division I school experience:

Their idea is that they want to leave the community and go off and have this amazing, Division I school experience, and because that's what they see as far as going to college, through media and just different, even some of the students that attend our school, some of our top students, they want that for themselves, but aren't always sure how to make that happen or have the work ethic to make it happen...If they can't, you know, leave and go off and live on a dorm on a campus and have a Division I experience, then they decide, "Well, I'm not going to do anything."

As a result, she thought the school could "do a better job of communicating what that college experience means" and explained that the Division I experience is not right for everyone and there may be more fitting options out there.

On the other hand, some students were perceived as lacking confidence in their abilities, especially when it comes to the prospect of the college curriculum. As William explained:

The curricular part they tend to have more confidence, probably a lot more than they should. Everything is going to be okay, you know, because they've always been high achievers and name, high school has come rather easy to a lot of them...I've seen too many time where that confidence level that they leave here

with, they come and visit me at Christmas after their first semester and they're like, "Holy cow, you're right, this is no joke."

The top students in the school were the exception and were discussed by many of the faculty participants. As a whole, it was a distinct and unique group in the sense that they had a much more realistic and earlier formed notion of what they wanted to do after high school and had the individual initiative to get it done. As Jessica, a teacher and NHS advisor explained, "They figured out that they wanted to do a long time ago and they have those graduation plans in place."

Student initiative has several roots. For some, it stemmed from parental or familial support, concern for questioning authority, aptitude or just simple lack of drive. Regardless, the general sentiment among these teachers was that, if students don't put effort in on their side, their most valiant efforts to promote achievement and postsecondary ambitions could still fail.

**RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do the messages make?**

As a whole, conversations among counselors, teachers, and students about higher education happened almost daily in District A. With one exception, typical answers to the question "How often do you talk about college?" were "All the time" or "Every day" (quite emphatically, also). Faculty also viewed communication about higher education as

a *dialogue* with students, as opposed to one-way communication from school to student. Most recognized that students did engage teachers and counselors quite a bit about the college process. However, many participants added that teachers and counselors were more likely to prompt conversations about postsecondary plans and typically dominated most conversations.

When it comes to the specific messages about postsecondary education that high school educators disseminated and received from their diverse student bodies, several important themes emerged. The first regarded message *form* and whether or not messages were perceived as more generalized or individualized. A second theme dealt more with about the frequency of messages and the appropriate time to introduce conversations about college. The third theme that emerged centered on the content of messages and whether messages about college were more informational (e.g., about applying and the curricular demands of higher education) or motivational (e.g. inspiring or challenging students to do more). Motivational messages reflected elements of meritocratic and neoliberal discourse, as well as references to the “American Dream.” Another important theme centered on the impact of state and federal mandates regarding postsecondary preparation and readiness on the amount of time counselors and teachers needed to talk to students about college.

### *Generalized or Individualized Messages*

Among the teachers and counselors in District A, there was little question that their students sought diverse paths after high school. While some took the traditional four-year route, others opted for two-year programs, the military, vocational or technical schools, or the workforce. Again, with only two exceptions, most of the faculty did not notice any distinguishable differences between racial groups in terms of which paths they chose. Because of the diversity of academic and career paths, messages about higher education within the school were overwhelmingly perceived as individualized. No one felt that “one-size-fits-all” messages were appropriate for discussing student achievement and plans after high school. Jessica, a newer teacher, summed up most everyone’s sentiments about the emphasis on individualized messages. As she explained, “I think you just have to handle each child separately and individually because not everybody is the same and not everybody comes in with the same goals.”

Sherry, the school’s counselor, gave very individualized attention to incoming seniors. As she explained:

I have met with each incoming senior and their parents individually for one hour to talk specifically about their plans and their circumstances and the process in which they need to engage as far as preparing for that next step after high school. Part of the individualization of messages included making students cognizant of the many post-high school paths that exist. Although the school counselor felt that there was

room for improvement in promoting different postsecondary options, many teachers felt that students were adequately made aware of their choices. As William explained:

The kids realize there are many different options, especially with a school that is so diverse as ours, we try to open their eyes to a lot of different paths... We're making sure that they know that there are other options out there. And I think we've done a pretty good job of doing that.

As Jessica adds:

So, everyone has an individual graduation plan coming into high school, with some sort of idea of what they want to do. And then, it's our job as individual teachers and mentors at, to try to help them figure out if that really is what they want to do... I think that we try to encourage and have them look at other options and maybe, you know, show them what their interests are and maybe whether their strengths are and kind of plant ideas in their head.

There was some variation in teachers' views of individualized messages. Denise and Lee agreed that individualized messages are used, but generalized messages about postsecondary education were also produced. As Denise explained,

I think it's more generalized, but there is [sic] opportunities, the seniors can go into the counselor's office and she does a really good job of, of trying to help meet their needs and get them going in the direction that they need.

Lee added that some messages have to be generalized, such as SAT/ACT dates and deadlines, but when it came to choosing a particular path, students needed more individualized guidance. Overall, individualized messages were deemed necessary and

appropriate because teachers felt that students should be treated as unique individuals. Although faculty members did not recognize racial differences in achievement or postsecondary paths and tended to homogenize the experiences of students, individualized messages were created according to the unique qualities of the students.

### ***Message Initiation***

Faculty varied quite a bit in their thoughts about when messaging about college starts and also when it is appropriate for messages about higher education to be introduced. While some teachers thought that college plans were discussed as early as junior high, a few faculty members thought that the messages about higher education didn't begin until junior year of high school. There were even examples of those who don't know to what extent these conversations happen in the school at all. As Robin admitted, "I just don't know how much of that is happening in the school, you know, whether those conversations are happening with the school, you know." However, if we set aside the content of messages and focus on the appropriate time to initiate conversations about college, two teachers made an important point about waiting until students are mature enough to use the information. As Jessica explained:

They're still babies when they come in, you know, they're still 14 and 15 years old and even at the junior high level, we're pushing them and we're encouraging them to come up thinking what do you want to do when you grow up?... I think that that's a good thing, definitely for sure, that we have them thinking about that

and then, at some levels it's also a little unrealistic because not only do they not know what they want to do, they don't really know who they are yet.

Denise also offered a similar sentiment, noting that pushing postsecondary plans too soon could negatively overwhelm students. As she added:

I think you also have to have a balance there because if you start pushing that too much, sometimes the Freshman are already overwhelmed with just coming to high school that they, you don't want to overemphasize it, but I think it would be important for them to already be thinking about what they want to do and where they want to be, so they can start seeing those options that they have.

Although faculty members agreed that there was most likely an appropriate time to introduce messages about higher education, none made a definite recommendation on when this should be. However, many teachers applauded the idea of having a graduation plan in place, which is formed fairly early in students high school careers. Lee, a veteran teacher, noted that the state has pushed for students to plan out their high school courses according to their interests and potential postsecondary plans. As she explained, "You have to map out your high school classes and you have to stay on track... So the state has really forced that, which in my opinion is great. We've needed that." To her and a few other teachers interviewed, a graduation plan of this form can help combat the lack of student initiative and focus when it comes to deciding what happens after high school.



### ***Informational or Motivational Messages***

Discussions with participants about messages revealed that *content* can be broken up into two general themes: *informational* and *motivational messages*. Informational messages involved standardized information such as deadlines, application/testing procedures, and curricular requirements. Teachers approached informational messages in two different ways. They either involved explicit conversations about applying for school or took the form of lessons incorporated into class that touched on curricular demands students might face in college (e.g., time management, study skills, organization and responsibility). Informational messages were also viewed as being able to be generalized across different students. Conversely, motivational messages were those that were used to encourage student success and combat doubt about the barriers to college that students saw in their way, including finances, family support, and self-confidence. Teachers were more likely to use informational messages that were incorporated into classroom lessons or motivational messages. However, informational messages about the details of applying to school were left to the counselor. During interviews, many teachers explicitly stated that they redirect students to the counselor's office when they can't answer questions about the application process. The counselor is in a unique position because her job is to be the source of the informational messages regarding the requirements of applying to postsecondary programs, although this does not necessarily limit her use of motivational messages.

For teachers, daily conversations are structured around incorporating important skill-based lessons into the classroom. For example, Robin mentioned that she has made sure that her students have developed a system for taking notes, with or without technology, and often discusses what the daily structure and schedule is like in college. Lee discussed something similar:

In class, I throw out things like, “Guys you can hear this next year when you’re taking your class. You might hear your professor say this. You might hear your professor say that...in class we do it like this, but in college it might do it like that.” So I try to build into the conversation that this is a steppingstone of where you go next. Class lessons can even be used as the source of motivational messages as well. When William shared part of his “last day” speech and touched on how he used class content to inspire students’ post-high school plans:

And because we talk about economics all semester, I tell them to be a credit to their community and not be a debit. To give back to the community, don’t always take away and be good citizens...Just to be a credit to someone, to help someone down the line and to give back to the community you come from.

Many conversations were started by students who inquired about their teachers’ own experiences in college. Personal narratives seemed to be an effective way to engage students about the topic. The high school even has “College Tee-Shirt Day” once a month as a way to prompt even more dialogue. According to some faculty members, sharing personal narratives about their own experiences did make the topic more

approachable and opened up opportunities to be a positive influence on their students.

For example, as Jessica explained of her own path to college:

I think I do relate to them and I hope that it's an inspiration to them that they can see my way was very non-traditional route and it took a long time, but that's okay. It's okay, you know, you don't have to do everything right by the book, if you will. It can take time to reach that goal if that's what you're looking for.

Other motivational messages were more straightforward and were used by teachers solely as a means of encouragement. When asked about the ideal messages she hopes students get about school, she answered, "To not give up on whatever their dreams are because, you know, they have those dreams for a reason."

Another set of applicable themes that emerged during interviews in District A were notions of meritocracy and "The American Dream," a popular belief and ideal that assumes "opportunity for success is equally available to everyone" (Bineham, 2015, p. 230). While faculty members may not have been conscious of their use of such discourses, they appeared frequently. For example, Denise explained that she wants her students to know that, "their goals are achievable, whatever they want to achieve, they can if they put in hard work." As Robin added, "It's just a matter of not necessarily that there are barriers there, but sort of getting them over the first hurdle that it is possible, regardless of the barriers, it's just you just have to work for it." In another interview, Lee described how the high school had developed a positive reputation for their scholarship program and were attracting families. As she explained, "We want families that are pushing and wanting the best for their kids and that's what American is made on right?"

These messages were also meant to be motivational and make academic success possible for all.

### ***State Pressures and Classroom Balance***

Combined with the continued pressures surrounding standardized testing, new federal and state mandates regarding postsecondary readiness have placed an enormous amount of pressure on teachers. An unintended and ironic consequence is that this extra pressure within the classroom may take away from teachers' abilities to properly address students' additional concerns about higher education because they are so focused on "teaching to the test." When asked if it's difficult to balance the time in the classroom with extra questions about higher education, with curricular requirements, Robin responded, "Oh, yeah, it's really hard. It's really hard." As Denise added, not only does this create undue pressure for faculty members, but this also puts more pressure on the students themselves:

I want my kids to be successful, but then, you know, me having that pressure sometimes, and I try not to but it does turn back to them and some of it is kind of unfair pressure on them, for the test. I mean, I don't know what the solution is for that, but I think there has to be a better system of accountability for schools.

Jessica, a teacher new to the field, was also concerned with the impact of state pressures on the enjoyment of education, which can also hurt student ambitions about

postsecondary education. As she explained, “It really takes the fun out of the classroom and it takes the fun out of teaching.”

However, not all teachers share this view. Lee, a more veteran teacher, thought that it’s great that new state mandates have emphasized postsecondary education and is making students choose a path sooner. Vince also didn’t view it as an inconvenience. As he added, “No ma’am, I don’t ever see it as being an issue... I don’t ever see it as being a balancing issue.”

**RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about college to diverse student bodies?**

Many resources were in place within District A to promote postsecondary advancement. They were designed to address finances, achievement gaps and information disparities. However, there is speculation about whether or not these resources were effective and to what extent they met the needs of diverse student bodies. In this section, I discuss the types of resources that existed within District. Faculty suggestions about how to improve resources were also included.

***Types of Resources***

One of the most noticeable qualities about District A was faculty’s emphasis on helpful resources that were geared towards life after high school. In particular, the

scholarship program was mentioned frequently and was clearly a priority for the high school. Even if some faculty members were unaware of other college-related resources, almost all recognized and discussed the scholarship program. This wasn't entirely surprising if you consider the fact that most faculty members identified finances as the most prominent barrier to higher education for their students. As the counselor explained of the scholarship opportunities, "We also have an unbelievable scholarship program at our school that I don't believe any other school our size in the state of Texas can compare." Most teachers expressed the same sentiments and often discussed the scholarship program in detail in their own interviews as well.

Another emphasized resource was a program brought into the school that helps students specifically with the finite aspects of the application process and other aspects of college readiness. As the school counselor, Sherry, added, the program is:

Really step-by-step, walk them through it, guide them through it...give them a lot of information about when you need to be doing things, and how to handle things in a timely manner and that sort of thing. And I feel like they get an abundance of assistance with the details.

Another beneficial opportunity offered by the high school was the opportunity to earn dual credits, specialized curriculums based on student interests and even certifications during high school. Such programs can help students begin to think about life after school and negotiate what career path and/or college is most appropriate for them. In general, teachers had positive views of the dual credit programs. College days and visits, SAT/ACT and FAFSA resources, tutoring, and daily broadcasted

announcements were also identified as key resources. However, most of these resources were just discussed briefly.

There were also several printed materials that students and parents received in a weekly bulletin, but their messages were overwhelmingly informational. Included were calendars that reminded students and families about important dates, meetings and workshops, to supplement announcements made at the school. The high school also used the newsletters to send information about helpful websites and apps, and college visits. However, because the school was attempting to go “paperless,” the printed materials given to students were not extensive. Only a small number of documents were analyzed, simply to get a sense of how they compared to direct communication occurring in the school.

The school’s website also provided students and parents with useful information about college prep. Along with an interactive calendar and general information about the school, it also had two important sections regarding postsecondary. Here parents and students could find resources for career exploration, SAT and ACT prep materials, and scholarships, as well as information about financial aid, dual credits and college-bound athletes.

### ***Room for Improvement***

With one exception, most faculty members in District A recognized that there was always room for improvement when it came to resources and communication about

higher education and life after high school. Several teachers noted that significant and conscious changes had occurred within the last five to ten years. As William explained, “We’ve really stepped back and looked at our student body and how the study body is changing and we’ve tried to change with them.”

One suggestion that was mentioned multiple times was to have another counselor within the school, one designated specifically to work with juniors and seniors about postsecondary planning. With only one counselor responsible for the entire high school student population, it was seen as an almost impossible feat for her to reach each student effectively, not for lack of trying. Even Sherry herself recognized the need and explicitly stated, “It would be very helpful to have another counselor.” She also added that the school did have another counselor a few years back, but when she left, no one was brought in to replace her. This was in line with Robin’s suggestion for having more individualized attention: “I think we need to meet with them one-on-one.” Although the school counselor did meet with every incoming senior during the summer to start these conversations, this could be construed as a call for this one-on-one planning to start sooner. In order to help compensate, Sherry said that teachers could fill the gap, especially if higher education concerns could be incorporated into elective classes.

Only one teacher, William, made reference to a particular group of students that warranted more attention. As he stated, “I think that our African American male population and I wouldn’t even begin to be able to figure out how to patch that hole, but I think there is a hole there.”



Another male teacher, Vince, suggested that academic recruiters could also be something to consider. As he explained:

Why not have recruiters that recruit academic, you know students... Because if we have somebody who comes to school, you know, gives a talk to a physics class about engineering or something like that, you know, someone that actually know what it takes to get into that department or to do that, well that might you know, go a long way.

With the exception of Vince and the recommendation for an additional counselor, many faculty members recognized the need for change, but had very few concrete suggestions for how to do so.

## **Discussion**

District A is a small, community-oriented school filled with faculty members who genuinely care about their job. However, messaging about higher education across the school is inconsistent and exhibits qualities that are in contradiction to what the academic literature would suggest. Although some of their efforts are appropriate for their school, interviews revealed that teachers and counselors may not be utilizing existing resources efficiently and may be ignoring barriers to the achievement of certain racial and ethnic groups.

### *Individualized and Colorblind Messaging*

As a whole, faculty members emphasized individualized messaging about higher education even though most simultaneously exhibited a colorblind mentality towards the student population and believed that SES, as opposed to race/ethnicity, was more influential in student achievement. Because a majority of students are classified as low-SES, most teachers see students as a homogenous group with similar experiences, which one would intuitively think would lead them to generate messages tailored to this specific audience. However, teachers and counselors were quite clear that individualized messages needed to be tailored to students based on the recognition that students have multiple postsecondary trajectories, independent of what may create the need for different paths. The many postsecondary pathways, within the context of low SES, drive messages about college. However, race and ethnicity, along with intersectionality are largely ignored.

In District A, constructing messages in this way made sense for educators. Approaching students individually about postsecondary plans was thought to maintain individuality and tailor plans based on skills sets and interests. Because information about scholarships and grants was included, these messages were also thought to be able to account for their financial difficulties. Teachers also most likely assumed that because messages were individualized, they would account for the specific barriers that each student faces, although most did not specifically stress race, ethnicity or cultural constraints as indicative of postsecondary advancement.

However, ignoring the influence of race on the ability to realize particularly postsecondary plans seems odd based on the literature. In their study of educational policy discourse, Winkle-Wagner (2012) found that public discussion about college admissions policies has become race-neutral, “falsely assuming an equal playing field” (p. 537). They also noted that omission of race from educational discourse is very harmful, even if unintentional. As they explained:

The failure to name the problem of racial inequality as having to do with *race* leads to much larger social pathologies such as continued racial inequalities in housing, schooling, and long-term social and economic advancement (Feagin, 2006; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Shapiro, 2004). “Colorblind” discourse may really conceal “colorblind racism”—where racism and racial inequality are implicated in the discourse and persist without being recognized (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).  
(Winkle-Wagner, 2012, p. 538)

A prevalence of colorblind ideology among faculty also signals a failure to recognize *intersectionality*, another important notion that has been linked to differences in academic success and postsecondary achievement. Intersectionality can be broadly defined as “the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference...social practices, institutional arrangements, cultural ideologies, and the outcomes of these interactions” have complex consequences (Davis, 1992; Strand, 2014). Although a majority of students in District A have the same low socioeconomic status, many students’ negative experiences are compounded by their simultaneous racial minority status. Messaging about higher education should also compensate for this.

Colorblindness is also often paired with meritocracy and ideas of the “American Dream.” As Blanchard & Muller (2015) explain, teachers evaluate students along several measures, “including their effort and potential, two central tenets of the American Dream of achieving success through hard work” (p. 264). While some scholars have found that teachers’ perceptions of student motivation are typically accurate, others have challenged this claim and point to several ways in which these perceptions are always vulnerable to biases and point to how “subjectivity in teachers’ perceptions point to power differences between teachers and students, particularly students who are distant from teachers in terms of social status or background” (Blanchard & Muller, 2015, p. 264). When we consider minority group achievement, thoughts such as “You can do it if you work hard enough” ignore the complexities of structural barriers, especially within education. Unfortunately, minority students don’t have the same access and “starting point” as students within dominant groups and this can impact academic achievement.

Failing to create messages about higher education that don’t specifically address race and/or intersectionality ignores structural barriers and can leave students unprepared to deal with similar constraints in college. Higher education has a well-documented problem with inclusivity (Obiakor, 1993; Muller et al., 2010; Hilburn, 2014) and if high school educators are not recognizing the impacts of race and ethnicity on achievement, students will not be prepared to deal with them in college. As a result, their educational experiences, both academic and social, may continue to suffer. Motivational messages could be used to properly address racial barriers, but that too begins with an acknowledgement that these issues exist, which most educators in District A currently do

not. Although informational messages could remain individualized, additional encouragement and support has to address *all* of the factors that impact student success in high school and college.

As Boutte et al. (2011) explain, teachers and counselors may be uncomfortable to talk about racial issues, but this does not stem from unwillingness, “but rather from unfamiliarity with the knowledge base and available resources” (p. 335). The authors also add that, “Once teachers recognize that silence on these issues contributes to the problem, then they may be more likely to interrupt racism rather than ignore it” (Boutte et al., 2011, p. 335). If race and ethnicity do dictate significant differences in achievement, as the research suggests, then messaging becomes more effective if it addresses these relevant barriers to the higher education system. However, if educators are not cognizant of these differences, they do not become influential when they are constructing messages for their diverse student bodies. And unfortunately, “If a student is unable to perform or to compete for college admissions, the cause is often credited to something internal to the group rather than to inequalities in K-12 schooling or in the larger society” (Winkle-Wagner, 2012, p. 539).

Although research points to the need for informational and motivational messages about higher education to include issues of racial and subsequent barriers, it is possible that SES may be far more influential than race in this school district. We may presume that race makes the most significant difference because of existing literature, but other situational characteristics may be more important in this case. The nature of

this study cannot answer this fully, but it does make a case for exploring this notion in future research.

Now, if we return to the seemingly contradictory phenomenon of educators equalizing the student body, but also emphasizing individualized messages, we don't necessarily reach a clear and satisfying conclusion. Interviews with participants revealed that the need for individualized messaging simply comes from their observation that students have many possible paths to pursue after high school and that people should be treated as unique individuals. The focus is on *individual* differences, as opposed to *group* differences, which isn't necessarily negated by faculty's belief that SES (of which most of their student population shares the same class) can be seen as an equalizing force. However, this could still be influencing messages unknowingly. However, this does not help to alleviate the potential impairment of messages that could result from ignoring racial differences in the student population and this is something that needs to be addressed if the school hopes to improve its messaging about higher education. Messages should be individual to an extent, but must also consider realistic, structural barriers that certain minority groups face in the education system.

### ***Message Consistency***

Another key observation that emerged during participant interviews was faculty members' differing opinions on when messages about higher education should be introduced to students and inconsistency in teachers' knowledge about the different

resources available to help with postsecondary decisions. Although it can be argued that because conversations about college are happening daily toward the end of students' high school careers, initiation of messages may not be as crucial. However, having discrepancies in knowledge between faculty members about postsecondary resources could confuse students. Likewise, inconsistency in message content may not properly reduce students' uncertainty about higher education.

These discrepancies in messaging seem to stem from faculty members thoughts about their role as sources of information about higher education. Teachers, the school counselor and teachers who are also athletic coaches each had differing views about their responsibility in this respect. Sherry, the school counselor, was the only faculty member who was specifically designated as the source of information about college throughout most interviews with teachers. Teachers also failed to clearly define themselves as important information sources and explained that discussions about college were typically discussed as something supplemental that comes up during class or specific times of the year, as opposed to being a central aspect of being a teacher. And when asked how to improve messages about postsecondary education, teachers consistently requested that another counselor be brought to the school. Expanding their own roles to compensate for information gaps was not suggested. Although the school counselor did recognize college readiness as her responsibility, it's unrealistic to assume one person can be expected to shoulder the postsecondary futures of hundreds of students alone. In her interview, Sherry specifically addressed that teachers and elective classes can help alleviate some of these stressors.

Two teachers did have slightly different views in regards to their role as mentors about college because of their dual position as athletic coaches. While they too cited the counselor as the central source postsecondary information, they also emphasized their own contributions to this topic. They likened this to the greater connection they had with students and even suggested that other teachers should work to learn more about their students. Wang (2012) agrees that engaging in more communicative behaviors with students can help develop stronger interpersonal and mentoring relationships (p. 336). It should be noted again that these two faculty members were also the only two to recognize racial differences in achievement. Perhaps more interaction with students, such as that experienced by coaches, can sensitize teachers to the more nuanced differences between them (including race/ethnicity).

Most interviewees recognized that there was room for improvement in regards to postsecondary preparedness and communication, but ignoring the potential for their own roles can undermine a potentially important network of mentors that can be used to reach students more effectively. By utilizing each other as a collective source, teachers and counselors could better utilize resources that they already have available to them. However, if additional resources cannot be added to the school, such as another counselor, District A needs to find ways to utilize those that already exist. Increasing consistency of communication among faculty about this topic is feasible and realistic (and arguably, necessary) and could be a significant step bridging the gap between students and the higher education system, without having to seek new resources. The



literature also shows that positive messages should be emphasized and reiterated whenever possible. As Wang (2012) explains:

When messages are internalized and remembered, they become an influential socializing force in the recipients' lives. Within the mentoring relationship, memorable messages can remain salient throughout students' college experiences and postcollege careers. This mentors' messages can serve as a support system and a socializing force. (p. 337)

Improving educators' messaging becomes particularly important for students who lack familial support, as teachers recognized that many of their students did. Educators must be cognizant of the experiences of their students and consciously provide the information and interpersonal support that they may not be getting at home. Improving interpersonal relationships with students may help to accomplish this. Fan (2012) confirms earlier research that there is a "statistically significant positive relationship between teacher-pupils relationship and children's academic performances" (p. 489). Of course, student motivation also plays a role and educators can only help those who are willing to accept the guidance. However, prompting more conversations about higher education in different contexts can potentially spark interest in previously overlooked students.

### ***Barriers to Message Construction***

High school educators face a variety of barriers when constructing messages about higher education. They take the form of structural barriers, including state pressures and limited class time, student motivation and initiative, and family variables. Each presents its own challenges to educators who seek to make the higher education more accessible to their diverse student bodies.

State pressures also become difficult to balance in the classroom and do not leave optimal time for having additional discussions about higher education. Multiple teachers expressed the stress that is associated with meeting curricular and standardized testing needs, which actually works against the states push for increased postsecondary readiness because not much else can be covered. Participants explained that the state still places an immense amount of importance on standardized testing for college, although they don't necessarily reflect the intelligence of students or are fair for some marginalized groups. However, teachers must continue to prepare students for these academic milestones if they want to give their students a chance to advance, but this limits the time they can cover additional and equally necessary information about college, still leaving students unprepared.

Student initiative also became a salient theme with participants. Although educators in District A worked hard to reach students and create individualized postsecondary plans, this was only as effective as students allowed it to be. Most teachers emphasized that students must also show initiative for their own futures because

no efforts on their part can combat complacency about college in students. Ogbu also stressed the importance of minority student initiative in his own work (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). This issue also speaks to the need of educators to diversify their messages beyond simply information about the application process and college readiness. Informational messages, while important, may not be as effective in inspiring students as motivational messages are, especially for those students who don't have the personal drive, but the academic potential.

Many teachers also cited family support as one of the crucial motivators to academic success, but did not address these barriers in their messages to students. Similarly, none discussed how to utilize this important resource or strengthen the communication that occurs between families. Parents can be an incredibly beneficial support system for students (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) and may even help to alleviate some of the responsibilities of educators. Again, making significant improvements in messaging about higher education doesn't necessarily mean seeking *new* resources, but learning to use existing resources more efficiently. This approach to change should be more appealing to educators, as opposed to having to introduce new programs for addressing the problem at hand.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISTRICT B**

This chapter presents data from District B, a very small high school located in central Texas. District B's high school is classified as a "majority minority" school in which the combined minority student population is larger than the Caucasian population. Teachers here are committed to the achievement of their students and promote the many different postsecondary paths students can take. The messages produced by teachers and counselors about college reflected a mix of both generalized messages, which are geared to the student body as a whole, and individualized messages, which are geared towards specific students based on the unique postsecondary path they may pursue. Motivational messages were also prominent within the school used as a means to encourage students. This case study revealed several themes regarding the role of race, SES, and family support in student achievement, student motivation and realistic expectations about higher education, and effective and ineffective resources geared towards postsecondary preparation within the school. The analysis of District B is driven and organized by the following research questions:

RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?

RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do these messages make?

RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about colleges to diverse student bodies?

I begin by describing the research site and explaining the local context of the high school. The analysis is then presented in three sections, corresponding with each of the research questions. Key themes and quotations are identified within each of these sections to provide support for important findings. A discussion section follows that evaluates key findings and highlights important connections to the literature and future research.

### **Research Site**

District B is located in central Texas, within a community that relishes in its small town charm, but city-like culture. Students are pushed to follow individualized, fulfilling career paths, regardless of what that looks like after high school. Teachers in District B feel their role is to be motivators because they want to make sure that students do not sell themselves short.

Along with an emphasis on providing their students with the best education possible, the school's administrative body and educators value extracurricular activities that broaden student experiences. District B is considered diverse and recently, the school became classified as "majority minority," where the number of minority students outweighs their White counterparts. Over 52% of students are Hispanic and African American (32.1% and 21%, respectively), while the population of White students is

about 44%. The school is also considered low-SES with about 75% classifying as economically disadvantaged. Teachers and counselors are very cognizant of the financial state of many of their students and strive to provide scholarships and support for those who wish to advance to a higher education. Finances are by far the most cited concern for both parents and students when it comes to making postsecondary decisions.

Conversations about postsecondary education happen daily and educators' messages about college can be best described as comprehensive, as teachers and counselors strive to cover application, curriculum and psychosocial aspects of the college process. While informational messages about the application process and college curriculum are emphasized, motivational messages that aim to challenge and encourage students are also prominent within this school. Teachers hope that their students are academically or financially successful, but also push students to choose a path that will leave them satisfied and happy. Because of this, the school provides information about the many postsecondary choices that exist, including junior college, four-year college, trade and vocational schools, and the military. Even if students choose to enter the workforce right out of college, teachers and counselors help them tailor their curriculums, receive certifications and offer practical advice for the real world.

However, teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of messaging and resources within the school differ. While the majority of participants felt that students were receiving the correct messages and support regarding higher education, at least two participants felt that resources were not appropriate for District B's diverse student body. However, all participants showed dedication and passion for their job and shared a

common goal: to provide their students with the best education possible. The key themes from District B are summarized in *Table 4*.

Table 4

*Key Themes from District B*

<b>THEME</b>	<b>THEME DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?</b>	
<i>Race, Economics &amp; Family Support</i>	The ways in which a student’s racial background, socioeconomic status, and presence/absence of family support combine to affect their academic achievement/ambitions.
<i>Student Motivation &amp; Realistic Expectations</i>	The extent to which students have a realistic outlook on their academic potential and the drive to make it happen.
<b>RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do these messages make?</b>	
<i>Generalized v. Individualized Informational Messages</i>	Informational messages outline the finite aspects of the application process and what students can expect in the college classroom. Generalized messages are those that designed for the student body as a whole. Individualized messages are designed for each student, based on their specific needs.

Table 4 Continued

THEME	THEME DESCRIPTION
<i>Motivational Messages</i>	Motivational messages are used to encourage students to pursue a college education.
<i>Message Initiation</i>	When students are first introduced to messages about higher education in school.
<i>Messages from Former Students</i>	The impact of messages from successful former students on high schoolers postsecondary goals.
<b>RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about colleges to diverse student bodies?</b>	
<i>Resources and Role of the School Counselor</i>	Formal and informal resources within the school designed specifically to help students with postsecondary education needs, and the role of the school counselor.
<i>Comparing with Other Schools</i>	The comparisons teachers make between their current position/postsecondary resources and those they had in previous teaching jobs.
<i>Building Relationships</i>	The impact of strong interpersonal relationships between students and educators.



**RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?**

The teachers and counselors within District B were incredibly passionate about their jobs and harped on the importance of building strong rapport with their students. Because the high school is situated within a small community, teachers feel as if they know what their students are experiencing and what barriers they face when contemplating academic advancement. Educators could easily identify differences in achievement and postsecondary paths among racial groups in school, but still cited socioeconomic status and family support, or the lack of support, as exercising a strong influence on student success. Teachers also emphasized how detrimental it can be for students who do not have the support of parents and how student motivation typically matches the level of involvement they receive from home. Finally, both counselors and teachers emphasized the importance of student motivation and how important it is to find a path that is realistic, but also one that you love.

***Race, Economics & Family Support***

With one exception, teachers and counselors within District B were cognizant of racial and cultural differences in the achievement of students and the particular postsecondary paths they take. And while they were able to describe the differing racial patterns that existed within the school, when asked if this was the most significant factor

of student success and advancement, overwhelmingly, the answer was “no.” Most educators felt that the effects of low socioeconomic status, combined with a lack of family support was much more damaging to student success than race/ethnicity-based barriers. Failing to recognize that that membership in more than one minority group, including race and socioeconomic status, can have compounding effects which cannot be explained or understood fully if separated, may be problematic (Becares & Priest, 2015). Failing to recognize the compounding effects of barriers can negatively impact student engagement and educational outcomes and limits the understanding of individual experiences (Nelson et al., 2015; Museus & Griffin, 2011).

Hispanic students were most often discussed when it came to the impacts of culture on higher education ambitions. When asked if most parents were supportive of students going to college, the school’s counselor, Sara, responded, “That’s a cultural kind of thing.” Although most parents do encourage their children, there are exceptions. As she explained:

Some of my Hispanic families...especially the girls, they want the girls to get married and have babies. They do push, sometimes they push the males to go, but most of the time they push them into work.

Alex, a veteran teacher echoed this point noting:

Well, in the Latino community really, the expectation is that you work and you don’t go to school. That you are supposed to go really directly into the workforce. But, as far as my female Latina students, there is very rarely

encouragement from the parents to go to school. They are encouraged to get married and have children.

Reagan adds that many of her students are also first generation college students and when they are also recent immigrants, they have it even tougher. As she explained:

A lot of them are breaking social barriers, especially our Hispanic girls in town. A lot of them are expected to stay home and have babies... Right now, I feel like we could do more in regards to understanding the Hispanic students, especially our ESL students or the students that have moved here... They're ostracized not only in the school every day, but also at home because their parents don't understand what they are going through.

Regan also noticed that her first generation African American students faced similar barriers. As she added, "A lot of them if they go to college, a lot of them may come back and experience someone who might say 'Oh, you think you're too good for us and that's because you got a college degree.'"

Alex also recognized patterns within other racial groups within the school. She noted that most of her Caucasian students were either headed for four-year or junior college, while her African American students felt, "If you can go to school, go to school. If you can't, you're going to work." She added that African American students also have more unrealistic expectations about what it takes to get into college. For example, she talked about how one student thought that all you needed to do to get into college was to apply. And when she didn't get into her dream school, LSU, the student became discouraged and reconsidered going to college at all.

Although these differences do exist and educators were quite aware of racial patterns, most still emphasized that economic status and family support primarily determined student success. As Isabel explained, “I hate to say it like this, but the lower income students are looking for the, ‘Where can I go to work now to get the money that I need to maybe go to college in the future’.” And when asked if these students lacked family support, she responded, “I believe they do. It’s never been a topic of conversation at home, which makes it less of one at school.”

In some cases, teachers simply lumped race and socioeconomic status together and even described them as coincidental factors. For example, when discussing the allocation of information about college within the school, Laura stated, “From what I’ve seen and what I’ve heard, *the more economically advantaged students, the Caucasians,* they are getting more of the information.”

Reagan felt that although racial differences existed, the students all related to one another because most could be classified as low-SES. As she explained:

The commonality that all of our students have is that we are 76% economically disadvantaged. Because of that, a lot of the kids go through the same situation and home and that sort of thing...I know that students that come from households where they are economically sound, they usually have it a little bit easier...And then, there are a lot of kids that come from a poor background, they feel like they are destined to be poor and they feel like they are destined to stay here and not improve on their life.

Yet, Reagan recognized that racial differences could make a difference on students' aspirations regarding post-secondary education given her experience working in another school district. She added, "When I was in the bigger district, yes, there were racial issues. But not so much here, we don't have to deal with that much. The kids all understand where the other person is coming from." Isabel's response sums up this common thought among educators in District B. She concluded, "It comes down to the economic factor more than anything. That just happens to be the population that is also typically the population of the minority."

One teacher, Farrah, did not recognize racial differences at all and simply identified the impacts of socioeconomic status and family support on achievement. She explained:

I mean the barriers that I really see has nothing to do with race. I see a more income based, not really income based, but just my economically disadvantaged kids, it's different... When you don't see much parent involvement at home and you don't see parents really care if they pass or fail their high school classes, those are the kids that you see not really wanting to go further after high school. I think that just comes from different households.

Separate of the compounding effects it can have when paired with low socioeconomic status, educators detailed the grim fate of the many students who lack family support. Although the school's counselor explained that "parents can come in any time and work on whatever they need to," teachers made sure to point out that many don't necessarily use these opportunities, especially those parents heading low income

and minority families. Alex, an experienced teacher, shared an anecdote about a student of hers that asked her to attend a financial aid meeting because the student knew she couldn't count on her own mother to be there. Having to cope with an absent parent is taxing and as Alex explained, "She's frustrated and I think she is a little embarrassed because this is a parent meeting and she won't have a parent there." She added, "So many of them just don't have the support at home that they need. So we are just going to take care of it because we need to." Farrah also described her familiarity with parents who don't want to be involved. When asked if she ever came across parents who don't really care about their students' achievement, she answered:

Yes, all the time. And it's heartbreaking. You'll call home and tell the parents that the child has four or five zeros...and they're not taking advantage of the opportunities and you have a parent who basically are like "Oh, I'll take care of it" and that's all they say and nothing ever changes. And it's hard.

She noted that students who have uninvolved parents are typically students who don't show much care about their own education.

Unfortunately, as Reagan explained, some parents not only choose not to be involved, but explicitly deter their child's achievements. She recalled:

Some of them are taught or told at home that they can't do it. Some of them are told they're not smart enough and we really try to break through that and try to let them know that they shouldn't allow anything to keep them from going forward. There are ways to deal with it.

Sometimes, efforts to counteract negativity at home do not work and students end up not pursuing a postsecondary education of any sort.

It's equally complicated for those students with parents who are not English speakers, even if they show concern for their students' academic achievements. The application process can be daunting and as Alex added, "They feel like there is not help available for them, they feel like they are not going to get any money and it is disheartening for me... The financial aid system at the university level can be so complete they just don't understand it." The counselor Sara resonated the same sentiments and explained that in a lot of districts, including District B, "[Students] have parents that haven't gone to college and don't know anything about college... You're not just educating the kids, you're educating the parents."

### ***Student Motivation and Realistic Expectations***

Another important theme that emerged was student motivation and unrealistic expectations regarding higher education. One teacher, Isabel, noted that the current generation of students is "extremely needy" and requires more assistance than the students she had when she started teaching just over ten years ago. For teachers in District B, it is important for them to be honest with students about potential career paths, while making sure that students choose a path that they truly enjoy. Fulfillment and happiness, as well as financial stability, is considered a very important postsecondary goal.

Alex shared an anecdote of a student who thought that all she needed to do was apply to a school to get in. As she explained, “She didn’t realize that SAT scores were considered or her class rank or her overall GPA. She was under the impression that all she needed to do was apply and she would be accepted.” And because she didn’t get into her dream school, she reconsidered going to college altogether. Alex added:

I want everyone to educate themselves, but I also don’t want these kids to be unrealistic about these things either. Not everyone is meant to be a doctor, not everyone is meant to be a lawyer and you know, to me, if you are in the bottom ten kids in the class, you’re probably not going to get into Harvard Law School. For students who have struggled financially and with parents who have struggled, they only see the end goal and not necessarily what it takes to get there. As Alex also explained:

College is not the starting process to working hard and enjoying a successful career. College is your ticket to a big bank account... That’s when it gets a little hard to say you know, “This is not what you need to do.” You need to think of something else.

Educators also emphasized that it’s important to encourage students to choose a career path that makes them happy. Even if it’s not what they think is best, both teachers and the school counselor recognized that you can’t force a student towards a goal that they don’t desire. For example, the school’s counselor described how one year, the school’s valedictorian had no interest in going to college and just wanted to settle down



and have a family. Although she did end up going to college, she dropped out shortly after. As Sara explained:

We helped out, but she ended up dropping out of school and I'm not exactly sure what she's doing right now, but that was a hard one to get through. Because valedictorians should go to college and they should go to the four years and the bigger college and do these great things... So, I mean, it's got to be what the kids want. It can't be something that we push them on or they're never going to end up where they want to be.

She added, "So we just look at reality and try to look at how things could go for the, but ultimately, it's their decision, so they have to be happy with that. And I can't make that decision for them. And their parents can't either. It ends up being a disaster if that happens."

Two other teachers also expressed the need to direct students toward a postsecondary path they enjoy. Farrah explained:

It's about supporting them and giving them enough information to where if they want to change their minds, they have that information to go forward on. But certainly, we don't want to push anything on our students that they feel like it doesn't suit their lives.

Reagan added, "I'll ask them what they enjoy. Because if you hate the field you go into, you're not going to stay in it. So you want to find something that you really enjoy."

**RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do these messages make?**

In District B, students are inundated with messages about higher education. Teachers and counselors make it a point to provide helpful information about college whenever possible. Generalized and individualized messages were both utilized when addressing students about this topic. Generalized messages were those designed and addressed to the entire student body, while individualized messages were constructed based on each student's unique postsecondary path. And while students were given the basic information about the application process and the demands of higher education, educators within the school also strived to encourage and challenge their students with motivational messages. Teachers varied in when they thought messages about college should be introduced to students, but all agreed that feedback from past students was useful to share with current students.

***Generalized or Individualized Informational Messages***

Although most participants felt that students received individualized attention when it came to college planning, a mix of generalized and individualized messages were used within the school by teachers and counselors regarding postsecondary education. Sara, the school's counselor, explained that most students were first

generation college students who didn't really have a clue about what to ask initially. So, she goes into the classroom and takes an "overall approach" at the beginning of the year, approaching college in more broad and generalized way. This gave students something to think about and then they came to ask questions.

When students come into the high school and begin conversations about college, Sara starts off with the questions "What do you like?" and "What's your goal?" As she explained, "It starts off more career-oriented and then we go to how to get there." Farrah agreed that the school takes a "very individual" approach to students' college plans, but the state's postsecondary readiness mandates seem to prefer more generalized approaches to messaging about higher education. As she explained:

We talk a lot about the state trying to make it a one-size-fits-all message about college, but we have so many more options in terms of technical schools, there's two-years schools. You can basically make it fit your needs. Or what you want to do. So it's very kind of individual type of basis for the kids [in District B].

Most importantly, regardless of which type of student they are working with, "We try to get them enough information where they can make an informed decision about what the best path might be for them." Reagan echoed Sara and Farrah:

We definitely individualize it. A lot of times we try to identify what students are very strong in, whether it is a certain class or skill, and then we try to help them get further in that field and develop it.

As Isabel added, "It's very broad and it is more of the choose your own, it's not a one-size-fits-all. It's not an everybody's going to college attitude. That's not portrayed here."

On the other hand, one teacher, Laura, thought that the messages that students received from the school were actually quite general. Although she felt messages should be individualized and she makes it a point to tailor her own messages to each student, she thought other teachers and counselors gave messages that may not fit with the unique needs of the individual student. As she explained:

I firmly believe from what the kids have, I've overheard conversations and them asking me questions, it's one-size-fits-all conversations with them...I think that they feel slighted, they feel like they're not getting information and I do think that causes them to be negative about that.

### ***Motivational Messages***

Along with the important informational messages that detail the application process and advice about the curricular demands of college, the educators in District B felt that it was important to provide motivational messages and encouragement to students. Students are often discouraged about school because of their socioeconomic status or the fact that they are from a small town and teachers do their best to combat these attitudes. As college approaches, students start to worry about the real world setting in. But as Alex explained, "We work through it together and we talk about it and we discuss it. They know that eventually this is going to happen and it's real and they're going to be okay." Farrah added:

We have a lot of economically disadvantaged kids. And so we really try to help them with options about how to get to college and in my class, especially, we just try to give them the confidence that, if you choose to move on to a four-year school you can do that. Because many times, the structure that they come from, you know, their parents aren't always talking to them about college and stuff. So I think it's kind of in the back of their minds, but they're not sure if that's the career path for them.

Reagan shared that the most frequent question she is asked by students is: "Do you think I can do it?" And as she responded: "One of the things that I tell them is to make sure you make yourself an individual and not a number when you go. It doesn't matter how big the university is." She also noted that coming from a small town makes many students think they can't handle college as well as those who come from a large district or city. However, she said the school also works to combat this:

We try to tell them, a lot of kids worry that because they are from a small town that they are not able to compete with kids from the big city, that somehow they are shortchanged in small districts. And I personally feel that even though they may not have all the different classes they offer, what our kids are ahead of is that they are able to multitask because many of them are involved in several organizations all at once... And because of the small community, there is a lot of community involvement.

College is also framed as an opportunity for future growth and a way for students to experience more than just their hometown. Alex, who has coincidentally had her

current students three times during their high school career, explained, “[District B] is not a big town and there’s not a lot of opportunities for them, so really since this group has been Freshman, I really, really pushed them to do something beyond where that are at right now.” Another teacher, Isabel, shared similar thoughts:

As a teacher that is still a student, I like to portray it as an opportunity and an experience that you’re able to build upon and create what you want out of it. The more that you put in, the more you’re going to get out. You actually discover yourself in ways that you can’t in high school.

The literature on memorable messages supports the effectiveness of such motivational messages, especially for first generation college students. Knapp et al. (1981) defines memorable messages as “verbal messages which may be remembered for extremely long periods of time and which people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives” (p. 27). Wang (2012) adds, “Within the mentoring relationship, memorable messages can remain salient throughout students’ college experiences and postcollege careers. Thus mentors’ messages can serve as a support system and a socializing force” (p. 337). In her study of first-generation college students, Wang (2012) also found these students remembered vividly what their mentors had said and credited these messages with influencing their present and future decisions” (p. 352). Motivational messages can be very important, especially for minority students who face additional barriers to the higher education system.

A specific type of motivational message that emerged during interviews was designed to challenge students. While motivational messages were meant to encourage

students to consider postsecondary education in general (“You can do it.”), challenge messages were those specifically designed to push students towards a more challenging path than the one they are currently considering (“You can do more”). Although it was important for teachers to make sure students’ goals were realistic, it was also essential for them to ensure that students weren’t underselling their capabilities. As Farrah explained, “When I see potential in somebody, I try my hardest to encourage them to go to college.” Alex motivated students similarly adding, “I do have some students who sell themselves short and I do encourage them to push themselves.” Isabel echoed both Farrah and Alex and explained how important postsecondary education is these days:

I feel that every student has the opportunity to go out and learn more and develop more. And I would never dissuade a student from going out and seeking a higher education. So, when they ask questions, I try to gear them more toward college experience or a trade school or technical school, rather than the workforce.

Because it’s not a feasible alternative in my opinion to the current trend in job markets to have a student go directly into the workforce situation.

Teachers in District B displayed a lot of honesty with their students. Their motivational messages conveyed that they want students to be fulfilled and challenged in whatever postsecondary path they chose.

### ***Message Initiation***

Educators in District B differed quite a bit in their opinion about when students start receiving messages about college and whether or not the timing is appropriate. Although state mandates lay out certain expectations, there seems to be a lot of variation as to whether information about higher education actually reaches students at the recommended time. As the school counselor shared, House Bill 5 requires educators to start talking about college when students are in eighth grade. As she explained, “They take an [aptitude] test and they get an idea of what they like to do. When they come to high school, we ask ‘What career do you want?’” In the high school, messages start freshman year. One teacher, Isabel, thinks this is too soon to be discussing college and careers with students:

I think most are still searching and that’s a fault in our education system and that we put pressure on them from their seventh grade year to start picking up halfway as to where they want to do and what you want to do...And that’s about maturity level to be able to make those decisions. We’re forcing them so young now to start making these decisions that are going to change their lives and they’re not always prepared to do that.

Reagan also noted that sometimes, even when these topics are discussed with students, they aren’t old enough to absorb it or think they have it covered. She explained, “A lot of times we’re trying to teach them because a lot of them think that they know



everything or that it's too far away and they don't realize that this time goes really fast." But, as they get older, they become more inquisitive.

However, one teacher, Laura, doesn't feel that students were actually getting messages early enough. Although the school counselor said that students start thinking about their postsecondary futures in eighth grade, Laura noted that students should be receiving messages at about that time, as if to convey she didn't think that was actually happening.

### *Messages from Former Students*

A few of the teachers explained how much they enjoy when past students returned to the high school to express gratitude for their help. Sometimes, they also provided some useful advice for high schoolers currently making decisions about higher education. For example, Reagan recalled:

We've had kids come back and say, "You know, we didn't realize just how much the high school teachers do for us and help us until we talked away and went to a college or university setting"... A lot of them will come back and thank us for nurturing them and helping them throughout those years.

Another student told her, "You know, when I was going to your high school, I didn't really believe you and I didn't think you were correct on things. And now that I'm out and in the workforce, I realize that I didn't know what I was talking about." Farrah added that past students could be helpful resources. As she explained:

Since I've been teaching for nine years, I've had several kids come up and give me their chemistry information from Texas A&M or they share their experiences with me and so I've been able to pass those things down.

Student feedback can be useful for teachers and counselors to adjust their messages to match the experiences of current college students, since it may have been some time since educators experienced it themselves. It also helped confirm if their current messages were effective and on track as evidence by students who had gone previously gone through the process.

**RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about colleges to diverse student bodies?**

Opinions about the effectiveness of postsecondary resources and the school's counselors differed among teachers in District B. While most teachers and counselors applauded the efforts of the school in assisting students for postsecondary readiness, others thought there was definitely room for improvement. Part of what drove these differences were teachers' past experiences in other schools, which they were quick to compare with their current position. However, regardless of their thoughts about the resources available to help students with decisions about higher education, all educators recognized that building strong and supportive relationships with students was an incredibly helpful resource in and of itself.

### ***Resources and the Role of the School Counselor***

Most participants in District B outlined the many resources within the school that helped students with postsecondary decisions. Among those mentioned were workshops for parents and students, community events like BBQs that allowed teachers to engage with parents, and resume/interviewing resources for students, on top of the individualized help that students received about the college application process. That being said, a couple of teachers felt that resources were still lacking and there were still students not getting the proper information. Participants who voiced positive attitudes about the school's resources were those that were recommended by the school's counselor as potential interviewees. Overall, there was a continuum of perspectives regarding resources, ranging from feelings that they were completely inadequate to feelings that they were actually quite appropriate for District B's student body.

The school's counselor, Sarah, outlined many resources available within the school and the many opportunities teachers had to improve relationships with their diverse student bodies. She explained:

We have cultural awareness types of things that are put on for us. There is always, if teachers feel the need, we always offer that they can go to workshops... We also have an ESL coordinator that helps us with parents and answering questions or anything like that. So we have lots of help out there, you know lots of different things. So, I think if the teachers really want it, they can get it.

Farrah and Isabel also emphasized the wealth of information provided to students and how effective the counselors were in the school. Farrah noted, “The counselors are really pulling them in and talking to them about ‘what are your future plans?’ and by the time they are juniors, they find out what you’re really interested in.” When it came to students who needed more help, she felt that the counselors were there for them too. She added, “The counselors really make sure they are talking to them and helping them with any questions or any two-year path they may want to take.” And when asked if students know about the resources at school, Isabel responded, “Yes, they do. They are very aware of it and they utilize those.”

Alex had a less positive opinion about the school’s resources and counselors. As a result, she felt that teachers have to compensate for the lack of resources. She noted:

It’s kind of a co-effort. I do feel as a teacher that has been with them for so long, I do feel responsible. And our counseling staff is only two counselors. So, one counselor covers two grade levels. So, her time is extremely stretched...So, a lot of my time after school or during my conference is spent helping students individually.

One teacher, Laura, had a very negative opinion about the school’s counseling and voiced concerns about the quality of information provided to students. In her opinion:

It’s a disconnect I feel between the counselors and the students. I’m not sure where the disconnect is or how that happens, but I feel like they are not getting the message out to the kids, to the majority of the population. There may be

smaller, you know the AP kids and kids like that are getting information, but it's not coming down the pipe to even the workforce kids.

And when she was asked if students sensed the differences, she responded, "Yes. Yes. I do think they notice that...I don't feel like they feel they are prepared for the workforce or college or anything like that." She too feels the need to compensate in class for a lack of postsecondary resources within the school. As she added, "Seeing the lack of information getting to these kids as a teacher I feel responsible. That's part of my job, having them be responsible adults being prepared. So that's why I tried to make it a point to have those conversations in class." She concluded:

The counselors need to be more visible in the school... Getting to know these kids and getting that information to teachers as well. If I had not have been in the position that I was in the past couple years, I wouldn't have had the information to communicate with my students about that.

### ***Comparing with Other Schools***

Differences of opinion about the school's resources often stemmed from teachers' experiences in other schools. While some felt District B was doing a commendable job in reaching its students, others had a different perspective. Farrah felt that the school takes a more proactive and positive approach than other school districts she's worked for. Resources were not as good as the smaller school she used to work at,

although they did the best they could with the resources they had available. However, in District B, she feels, “They really do a fantastic job of helping the kids get prepared.”

Reagan had a similar view and emphasized the importance of being in a smaller community and the co-effort of raising children. She also outlined, as compared with other schools, how discipline issues here are very rare. As she explained:

We have a smaller school district and it’s a much more intimate setting, I guess. For lack of a better word...I really feel a lot of times it takes a community to raise a child, it’s not just a parent. And these days, we really need the parents to do more raising, but when you’re in a small town, you got other people looking out for your children, as well...We just don’t have many of the discipline issues as we did in a bigger town. Discipline issues are very rare.

However, one teacher did not share the sentiments of her fellow faculty members. Laura, who has also worked in another school, felt that District B was lacking in its efforts to reach students about higher education. She contended:

We had one counselor [at the other school], but the kids were always involved in something having to do with careers outside of high school, preparing for going into the workforce or technical school or college, something of that sort. It started in middle school and it went all the way to high school. Here it seems to be completely opposite and the kids are very inquisitive and want to know this information and what I realized was they don’t know.

### ***Building Relationships with Students***

One of the most important goals for educators in District B is to build strong interpersonal relationships with students. Doing so allows them to understand what students are going through and to have honest conversations about college. Sara, the school counselor explained: “We build relationships with our students... We know their backgrounds. It’s a small school. I think I have 158 students in my senior class. So we know the kids and I think because of that, we’re able to talk to them honestly.”

Another teacher, Alex, has been fortunate enough that her teaching assignments have given her the opportunity to have her current class for the third time in their high school careers. Because of this, she knows them incredibly well. When asked if students ever talked to her about their lack of family support or personal barriers, she responded:

I think that, they know that I know them well enough that we in some cases just don’t need to discuss it. I don’t need to ask why mom is doing this or why they haven’t brought this yet or why dad isn’t doing it because they know I know where they come from.

Farrah has had similar experiences and attributed it to benefits of being in a small school. She added:

My class sizes are small, so I really get that one-on-one relationship individually with my kids and I really get to talk to them and it’s a very good rapport to where they feel comfortable talking to me if they have questions about college.

Laura has even incorporated journal writing in class as a way for students to express themselves and it gives her the opportunity to go back and forth with students candidly, including about issues regarding college and their postsecondary plans.

## **Discussion**

District B is a small high school in central Texas and its educators strive to promote the academic achievement and postsecondary advancement of its students. Generalized and individualized informational messages, as well as motivational messages, were used to communicate to students about college. However, messaging about higher education differed in several respects throughout the school, including when to initiate these types of messages and which student factors and experiences influenced message construction. Interviews revealed important implications about intersectionality, the tensions between the school and community, educators' use of multiple message types and their emphasis on building relationships with students.

### ***Ignoring Intersectionality***

Intersectionality is defined as “the processes through which multiple social identities converge and ultimately shape individual and group experiences” (Museus & Griffin, 2011, p. 7). Because the majority of District B’s student population can be classified as below the poverty level, many of the minority students deal with the



intersections of race and socioeconomic status. However, when educators were asked about the most indicative barriers to student achievement, SES was seen as the most prominent factor. Often, their responses neglected the racial and cultural experiences of their students or simply lumped race and SES together, without considering the implications of what it meant for their students to experience membership in more than one minority group.

This lack of attention given to issues of intersectionality is surprising, as Museus and Griffin (2011) note:

Scholars have argued that there is a unique experience at the intersection of individuals' identities, and efforts to isolate the influence of any one social identity fails to capture how membership in multiple identity groups can affect how people are perceived, treated and experience college and university environments. (p. 7)

Kimberle Crenshaw is known for her scholarship on intersectionality and she has argued that ignoring these intersections can undermine the unique experiences of these individuals (Musues & Griffin, 2011, p. 6). Although teachers and counselors within District B emphasize the importance of building relationships with students as a means to better understand their experiences, failing to recognize the role of intersectionality may limit the effectiveness of the teacher-student relationship. SES may very well be important in the experiences of their students, but using it as a means to equalize the experiences of the student body undermines individual differences, which could also counteract their emphasis on individualized messaging about higher education.

When we consider the messages that teachers construct for their students, it's important to understand them situated within common discourses in the education system. Such discourses have historically ignored the effects of intersectionality and race on academic achievement, although scholars have illuminated important implications. These discourses were evident in educators' responses regarding the postsecondary barriers that students face. To some extent, structural barriers were ignored. As Burr (2015) explains:

Constructions of the world therefore sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others. Our constructions of the world are therefor also bound up with power relations because they have implications for what is permissible for different people to do, and how they may legitimately treat others. (p. 5)

Teachers' perceptions did impact the messages they constructed. However, because they did not account for important factors such as race and intersectionality, they have the potential to help sustain harmful structural barriers.

### ***Tensions Between “The System” and “Community Forces”***

Students are often caught in a tension between what Ogbu describes as “the system” and “community forces.” As the teachers in District B shared, many students in their school would be first generation college students. For some, this meant they lacked support from home because their parents had not been to college. As such, “parents are unable to understand [first generation college] students' challenges or offer practical

advice” (Wang, 2012, p. 338). For others, going to college means rejecting cultural influences and/or community influences that push them to go directly into the workforce or start a family after high school. Participants also explained how some students succumb to these pressures and don’t reach their potential academically.

In these cases, teachers and counselors act as an important liaison between the school and the community and can help students navigate the uncharted territory of higher education. As Wang (2012) notes, “In settings that are both instructional and organizational such as the classroom, mentors can serve as ‘a person who looks after, advises, protects, and takes a special interest in another’s development’ (Buell, 2004, p. 58)” (p. 336). Educators in District B were fully aware that they needed to provide additional support to students, especially for those that didn’t have support at home. During interviews, they consistently emphasized the importance of getting to know their students intimately and providing additional help to both students and parents whenever necessary.

Existing literature supports the need for strong interpersonal relationships between teachers and students and the positive impacts this can have on minority student achievement (Martinez & Welton, 2014; Blanchard & Muller, 2015). The teachers and counselors in District B seem to have accepted this important role. However, as discussed above, ignoring the significant impacts of race on student achievement can limit the extent to which students can connect with teachers. The school counselor noted that most faculty members at the school identified as White, as were all of those who participated in this study, and this automatically created a disconnect between teachers

and students. Although teachers and counselors could identify racial differences in achievement and cultural barriers among their students, it did not influence the way that they tailored messages about higher education. Instead, SES and family support were the factors that educators worked most to combat.

### ***Message Design***

Interviews with teachers and counselors in District B revealed that message design was informed by two tensions: (1) individualized and generalized informational messages, and (2) motivational and challenge messages. The former regarded basic information about the application process and curricular demands of college and was tailored by some educators based off of students' interests and individual characteristics. The second tension addressed messages that offered encouragement ("You can do it.") and/or challenged students ("You can do better").

Participants utilized these messages in different ways and although educators used each message type purposefully, it wasn't clear which type was most impactful for minority groups and when. The literature on message construction on higher education should be extended to understand which message types are more important for reaching diverse student bodies and how different messages can be utilized in a complimentary fashion to reinforce important points about college.

### ***Relationship Building***

Social constructionism contends that meaning and knowledge are created through social interactions (Burr, 2015). In the context of education, educators make meaning of their roles by interacting with other faculty members, administration, students and the greater community. In their interviews, participants thoroughly detailed the importance of their relationships with students and how it informed their messages about higher education. The analysis points to relationship building as an essential component to message design.

According to Wang (2012), “relational researchers argue that teachers and students construct shared meaning within the context of the teacher-student relationship” (p.336). Interactions with students reinforce teachers’ roles and the meanings they create and vice versa. Educators in District B value their connections with students and recognized that both parties played an important role in constructing their teaching and learning environment. Daily conversations, prompted by both students and teachers, helped navigate the prospect of higher education. The literature reflects that students adjust their perceptions about college because of positive interactions with their teachers and study participants acknowledged that they adjusted their messaging about college based on their students’ needs and the feedback they received from past students. However, although teachers and counselors have been identified as important sources of information about college, it’s not clear how this changes when educators fail to understand key components of their students’ experiences. Research should continue to

explore how educators' understanding of race and intersectionality impact the messages they construct about higher education for their diverse student bodies.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **DISTRICT C**

This chapter presents data from District C, a medium-sized central Texas high school that is predominately Hispanic with smaller, but comparable populations of White and Black students. District C is also classified as low-SES, with over 50% of the district living under the poverty level. Although academics are the central focus of educators, the high school also places a strong emphasis on athletics. Messages about higher education vary greatly between teachers and counselors, but all strive for a common goal: the advancement and success of their students. The following case study revealed a variety of themes about clear role designations for teachers and counselors when it comes to talking to students about higher education, the importance of family and friends, and the need for student initiative in postsecondary decisions.

The results from the data analysis for District C are organized by my thesis' three research questions:

RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?

RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do these messages make?

RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about colleges to diverse student bodies?

I begin by describing the research site, in order to provide the reader with a sense of the local community and the high school's academic environment. Then, I present the analysis corresponding with each of the research questions. Key themes and quotations are identified within each of these sections to provide support for important findings. I conclude with a discussion section to evaluate key findings.

### **Research Site**

District C is located within a small town in central Texas and residents are proud of its community environment. One teacher described it as reminiscent of the television show "Friday Night Lights," and explained how the town closes down and comes together for important sports games. The city itself has pushed for improving the district's academic performance and increasing postsecondary readiness, as a means of producing college-educated young adults who come back and contribute to local business. However, although many benefits are said to be derived from the close-knit community, some teachers blame this environment for students passing up on higher education to stay near home and working locally right out of high school.

The high school itself has many resources geared towards preparing students for life after high school, regardless of which path they choose. In the past few years, the school has developed a college and career readiness program, with a counselor tasked specifically towards helping students with these decisions. It also has strong variety of extracurricular programs, including different athletics, band, National Honors Society,



and student council. District C's student body has over 700 students and is relatively diverse. Its largest student group is Hispanic, at about 48% of the population, followed by 29% of students who identify as White and 23% as African American. Like many other districts in the area, the school has a very high percentage of students who classify as low-SES. Because of this, college readiness efforts focus heavily on finances, grants and scholarships, as teachers identified this as the most prominent barrier students face on their way to college.

The topic of college comes up daily throughout the school and students begin to plan for their future careers freshman year. Although both teachers and counselors found it important to talk frequently about higher education, the types of conversations differ in the classroom versus the counselor's office. While counselors take responsibility for the finite aspects of the testing and applying for college, teachers focus their attention on increasing students' work ethic, responsibility and initiative for their own success. Messages about higher education are seen by most as individualized, which means they are tailored to each student's needs and interests. Educators in District C promote the many different possible postsecondary paths that students can take, and recognize the significant role that parents and peers can have on these decisions. They also note the importance of building trust and strong relationships with students, so students are comfortable coming to them with their questions and concerns about college.

In District C, seven teachers and the school's three counselors were interviewed. All but one participant were female and between 24 and 53 years of age. Their teaching experience ranged from 2 to 21 years. Most faculty members also identified as White,

with the exception of one female teacher who identified as Black and another who identified as Hispanic. Every educator showed immense care for their job and expressed their role as mentors in the postsecondary process. However, what this role entailed was different for each participant and very interesting themes emerged about how teachers and counselors in District C sought to bridge the gap between their students and higher education. The key themes from District C are outlined in *Table 5*.

Table 5

*Key Themes from District C*

THEME	THEME DESCRIPTION
<p><b>RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?</b></p>	
<p><i>Multiple Barriers to Higher Education</i></p>	<p>Types of barriers that impact academic achievement (i.e. SES, race, and family support) and how they interact.</p>
<p><i>Race, Power and Conflict</i></p>	<p>How racism manifests itself in the school and differences in power and conflict/discipline between racial groups of students.</p>
<p><i>Student Initiative and Work Ethic</i></p>	<p>The extent to which students have a realistic outlook on their academic potential and the drive to make it happen.</p>

Table 5 Continued

THEME	THEME DESCRIPTION
<i>Family and Friends</i>	The impacts of familial and peer support on academic success and postsecondary advancement.
<i>Parents and Home Life</i>	The extent to which parents are involved with their child's postsecondary education decisions and whether or not conversations about college are happening at home.
<i>Peers</i>	How students' friends and alumni can act as resources and/or deterrents.
<p><b>RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do they messages make?</b></p>	
<i>Informational Messages</i>	Informational messages outline the finite aspects of the application process and what students can expect in the college classroom. Who disseminates informational messages within the school is also important.
<i>Realistic Motivational Messages</i>	Messages that are meant to <i>encourage</i> students to pursue a college degree, but do not set students up for failure by outlining unrealistic goals/expectations.

Table 5 Continued

THEME	THEME DESCRIPTION
<p><b>RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about colleges to diverse student bodies?</b></p>	
<p><i>Room for Improvement</i></p>	<p>Suggestions for improving formal and informal postsecondary education resources.</p>
<p><i>Relationships with Teachers</i></p>	<p>The impact of strong interpersonal relationships between students and educators.</p>

**RQ1: What achievement differences do high school teachers and academic counselors perceive among their diverse student bodies?**

Student achievement remains a top priority for teachers and counselors in District C. However, each participant had a slightly different view as to what impacts students' ability to advance to higher education. Although many of the educators discussed money as an important barrier and detailed the overall effects of having a majority of the student population being classified as low-SES, finances were not prioritized as being solely indicative of success. Instead, most recognized that many factors coalesce to determine students' experiences, including money, family and peer support, student initiative, class level, and student attitudes.

When it comes to the school's demographics, educators in District C reported proportions of racial groups that were slightly varied and also much different than those

reported by the Texas Education Agency. For the most part, teachers felt that Hispanic, White, and Black student groups were comparable in size, instead of recognizing that almost half of their student body identified as Hispanic. However, conversations about the diversity of students did reveal some troubling themes regarding power dynamics and the effects of differential treatment on postsecondary choices.

The influence of family and friends became particularly salient during interviews with the faculty members of District C. Parents were regarded as a critical component for facilitating or hindering student achievement. Many participants also highlighted peers as important influences, both positive and negative. While some teachers noted that lacking friends who have college plans deterred their friends from formulating their own, others pointed to the benefits of having peers share their experiences with higher education as a means to inspire their current students.

### ***Multiple Barriers to Higher Education***

Socioeconomic status was cited as an important concern for students. For one new teacher, Lily, this was actually the most significant barrier students faced in regards to college. As she explained, “SES is a big factor and that’s probably the biggest factor that these kids face.” However, in most cases, including with Lily, finances were mentioned in conjunction with another important factor, family influence. This is in line with the literature that points to the many intersecting factors that contribute to minority achievement, including family and finances, but also cultural and social constraints

(Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). As she added, “Really, it’s money and then the family influence and some of them have just not had anybody push them towards that.” Darla, a 33-year veteran in District C, shared a similar sentiment:

I think finances is a little bit of it, but I think a little bit more, the parents are worried about their kids going to college. That they want their kids to stay close or they want their kids to stay home more than go off to college. We’re run into that quite a bit.

The school’s college and career counselor, Vanessa, also combined financial and family influence as joint barriers to pursuing postsecondary education:

Some students find it hard to “see” themselves at college because their family did not attend or they have never been on a campus for a visit, football game or educational high school experience. Money is also a barrier for many of these students.

Another one of the school’s counselors, Leah, noted that this was particularly true for Hispanic students who “feel like they have to work for the family and pay back the family.” She also expressed that diversity can be seen in terms of socioeconomic status and that there is a lot of differences in family income that dictate many of students’ experiences.

Anna, the third school counselor, added that student’s confidence in his or her own intelligence was also a notable influence. She explained her perspective of student barriers as, “Financial. Financial. But usually like, I can’t afford to go to college. Financial, or I’m not smart enough.” Celia, a new teacher, equated those with low

socioeconomic status with those that typically have low academic standing and linked this to these students' numerous responsibilities at home. As she added:

A lot of them have responsibilities outside of school... It's a challenge as far as you know making school the number one priority because they have so many other real-life issues that they're facing... That's just a common issue among low SES districts and just because again they have multiple other obstacles they have to face and so sometimes, school is not always their main priority.

Because finances are an important concern for many students, both teachers and counselors stressed the importance of scholarships and financial aid opportunities in higher education. Multiple resources in the school are geared specifically towards helping both students and parents with these issues. However, most educators also recognized that this information alone does not compensate for the multiple barriers that stand between their student and postsecondary success.

### ***Race, Power and Conflict***

Students' race and ethnicity became an important theme throughout participants' interviews. While a few teachers did not link these factors to student achievement, others were able to draw clear distinctions in their student body and outline the different paths certain student groups take. Along with recognition of the effects of socioeconomic status, these racial differences point to an acknowledgement of intersectionality, which point to the effects of multiple forms of inequality (Gillborn, 2015). Aside from

achievement, discussions of race also bridged into important conversations about the power imbalances in high school and college, as well as differences in disciplinary action within District C.

For a few teachers, race/ethnicity was not indicative of student achievement or postsecondary advancement. For Jack, a relatively experienced computer science teacher, it was hard to even make the assessment because many African American students drop out of his course at the beginning of the year. When asked if he noticed differences in his own students, he explained:

That's a tough one. Partially that's tough because oftentimes, for some reason, I lose a lot of my African American students at the beginning of the year... But those students that I primarily deal with are Hispanic and Caucasian... Those two groups are pretty equal in their questionings for me.

Another teacher, Carrie, also did not notice any major achievement differences, but noted that the racial makeup of her courses did differ slightly. She noted:

My AP courses are fairly evenly mixed as far as, you know, race and whatnot. And all of those kids for the most part ask questions. I think that's more of the nature of the kid to take AP courses, they tend to be more of the question askers anyway... I might have a few more Caucasian kids taking my class at the AP level than I do as far as my on level, my on level kids tend to be more Hispanic and Black kids.

One of the school's counselors, Anna, also did not notice any racial differences. As she added when asked if she noted differences in the types of barriers or inquiries about



higher education between racial groups, “Not really. Or maybe I don’t pay enough attention to it...But, to me, they’re just all coming in.”

Most teachers, however, were able to draw distinctions between their diverse student bodies. Rae, a Black female who has been teaching in District C for almost two decades, explained it in this way:

The Caucasian population is going into agriculture or going to college...The Hispanic population, they figure, it’s a cultural thing and 15-year-old girls are considered women...They’re just thinking well I’m going to be a wife and I’m not going to go to school at all. And so sometimes you have a high pregnancy rate and so they don’t go to school and the man that they marry, they have to accept their responsibilities and so they don’t go to school either...It’s a cultural thing. And your black population, they’re figuring that there’s two choices. You either don’t go and you just go to work or you have to get a scholarship in some type of sport.

Lily, a newer teacher noted important differences in her class composition and how students perceived their racial differences. She explained, “In pre-AP, I have 50 students and of those 50 students, maybe seven or African American and about 10 are Hispanic and the rest are White.” Even more importantly, she shared that students were aware of the fact that college is designed around the White experience and this deterred some of her students from wanting to advance. She recalled this experience:

Just last week, one of my Hispanic students said that she wished she could say whatever white people said and still be successful... And similarly for her

African American students, “If they talked educated at home, what I’ve taught them, then they’ll get made fun of.”

Students not only perceived differences in their experiences within school, but also in terms of the implications as to what those differences meant at home.

Celia, another newer teacher in the district equated race to certain SES classifications. As she explained, “Probably our 25% of students that aren’t low SES are our 25% Caucasians ... They usually have plans to go to college.” Her African American and Hispanic students typically opt for community college and family support is cited for the difference. As she added:

I would say that family support is much less or is much lower in our Hispanic community... And in our African American community, it’s kind of a toss up because I have a lot of African American parents that are definitely on top of their kids’ grades and they know what they want their kids to do and then you have your, it’s kind of two extremes. They’re either there all the time or they are not there at all.

The school’s college and career counselor, Vanessa, also made similar distinctions as teachers did about racial groups in the high school:

Typically the hesitancy about college comes from the Hispanic community because family obligations and expectations to provide for family and make a family are really pushed at home. They also tend to work on their own as some of them are worried about immigration or are not residents of U.S., which makes them fearful. African Americans will not always have the follow through and

need more one-on-one assistance. The Caucasian group is more likely to apply for multiple colleges and do more research on their own and then come and ask questions.

Along with achievement differences, two teachers also pointed to evident power dynamics and unfair disciplinary actions within the school. One newer teacher, Willow, explained that students recognize racial power differences. As she shared:

On the Caucasian side, they are more spoiled. They'll say whatever they wanna say, they can be a little bit racist and judgmental and I have to watch them...[Minority students] don't feel safe as it is. If they don't feel safe and secure in one, or confident in one learning environment, they're not going to feel any different in another learning environment because they have to find something within themselves first."

Race also became an important topic with Lily, a teacher who made a point to note the disciplinary differences that she noticed in the school. As she explained:

I feel like there's this stigma in my district where African American students, the only way to learn is that they are you know, punished... And I was saying, I sent this person out and what did they get? And they're like, "nothing." And I was like and I send you out and what did you get? And they're like, "a week"... They say they want us to better the community, but there's not the same kind of punishment on both ends... I tell them, you know, it's unfair how the world works and the expectations of you, but you can't act the same way that they do, that's just reality.

Although these two scenarios do not speak specifically to achievement, both Willow and Lily noted that these dynamics deter students' ambitions regarding higher education. If they have these experiences in a more sheltered environment like high school, they only expect things to be worse in college. Obiakor (1993) describes this struggle as minorities having to play a "political game" and it shed lights on the failure of the education system to meet their needs and help them advance.

### ***Student Initiative and Work Ethic***

Among the other important factors that were attributed to student achievement, teachers and counselors alike also frequently cited student initiative and work ethic as critical. Rae, an experienced teacher, explained students are under the false assumption that it is simply intelligence that determines whether your advance to college or not. As she explained:

It's a mind blowing thing that you think you have to be just super smart to go, when most of the time we just have to be super determined...Just because the valedictorian got into college doesn't mean you can't. That's not, that's not indicative of your success. You know, it's not. It's just different. It's just different. And they'll say it's because they're smart, that's not necessarily true. You have to work. You have to want to work. You have to work.

Both Celia and Willow, two newer teachers, recognized that getting students to “want to work” is not necessarily easy and this can impact the effectiveness of postsecondary education programs. As Celia explained:

As far as responsibility goes and their work ethic goes, it’s definitely a struggle teaching them how much they really are going to have to work...Everything takes practice and whether you’re good at it or not, you have to work at it.

And as far as resources about higher education go, they’ll only be helpful, as Willow added, “if we can get these students to be more independent learners than what they are...Intrinsic motivation needs to be enhanced.”

Anna, the school’s main counselor also explained that they expect students to take some initiative when it comes to their postsecondary plans. Although they get every senior applied through the state’s website “Apply Texas,” after that “it’s up to them to come to the college center and help continue the process.” She also added:

We really encourage them to start doing things for themselves...So we’re going to get them and then we try to help them find their independence with it all...I don’t know why or what, but I do feel like they need to be led a little bit more...I definitely would say it’s a different type of kiddo.

While most teachers felt that all students need to show more initiative for their own achievement in general, many also made observations that connected the level of work ethic and responsibility for postsecondary decisions with class level: on level, pre-AP or AP. Lily pointed out, most students in pre-AP and AP classes are in those courses because they have the intention of going to college. As she explained, “Most of them

have been in pre-AP since the sixth grade when they were first eligible. And they stay there in pre-AP because they want to go to college.” Therefore, it’s not surprising that these students ask more questions and take more initiative when it comes to higher education. Carrie confirmed, “I get more questions about expectations from AP kids than from my on level kids.” Celia noted that much of this is due to family support. As she added, “The majority of them have the household life where they have parents encouraging them to do well in school and go to college.”

Jack, the only male teacher interviewed, only teaches higher level courses and it seems his own perceptions about his students’ achievement and postsecondary paths were skewed because of it. Conversations about college in his class were typically impromptu and always initiated by his students, something that very much differed from other teachers in District C. He also explained that his students don’t “anticipat[e] that college is too academically hard.” It’s also important for him to focus on class material during class time, as opposed to supplemental conversations about postsecondary education. As he added, “Like if a kid asks in the middle of class, I have other things I want to talk about, but I will come back to them and make sure their questions are answered.”

### ***Family and Friends***

Two of the most significant factors that educators in District C linked to achievement were family and friends. Both groups were seen as having the potential to

be both a positive influence and/or a detrimental one to students' postsecondary ambitions. In most cases, teachers discussed how disheartening it could be when students don't have support from their parents. Many are first-generation college students, leaving their parents incapable of helping them through the application process (Holland, 2015; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). This can have serious detriments to students' decisions about higher education (Fallon, 1997). In some cases, parents want their children to forgo college completely. Sometimes, when parents are involved in their child's high school careers, it's for the wrong reason and they still fail to support them academically. On the other hand, peers were identified as reasons why students chose not to pursue postsecondary education, but were also labeled as a potential resource to motivate students to strive for more.

### **Parents and home life**

As Rae, a teacher of almost two decades explained, family support is a "a very big deal." She continued, "The ones that are thinking, 'Hey, I'm going to school,' most of them have parents that are getting them to go in that direction." And because she too was a first-generation student, she understands how difficult it can be for students facing the same barrier. She added:

Because I'm a first-generation college student myself and so I know how hard it can be. I know...It's hard, it really is... And I keep telling them, you can, it's

possible. It really is. Will you have to work a little bit harder, yeah. But, it's possible.

Carrie, another teacher, mirrored this same idea about first-generation students and how they compared to those who do have parents who were a part of the college process:

A lot of their parents didn't finish high school. So, you know college is just one of those things that a lot of them just don't really consider. They think that it's not something that they need to strive for... The kids whose parents have gone to college, they already know it's probably an expectation in their household.

Anna has also noticed this trend in the counselor's office. In general, she said, "I wish parents were more involved." She also added:

We have a lot of students that are, that would be the first time, first family member to go, so that's another little barrier that we have. It's like, "Well my mom didn't go and my dad didn't go, none of my siblings went, but I'm interested, but no one else went and I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

However, it's not just first-generation students that lack parental support.

Because the school is predominately low-SES, families have financial constraints that could potentially affect many students within the school. One teacher, Willow, painted a grim picture:

There's a lot of people in the families where they don't put a lot of value on education. They're more concerned with "Okay, we need to go make money so we can buy groceries, pay the rent," you know... People sell drugs instead of go to school. You have to stay home and babysit your little brother instead of



school. Things like that...A lot of their home life is very dysfunctional. Some of them live in dilapidated dwellings...Don't have any food. They don't have any clothing.

Because of the many different family circumstances that students find themselves in, messages about higher education need to be adjusted. As Rae pointed out, "The conversations are different with each one because each one has a different home life."

Sometimes, when parents do care about their high school students, their priorities are a bit skewed and the focus is not really on education. Two teachers described how the school places a lot of importance on athletics, an activity that many parents closely follow. Willow explained, "Sports is highly supported, but if you were to compare that to how students are supported with their education – not so much. There's a huge gap there." Rae also noted that when parents place a high value on sport, so do their children. Unfortunately, not enough emphasis is also being placed on academics. She added, "What if they did the same thing with books? What if they did the same thing with, you know, anything in education? Hey, why don't you read this? Hey, this is great work!" In each of these cases, it's not only important for parents to be invested in their child, but invested in the right way.

## **Peers**

Many teachers and counselors in District C emphasized the importance of social networks. The conversations about peers took two forms: ways that friends can hold

each other back or how peers can be used as a helpful resource to inspire postsecondary ambitions. Rae noted that it's important for educators to initiate messages about higher education early on before key social connections are made. As she explained:

You have to get them early because by the time they get into junior high, in junior high you become a clique and then you want to be with the popular people and then usually that's pretty much who you run with. And so it's almost like if this group is going to college, that whole group is going to college. Does that make sense?... They'll keep you down and say it's not for us. It becomes an us and not just an I.

Because peers can be so influential, several teachers suggested that they be used as a resource to convey positive experiences with higher education. As Lily explained, "I'm trying to get something going where the seniors can talk to the freshman... To help them get their mind going and not slacking off and not doing the bare minimum." Former students are also important tools because they can be more relatable than the typical postsecondary sources. Carrie added:

Sometimes I think even if you have former students coming back and talking about college to groups of kids, hearing it from peers, I think it more beneficial to the high school kids. They're at such a pivotal time, they don't want to hear it from their teachers or their parents or any other adults.

Darla, another veteran teacher, also used the stories and experiences of alumni to motivate current students. As she explained:

I try to motivate them a little bit with [District C] kids who are graduating from here and sat in the same seats you did and have gone on to bigger and better things. And then when they have the actual students, you know, email me or whatever, I try to use that to motivate them a little bit.

Research on peer influence is largely inconclusive (McKown, 2013), but these teachers' observations point to the need to explore this relationship further.

**RQ2: What messages do high school teachers and academic counselors communicate to and receive from diverse student bodies about college and what differences do they messages make?**

When asked if messages about college were more individualized or “one-size-fits-all,” most educators in District C identified them as individualized and geared toward each student’s interests and needs. Although one teacher thought that the high school overly pushes the traditional four-year college agenda, the majority of educators felt that many postsecondary paths were promoted and the school’s student-by-student college planning process helps to reach diverse student bodies. The impetus for this kind of individualized college planning can be traced to Texas House Bill 5, which pushes for increased postsecondary readiness, as several participants noted. As Anna, the school’s counselor, explained of the bill, “It’s like picking a major, except for you’re in high school and you’re picking an interest, a direction you want to go... So we are really

working toward college readiness.” Career planning starts as early as junior high and is supposed to motivate students to take this topic more seriously, earlier. She added:

I feel like that they have a lot more confidence. Another thing, we actually, we actually can show how we have more kiddos that have applied and been [sic] accepted to college than in years past...Meeting with every kid individually really, really is a big reason as to why, you know, they take more stock in what they’re doing, instead of meeting with them in the groups...You can see the motivation turn around just in that 20 minutes that you’re with them.

While the messages teachers and counselors constructed were individualized according to the student, messages about higher education took two distinct forms in District C. The first type of message were informational messages, which either addressed the college application process and barriers to higher education or focused on practical, skills-based lessons about what students could expect in college. The second type of messages, motivational messages, were used to encourage students. An interesting characteristic of the motivational messages used in District C was that educators felt the need to manage the tension between being optimistic about students’ opportunities, but realistic about what was actually possible for students to accomplish given their particular circumstances and interests. Support was important, but so was making sure that they did not set their students up for failure. The source of these different message types varied, as teachers were typically the main source for motivational messages and designated counselors were the main source of informational messages.

### *Informational Messages*

In District C, there were clear delineations about the source of different types of messages. While motivational messages were used by both teachers *and* counselors, informational messages responding to questions about the college application process and barriers to higher education were almost exclusively addressed by the counselors. While practical, skill-based messages about what to expect in the college classroom were typically constructed by teachers.

As Carrie, a District C teacher, explained, “Typically when I talk about it, I talk about sort of, I guess life as a student. We do have a college career counselor who does a lot of the application and scholarships and things like that for them.” Jack expressed something similar saying, “When we usually discuss college, it’s like when you get to that level, this is what will be expected of you... These are the study skills that you’ll have to use when you’re in college.” However, when asked about the specific messages about college that the school gives, he replied, “I’m not a counselor, but I know our counselors meet with all of our students and I think they kind of touch on [it].” Similarly, when asked if students talked to her about barriers to higher education, Willow responded, “We have a counselor here... She usually handles those types of things.” When asked if she covered things like the admissions process in class, Darla, a veteran teacher, recalled, “I don’t do that. You have people here that do that, that are counselors that are working with the kids on that.”

Because District C has three school counselors, each has also been designated their own expertise regarding higher education. One covers state testing, another grades, and the third specializes in career and college counseling. As Leah explained:

I do state testing... We have a CTE counselor here, a career and technology counselor, and she handles college and career stuff. And then, there is the head counselor and she does grades, gradebook. So she has her responsibilities.

However, although there is a counselor geared specifically towards college and career counseling, the other two counselors answered daily questions about college as well. As Leah added:

I want everyone to feel like they can go to college if they want to go to college, so college is in our conversations a lot. I might not have all the ins and outs of it, but I know enough to direct them towards [Vanessa] or towards the website.

Anna, the school's head counselor echoed this:

We have a counselor that is completely in charge of the college and career counseling... They come and ask me the same questions too. So if I can't answer it, I send them to her, but I still deal with it on a daily basis.

### ***Realistic Motivational Messages***

Both teachers and counselors used motivational messages in District C to encourage students to pursue their higher education ambitions. However, teachers and counselors were careful to make sure that motivational messages were realistic, meaning

that they were inspiring students to set goals that they could actually reach. Most educators also created motivational messages designed to challenge students and keep them from undermining their own potential. For example, when she discusses college in her classroom, Carrie tries to phrase messages about *when* students go to college, instead of *if*. As she explained, “It’s when you go to college, this is what you should expect. Sort of give it to them as this is sort of what your expectation should be and that’s how I kind of phrase these topics.” Beyond academics, college was also advertised as a way to broaden students’ experiences and worldview. As Darla noted, “In a small school setting, you can’t see what the world has to offer. And a lot of times when you go to college, that’s when you discover what you want to do in life.”

While it’s important to be a support system for students, it’s also necessary to help them find a realistic path that suits them. As Carrie explained:

I don’t wash those dreams by any means, but I, you know, definitely try to make them see it realistically and see, you know that maybe see other options if that’s not very realistic...I don’t think that college is necessarily the end all be all. I always emphasize it because I feel like it’s the easiest way to improve and get better and further your education.

Celia, a newer teacher, also recognized that college is not the realistic path for everyone, for whatever reason. However, if that is students’ goal, she assures them that it might take quite a bit of work to make it happen. She described:

I would tell them that it doesn’t matter what your situation is, there is always a way that you could, if that’s what you want, you can get it. But, you know, I also

tell them realistically, in some of their situations, some of them are not going to go to college...I tell every singly student that you know, they are perfectly capable of doing it, but it will take a lot of work from them. It's not going to happen for free. It's not going to happen easy. They're going to have to work at it. Nothing's easy and nothing's free.

The counseling office does it own fair share of grounding motivational messages in realistic expectations. All three counselors assure students that college is an option, but everyone's experience differs. As Vanessa, the school's college and career counselor explained:

I talk with my students about their goals and their passions. It is important to try and match a student with a career that they can love for a long time so it does not feel like a job. It is also important to know if that student has the skills to actually make it a career or will it take a lot of training or education and if so... The message sent is that there is something out there that can be found that will meet all of the criteria. It might deviate from the plan that they saw as a young child and it could take a longer time, but college can be obtained by anyone that wants it.

As Leah, another counselor, tells her students, "High school can be harsh and kids can be cruel and your life goes on...But honestly, you're going to move forward and college is a different, it opens different paths and it opens the front doors after high school." The school's third counselor, Anna, also assures students that they can go, despite difficulties they may have had in their past. As she added:



We all have uh ohs in our lives, you know, whether it's in high school, in college, as adults. It doesn't matter as long as you can recover from them and just letting them know that they can go because a lot of the students think that they can't, from whatever situation, but they can.

Participants found it very important to be a positive source of information about higher education for their students. Messages sought to challenge students, but also help them make postsecondary decisions that were realistic and practical, as well as fulfilling. This is in line with research that recommends both challenge and support when dealing with diverse learners (Hammond, 2006).

**RQ3: What resources and tools do high school educators use to communicate their messages about colleges to diverse student bodies?**

Teachers and counselors outlined many postsecondary resources that were available to them and their students. These included the college and career counselor, dual credit programs, college visits, college fairs, individualized meetings with counselors, and parent and student workshops. However, individual knowledge about these resources varied considerably among teachers. For example, one teacher only thought that there was one school counselor when there are in fact three in the high school. While some felt that the school was doing an adequate job reaching its students, many felt that there was room for improvement.

An interesting theme that emerged were problems that were tied to being a small town. While the close-knit community associated with being a small town is oftentimes viewed as a valuable resource, a few teachers mentioned how this can actually counteract the efforts of the school's postsecondary readiness efforts. As Darla, a veteran teacher, explained, "I think most of Brazos County is not educated...Just because of the environment we're in, most of them are farmers or they work in the factories here and all that... For the most part, you see generations here." Rae, another long time teacher, added that this trend can impact students' own thoughts about higher education. She noted, "It's easy to get wrapped up and into a cycle of not doing. And not going. And not thinking that I can do it, when you can." Unfortunately, as Carrie pointed out, "You've gotta get out of the town you grew up in. Because then you grow up and you don't get to see that there's a big huge world of opportunities out there." College is perceived as more than just an academic achievement. It is also an activity that gives students invaluable life experiences and opportunities, but these experiences can never be accessed if the students don't leave their hometown.

Educators in District C also emphasized the importance of building strong relationships with students, so students view teachers and counselors as trustworthy mentors. Unfortunately, turnover is particularly high in the school and many students are deterred from using teachers as sources of information about higher education. As Jack explained, "We have pretty high turnover, and so a lot of our teachers aren't able to build a relationship with students and so then, they don't feel comfortable coming and asking those questions."

### ***Room for Improvement***

Teachers and counselors mentioned several ways in which the school could improve its resources and messaging about college. While some noted that the school had gotten better in recent years, others mentioned that there were students that the school still failed to reach. Another teacher felt that District C needed to do a better job advertising various postsecondary paths and one teacher thought that while resources and messaging about college seemed adequate, it doesn't make a difference if students are not performing academically. Therefore, the school needs to turn its attention to improving students' education.

Both Darla and Anna have worked in District C for a long time and have seen recent improvements. Although she recognized that there were still gaps, Darla explained, "We're getting there. I think we're better than we were and we're getting there." She also thought that the counselors were very proactive about sharing helpful resources with students. Anna also shared improvements being made in the counselor's office:

I would say that things have gotten better since we've had this college and career program...I would say a couple years ago, I did the best I could to answer the questions, I called, I figured it out for them, I helped them but now it's even better.

However, other teachers feel that postsecondary resources are still ineffective because they are failing to reach the students that need support the most. As Rae, a long-term member of District C described:

I think we do a horrible job with the kid that we have to try to convince they can go. That's just my opinion. I don't think we convince enough of them that they can do it. And that's just because their educational experience is just not that positive... The ones that are going to go to college are going to go to college. Period. But there is a group of kids, it is a large, it's a huge group that don't think that they can.

And it is these students that she personally attempts to reach. Lily, a less experienced teacher made a similar observation and suggested the guest speakers should be relatable to the demographics of the student body. She noted:

I don't feel there's enough of a message for those students that do have those barriers. I feel like it's made easy for the ones that have families that have gone to college...Most of the people they bring in are people that are successful, you know or they went to school for four years and they never struggled...I think we need more people to come and have, you know people from different universities come talk to the kids, but not the regular people. Not the white people.

Even the school's college and career counselor noted that having relatable speakers was important to improving the resources already in place. As she explained:

If a black teacher or counselor is speaking to a black group of students about college the message is more relevant to them because they share the same culture

and have the same belief system. Same goes for any culture...its about relevancy...Provide diverse speakers and attend workshops that are about diversity and getting the word out. Provide more opportunities to attend colleges known for their diversity.

One newer teacher, Willow, explained that in her short time in the school, she felt that students were being given limited information about postsecondary paths. In her opinion:

It seems a little bit limited in terms of which options are marketed...The only thing I have witnessed that's very obvious is Blinn College. They have a dual-credit program with it, but only the AP kids do that.

She also noted that there seems to be limited messages about higher education in general and that there need to be more messages, both "quality and quantity."

Lastly, one teacher felt that the messages that students receive about school are actually appropriate. However, unless we improve academic performance, these efforts might be for nothing. As Celia shared, "I feel like they are exposed to it enough. Now, there are definitely things we could improve on in preparing them for, education-wise."

One challenge to improving the resources for students is the time it takes counselors to perform their work. Although counselors work hard to provide students with adequate information about higher education, they admitted that certain demands of their job kept them from being the most effective resources possible. As Anna explained:

There's so much paper on my desk that gets me a little defeated at times...If none of us had the extra, extra, extra jobs that we have as counselors, that not

necessarily counseling related, I think that the students would get a lot more attention than what they do.

Leah also mentioned the large amount of paperwork. As she added, “Paperwork, you know, should only be a certain percentage. But, I think that paperwork can go above that. So, I stay on my computer all day long, you know.” She also mentioned that these things, along with her testing responsibilities, sometimes kept her from being able to help students as much as she’d like and noted how students don’t like that much either.

### ***Relationship with Teachers***

The literature has established a positive link between effective teachers and minority student achievement and advancement (Martinez & Welton, 2014; Blanchard & Muller, 2015; Hemmings, 1994). However, in District C, faculty turnover is very high and it keeps students from utilizing these potential mentors. As Rae, a veteran teacher in the school, noted, “Turnover is extremely high... So how can you build relationships? How can you convince somebody when they’re thinking you’re not going to be around?” One of the school’s counselors, Leah, described about her own sadness about the prospect of leaving her advisees. As she explained, “I’m getting ready to think about leaving. I feel like a traitor or something. You know, it’s just hard because you get so attached to them and watching them mature from Freshmen.”

Another teacher, Lily, added that building relationships with students was important beyond postsecondary considerations. As she explained:

Sometimes I'll hear, you know when teachers talk, I'll hear "Oh, he's so horrible in my class, I had to call mom and tell her," and I'm thinking, "Well, he's an angel in my class." He does goof and maybe it has to do with relationships that teachers build with that student. And perhaps he just does not respect the teachers yet, that's why they're not performing where you know, they should be. Building strong relationships is not only important when it comes time to make decisions about college. It can also help to bridge the achievement gap and will help minority groups create more positive association with school.

## **Discussion**

District C is a sizeable high school, whose educators all work to promote the success of their students, but take very different paths for doing so. Interviews with participants revealed important themes in regards to the many factors that dictate minority achievement and higher education advancement, intersectionality, peers and message source. The analysis supports Ogbu and Simons' (1998) recognition of both community and school-based factors, as well as the role of race. Teachers also overwhelmingly identified the need for improving the resources and messages students receive about higher education.

Four important areas of discussion emerged from the analysis: (1) the many different factors that intersect to impact minority student achievement, (2) the

importance of peers as a means of encouragement, (3) the emphasis on motivational messages, and (4) the impact of message source.

### *Multiple Means for Success*

Faculty members identified many factors that contributed to the academic success of their students. While socioeconomic status and family support were cited most frequently, race also became a central component of interviews. This recognition of intersecting factors is in line with the literature that has pointed to the compounding effects of multiple academic barriers, particularly SES and minority racial status (Becares & Priest, 2015). Acknowledging intersectionality is important because it means that educators are cognizant of the many barriers that stand between their diverse student bodies and the higher education system. Messages about college can be better tailored to the individual experiences of students and address those factors that are impacting students the most. As Gillborn (2015) points out, critical race activists promote an intersectional approach to “better understand the nature of social inequalities and the processes that create and sustain them” (p. 279). They also stress that intersectionality should have an activism aim to change “the status quo” (Gillborn, 2015, p. 279). Although faculty in District C outlined many areas for improvement in postsecondary sources, they’ve taken an important step toward creating change. Being cognizant of these interacting barriers is crucial for learning how to construct messages that can be used to counteract them.



Ogbu and Simons (1998) also recommend striving to understand the competing factors that dictate minority student achievement. They assert that forces within the school and in the community coalesce to dictate minority advancement. They also explain, “Teachers should avoid basing expectations about an individual’s school performance and behavior on group membership. Students should be treated as individuals” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 179). Many factors, along with race, work together to impact achievement. However, this doesn’t mean that race doesn’t play into students’ individual experiences and educators within District C seem to have an understanding of this. Socioeconomic status, family support and race were all deemed important and some teachers and counselors made preliminary considerations of how they interact. However, the most prominent relationship they noted was that between socioeconomic and family support and while these are important, race was not identified in conjunction with these factors. To construct the appropriate messages about higher education, students’ barriers should be considered collectively to assess how they interact and to make judgments about how to be a proper resource for them in regards to postsecondary decisions.

### *Peers*

Although the literature has firmly established the role of parental support in the postsecondary advancement of minority students (Fallon, 1997; Monahan, 1993; Holland, 2015; Schaeffer, 2010), the research on peers is not as strong (McKown, 2013).

However, interviews from District C make an argument for extending this line of research and evaluating the important role friends can play in applying for college. Teachers and counselors in this high school noted that peers could be both positive and negative influences. While peers were viewed as a resource to inspire other students, teachers also recognized that friends can hold each other back and will often choose a similar. This speaks to recommendations for improving postsecondary resources and the initiation of message about higher education.

As one teacher noted, high school students are at the age where they don't necessarily want to take direction from adults, including teachers and parents. Social influence is far more prominent and it could be beneficial to utilize this already present resource to help promote higher education. However, as other educators in District C explained, it's also important for sources of information about college to be relatable to students, especially in regards to race. Therefore, while peers should be utilized, it's still important to consider which students would be most valuable to reaching diverse student bodies. Students are most impacted by those who have overcome the same barriers and experiences.

Initiation of messages about higher education also became an important consideration when peers were discussed. Social networks form early in students' educational careers and if their friends are not headed towards higher education, teachers in District C noticed that this keeps other members of a clique from wanting to advance as well. Therefore, educators need to reach students *early*, before key social networks are formed. However, since these findings are not decisively supported by the literature,

more research needs to be done to extend what we currently understand about peer influence for minority student achievement. Educators may already have this useful resource at their fingertips, but still lack the proper information about how to utilize it.

### ***Motivational Messages***

Motivational messages are important for students, especially for those who aren't receiving support from other sources, including parents and peers. These messages were constructed in District C as a way to challenge students to broaden their horizons about postsecondary education paths. These memorable messages have the potential to resonate with students for a long period of time and influence their future decisions (Knapp et al., 1981). Wang (2012) also noted that these messages are particularly impactful for first-generation college students and solidify how important a mentor like a teacher can be in postsecondary education decisions.

However, Hammond (2006) explains that this challenge needs to accompany high levels of support when dealing with minority students. Although educators also found it important to keep their motivational messages realistic, so as not to set their students up for failure, the school seemed to lack the necessary support to help students follow through with their plan. Most educators in District C recognized that resources within the school were still lacking, especially for underrepresented groups. So although most aimed to challenge their students to live up to their postsecondary potential, these

messages could be counteracted by the lack of resource support necessary for them to actually make it happen.

This tension between challenge and support should be explored further in the context of message construction. Even though high schools should motivate and challenge their students to accomplish more, if they are not paired with effective informational messages about the application process, messaging is incomplete and may not be valuable resources to bridge the gap between the higher education system and diverse student bodies.

### *Message Source*

One of the most salient factors that emerged in District C interviews was the clear role designation for certain types of messages. While teachers constructed predominantly motivational messages, informational messages about the finite application process were left to the counselors. Even within the counselor's office, there were specific topics that each person covered (e.g., college and career, testing, grading). This approach makes sense because of the large number of students in the high school and the many other responsibilities teachers and counselors have. Teachers have to deal with state testing and curricular demands, so it's hard to dedicate time to helping students through the application process. Instead, motivational messages can simply be incorporated into lessons they are already giving. Counselors also have responsibilities

beyond counseling and differentiating their own roles also helps to counteract their own time constraints.

However, despite this role differentiation, many teachers and counselors noticed pitfalls in the school's current postsecondary resources. Although these roles are defined so each topic can be covered in more detail by each source, it doesn't seem as if key messages about higher education are as effective as they need to be. There could be several reasons for this, which were also revealed throughout interviews. The first is relatability of message source. Because most educators in District C and the speakers they bring in to talk about higher education are white, the diverse student body has a hard time relating to their experiences or being motivated by their success. Another possibility is that this differentiation of messages may mean there is a lack of repetition of important messages about college. And lastly, as discussed earlier, although educators recognize the many factors that dictate minority student success, they may not be adjusting their messages appropriately. Responses did not reveal if this was or was not the case and is valuable to investigate further.

## CHAPTER VII

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

High school educators play a critical role in helping underrepresented students make the transition to college. Because these students typically lack other forms of support at home and from peers when it comes to postsecondary decisions, teachers and counselors can help fill the gap. A great deal of research regarding the roles of teachers and counselors in the postsecondary decisions of underrepresented students has focused on the importance of building relationships with students, how educators must remain culturally responsive and adapt curricula, and how they must recognize structural barriers in order to act as advocates for underrepresented students (Martinez & Welton, 2014; Hemming, 1994; Holland, 2015). However, relatively little is known about the specific messages teachers and counselors construct about higher education for their diverse student bodies. A focus on the messaging process is important because it allows educators the opportunity to evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of the information they are giving students about college.

In order to explore this topic further, teachers and counselors were interviewed in three small high schools in central Texas. Each district was initially treated as its own case study (District A, B, and C), in order to learn about the different messages teachers and counselors produce for underrepresented students regarding higher education at their respective school.

Several themes emerged about colorblindness and intersectionality, the role of SES in academic advancement, family and peer support, and the teacher-student relationship; some of these themes cut across all three districts, while others were unique to a particular district.

This chapter presents a comparative analysis of Districts A, B, and C. First, it compares key themes across the three case studies. Second, it presents a practical model of message design for underrepresented groups regarding higher education, based on several key tensions about designing messages that emerged from the analysis. Third, the chapter outlines important implications for future research, theory, and practice. Finally, I present a short summary of my thesis.

### **Case Study Comparison**

A comparison of District A, B, and C highlights important themes about constructing messages for underrepresented groups about higher education. The complexity of race and its relationship with socioeconomic status, the role of parent and peer support, the importance of student initiative and building relationships with students emerged as important factors that impact academic achievement. Important themes regarding message source, content, and initiation also emerged in the analysis. A summary of case study comparisons can be found in *Table 6*. The presence or absence of a particular theme is highlighted and a brief description of how that theme was constructed in the district summarized.

Table 6

*Case Study Comparison*

	District A	District B	District C
<b>Race, SES &amp; Intersectionality</b>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SES swamped racial differences in academic achievement.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators were able to identify racial differences in postsecondary paths, but still cited SES as more indicative of achievement differences.</li> <li>• Intersectionality was ignored.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators recognized a multitude of factors that impact achievement, including race and ethnicity.</li> </ul>
<b>Family &amp; Friends</b>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family support was seen as a significant factor for minority student achievement.</li> <li>• Peers were NOT identified as a potential resource/hindrance.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family support was seen as a significant factor for minority student achievement.</li> <li>• Peers were identified as a potential resource and/or determinant of academic success.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family support was seen as a significant factor for minority student achievement.</li> <li>• Peers were identified as a potential resource and/or determinant of academic success.</li> </ul>
<b>Student Motivation &amp; Initiation</b>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators worked hard to reach students individually, but recognized students also had to have the motivation to follow through.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants emphasized that you can't force a student to pursue a path they aren't interested in, no matter how hard you try.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers and counselors recognized their own role as sources of information about higher education, but also felt it was important to make students take responsibility for their own goals/plans as well.</li> </ul>
<b>Relationships with Students</b>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building trust and strong relationships with students was emphasized.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building trust and strong relationships with students was emphasized.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building trust and strong relationships with students was emphasized.</li> </ul>



Table 6 Continued

	District A	District B	District C
<b>Informational v. Motivational Messages</b>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <p>Informational Messages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Individualized</i> messages were emphasized.</li> </ul> <p>Motivational Messages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designed just to encourage students to pursue a college degree.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <p>Informational Messages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilized a mixture of both individualized and generalized messages.</li> </ul> <p>Motivational Messages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Along with standard encouragement messages, another form of motivational message emerged: <i>challenge messages</i>. While standard motivational messages convey, “You can do it,” challenge messages convey “You can do more.”</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <p>Informational Messages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Individualized</i> messages were emphasized.</li> </ul> <p>Motivational Messages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designed just to encourage students to pursue a college degree.</li> </ul>
<b>Message Source</b>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers failed to identify themselves as key sources of information about college. They redirected finite questions about the college application process to the school counselor.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Absent</b></p>	<p><b>Present</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different types of messages came from distinct sources. Teacher predominately used motivational messages, while informational messages about the application process were left to the school’s counselors.</li> </ul>
<b>Message Initiation</b>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators within the district and across districts differed greatly in when they thought messages about college should begin.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators within the district and across districts differed greatly in when they thought messages about college should begin.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators within the district and across districts differed greatly in when they thought messages about college should begin.</li> </ul>

### ***Race, SES, and Intersectionality***

Race, socioeconomic status and intersectionality became important themes in each of the case studies. These factors were tied to minority achievement, but did so in very different ways in each school district. In District A, socioeconomic status was the most crucial factor tied to academic achievement and was thought to erase racial differences. Because the vast majority of students were classified as low-SES, regardless of race, SES was seen as the leading determinant for success. Educators in District B were easily able to identify racial differences in students' postsecondary paths, but still cited family support and SES as most indicative of achievement differences. Intersectionality between SES and race was not considered. Finally, in District C, teachers and counselors identified a multiplicity of factors that impacted minority student achievement, including race. Race was also discussed in relation to power conflicts within the school and as a reason that underrepresented groups are more hesitant about higher education.

Intersectionality is an important topic to discuss in this context and these three case studies reveal why it may become more or less relevant in certain school districts. Existing literature has pointed to the compounding negative effects of race and SES (Nelson et al., 2015; Gillborn, 2015). However, the literature on intersectionality doesn't account for the potential equalizing effect of SES in the educational context. The data in this study revealed that race might not be as indicative of academic success in the minds of teachers and counselors when students are of equally low socioeconomic status. In

District A and B, participants revealed that the majority of the school was low-SES and this was true for all racial groups. This differed in District C, where SES was more varied and the population of Caucasian students was in line with those who did not classify as low-SES. These differences could account for why District C was the only one where educators drew significant connections between race and achievement and recognized that multiple factors dictate whether or not minority students advance to higher education. Perhaps, when students are of an equally low socioeconomic status, SES might be the most indicative factor for academic achievement in the mental models of teachers and counselors. However, there are other factors that could impact minority student achievement, beyond race and SES.

Overall, race, ethnicity, and culture were rarely considered as drivers of messaging about higher education. In the best case, as illustrated particularly in District C, race was identified as intersecting with other important factors to impact achievement. However, this only emerged in a limited number of interviews. The majority of participants throughout the three districts revealed that race is not considered at all when students are guided through the college application process.

### ***Family and Friends***

Educators in all three districts revealed that parents and peers were two of the most indicative factors of student success. Scholars have identified parental support as imperative for minority student advancement and likewise a lack thereof can be one of

the biggest detriments. Teacher and counselors from all three districts revealed the same patterns. And although the research on peer support is not as conclusive, educators from these three districts, particularly District C, identified friends as influential forces in students' postsecondary plans.

### **Parents and family support**

Family support was one of the most important factors for minority student success that educators in every school district identified. The literature also points to how crucial parents can be in their children's plans for postsecondary education (Monohan, 1993; Fallon, 1997; Schaeffer, 2010). Participants noted that those students who have plans to go to college are overwhelmingly those that also have parents who are invested in their education. However, lack of parental involvement occurs for several reasons. Because most of the students in these three school districts are first-generation college students, their parents do not have the knowledge of what it takes to properly support them. Even if they are motivated to assist, Holland (2015) notes that they are just simply not equipped with the necessary knowledge. From the beginning, this puts certain students at a disadvantage.

In some cases, parents do not want their students to attend college at all. Typically this stems from cultural values and seems to affect Hispanic women the most in the three districts chosen for this study. These women of color are expected to stay home and raise families, just as generations before them had done. Participants revealed

that in these cases, students find themselves in a tension between the school and their community and sadly, often succumb to the pressures of their families.

This makes an argument for why educators need to make an effort to understand the family dynamics of their students and how parents play into their postsecondary decisions. First, parents can be utilized as a resource to help students pursue their educational ambitions. All of the school districts did note that they attempted to reach parents in some way, whether it was through college workshops or inviting them to meetings in the counselors office to discuss their children's college plans. However, many teachers did not have contact with parents often and when they did, it wasn't necessarily in regards to higher education. Teachers in every district expressed their desire to help students achieve their postsecondary education goals and yet, most are ignoring this potentially helpful, but untapped resource.

In the cases where parents do not want to be involved in their child's education, teachers have to compensate. However, they can't do that if they don't know that these barriers exist for their students. This again points to the need for educators to understand the relationships between family support and student achievement. Many teachers did identify this as a major barrier to academic achievement, but most failed to connect this to how they adjust messages about higher education.

### *Peers*

While the role of peers was not a salient theme in District A, it was identified as an important factor in Districts B and C. Teachers in District B noted how much they enjoyed student feedback, both as a means to reassure them that they are doing their job correctly, but also as source of important information for current students. Peers were valued for the same reason in District C, but teachers here also revealed that friends could also be responsible for holding each other back. Decisions about higher education often become collective, so if certain members of a clique were not going to college, it became harder to convince other members of the group to go. This speaks to the importance of the early initiation of messages about college education, before key social groups are formed. It also points to the use of peers as a resource and another factor to consider when constructing messages about higher education.

### *Student Motivation and Initiative*

Interviews in all three districts revealed a general sentiment that the current generation of students is more needy than those past. Because of this, student motivation and initiative became an important factor within the context of academic achievement and postsecondary advancement. This topic was emphasized in all of the case studies, but manifested itself a little differently in each school district. District A educators worked hard to reach students individually, but recognized that their efforts were only as

effective as students allowed them to be. If they were not invested in their future, for whatever reason, there is not much that can be done. In District B, student initiative was also framed as a potentially conflicting with educators' individualized effort to help students apply and prepare for college. Participants in this high school emphasized that you can't force students into a path that they wouldn't enjoy or don't want, regardless of how much effort educators put in. Likewise, parents can't make this decision for students either. Teachers and counselors in District C also recognized that they were important sources of information about higher education, but also make it a point for students to act independently and take responsibility for their own educational ambitions. Their messages about college also emphasized that hard work was necessary for going to college, regardless of their personal background. The type of class that students were enrolled in (on-level, pre-AP or AP) was also tied to student motivation and unsurprisingly, students with more motivation were typically those in higher level courses.

The role of student motivation is important to message construction. Although messages about the application process and curricular demands of college are very important for educators to disseminate, they become irrelevant if messages are not also geared towards motivating students to take stock in their own future. Depending on the student, increasing initiative may require different types of messages. While simple encouragement may work for some, others will need to be coaxed through more practical means, such as explaining how a college education can help them become more financially stable. Educators in District A, B, and C utilized both informational and

motivational messages, but it wasn't clear how student initiative impacted their message choices and if/how they prioritized certain messages for certain types of students. That being said, if students do not want to attend college, educators need to consider when these types of messages are ineffective and not worth pursuing any longer. College is not for everyone. The goal is instead to reach those that have these ambitions, but don't have the self-confidence or knowledge to make it happen on their own.

### ***Relationship with Students***

Another important theme that emerged in District B and C was the importance of building strong relationships with students. Although it was not discussed in-depth, it was clear that this was also important to some teachers in District A and for good reason. Existing literature has detailed the central role teachers and counselors have in making the higher education more accessible to minority students (Martinez & Welton, 2014; Blanchard & Muller, 2015; Fallon, 1997). This is particularly true if students are first-generation college students and don't have support at home. In District B, building relationships with students was one of the most important goals for educators. They noted how this helped them understand students' individual experiences and allowed them to have frank conversations with them about college. Educators in District C recognized the bond between student and teacher as a key resource when it came to information about higher education. Students were more comfortable asking questions about college if they thought teachers and counselors were trusted mentors.



However, in order for the relationships between educators and minority students to be as effective as possible, it is important for educators to be culturally responsive (Hemming, 1994; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). In school districts where educators are unmindful of racial differences, there is the potential to undermine this relationship because educators don't understand the extent of barriers that could deter students from pursuing a degree. Teachers must be cognizant and take action against structural barriers that impact their minority and low-income students (Holland, 2015). This becomes increasingly important as student bodies continue to diversify (Blanchard & Muller, 2015).

Building trust with students lays the backdrop for effective messaging. Students have to feel that their source cares for their wellbeing and is giving them credible information. Educators also act as a bridge between students and peers, and between schools and parents, all of which are influential in minority students' academic achievement and postsecondary plans. However, if these other forms of support don't exist or cannot be manifested, the role of teachers and counselors becomes that much more crucial.

### ***Informational versus Motivational Messages***

When it came to message content, messages took two general forms: (1) informational and (2) motivational. While informational messages included finite information about the application process and the curricular demands of higher

education, motivational messages were used as a means of general encouragement to inspire students to consider some form of postsecondary education. Informational messages were viewed as either generalized, which means they were designed for the student body as a whole, or individualized and tailored to students' individual needs. Although motivational messages were fairly consistent across school districts, challenge messages were a distinct type that emerged in District B. General motivational messages say, "You can do it," while challenge messages express, "You can do more." The latter is more geared to those students who have made decisions about higher education, but are undermining their own potential.

In District A, no one felt that one-size-fits-all informational messages were appropriate. Teachers and counselors used both informational and motivational messages, although the counselor was designated the central source of information about the college application process. Educators in District B utilized a mix of general and individualized information messages. Because the majority of their students were first-generation college goers, generalized messages were used initially in order to spark interest and give students a starting place. Once students began to ask more questions and near the point where more concrete decisions needed to be made, messages shifted to a more individualized form. Motivational messages were also emphasized and were geared towards helping students combat financial barriers and family concerns. Interviews in District C revealed that individualized forms of informational messages were utilized most often. There was also an emphasis on motivational, but practical

messages. While educators thought it was important for students to pursue a postsecondary education, they made sure not to set students up for failure.

### *Message Source*

Educators from these three school districts revealed some important information about message construction, including differences in source and message initiation. While teachers and counselors were the key source of information about higher education in schools, the state disseminates its own messages about postsecondary readiness that often worked against teachers' own efforts to help students advance. As one teacher in District B noted, the state takes a more generalized approach to messages about higher education, although most teachers and counselors thought an individualized approach was more appropriate. This push is more for four-year universities and doesn't recognize that this might not be the path for the ever-diversifying high school student population. The state is still heavily focused on standardized testing, which places time constraints on teachers who have to worry about meeting stringent curricular demands, as opposed to having the time to help students make the transition to higher education. Ironically, this actually ends up deterring the state's goal of increasing the number of students who are applying and attending college.

In District A, teachers failed to define themselves as central sources of information about higher education and designated the school's only counselor for this role. District C also revealed some interesting patterns in terms of sources of different

types of messages within the school itself. There was a clear distinction between who was in charge of disseminating which information about college. While teachers tended to utilize motivational messages and occasionally incorporated practical lessons about the college curriculum into their own classes, informational messages were left heavily to counselors. Even within the counselor's office, each of the three counselors had their own specific subset of information they were in charge of. Because the school has a larger number of students, when compared with District A and B, this made sense for educators in District C. Because there are so many facets of the postsecondary planning process, it helps to have "experts" in each major area. Therefore, school size and the amount of available staff might also be indicative of how schools as a whole tackle message dissemination about higher education. Unfortunately, District C was also the school where teachers felt there was the most room for improvement. Although educators in District C made conscious decisions regarding the sources of messages about higher education, this did not compensate for the pitfalls that they identified in the school's postsecondary resources.

In each of the three districts, some participants even revealed that they didn't know much about the school's postsecondary resources at all. This could easily lead one to believe that they were not redirecting students to these potentially helpful resources since they did not know they existed.

### ***Message Initiation***

Educators in all three districts differed widely in when they felt messages about college should begin for students. While the state's new House Bill 5 requires students to start making college and career-oriented decisions in eighth grade, many teachers argued that this might be too soon to have these conversations. The tension seemed to exist because of questions about student maturity. Although some teachers felt that messages about college cannot come too soon, others noted that until a certain age, students don't have the maturity level or comprehension to make core decisions that could change the rest of their lives. Both arguments here make sense. On the one hand, messages should be initiated early enough to counteract conflicting messages students get from parents and peers, but late enough that they are mature enough to absorb the information in a meaningful way.

Of course, there are different types of applicable messages that can be incorporated throughout a child's schooling, even if they are not explicitly linked to higher education. As one teacher explained, messages about things like personal responsibility are appropriate in primary school, but are still relevant when students are making concrete decisions about college. Another teacher noted that middle school is more about being social for students, so messages should attempt to counteract any negative influences peers may have on students' achievement. Timing of messages is important, but research has not adequately explored when it is most beneficial to introduce students to messages about college. Paired with useful content, from reliable

sources, messages about higher education can be used as a tool to help bridge the gap between the higher education system and minority student groups.

### **A Practical Model for Message Design**

The common themes that emerged between these case studies serve as a basis for developing a model for designing messages about higher education for underrepresented groups (*See Figure 2*). Though preliminary, this model is based, in part, on Aakhus (2007) idea of communication as design. The communication as design approach presumes that there are certain interactional challenges that create a gap between the desirability and efficacy of current communication practices and ideal communication practices. Communication needs to be designed in a way that addresses the communication challenges allowing the gap to be closed between the current and ideal. Therefore, this model provides a base for educators to consider how to better construct their messages about postsecondary education, as a means to close the gap further.

The proposed model was designed based on the analysis from the study as well as theoretical influences of social constructionism and Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory. First, the model was crafted to reflect how meaning making about higher education is derived from interaction between educators and students. According to the tenets of social constructionism, meaning and knowledge are created through our social interactions with others and the communication that occurs between people (Burr, 2015; Allen, 2005; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). The results of this thesis point to a similar

phenomenon in the education context. Through their interactions with students, high school educators make sense of their role in the school and make assessments about those they teach. This meaning-making process then influences the types of messages they construct for students about higher education.

Second, Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory helps to identify the barriers and constraints that impact this interaction between educators and students and complicate the communication process. The practical model below is also designed to capture these contextual factors. Ogbu's theory outlines constraints that impact minority student achievement that exist within the education system and students' broader communities (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). These are factors that students need to be cognizant of if they intend to help students combat them through their messages regarding college. Not all of the constraints Ogbu discussed in regards to constraining minority achievement emerged in the data analysis and only those that seems to be evident within these school districts were incorporated into the practical model.

To present my model, I initially identify two key model components that emerge from my analysis—interactional challenges and contextual variables—and then demonstrate how the model operates.

## *Interactional Challenges*

Based on my analysis, I propose that there are three key interactional challenges that influence message design when crafting messages for members of underrepresented groups:

- (a) Message source: *Who* constructs and disseminates messages.
- (b) Message content: *What* the messages say.
- (c) Message initiation: *When* messages are disseminated.

Each of these interactional challenges is associated with certain tensions. For purposes of this model, tensions are contradictions that exist inherently within relationships (Miller, 2005). As Miller (2005) explains:

These contradictions are conceptualized not as dualisms—either-or concepts in which a particular option in the pair must be chosen—but as dialectics in which the tension inherent in the contradiction is not something to be resolved through choice but something that defines the nature of the relationship and sustains the life of the relationship. (p. 194)

The tensions regarding *message source* reflect where messages about higher education come from: (a) the high school versus the state, and (b) teachers versus counselors. Participants revealed that messages disseminated by high schools may be in tension with the messages from the state of Texas that circulate through its mandates regarding postsecondary readiness. There is also a potential tension between the roles that teachers or counselors or counselors in message creation and dissemination. While



teachers typically utilized motivational messages and practical messages about the college curriculum, counselors were often designated as the central source of informational messages about the application process. A key design choice when constructing messages regarding postsecondary message is who the source of the message should be which is also connected to tensions regarding message content.

My analysis suggests that there is one primary tension associated with *message content*; the tension between informational and motivational messages. Informational messages are those that deal with the finite details of the application process and the curricular demands of college. Informational messages can also be broken into a secondary tension, generalized versus individualized messages. Generalized messages are those about higher education that are designed broadly for the entire student body, while individualized messages are adjusted to students' unique needs and experiences.

The other main message content type, motivational messages, are those that are meant to inspire students to achieve their postsecondary education dreams. They too can be broken up into a more specific secondary tension, encouragement messages versus challenge messages. Encouragement messages are those that inspire students to consider postsecondary education, as opposed to challenge messages that push students to choose a more challenging and fitting path than the one they've already chosen. The various primary and secondary tensions represent different choices points that designers of messages—teachers, counselors, principals, and other administrators—can make when creating a structure for creating and disseminating messages to underrepresented students regarding postsecondary education.

The third major tension, *message timing*, has to do with the appropriate time to initiate messaging about higher education. While some participants argued that high school was adequate because it allowed students to mature and be able to understand messages fully, others preferred earlier initiation in middle school to plant the seed early and combat harmful social relationships that develop at that time as well. While the tensions regarding message source and message content focus on who creates or initiates a message about what, message timing addresses the issue of when a message should be initiated. The tensions associated with message source, message content, and message timing provides a series of clear choice points that messages designers can consider when determining who should initiate a message, about what, and when.

### ***Contextual Factors***

My analysis suggests that there are also a variety of contextual factors that affect the way messages about higher education are produced and interpreted. These various factors not only influence how designers may manage the aforementioned tensions, they also influence how students may makes sense of messages, and subsequent outcomes such as their intentions and likeliness of attending college. They include:

- (a) Educator-student relationship quality: The extent to which students trust teachers and counselors and the information they give about higher education.

- (b) Family support: Whether or not parents want and/or can help their children through the college application process.
- (c) Socioeconomic status: The economic and social position of a student's family.
- (d) Student initiative and motivation: The level of effort students exhibit in regards to postsecondary planning.
- (e) Race/ethnicity: The racial group students belong to and/or identify.

Educator-student relationship quality reflects the literature that identifies teachers and counselors as important sources of information about college, and points to the importance of *trust* in information source. Family support considers the extent to which a student's parents are involved in their education. Socioeconomic status becomes an important factor, particularly with those students who are below the poverty level. Student initiative reflects the importance of students taking responsibility for their futures. Lastly, the literature also emphasizes the impact of race/ethnicity on minority student achievement.

*Presentation of Model*

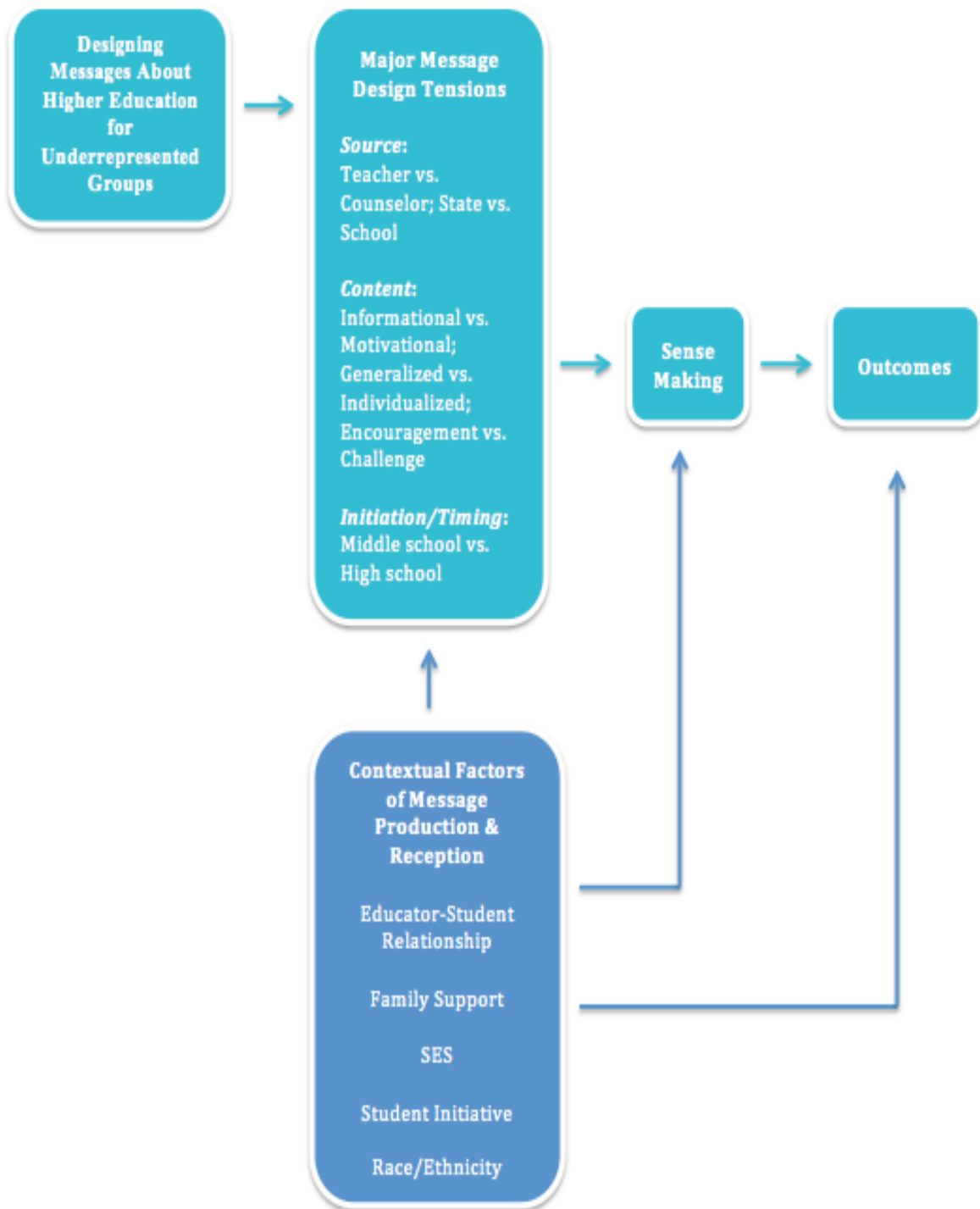


Figure 2. A Proposed Model for the Design of Messages About Higher Education for Underrepresented Groups

My proposed model offers one way to approach the process of designing messages to better address communicating with diverse student bodies about college. There are many possible message designers in the educational system including teachers, counselors, administrators, and the state itself. While there a variety of message designers, I am suggesting that they share a common set of design choices when designing messages and that these messages influence how underrepresented students and other parties make sense of the post secondary experience, which in turn encourage or hinder specific outcomes. This model is grounded in the social constructionist literature which highlights that the way that people construct their experiences influences the kinds of social worlds and outcomes that are subsequently created (Burr, 2015; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Allen, 2005).

In order to design messages about higher education for underrepresented students, educators must consider the major components and associated tensions outlined in the model regarding message source, message content and message initiation. Not only must teachers and counselors consider their own message choices within the context of these factors, but they also need to consider the messages produced by other sources, in order for their own messages to be complimentary to the diverse messages students are receiving. Given that there are multiple message designers in educational systems, constructive messages are more likely to be effective if they align with the messages of other designers.

The contextual factors that emerged in the data must also be considered during the message production process, as connections can be drawn between each of them and

student achievement. However, they are also important for message *reception* and when educators are constructing messages about college, it's also important for them to consider how these factors impact the way their audiences decode their messages.

The messages that are constructed about higher education initiate the sense making process regarding higher education and finally, lead to certain outcome regarding minority students' intentions to seek a college education. Although this is a very preliminary model, it gives us a basis for understanding the essential and complex factors that impact decisions high school educators make about their messages regarding higher education.

Although sense making is a finite component of the model, it's important to note that it occurs throughout the entirety of this process in some way. It is not simply an outcome. As educators make decisions about the key message design tensions and how they are influenced by the contextual factors also present in the model, they are also engaging in sense making. The outcome labeled "sense making" is intended to indicate the process by which students absorb the constructed messages about college and make meaning of their decisions regarding postsecondary education.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The proposed model highlights important implications for theory and research. Social constructionism and Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory were both used as resources to help inform the study's design and analysis. Social constructionism was

useful for looking at how teachers and counselors make sense of their roles as sources of information about higher education and how their experiences and relationships with others impact the messages they create. However, the theory doesn't account for the way that outside factors can impact the messages they construct, including students' family support, socioeconomic status and race. This is where Ogbu's model becomes helpful. It outlines key barriers that impact minority student achievement and tensions that occur between schools and parents.

This study points to several possibilities for future research that can both extend the model and the literature. The first regards message initiation. Participants had inconclusive opinions of when messages about college should be introduced to students and the current literature cannot answer this question either. Timing is involved in the effectiveness of messages and in order for educators to construct meaningful messages; they have to wait until their audience is prepared to understand them fully. Therefore, future research might examine what additional tensions are associated with timing and how the timing of messages might influence sense making and outcomes.

A second area for research could explore the decision-making process that message designers use when determining what kind of messages to employ and when. Several types of messages regarding higher education emerged during this study, including informational and motivational messages. These different types of messages seemed to have their own purpose, but it wasn't clear how participants in this study made decisions about which types of messages to use when, with whom, and if they were appropriate. Although both informational and motivational messages may be

useful, future research could explore which types are most impactful for minority students making decisions about higher education. Because underrepresented groups of students have different experiences than their White counterparts and have unique barriers to college, messages need to be adjusted to fit diverse student bodies. Learning more about how to utilize different types of messages more effectively can help provide the necessary motivation and informational support for these students.

A third area for future research could center on the message consistency or inconsistency among different message sources regarding post secondary education. Inconsistencies in the types of messages that students receive from different sources within their school can cause confusion, particularly for those in minority groups who typically lack other means of information about higher education. The job of educators is to reduce students' uncertainty about college and participants in each district revealed that schools might not be doing that as effectively as possible. A lack of consistency among and poor alignment of messages may be part of the problem. Research needs to tackle how schools can construct useful and consistent messages about postsecondary information across their school. This could also help alleviate some of the stress counselors in the smaller districts felt because they are held responsible for most aspects of college and career readiness. Better utilization of resources that are already available within the school would be beneficial, particularly when schools don't have the opportunity to add more.

Educators should also consider school-wide consistency of messaging as an important tool. One of the major recommendations teachers and counselors made for



improving postsecondary resources was to increase the presence of counselors in schools, as they were identified as the major source of informational messages about applying for college. However, even if a school has the option of having more counselors, it's unrealistic to assume that a few individuals can take care of the complexities of the college process for hundreds of students. As one counselor noted, teachers can incorporate more relevant messages about higher education in class and elective courses can also be redesigned to pick up the slack. However, this takes a collective effort on the part of educators throughout the school to make sure they have a clear understanding of their role and the postsecondary resources available. On the flip side, if messages about higher education are inconsistent, it can work to confuse students even further. In most cases, small high schools may not have the ability to add resources geared specifically towards helping students with postsecondary readiness. Therefore, working to improve those that are already available can help educators assist minority student achievement and advancement to higher education.

Fourth, the analysis points to why colorblindness in messaging and its subsequent effects need to be explored. Several important implications revolved around the role of race, a contextual factor in message design. Although teachers and counselors are important sources of information about college, it's unclear about how colorblindness can impact their relationships with minority students. Many educators outline the importance of building strong bonds with students, but without recognizing the role that race places in their experiences can undermine this relationships and the effectiveness of messages teachers and counselors construct about college. The use of

cross-racial mentoring becomes potentially relevant here. Extensive research has revealed the harmful effects of colorblindness on minority achievement in the education system, yet the data revealed that these conversations are not happening in schools. Therefore, implicit bias training may be necessary for teachers.

The presence of white privilege and the white racial frame should also be examined further in this context as it too can impact the way teachers communicate with their students. Feagin and Cobas (2008) describe the white racial frame as “white ‘common sense’,” which encompasses harmful stereotypes and tools that maintain and rationalize racial hierarchy. White privilege helps to perpetuate inequality not only in K-12 schools, but also higher education (Patton, 2016). Patton et al. (2014) explained, “The lack of effort to explicitly grapple with...racism/white supremacy...is a persistent trend that is symptomatic of a society that would rather tiptoe around the issue of race rather than directly address it” (p. 136). The analysis of this study revealed that educators are comfortable talking about poverty, but not race. It’s easier to ignore race. However, when they don’t recognize race, they don’t explicitly combat the harmful differences that exist for minority students. This could in turn help to preserve racism at the individual, institutional and systemic level. It’s also possible that there was a disconnect between “story-lived” and “story-told.” Although teachers explicated their feeling about race and what was identified as colorblindness, how they interact with students may tell a different story. Participant observation might balance interview data to explore this further.

The literature on the intersectionality of race and socioeconomic status was challenged by the findings of this study. While race became a factor indicative of student achievement when socioeconomic status was more varied among students, SES seemed to equalize the experiences of student bodies that are overwhelmingly below the poverty level (e.g., District A). Current research does not reflect how critical mass can impact the effect of race, in the context of high schools. It's possible that socioeconomic status trumps race in certain districts, but further research is needed to explore this possibility. It's important to note that this doesn't mean that race should be ignored in school districts where SES is the determinant of academic success. Colorblindness is still dangerous. Understanding the effects of race on achievement is important for building relationships with students, understanding the complexity of their experiences and being transparent about structural barriers that they are sure to face in higher education.

Fifth, future research should explore the role of messaging by parents and peers. The role of parents and peers emerged as key themes in the three school districts chosen for this study. And while participants touched on how peers can be used as an important resource to inspire the postsecondary plans of students, the interviews did not reveal how parents can be used similarly. Teachers can act as a liaison between what Ogbu deems "the system" and "community forces," and help garner the support of parents, which the literature has established as an important influence in minority student achievement.

Research on the messaging activity of peers is important to explore further, as it could very well be a significant contextual factor in message design. While some research points to a relationship between achievement and peer support, other research

presents contradictory findings (McKown, 2013). It's also still unclear as to when friends become most influential and if there are differences in the way peer influence manifests itself among different racial groups. Like parents, educators can utilize peers as an important resource to help motivate diverse student bodies to think about college, but more needs to be learned about this relationship first. Additionally, more research needs to be conducted before peer influence can be incorporated into a model of message design for minority groups about college.

In order to explore the full scope of this research problem, future studies should also sample students and parents, as their perspectives might shed significant light on the biases of educators. Participant interviews revealed that some educators shifted the blame for achievement differences to parents and the students themselves, which these groups could potentially challenge in a study designed to capture their perspectives. The data in this study also revealed notions of meritocracy and the focus on individualism informed by neoliberalism and sampling these other groups could help uncover the implicit biases and stereotypes that influence teachers interactions.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations of my thesis. Because of the qualitative nature of this study, formal generalization was not possible. As Tracy (2013) explains, "Case studies aim instead at transferability and naturalistic observation" (p. 267). These concepts speak to readers' appreciation for the work and their ability to relate a study's

findings to their own experiences (Tracy, 2013). Shenton (2004) adds that transferability is accomplished by providing extensive detail and “description of phenomenon in question to allow comparisons to be made” (p. 73).

Transferability may not be as robust as desired given three factors. First, because purposeful sampling was used, the results of my data analysis and proposed model may not be transferable to message design outside of the specific context of small schools in central Texas. Although a fourth school district was chosen originally, they had to exit the study at the last minute. Second, transferability may be limited by the sample size comprising the three cases. For example, in District B, additional participants were sought, but only five teachers and one of the two school counselors were interviewed representing a slightly smaller than hoped for sample. Again, more participants may have revealed more complexities about the topic. Third, as the interviews were conducted and coded by only one researcher, there is potential for the researcher’s preconceptions to influence the analysis. However, I put in safeguards to this by trying to present thorough descriptions and verbatim participant quotations to give the reader to make decisions regarding the coherence and fidelity of my analysis and also built in reflexivity to the process by using three different case studies and having my analysis questioned by my research supervisors. While these process hopefully produced a set of robust ideas and concepts that might be transferred other settings, the relatively small sample size might hinder transferability.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis sought to understand the role of message construction in the way that high school educators can bridge the gap between the higher education system and diverse student bodies. As students become increasingly diverse, it's important for educators to strive to make the education system more inclusive and accessible to minority groups. Therefore, my goal was determine how high school teachers and counselors may construct messages about college and how these messages can motivate and support minority student advancement.

In order to evaluate this topic, I did an extensive case study with three school districts in central Texas. These schools were chosen based on their sizeable minority populations. Interviews were conducted with teachers and counselors from each school to explore the types of messages that they construct about higher education and how they change depending on the dynamics and demographics of each school.

The case studies revealed key themes about race and intersectionality in the context of education, message source, message initiation, student motivation and the tensions that exist between the school and “community forces.” While educators in these schools put the wellbeing and achievement of their students their main priority, gaps were identified in their postsecondary resources. The data also helped to construct a practical model for constructing messages about higher education for minority students, which pointed to important tensions and moderating factors that impact message design.

This study's findings also pointed to implications for theory and practice, and identified ways to extend the research on message construction.

High school educators are in an important position for guiding students through the process of preparing for college. Their role becomes even more important for minority students who often lack other forms of support. Therefore, teachers and counselors should continually strive to improve the information they disseminate and the support they provide to students about the higher education system. Learning how to construct effective messages about postsecondary opportunities is an important place to start.

## REFERENCES

- Allen, B. J. (1995). 'Diversity' and organizational communication. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 23(2), 143-155.
- Allen, B. J. (2005). Social constructionism. In S. May & D. K. Mumby (Eds.), *Engaging organizational communication theory & research: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 35-53). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Anderson, J. A. (1987). *Communication research: Issues and methods*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Archer-Banks, D. A. M., & Behar-Horenstein, L. S. (2012). Ogbu revisited: Unpacking high-achieving African American girls' high school experiences. *Urban Education*, 47(1), 198-223.
- Au, W. W. (2009). High-stake testing and discursive control: The triple bind for non-standard student identities. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 11(2), 65-71.
- Barge, J. K., & Loges, W. E. (2003). Parent, student, and teacher perceptions of parental involvement. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 31(2), 140-163.
- Becares, L., & Priest, N. (2015). Understanding the influence of race/ethnicity, gender, and class on inequalities in academic and non-academic outcomes among eighth-grade students: Findings from an intersectionality approach. *PLoS ONE*, 10(10), 1-17.
- Benner, A. D., & Graham, S. (2011). Latino adolescents' experiences of discrimination across the first 2 years of high school: Correlates and influences on educational outcomes. *Child Development*, 82(2), 508-519.



- Bineham, J. L. (2015). How The Blind Side blinds us: Postracism and the American dream. *Southern Communication Journal, 80*(3), 230-245.
- Blanchard, S., & Muller, C. (2015). Gatekeepers of the "American Dream": How teachers' perceptions shape the academic outcomes of immigrant and language-minority students. *Social Science Research, 51*, 262-275.
- Bouette, G. S., Lopez-Robertson, J., & Powers-Costello, E. (2011). Moving beyond colorblindness in early childhood classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 39*, 335-342.
- Brustein, W. I. (2007). The global campus: Challenges and opportunities for higher education in North America. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 11*(3-4), 382-391.
- Burr, V. (2015). *Social Constructivism* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Camera, L. (2015, December 9). Education shifts to states: Will they ensure equal opportunity for the most disadvantaged students? *U.S. News*.
- “Case Study.” In *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, Retrieved April 2, 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/case%20study>.
- Cherng, H. Y. S., Turney, K., & Kao, G. (2014). Less socially engaged? Participation in friendship and extracurricular activities among racial/ethnic minority and immigrant adolescents. *Teachers College Record, 116*, 1-28.
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Journal of Women in Culture & Society, 38*(4), 785-810.

- Cotton, Kathleen. School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance (School Improvement Research Series). Portland, Ore.: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1996. Retrieve from <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/10/c020.html>.
- Conrad, C. & Poole, M. S. (2005). *Strategic organizational communication* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Davis, K. (1992). Toward a feminist rhetoric: The Gilligan-debate revisited. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 15(2), 219-213.
- Deetz, S. A. & Eger, E. K. (2014). Developing a metatheoretical perspective for organizational communication studies. In L.L. Putnam & D. Mumby (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (pp. 27-48). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- den Brok, P., Brekelmans, M., & Wubbels, T. (2004). Interpersonal teacher behaviour and student outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 15, 407–442.
- Denzin, N.K. (2009). The elephant in the living room: Or extending the conversation about the politics of evidence. *Qualitative Research* 9(2), 139-160.
- Dockery, D., & McKelvey, S. (2013). Underrepresented college students' experiences with school counselors. *Journal of School Counseling*, 11(3), 1-30.
- Elam, C., & Brown, G. (2005). The inclusive university: Helping minority students choose a college and identify institutions that value diversity. *Journal Of College Admission*, 187, 14-17.

- Fairhurst, G. T., & Grant, D. (2010). The social construction of leadership: A sailing guide. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 24(2), 171-210.
- Fallon, M.V. (1997). The school counselor's role in first generation students' college plans. *The School Counselor*, 44(5), 384-393.
- Fan, F. A. (2012). Teacher: Students' interpersonal relationships and students' academic achievements in social studies. *Teachers and Teaching*, 18(4), 483-490.
- Farrell, M. (2015). Leadership reflections. *Journal of Library Administration*, 55, 302-311.
- Feagin, J. R., & Cobas, J. A. (2008). Latinos/as and white racial frame: The procrustean bed of assimilation. *Sociological Inquiry*, 78(1), 39-53.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219-245.
- Foster, M. K. (2004). Coming to terms: A discussion of John Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of minority academic achievement. *Intercultural Education*, 15(4), 369-384.
- Fraenkel, J.R., Wallen, N.E., & Hyun, H.H. (2015). *How to design and evaluate research in education*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Gillborn, D. (2015). Intersectionality, critical race theory, and the primacy of racism: Race, class, gender, and disability in education. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(3), 277-287.
- Griffin, A. H., Jr. (1978). Standardized testing: Implications for minority students. *National Education Association*, 1-17.

- Hamm, J.V., & Faircloth, B.S. (2005). The role of friendship in adolescents' sense of school belonging. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2005(107), 61-78.
- Hammer, M. R., Wiseman, R. L., Rasmussen, J. L., & Brusckke, J. C. (1998). A test of anxiety/uncertainty management theory: The intercultural adaptation context. *Communication Quarterly*, 46(3), 309-326.
- Hammond, J. (2006). High challenge, high support: Integrating language and content instruction for diverse learners in an English literature classroom. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 5, 269-283.
- Hemmings, A. (1994). Culturally responsive teaching: When and how high school teachers should cross cultural boundaries to reach students. Presented at *The Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*. New Orleans, LA.
- Holland, M.M. (2015). Trusting each other: Student-counselor relationships in diverse high schools. *Sociology of Education*, 88(3), 244-262.
- Joffe, H., & Yardley, L. (2004). Content and thematic analysis. In D.F. Marks & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Research methods for clinical and health psychology* (pp. 56-68). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Johnson, R. B. (1997). Examining the validity structure of qualitative research. *Education*, 118(2), 282-292.
- Knapp, M. L., Stohl, C., & Reardon, K. K. (1981). "Memorable messages." *Journal of Communication*, 31, 27-41.

- Li, N., & Hasan, Z. (2010). Closing the achievement gap: Strategies for ensuring the success of minority students. *National Teacher Education Journal, 3*(2), 47-59.
- Malone, H.J. (2013). The search stage: When, where, and what information do urban public high school students gather about college. *Journal of School Counseling, 11*(13), 1-36.
- Martinez, G.F., & Deil-Amen, R. (2015). College for all Latinos? The role of high school messages in facing college challenges. *Teachers College Record, 117*(3), 1-50.
- Martinez, M., & Klopott, S. (2005). The link between high school reform and college access and success for low-income and minority youth. *American Youth Policy Forum.*
- Martinez, M.A., & Welton, A.D. (2014). Examining college opportunity structures for students of color at 'high-minority,' high-poverty secondary schools in Texas. *Journal of School Leadership, 24*(5), 800-841.
- McCall, L. The complexity of intersectionality. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 30*(3), 1771-1800.
- McKown, C. (2013). Social equity theory and racial-ethnic achievement gaps. *Child Development, 84*(4), 1120-1136.
- McKown, C. & Weinstein, R. S. (2002). Modeling the role of child ethnicity and gender in children's differential response to teacher expectations. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 32*, 159-184.

- Meric, I., Er, M., & Gorun, M. (2015). Managing diversity in higher education: USAFA case. *Procedia- Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 195, 72-81.
- Miller, K. (2005). *Communication theories: Perspectives, processes, and contexts* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Miller, K. (2015). *Organizational communication: Approaches and processes* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning.
- Mualana, R., Opdenakker, M. C., & Bosker, R. (2013). Teacher-student interpersonal relationships change and affect academic motivation: A multilevel growth curve modeling. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 84, 459-482.
- Muller, C., Riegler-Crumb, C., Schiller, K. S., Wilkinson, L., & Frank, K. A. (2010). Race and academic achievement in racially diverse high schools: Opportunity and stratification. *Teachers College Record*, 112(4), 1038–1063.
- Monahan, P.R. (1993). *Enhancing higher educational opportunities for secondary school minority students: A precollegiate program* (Practicum Report). Retrieved from ERIC. (ED370051).
- Museus, S. D., & Griffin, K.A. (2011). Mapping the margins in higher education: On the promise of Intersectionality frameworks in research and discourse. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 151, 5-13.
- Musial, E. (2014). Teacher-parent cooperation and pupils' achievements in the perception of adult respondents. *Pedagogy Studies*, 114(2), 96-105.

- Nelson, J. D., Stahl, G., & Wallace, D. (2015). Race, class, and gender in boys' education: Repositioning intersectionality theory. *Culture, Society & Masculinities*, 7(2), 171-187.
- Obiakor, F.E. (1993). The politics of higher education: Perspectives for minorities in the 21st century. Presented at *The Annual Arkansas Association of Colleges for Teacher Education Conference*. Little Rock, AR.
- O'Connor, C., Hill, L.D., & Robinson, S.R. (2009). Who's at risk in school and what's race got to do with it? *Review of Research in Education*, 33(1), 1-34.
- O'Hair, D., Friedrich, G. W., & Dixon, L. D. (2010). *Strategic communication in business and the professions*. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Ogbu, J.U. (1992). Understanding cultural diversity and learning. *Educational Researcher*, 21(8), 5-24.
- Ogbu, J. U., & Simons, H. D. (1998). Voluntary and involuntary minorities: A cultural-ecological theory of school performance with some implications for education. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 29(2), 155-188.
- Organization. (2016). In Cambridge Dictionaries Online. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Patton, L. D., Haynes, C. M., Harris, J. C., & Ivery, S. M. (2014). Perhaps the field of education isn't so nice after all: A review essay and examination of critical race research in postsecondary contexts. *NASAP Journal*, 15(2), 135-148.
- Patton, L. D. (2016). Disrupting postsecondary prose: Toward a critical race theory of higher education. *Urban Education*, 51(3), 315-342.

- Petrovici, M. C. (2012). Message construction- A prerequisite to effective didactic communication. *Annals of DAAAM & Proceedings*, 23(1), 1023-1026.
- Phillips, M. (2006). Standardized tests aren't like t-shirts: One size doesn't fit all. *Multicultural Education*, 14(1), 52-55.
- Ramaga, P. V. (1992). Relativity of the minority concept. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 14(1), 104-119.
- Riegle, S. & Warsame, K. (2012). Understanding the challenges of diversity" Analyzing a restructured curriculum. *The Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*. Vancouver, BC.
- Rosenfeld, L. B., & Richman, J. M. (1999). Supportive communication and school outcomes, Part II: Academically "at-risk" low income high school students. *Communication Education*, 48(4), 294-307.
- Schaeffer, K., Akos, P., & Barrow, J. (2010). A phenomenological study of high school counselor advocacy as it relates to the college access of underrepresented students. *Journal of School Counseling*, 8(2), 1-35.
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22, 63-75.
- Sosa, T. & Gomez, K. (2012). Connecting teacher efficacy beliefs in promoting resilience to support of Latino students. *Urban Education*, 47, 876-909.
- Stewart, V. (2007). Becoming citizens of the world. *Educational Leadership*, 64(7), 8-14.



- Strand, S. (2014). Ethnicity, gender, social class and achievement gaps at age 16: Intersectionality and 'getting it' for the white working class. *Research Papers in Education*, 29(2), 131-171.
- Strom, R. E., & Boster, F. J. (2007). Dropping out of high school: A meta-analysis assessing the effect of messages in the home and in school. *Communication Education*, 56(4), 433-452.
- Swerling, J. & Sen, C. (2009). The institutionalize of the strategic communication function in the United States. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 3, 131-146.
- Taylor, B. C., & Trujillo, N. (2014). In L.L. Putnam & D. Mumby (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (pp. 161-194). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Texas Association of School Administrators. (2013). *House bill 5 resources*. Austin, TX.
- Texas Education Agency. (2014). Snapshot 2014 peer search. Austin, TX.
- Thijs, J. & Fleischmann, F. (2015). Student-teacher relationships and achievement goal orientations: Examining student perceptions in an ethnically diverse sample. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 42, 53-63.
- Tracy, S. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collective evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2015). *Every student succeeds act (ESSA)*. Washington, DC.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2011-2012). *Student-to-counselor ratios for elementary*

*and secondary schools.* Washington, DC.

- Wang, T. (2014). Understanding the memorable messages first-generation college students receive from on-campus mentors. *Communication Education, 61*(4), 335-357.
- Wass, R. & Golding, C. (2014). Sharpening a tool for teaching: The zone of proximal development. *Teaching in Higher Education, 19*(6), 671-684.
- What's wrong with standardized tests? (1992). *National Center for Fair and Open Testing.* Cambridge, MA. 1-4.
- White, J.W., & Ali-Khan, C. (2013). The role of academic discourse in minority students' academic assimilation. *American Secondary Education, 42*(1), 24-42.
- Williams, A. (2011). A call for change: Narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students. *The Clearing House, 84*, 65-71.
- Wimberly, G. L., & Noeth, R. J. (2004). *Schools involving parents in early postsecondary planning.* ACT Policy Report, ACT, Inc.
- Winkle-Wagner, R., Sule, V. T., & Maramba, D. C. (2012). When race disappears: College admissions policy discourse in the state of Texas. *Educational Policy, 28*(4), 516-546.

**APPENDIX A**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDES**

**TEACHERS**

1. Tell me a little about your teaching experience.
2. How often do you discuss college in your classes?
3. When you talk to your students about higher education in class, what do you talk about? What messages are you hoping to send to your students?
4. What types of questions do students usually ask you about college when they approach you?
5. What types of barriers do students identify when they are talking about their college plans? Do these barriers ever cause you to adjust your messages about college?
6. What are the general messages students receive about college in high school? From whom? When?

**---- BREAK----**

7. Reflecting on your answers to the previous questions, do you notice any racial differences in the types of questions students ask or the barrier to college they identify? (**Asked only if racial differences were not identified in answers to first set of questions**)
8. In what ways do you tailor your messages to students to better communication to a diverse student body? (**Asked only if racial differences were not identified in answers to first set of questions**)
9. In terms of the general messages students receive about college in high school, on a scale from 1-10, how appropriate are they for diverse student bodies? Why? Which messages tend to be most appropriate? Least appropriate?
10. What tools/resources are you given by your school district to teach your students about college? Are they adequate for diverse student bodies?
11. How can high schools improve their messages to diverse student bodies about college?

## **ACADEMIC ADVISORS**

1. Tell me a little about your experiences as an academic counselor.
2. How often do you find yourself discussing college with your students?
3. When you talk to your students about higher education in class, what do you talk about? What messages are you hoping to send to your students?
4. What types of questions do students usually ask you about college when they approach you?
5. What types of barriers do students identify when they are talking about their college plans? Do these barriers ever cause you to adjust your messages about college?
6. What are the general messages students receive about college in high school? From whom? When?

### **---- BREAK----**

7. Reflecting on your answers to the previous questions, do you notice any racial differences in the types of questions students ask or the barrier to college they identify? (**Asked only if racial differences were not identified in answers to first set of questions**)
8. In what ways do you tailor your messages to students to better communication to a diverse student body? (**Asked only if racial differences were not identified in answers to first set of questions**)
9. In terms of the general messages students receive about college in high school, on a scale from 1-10, how appropriate are they for diverse student bodies? Why? Which messages tend to be most appropriate? Least appropriate?
10. What tools/resources are you given by your school district to teach your students about college? Are they adequate for diverse student bodies?
11. How can high schools improve their messages to diverse student bodies about college?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **TRANSCRIPTIONS**

[Transcriptions were not included in the document to help ensure the confidentiality of participants. Transcripts will be provided upon request.]