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## College Ready at a Cost: Underrepresented Students Overwhelmed, Scared, Increasingly Stressed, and Coping

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College ready at a cost:

Underrepresented Students Overwhelmed, Scared, Increasingly Stressed, and Coping

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### Abstract

As the push and expectation to attend college continues to increase, making the process of getting into college more competitive than ever before, there is a need to interrogate whether and how efforts to create a college-going culture and increase college readiness among students, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds, might have an adverse impact on students. This study illuminates 59 students' voices who participated in a multi-site descriptive case study examining the strong college-going culture and college readiness efforts at three racially and economically diverse urban public high schools in different regions of Texas. While students revealed positive aspects of their schools' efforts, this study focuses on some of the negative, unintended consequences related to how students felt and coped with being overwhelmed, scared, and increasingly stressed as a result of the narrow focus on college readiness. Such findings must be considered by scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, alike.

Keywords: college readiness, college-going culture, underrepresented students, students of color, well-being, academic stress

### **College ready at a cost:**

#### **Underrepresented Students Overwhelmed, Scared, Increasingly Stressed and Coping**

College readiness has become a topic of concern nationwide, with greater efforts to define and understand the concept to close the gap between high school achievement and postsecondary expectations. The term itself “refers to the multidimensional set of skills, traits, habits, and knowledge that students need to enter college with the capacity to succeed once they are enrolled” (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012, p. 2). Thus, college readiness models have been developed to help guide educators in their efforts. Conley’s (2011) model highlights key content strategies, key content knowledge, academic behaviors, and contextual skills and awareness, while Duncheon (2015) narrowed college readiness into three categories: cognitive academic factors, non-cognitive academic factors, and campus integration factors. Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong’s (2012) ecological college readiness model accounts for the “complexity of the interacting personal, organizational, and societal factors,” and most aptly accounts for student and contextual differences based on race, language, first generation college status and other social and cultural indicators (p. 91). Such a model speaks to some scholars’ concerns with utilizing an oversimplified, one-size-fits-all approach to college readiness (Barnes & Slate, 2013; Barnes, Slate, & Rojas-LeBouef, 2010; author, 2014).

Consequently, creating a college-going culture on a school campus can be considered a vital aspect that contributes to college readiness efforts. Corwin and Tierney (2007) indicate a college-going culture is one in which “aspirations and behaviors conducive to preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in college” are cultivated by a school. This culture is “tangible, pervasive and beneficial” and should be accessible and inclusive (p. 3). Alternatively,

McClafferty, McDonough, and Nuñez (2009) suggest nine principles of a college-going culture including: college talk, clear expectations, information and resources, a comprehensive counseling model, testing curricula, faculty involvement, family involvement, college and university partnerships, and articulation.

Most research and practice related to college readiness or college-going culture have focused on promoting such efforts, and specifically uncovering and addressing challenges underrepresented students face in acquiring the necessary academic skills and college knowledge, and developing the self-efficacy, motivation, and aspirations to successfully navigate the college choice and preparation process (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Barnes & Slate, 2014; Conley, 2011; Knight & Marciano, 2013; Radcliffe & Bos, 2011; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009; Tichavakunda, 2017). Such work remains integral to increasing college access and readiness among underserved students. However, few scholars have interrogated whether and how efforts to create a college-going culture and increase college readiness among students, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds, might have an adverse impact on students as well. Such research is vital given that the push and expectation to attend college has continued to increase and made the process of getting into college more competitive and stressful than ever before (Bound, Hershbein, & Long, 2009).

In 2015, *The Atlantic* published an article by Leonard, et al. (2015) that spurred a question related to this concern: “What’s the balance between preparing students for college and ensuring they aren’t killing themselves in the process?” (Ossola, 2015). The study, which was conducted with students attending elite private high schools, found that about half of students were experiencing chronic stress given the pressures associated with their rigorous course loads, extracurricular activities, and other college preparations. Similar results have been found by a

few other scholars after examining general well-being and student engagement in high-achieving middle to upper class schools where academic success and being accepted to a prestigious university are expectations (Pope, 2001; Pope & Simon, 2005). Such schools often represent the epitome of a college-going culture given the high expectations held for students and increased access that students have to extensive academic supports and courses that maintain the academic rigor necessary to prepare them for their postsecondary pursuits. As other more economically and racially diverse schools have well-intentioned goals of developing a similar college-going culture, additional research is needed to examine the extent to which underrepresented students in these school contexts confront similar stress in the midst of their college preparations and attempts to be college ready. This study attends to this critical gap in the literature to inform college readiness and outreach efforts at more demographically and economically diverse schools in urban contexts.

This paper draws on a portion of interview data with 59 students who were participants in a multi-site descriptive case study that took place in 2013-14 and 2015-16 examining the college-going culture and college readiness efforts at three urban public high schools in different geographic regions of Texas. The school sites were purposefully chosen because they served a majority of students of color (72%-97%) and a high percentage of students (about 50% or more) that qualified for free and/or reduced price lunch. More specifically, each school was predominantly comprised of Latina/o students (between 66% and 97% during the study period). Each school also had high college ready graduate rates when compared to comparably sized schools with similar demographics in their regions; high college ready graduate rates were equated with the likelihood of a strong college-going culture and increased college readiness efforts at school sites. The case study has yielded a large data set drawing on multiple

stakeholder perspectives and sources of data. Multiple papers that draw on portions of data are in process, examining various emergent themes, including some of the positive aspects and outcomes at the schools. However, this paper illuminates students' voices to consider the following question: How did the increased college readiness efforts and strong college-going cultures at the three racially and economically diverse urban public high schools adversely impact students' schooling experiences and well-being, if at all?

### **Supporting Literature**

Many scholars agree that student voices are important and informative in school improvement efforts, especially for communities aiming to operate in more culturally responsive ways (Gay, 2010). Young people have legitimate perspectives, are developmentally capable of political participation, and have valuable knowledge and experiences. Based on the moral principles of equity and justice, affirming student voice ensures that students play an active role in decision-making that affects their lives (Cook-Sather, 2006). Are student voices, particularly those of students of color and students from marginalized communities, represented in college readiness efforts and in scholarship focused on creating a college-going culture? Is the socio-emotional well-being of students taken into account in college readiness efforts and the development of college-going cultures?

Prominent college readiness scholars tend to highlight student performance (behaviors, attitudes, skills), rather than student voice, in determining the success of readiness efforts (Conley, 2011). Even the recent calls for incorporating social and emotional learning (SEL) into college readiness endeavors are focused on core SEL competencies or what students should be able to *do* (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013). Some literature on college-going culture highlights student voice to gauge self-perceptions of ability (Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2015) or

experiences with “institutional and interpersonal structures of care” (Knight-Diop, 2010, p. 171) that influence college access for students of color.

Other researchers have included measures of student voice in studies of college readiness among high school students and college freshmen (McDonald & Farrell, 2012; Smith & Zhang, 2009), although these studies also do not necessarily focus on the social emotional aspects associated with college readiness. Smith and Zhang (2009) examined student perceptions and experiences during transition from high school to college via a survey. Their findings emphasized the critical role teachers and counselors play in assisting students with the transitioning process, particularly for students of color. Findings suggest the need to increase counseling resources and collaborative support from teachers at schools that serve high proportions of students of color (Stone-Johnson, 2015).

McDonald and Farrell (2012) used measures of student voice to indicate student perceptions of, not only academic readiness, but personal and social readiness for transitioning to college. This study was conducted in an early college high school where students attributed their high levels of readiness to being immersed in college environments, including interactions with college students and faculty members. Students described college readiness as being able to “complete rigorous coursework, exhibit high-level thinking, and problem-solving and personal skills, such as time management and discipline” (p. 228). Students noted how many factors impacted their college readiness.

The results of the aforementioned studies point to the importance of considering both cognitive and non-cognitive factors when measuring students’ perceptions of college readiness. In fact, non-cognitive variables may be better predictors of readiness as these complex behaviors and attitudes affect long-term student success (Gaertner & McClarty, 2015; Komarraju, Ramsey,

& Rinella, 2013). Alternatively, Komarraju, Ramsey, and Rinella (2013) argued that high school GPA is one of the best predictors of college success because it *reflects* the student's non-cognitive behaviors, including self-confidence, discipline, drive, and strong study skills. They explained that cognitive elements indicated a student's *capability* for success, whereas "personality and motivational factors help explain what the student might actually achieve" (p. 104).

Gaertner and McClarty (2015) also criticized college readiness efforts for only focusing on academic achievements. They created a college readiness index for middle school students that evaluated: "achievement, behavior, motivation, social engagement, family circumstances, and school characteristics" (p. 20). They found that differences among these elements, most notably among motivation and behavior, accounted for the significant variance in college readiness among high school students. The authors concluded that, "demonstrating college readiness is a function of a complex set of interdependent attitudes and behaviors-not just cognitive ability and economic circumstance" (p. 27). Early intervention efforts were recommended, especially for the student behaviors, attitudes, and motivations that are easily addressed and changed.

Because reinforcing psychosocial skills leads to academic success for high school students (Kaufman, Agars, & Lopez-Wagner, 2008; Komarraju, Ramsey, & Rinella, 2013), measuring student experiences and perspectives around readiness factors such as motivation, study skills, and goal-setting is useful in determining the success of college ready high schools. After all, there is a significant and positive relationship between student conscientiousness (i.e. persistence, self-regulation, motivation) and academic performance (Kaufman, et al., 2008;

O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007). In listening to student voices, we gain a clearer understanding of what students need in order to benefit from college readiness efforts.

One area of need is stress-reduction. Several studies indicate that adolescents suffer from high levels of school-related stress (American Psychological Association, 2009; Conner & Pope, 2013). In 2001, Pope conducted a case study of five racially diverse students at a high-achieving high school in a wealthy California suburb. These students developed methods for handling overwhelming workloads including multi-tasking, complaining to administration about teachers, contesting grades, and cheating. Although Pope's study focused on more affluent teens, the evidence of psychosocial stress and the compromising of values may be directly related to workload and achievement expectations for high school students. Teens from low-income families may be faced with greater responsibilities (e.g. holding a job and attending school) and additional stressors (e.g. financial or time-management) that impact their mental and physical health.

A limited number of studies have further examined the connection between preparations or preparedness for college and psycho-social well-being. Turcios-Cotto and Milan (2013) examined college aspirations among racially and ethnically diverse adolescents and found that Latina/o students pursuing higher education expressed more emotional distress and depressive symptoms than their non-Latina/o peers. These symptoms may be a result of tensions between individualistic goals (like attending college) and the Latino cultural value of *familismo*, "which emphasizes strong family ties and the importance of family" (p. 1408). In light of these cultural values, going to college may represent separation from family.

As previously noted in the introduction, a more recent mixed-methods study by Leonard and others (2015) showed that teens attending private high schools suffered from and

internalized high levels of chronic stress in response to pressures associated with academic performance and the college admissions processes, often turning to drug and alcohol use as a coping mechanism. Gilyardi (2006) also examined stress related to career and college preparedness among high school seniors at a middle upper class suburban school in western New York where a majority of the students were White. Gilyardi developed a seven-question survey consisting of true/false, multiple choice, and short answers that was disseminated to 100 students at the school. Findings from the survey revealed the most common stressors related to:

...not knowing what major or career was right for them, whether to go to a local college or a college away from home, the cost of college, pressures from parents and teachers, the college application process, SAT scores, finding the right college for them, being away from home, getting accepted to the college of their choice. (p. 16)

However, Gilyardi's findings provided limited details given the methods used, and the student population was not racially or economically diverse. Thus, it is essential that student voices in general, and those of underrepresented students in urban contexts in particular, help determine the effectiveness of college readiness efforts, and that cognitive, non-cognitive, and other factors be considered when ascertaining the impact of such efforts.

### **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is couched in notions of well-being and academic stress as they relate to adolescents and high school students, in particular. In general, *stress* refers to the events (and/or conditions) that affect an individual's psychological and physical well-being (Grant, et al., 2003). Several scholars note that the adolescent stage of development is a particularly challenging time in which young people experience heightened levels of stress, both general and academic (Hollenstein & Loughheed, 2013). In fact, Frydenberg

(2008) states that several kinds of environmental stressors are quite common during the adolescent stage of development: academic, social issues, and relationships.

This study primarily considers those academic stressors, in relation to the schools' increased college readiness efforts and strong college-going cultures, that negatively impact students' schooling experiences and well-being. According to Ben-Zur and Zeidner (2012), "Academic stress refers to those environmental demands and challenges in an academic setting (e.g., meeting deadlines for assignments, exams, social relations, etc.) that tax, challenge, or exceed a students' coping resources, and represent a "call for action"" (p. 713). How students experience such stress varies based on a myriad of factors including:

...the objective properties of the academic environment (academic standards of excellence, course difficulty, etc.), the individual's perception of the academic environment (perceived competitiveness, perceived social support, etc.), perceived coping resources (cognitive, social, emotional, physical, spiritual), available arsenal of coping strategies for transacting with environmental stressors, and the specific cultural lens through which the environmental demands are experienced. (p. 713)

This definition of academic stress aligns with the psychological model of stress, which is used most often to conceptualize stress in research studies (Compas & Andreotti, 2012). The psychological model of stress emerged in the late 1990s and is described as "the particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). The psychological model of stress is taken into account as part of the conceptual framework of this study as well, as it accounts for both environmental stressors and the individual's perception and appraisal of these stressors.

### **Methodology**

The research design for this study was qualitative in nature, utilizing a descriptive, multi-site case study approach (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Yin (2014) describes a case study in terms of two key aspects: 1) an in-depth examination of a phenomenon, or case, in its real-world context that 2) draws on multiple data points as sources of evidence. A case study design is also particularly useful when attempting to answer “how” and “why” questions as a means of understanding said phenomena within its context. The phenomenon under investigation in this study was the process of developing a strong college-going culture and maintaining high college readiness rates among students at three urban public high schools. As previously noted, additional papers are in progress that highlight additional findings from the case study. However, this paper centers students’ voices to examine how the increased college readiness efforts and strong college-going cultures at the three racially and economically diverse urban public high schools adversely impacted students’ schooling experiences and well-being, if at all.

### **Data Sources & Data Collection Procedures**

Three public urban high schools in Texas served as the sites for this study; one in the Gulf Coast region (referred to as Garner high school), Central Texas (referred to as Collins high school), and South Texas (referred to as Stanton high school). The schools were purposefully chosen because of the racial and economic diversity of their student bodies, although all served a majority of Latina/o students, and their ability to consistently graduate at least 50% or more of students from all racial and income backgrounds college ready in mathematics, language arts, and both combined subjects for at least three years or more prior to beginning the study in 2013. College readiness was based on the Texas Education Agency’s college ready graduate indicator; derived from SAT, ACT, or state mandated exit level exam scores.

The primary sources of data examined for this paper include semi-structured individual and group interviews with 59 students, with field notes, observations, archival data, and school documents (e.g., school newspapers, flyers with college-related material) providing additional contextual information. Interviews with school personnel (i.e., teachers, counselors, administrators), parents, and community members were collected as well, but were not examined for this paper. Data was collected during two academic school years (2013-2014; 2014-2015) during week-long visits to the sites. Numerous strategies were utilized to recruit a random, and diverse sample of student participants, without encroaching on their class time. Some students were randomly solicited for participation during their lunch hour, and others from among students that had a library or office aide class period; often these were seniors at each school. Other students were solicited through the student council, with the assistance of the faculty sponsor. Table 1 provides additional information about participants delineated by school, gender and individual or focus group assignment.

Table 1 Participants by school, gender, and individual or focus group delineation

School	Individual Interviews	Group Interviews	Total Participants
Garner	2 males, 2 females	Group 1: 1 male, 1 female Group 2: 3 females Group 3: 2 males Group 4: 4 females Group 5: 3 males, 1 female	19
Collins	2 males, 4 females	Group 1: 2 males, 2 females Group 2: 2 females Group 3: 2 females Group 4: 2 males, 1 female Group 5: 1 male, 1 female	19
Stanton	1 male, 1 female	Group 1: 3 males, 2 females Group 2: 4 females Group 3: 1 male, 2 females Group 4: 2 males, 5 females	21

Students were not explicitly asked to self-identity their race/ethnicity, although this identity often emerged while students were describing educational aspirations and family's educational backgrounds; a majority of the 59 students were Latina/o, while only a handful were Black/African American. Table 2 provides student enrollment and demographic data for each school site.

Table 2 Student enrollment and demographic data for school sites

School and Year	Enrollment	Economically Disadvantaged (%)	Demographics of Student Population (%)			
			Latino	Black	White	Asian
<b>Garner</b>						
2013-14	2662	90.2	90.0	7.0	1.6	0.2
2014-15	2810	82.3	91.0	6.7	1.5	0.3
<b>Collins</b>						
2013-14	2578	49.90	66.8	5.95	20.7	4.1
2014-15	2682	46.0	66.6	6.0	20.8	4.1
<b>Stanton</b>						
2013-14	2770	51.3	96.9	0.2	1.7	0.9
2014-15	2703	56.2	97.0	0.2	1.7	0.9

Interviews were guided by a protocol that consisted of 18 key questions that were asked of all stakeholders in the study. The complete interview protocol is provided in the Appendix. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations that are pertinent to mention. For instance, the three school sites were originally identified in the larger project based on school demographics and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) college ready graduate rates. Admittedly, the TEA college ready graduate indicator is based on a narrow measure, drawing on SAT, ACT and Texas exit exam scores. While we as well as other scholars (Maruyama, 2012; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009) agree that college readiness should be measured through more holistic and multiple means, there

is a lack of consensus on how to measure college readiness. Thus, studies still have utilized the TEA college ready graduate indicator as a means to assess college readiness (Barnes & Slate, 2014; Harvey, Slate, Moore, Barnes, & Martinez-Garcia, 2013). We similarly, consider the TEA indicator as problematic, but focused on utilizing the indicator solely as a means of identifying school sites.

This qualitative case study also is limited in that well-being and academic stress levels among students were not measured directly and purposefully. Instead, this study focused on illuminating underrepresented students' perspectives and experiences with the strong college culture and college readiness efforts on their campuses, and in this process shed light on any negative aspects they self-reported. As such, findings are not meant to be generalizable to all other underrepresented students. However, it is possible that other underrepresented students in general, and those in similar school contexts might identify with the experiences of the students in this study.

### **Data Analysis**

With the conceptual framework in mind, the three-author research team utilized aspects of Hatch's (2002) typological analysis strategy, which is more deductive in nature. Typological analysis entails using predetermined categories derived from theory, research objectives, or initial data analysis to "find and mark those places in the data where evidence related to that particular typology is found" (p. 154). The next step in the analysis process involves creating summaries based on the selected data and then identifying patterns in the data that align with the summaries. One-sentence generalizations are then written based on patterns found, and data excerpts are identified that provide evidence for the generalizations.

We began by adopting the first step of Hatch’s process. For the first level of analysis the team utilized negative and emotionally distressed responses as typologies. In this process, the research team read and reviewed the original transcripts to identify and mark instances in the data in which students expressed or demonstrated any negative psychological or academic stress responses associated with the increased college readiness efforts or the strong college-going culture at their schools. Each team member examined a certain number of transcripts to root out “something ‘telling,’ something ‘meaningful,’ something ‘thematic’ in the various experiential accounts” of students (Van Manen, 1990, p. 86). The research team derived a total of 19 thematic codes during this stage of analysis. Table 3 provides a list of these initial codes, which are shared to provide greater clarity to the analysis process and reveal a more holistic perspective of students’ experiences as reflected in their responses in the transcripts. As the three researchers coded a certain number of transcripts individually, there was some overlap among the initial codes.

Table 3 Initial thematic codes derived by research team, listed in alphabetical order

1.	Anxiety about taking advanced courses because of workload & potentially lower GPA
2.	Anxiety about taking advanced courses, dealing with workload, and having to work
3.	Anxiety/concerns about attending college (academic preparedness, financial cost)
4.	Anxiety associated with cultural brokering between school/American values/notions of success and traditional Mexican parents
5.	Career interests as a means of obtaining a good paying job/a job that is on demand
6.	Cheating
7.	Competition pressures
8.	Feeling less than “college material” based on test scores
9.	Frustration with educators with solely savior mentality
10.	Frustrations with current school conditions (limited counselor access, teacher apathy, low expectations in courses, content isn’t challenging)
11.	General stress & fatigue (stress, overwhelmed, tired)
12.	Heavy workloads (lack of balance; reduced relaxation/downtime, arts, extracurricular activities)
13.	Lack of voice and choice (affecting motivation & apathy)
14.	Pressure from school to attend college (big push, expectations high but contrary to what they think is reality)

15.	Scared about financing college
16.	Scared about whether or not is prepared for college
17.	Self-defeat (not measuring up/not good enough, hopelessness)
18.	Tune out given bombardment of visual college materials
19.	Worried that they aren't being treated like college students, prepared academically (babied too much)

The team then veered from Hatch's process. While we reviewed, and discussed patterns and connections that had emerged within and among the transcripts and in relation to the initial codes, we did not necessarily develop summaries based on the data at this point. Instead, we identified the most relevant or poignant overarching themes for the findings which we agreed upon, based on our coded transcripts and initial themes. One sentence themes, primarily drawing on direct quotes from students, were then created that provided the culminating thematic findings. The resulting themes relate to how students felt overwhelmed, scared, and increasingly stressed, and how they coped.

### **Findings**

All students expressed a sincere appreciation for the strong college culture fostered on their campuses and college readiness efforts through such things as advanced course offerings and other college-focused programming. However, conversations also revealed a level of increased academic stress, frustration, exhaustion, and at times anger experienced by a number of students at all three campuses as a result of the constant and narrow focus on college readiness and attending college in order to ensure a productive career and future.

#### **“It's very overwhelming”**

Numerous students expressed feelings of being overwhelmed when asked about what it meant to be and whether they were college ready. For some, this overwhelmed feeling related to the idea that there was simply too much knowledge (i.e., academic, financial, etc.) needed to be

college ready, and too many things that needed to be done with regards to the college application process. A few expressed concerns about workloads, making statements like “It’s just too much. They overwhelm you with a lot of work!” For others, feeling overwhelmed related to high expectations associated with being college ready, in that students were expected to be extraordinary in all that they did, while also being well-rounded, involved in extracurricular activities and volunteering, and taking and getting credit for advanced coursework.

In a group interview with seven Latina/o student council members from Stanton high school, the feeling of being overwhelmed permeated the conversation. It was these students that first prompted this study. When answering questions about what the school was doing to both promote college and prepare students for college, four female seniors launched into a conversation about how students were inundated with busy work and, yet, they were expected to have good grades and be involved in extracurricular activities. One female senior exclaimed, “Now, to just get into a good college, so much is expected—so much!” She felt, “It’s just a lot. It’s very overwhelming.” A male junior agreed, “You could be so smart and so talented and you could focus so much on school and ignore sports and activities and they’re gonna be like, ‘Well, this kid isn’t well-rounded. We don’t want him, even though his GPA is off the charts.’” He explained his understanding further- “Colleges are looking for so much more now. Now, it’s not just grades. It’s ‘Are you in sports? Are you involved?’”

Additional conversation indicated students were overwhelmed with expectations of individual student responsibility associated with being college ready. Several female seniors said they had access to helpful information and knew what they had to do, but still struggled with meeting these expectations. One female senior expressed exasperation, “We know we have to do

this; we just don't want to." Another female senior clarified how students "can't do so many things at one time."

### **"It's a little scary"**

Another negative emotional reaction that college readiness efforts stirred up for some students was fear of not being prepared academically. This fear was expressed among some high achieving students that were taking advanced courses, as well as students enrolled in "regular" courses. Some students expressed this fear of not being academically prepared despite hearing verbal cues from schools indicating students were being adequately prepared for college. There were also fears related to financing college, and particularly with getting scholarships and grants because schools tended to focus on these the most.

During a group interview with three juniors at Stanton students expressed doubts about how well they were prepared for college. One female junior talked about how Stanton's teachers and administrators regularly communicated that college was a difficult time and a "crucial moment" in students' lives. This stirred fear for her, and she stated, "It's a little scary when thinking about—okay, what do I do after high school? I have to go to school and I have to still live my life." Several students at Garner also admitted they were "scared" about whether they were sufficiently being prepared, academically and socially, for college, despite their school's strong college culture. One African American female in her sophomore year, for instance, simply indicated, "I don't know, I'm scared. You never know." This same emotion was expressed by two Latina seniors in a group interview, with one providing extended insight after sharing the story of a Garner alumnus now in college:

I remember last year, my junior year, [former Garner] students came in and they're like, "Man, I had the AP [advanced placement] teachers tell me, 'You're an amazing writer.

You're a wonderful writer. You're writing so, so well written." Whenever he said he had got to college, the teacher laughed at him and tore up his paper and said that his writing was crap. I think that's what scares me 'cause here they can tell you something and then whenever you go over there it's a whole totally different—routine. I think that scares me. That scares me. What if you're here and they tell you, 'Yeah, everything's fine. Your writing's amazing'— but when you get there, they laugh at you, 'cause it's not what they expected and it's not what they want. That's really what scares me.

The fears associated with financing college were also prominent among students, given the continued visual and verbal cues regarding scholarships and FAFSA deadlines at school. The same two Latina seniors from Garner spoke to such fears, with one sharing doubts about being able to finance her education,

I think about the money because since I'm the first one to graduate, so I know they're [parents] gonna help me out and stuff, but that's what I think about, money. Then, my parents are always telling me, 'I'll make this money for you,' but they don't, so I think I'm gonna have to do it on my own...Yeah, I'm kinda scared [*chuckling*].

Despite fears she admitted her parents were "very supportive." She had three older brothers, two of which had attended some college and attained two-year certifications; they were supportive of her dream of attending college to be a veterinarian, but at least one of her brothers had similar concerns regarding finances, "my middle brother, he always tells me about the money too. He's like, 'Where are we gonna get the money?'" The students were subsequently asked about loans as a viable option to assist with college plans. However, both students expressed some aversion to loans. The female who initially expressed concerns also admitted that her brothers reaffirmed this aversion, telling her "loans are bad."

Similarly, an African American female at Collins high school revealed that her “biggest concern is financially [being able to attend college].” “What I’m gonna do about that?” the senior asked, because she admitted, “I can’t really pay for college right now. That’s my biggest concern right now, is tryin’ to pay for that.” A male senior at the same school also revealed a level of fear in being able to attend college because of finances while describing the support on the campus,

I think the school is very supportive. [The principal] obviously wants to see everyone graduate and move on to college, but realistically, we all know that’s not going to happen. There’s a good majority who most likely won’t end up in college. I sometimes fear that I may not be able to go to college either, but my parents said they’d be able to help me out with at least a community college.

### **“I was incredibly stressed”**

The college culture also gave rise to increased anxiety and stress for some students. In particular, the visual and auditory cues that promoted a college culture at the schools (i.e., college banners, posters and announcements for scholarships) were seen positively by most, but for some, such constant messaging translated to increased pressure that resulted in increased anxiety and stress. Some students also had to act as cultural brokers relaying college information to their parents, and at times this meant making sense of varying expectations. For students of Mexican descent, many of whom were first generation college students and first generation immigrants, this meant navigating the tensions between the American college culture expectations of their schools and the expectations of their traditional Mexican parents, which at times did not coincide; this is consistent with previous literature (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013).

During the student council focus group at Stanton high school, students talked about how adults in their lives (i.e. parents and teachers) did not understand that students suffered from high

levels of stress; it did not “matter how much you try to explain to them.” According to two female seniors, teachers do not know about or understand student stress levels because “no one’s asking.” One of these students also shared that she chooses not to speak to her teachers about her stress and attributed this lack of communication to an “age gap.” A male senior in the group described himself as “incredibly stressed,” stating that his mother thought he was only complaining about homework but that “...it’s not just homework; it’s so much more.” Another female senior described how she attempted to communicate to her parents that she was overwhelmed and stressed, but they responded by saying, “Yes-you have to have all this, but it’s not like you’re trying hard enough.” Overall, students felt that even when they attempted to communicate high levels of stress, their concerns were often dismissed.

Among the three school sites under study, Garner high school appeared to have more students who had recently immigrated to the U.S., many with Spanish-speaking parents who were not always familiar with or who did not understand the expectations associated with the school’s college-going culture and the processes associated with preparing for college. One Latino male at the school spoke to the cultural brokering he often did to relay college information to his parents; expressing anxiety in this process. The student had adopted the college-going culture mindset, and this gave rise to tension between him and his parents who did not necessarily express their full support of his college preparations and decisions, given the family’s limited understanding of the associated processes. The student described his situation:

My parents didn't go to college...They didn't finish high school. And they came over here [from Mexico]...And me saying [I'm] going to college is like my parents saying 'What is that?' Like they don't understand the process. Like, I have, right now I'm trying to do my FAFSA...And then they're like, 'What's, what, what if it's like something illegal? What if

they're like scamming you or something?' I'm like 'It's the government.' Like, 'I just need your tax returns.' And they're like, 'No.' So I'm having diffi-, difficulty with that...

The student went on explaining, “for me, it's hard, it's hard to like cope with them [parents]...They're like really traditional.” His parents had not attended college, and since his father had become “*un supervisor* [a supervisor], like, a paid well mechanic [sic],” his family thought, “see your daddy didn't go to college and he's getting paid more than everybody else.” To which the student thought, “Yeah, but he's, like, working hard too, getting burnt by the sun...I'm not gonna be one of the hundred Mexicans you see in the construction working.”

### **Developing Coping Strategies**

As previous students' experiences indicate, reactions to the increased college readiness efforts and strong college culture on campuses varied. Some students expressed negative emotions, while others found a means of coping. Some strategies included: cheating, in order to meet the high academic expectations and achieve the necessary GPA and test scores to secure admittance to a university, purposeful resistance or avoidance, either to advanced placement [AP]/advanced courses because of the associated workload associated and the anxiety that resulted from this, or because of the need for self-preservation, in order to meet other needs that took precedence, such as working to contribute to the family income.

One coping mechanism was to engage in cheating behaviors. At Stanton, several of the student council members discussed the cheating culture on campus. One female stated, “the cheating culture is very heavy here” and further explained that students do whatever they can to earn top grades; “the thing with high school now is just getting an A. It doesn't matter how you do it.” Another student council member offered one surprising example- “You hear about kids paying other kids to take the SATS for them.” In another Stanton focus group with four Latina

juniors, one stated that many students “cheat their way to the top” and that “there’s a lot of cheating” on campus. A second student chimed in and explained, “You can really get by, by just copying people and not even studying at all.”

Other students exhibited purposeful resistance as a coping strategy to deal with some of the expectations associated with the college-going culture at their schools. This resistance was often in relation to advanced coursework because of the heavy workload and subsequent associated anxiety, or avoiding such coursework in order to meet the more immediate needs of their families and work while attending school. At Garner high school, a group of three Latina/o seniors shared their perspectives, as they purposefully did not take advanced courses because of the workload and the potential of garnering a lower GPA. One student felt he could manage taking AP courses but did not because he “didn’t wanna fail that class.” Another student agreed with these sentiments, having taken AP classes junior year, but “took all regular this year because I just felt it’s just a lotta, it’s just too much. They overwhelm you with a lotta work, and like they said, it brings your grade down cause there’s just so much work and so little time.” This student reiterated, “I didn’t wanna do it...It was just a lot of weight on my shoulders... It’s so stressing.”

At Collins, a male senior also now purposefully avoided advanced courses after attempting them sophomore year:

I haven’t really taken advantage of the AP courses just because I don’t feel like I’d be capable of handling that much work, and I’ve noticed over the years that I get really stressed out and frustrated with—like if I have a stack of homework I have to take home every day...I feel very comfortable where I’m at. Could I improve? Yes, of course. I could have taken AP courses, but again, my personality won’t allow it. I’m very

comfortable with where I'm at. I feel I'm doing well in my courses. I haven't gotten a grade below a 90 since the first day of school this year.

An African American female in her senior year at Collins had a similar approach, admitting that she had "just taken regular classes" in high school after she had "tried to take pre-AP classes" in middle school, "but it was really difficult to keep up with". Consequently, she "just decided to keep regular classes to try and get all A's."

Another Latino senior at Garner shared similar sentiments, but strategically did not take advanced courses because of the time demands associated with completing such coursework, which the student could not realistically do because of the need to work part-time. He explained, "I took AP Algebra and AP History" during junior year, but then in senior year decided, "I didn't want to deal with all that work... 'Cause I, like right after I leave here at 1, I go to work." The student knew from experience that taking advanced courses and working was not be feasible, "When I was in my junior year, the homework was 24/7. I had to do English reports like every other weekend and all this stuff."

Other students at Garner described similar situations, for themselves or their peers; not taking advanced courses because they chose or needed to work too. Two Latina seniors talked about this further, with one detailing the kind of pressures that some of her friends have to deal with, "My friend [female student], her mom puts all this pressure on her. She tells her, 'You need to go find a job. How're you gonna pay for all of this?' Yeah, they have money, but they make [female student] work for what she needs." Yet the two seniors understood why students that had to work purposefully did not enroll in advanced courses, even though school personnel urged students to take such courses to prepare for college. The second female shared her perspective:

I think it's more stress on the student because, especially if you have AP classes, then you're working. You work till maybe 9:00 [p.m.], so you don't get back till maybe 10:00-11:00 [p.m.] 'cause you're closing. You have to go, and then you have so much homework that you have to do. Then you come to school the next day and you're tired because your body didn't get that rest it needed.

Moreover, if students who worked took AP courses and needed additional assistance, it would be likely that they could not access this assistance because as one of the females pointed out, "they don't get to stay after school 'cause they're working. Like the tutorials, the stuff they need [is after school]."

### **Discussion**

This study acknowledges the positive outcomes for students, particularly students of color and other historically underrepresented communities in higher education, when high schools foster a strong college-going culture and engage in college readiness efforts. However, this study provides a new critical perspective to consider when examining the implications of such efforts, the potential for negative, unintended consequences on student well-being. The most prominent problematic feelings that emerged for students were feeling overwhelmed, fear, anxiety, stress, as well as frustration. As a result, some students developed coping strategies that were not always positive, such as cheating in order to meet the high expectations and necessary college related activities associated with being college ready.

Alternatively, some students coped by rising to the challenge of trying to be super students even when they felt overwhelmed by the college culture and associated activities. In trying to meet such high expectations and perform superbly in everything they do, however, these students often exhibited a lack of social and emotional balance. Other students that felt

overwhelmed reacted by giving up on the idea of attending college given the high pressures associated with being college ready, with some ultimately feeling as if they were not college material if they did not meet expectations, and in such cases would blame themselves. There were other students who purposefully utilized their agency and resisted taking AP courses to avoid anxiety or because they needed work-life balance. However, this means these students run the risk of being underprepared or less competitive in the college admissions process. The irony is that it is underrepresented students who often come from less affluent backgrounds, must work while attending high school in order to contribute to their families, and have the most to lose if they are underprepared and unable to obtain a higher education.

The increased exposure to college information, college talk, and college expectations, and the use of college-related recognitions also caused increased competition among some students that led to increased stress and gave rise to cheating as a means of meeting expectations and achieving a high GPA. Thus, an increased college-going culture could also lead to the narrow focus on college as the only means of attaining “success”; sending a clear message of what and who is valued, at the expense of students who have other talents, or are taking other pathways. School personnel and leaders alike must consider next steps to combat and address such potential unintended negative consequences among students, particularly those from underserved backgrounds who are already facing additional barriers to college access and readiness than their counterparts.

### **Conclusion**

In order to fully understand the construct of college readiness and to consider the implications of creating college-going cultures on high school campuses, it is necessary to consider the voices and experiences of students. Future research must include student voices to a

greater extent, particularly the voices of students from diverse and underrepresented communities, to further understand the effects of the discourse, policies, and practices implemented to support college readiness and a college-going culture in secondary schools. Studies that directly measure academic stress among underrepresented students quantitatively through a sound self-reporting tool or physiologically would expand on the current findings.

The critical role that school personnel play in creating a college-going culture and supporting students' postsecondary readiness and pursuits is well-established and findings reiterate this (Smith & Zhang, 2009). However, additional research is needed to ascertain the extent to which school personnel are aware of the unintended negative impact of increased college readiness efforts that some students are experiencing and whether and how they are addressing such an impact. As the recent work of Mac Iver, Mac Iver, and Clark (2017) indicates, even district level efforts that successfully and systemically promote college readiness in an urban district like Dallas Independent School District, do not necessarily include student voices to consider the holistic impact; both positive and potentially unintended negative effects. It is important to include parents in such conversations as well, so that all key stakeholders may recognize the realities that students are experiencing.

Additional studies that examine non-cognitive factors as better predictors of college readiness and retention would also be useful. Many students indicated that they were highly-motivated, determined, and disciplined, despite the increased pressures and stress associated with the pervasive college-going culture on their campuses. Yet some students dealt with such pressures by cheating in order to attain a high GPA. This finding is ironic, given that some scholars consider GPA as a more accurate marker for college readiness (Komarraju, Ramsey, & Rinella, 2013). Resorting to cheating may indicate a type of student motivation, but these

behaviors certainly do not indicate strong study skills or a drive to learn with integrity. School and district leaders and educators must be more cognizant of the potential for such behaviors when they are attempting to support postsecondary readiness and promote a college culture on their campuses.

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