

May 2022

## The Impact of Counselor on First Generation Student Access to Higher Education

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<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2022.EDU.06>

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Hill, Marianne, "The Impact of Counselor on First Generation Student Access to Higher Education" (2022). *Master of Science in Education | Master's Theses*. 52.  
<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2022.EDU.06>

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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**The Impact of Counselor on First Generation Student Access to Higher Education**

By

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A culminating thesis, submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science of Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

December 2022

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## Abstract

There have been many studies around the struggles that first generation students face in their quest to access college. A college going culture can encourage students and families to seek the information they need to access higher education, but it is not enough (Martinez, Lewis, & Marquez, 2020). There is a lack of understanding about how counselors can address the need for more culturally aware practices and provide students with relevant information, strong networks and realistic goal setting (Crawley, Cheuk, Mansoor, Perez, & Park, 2019).

My goal was to seek to understand the experiences of my participants by conducting in-depth interviews. The research was conducted at a mostly white, affluent Catholic high school in Northern California where five current or previous counselors and four adult students were purposefully recruited to participate in an interview. This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach to understand the meaning of individual and group experiences of a social and human problem (Creswell, 2018).

Guiding questions were formed based upon the following research questions: (1) What does a successful transition from high school to college look like for first generation students at one college preparatory high school in Northern California? (2) How can culturally aware counseling practices improve outcomes for first generation students? (3) What preparation and training do counselors need to support first generation students' access to higher education? Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews and researcher memos were coded to locate themes. The findings show student and counselor perspectives on a college going culture and the transition to college and current counselor practices. Finally, this study arrived at some unexpected findings of student and counselor frustration due to the lack of clear understanding of the role of counselor.

## Acknowledgements

In the middle of a global pandemic and in middle age, I decided to embark upon the unplanned journey of graduate school. I wasn't even sure what I was getting myself into, but somehow it felt just like the right thing at the right time in so many ways. I am so grateful for the support of my family, all of whom encouraged me to go forward, especially when I questioned myself. I am especially grateful to my husband Craig, who had more confidence in me than I had in myself and pushed me to reach for my goals even when we were still putting our own kids through college. For my daughters, who are also currently in graduate school, for the citation tips, writing strategies, positive thoughts and reminders that it was okay to not be perfect. To my sons for understanding that mom was busy, reminding me to take breaks and expressing that "you got this." Thank you to the students and counselor colleagues for participating in my study. I was honored to hear your stories. Thank you to my second reader Veronica Fruiht for your time and thoughtful comments and feedback. Special thanks to my advisor Katie Lewis for the direction, encouragement and support; this thesis would not have been possible without you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

For first generation students seeking college in an affluent, mostly white setting, a college going culture and expectations for college can bring unique struggles and challenges. These students can feel unseen and like they're on the outside-“Yeah. 100% -I was definitely an outsider” was how one student described his experience of seeking college among his peers. This study seeks to understand how high school counselors can be better prepared to support all students in the preparation and access to higher education, including those first in their families to seek college. The diverse socio-economic setting for this study reveals some inequities that impact students with fewer resources and, in fact, such inequities can impact the hopes, dreams, and well-being of these students. It is important to listen to the stories of first generation students in order to understand the barriers they face and to improve our support of them in their goal to access higher education. Although some studies indicate improvements in recent years, some groups of students are still underrepresented in college enrollment, including first generation, low income, African American, and Hispanic students; as of 2013, students from higher income families enrolled in college at a 31% higher rate than first generation, low income students (Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2018).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand counselors' perceptions about their preparation to support first generation high school students to access higher education at this Northern California high school. The study seeks to understand what preparation and training counselors receive to support underserved students, and what inequities or gaps exist in the preparation. It is important to understand how a college going culture in the affluent, mostly white setting and the current counseling practices impact the dreams and well-being of all students.

## Statement of Purpose

There is plenty of existing research regarding the path to college for first generation students. Studies indicate the importance of the counselor role in supporting minority students in the college choice process. College preparation that includes a strong college going culture best serves student access to higher education (Corbin & Tierney, 2007), yet at the same time, educational expectations are complicated and marginalized students can be negatively impacted without other supportive practices in place (Martinez, Lewis, & Marquez, 2020; Turcious, Cotto, & Milan, 2013). Existing literature helps understand what a successful transition to college looks like and address barriers that might be faced by first generation students. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model is an excellent framework to guide counselors in focusing on student cultural strengths when advising them in their college choice process. Understanding social capital and applying it to help improve outcomes of first generation students is also well supported in existing literature. Social capital provided by schools and specifically by school counselors, can bridge the gap felt by some first generation students who may have limited support and understanding from home in the college choice process (Crawley et al., 2017). These theories have positive impacts on academic achievement and college access. Lastly, counselors can gain an understanding of the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (Ratts et al., 2015) and the importance of counseling through a multicultural lens (Sue et al., 2019), as well as being mindful of building trust and rapport and the importance of advocating for first generation students.

While this large body of research has contributed greatly to the improved outcomes of first generation students and their path to higher education, there is limited research available regarding the experiences and outcomes of first generation students seeking college in a setting

with mostly affluent, white peers. The present study aimed to understand the unique struggles and barriers that these students face in this setting in order to help counselors be better prepared to support their path to college. This research aimed to understand how students are impacted by a college going culture and what their successful transition to college looks like. The present study also sought to understand how culturally aware counseling practices can improve outcomes of first generation students in the college choice process, and how counselors can be better prepared to serve these students and their access to higher education.

### **Overview of the Research Design**

The present study was conducted at a private, Catholic high school in Northern California. The school serves 784 students in 9th through 12th grade. The student body comes from over 40 parochial, private, and public middle and grammar schools. About sixty-five percent of the student body identify as Catholic. The school draws from a broad, area-wide spectrum of social, ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds, but identifies as predominantly white and the community is considered mostly affluent. Graduation requirements are described as college preparatory and there are numerous offerings of Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors courses. This is the only site where research was conducted.

A total of five current and former counselors and four students (one adult senior and three recent graduates) participated in this study. Student participants, two men and two women, all identified as first in their families to seek college and are between the ages of 18 and 21. Counselors were between the age of 28 and 45 years old, three men and two women, all identifying as white. Participants were purposefully selected because they are affiliated with the school site and counseling participants were considered my school colleagues since I work with them as a school counselor at this school site. The counselor participants have caseloads that are

diverse and include some first generation students. I was acquainted with the student participants in the past but did not know them well.

The primary method of data collection was a single in-depth interview with each participant. Interview questions were designed for each group, students and counselors, and were designed to address the three main research questions: (1) What does a successful transition from high school to college look like for first generation students at one college preparatory high school in Northern California? (2) How can culturally aware counseling practices improve outcomes for first generation students? (3) What preparation and training do counselors need to support first generation students' access to higher education? The interviews were guided by the interview questions, but I allowed the conversation to grow organically in order to understand the stories of each participant. The research consisted of only qualitative data via the interviews and was supplemented by memos and notes taken during and immediately following the interviews, as well as during the transcription and coding process. Qualitative data was analyzed and codes were generated to best capture the experiences of the participants. Themes that reflected the perspectives of the participants were determined and connected back to the research questions mentioned above.

### **Significance of the Study**

The results of this study are significant for understanding how counselors can be better prepared to support first generation students seeking college. Previous studies that focused on this topic were mostly in settings where most students were first generation, students of color, and often low income. This study focused on understanding particular barriers for first generation students that are interested in accessing higher education in a setting that serves mostly white, affluent students who have parents that attended college and/or understand the

college choice process. While this study found many similar barriers for first generation students that were mentioned in previous literature, there were other themes that arose in the findings that address this gap in the research.

One key finding was the particular negative implications of a college going culture and noticing what a successful transition to college looks like for some first generation students. While a college going culture had a positive impact on these students and their hopes and dreams for college, the expectations of what their path to college should look like were influenced by their more affluent and informed peers. The plan to get to college was inflexible, not communicated to a diverse population, and was created to fit one type of student, which did not consider the strengths and the needs of many first generation students. There was a lack of understanding among stakeholders about the financial and cultural barriers students felt. These elements added noted anxiety and stress to the lives of these students. Another key finding was the lack of understanding about the role of the high school counselor as a college counselor. All participants expressed that understanding the role of counselor, especially in the context of the college choice process, was critical to doing meaningful work and providing helpful, relevant information to all students. Both findings led to an understanding that there is a need for better training and preparation in order to better serve all students and for counselors to feel like they are doing meaningful, fulfilling work.

### **Research Implications**

The needs of first generation students who are seeking college in a setting where their peers and community are mostly affluent with parents and siblings who are college graduates and understand the college choice process, can often be overlooked. These students can easily be viewed as coming from a place of deficits and struggle, especially in stark comparison to their

classmates, and this study sheds light on the need to understand their strengths and contributions. Are the views of counselors based too heavily on their own experiences and the experiences of the majority of the students being served? Are we not honoring the stories of all students, including those in the minority? How can we know if we don't ask them what they need? As counselors, we can examine the privileges we have and that many students have and remember that those privileges are not afforded to all. The more diversity we can bring to our learning environments, including and especially higher education, the more all students will learn about diverse perspectives and experiences and become agents of change for future generations. We can help with this by supporting the path to college for students from all backgrounds.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a failure to meet the needs of all students in their quest to access college. This literature review describes how college and high school counselors can be better prepared to support all students in their preparation and access to higher education, including first generation students. The literature questions how counseling practices should address the need for more culturally aware, strength-based practices and provide students with relevant information, strong networks, and realistic goal setting (Crowley et al., 2019). It is important to consider how college counseling practices can change the view of first generation students from one of deficits and struggles to one with cultural wealth and capital (Purgason et al., 2020). This literature helps us to build practices that allow time and space to build trust and alliances with all students and that will assist counselors to build advocacy of marginalized students into their professional practices.

The present study sets out to understand how high school counselors can be better prepared to support first generation students to access higher education. While there is plenty of existing literature about accessing higher education, counseling first generation and underserved students, and the roles of counselors who support the college choice process, there are gaps in research regarding college access for first generation students in a predominantly white, affluent setting. The existing body of research is especially important when considering the impacts counselors have on the access first generation students have to higher education. The literature examines how counselor training and preparation can impact the support of all students. The following sections provide readers with a review of the literature regarding counselor preparation and the college choice process for all students.

The review of existing research will cover three main areas. First, this review will address what a successful transition from high school to college looks like and how a college going culture plays a role in that transition. The discussion will include key markers for a successful transition, a definition of college going culture (Corbin & Tierney, 2007), and some pitfalls of that culture, especially for first generation students (Martinez, Lewis, & Marquez, 2020). Second, the review will examine counseling from a Cultural Wealth and social capital viewpoint. This literature review views counseling for college access from a Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso, 2005) and explores how social capital impacts access to college for first generation students. Lastly, the topic of multicultural or culturally responsive training for counselors will be examined (Sue, Sue, Neville, & Smith, 2019). The literature explores specific cultural competencies that can be built into counseling practices and the topics of trust and advocacy when counseling students from different cultural backgrounds.

### **Successful Transition from High School to College**

The literature supports that a successful transition from high school to college involves several fundamental steps as well as a high school environment that cultivates aspirations for college. The necessary factors for a successful transition can be more complicated for first generation students. A school culture that encourages the path to college is generally accepted as a positive influence on students, improving their chances of accessing higher education, but for first generation students there are struggles associated with this college going culture that the current literature addresses. There are several elements to predicting a successful transition to college beyond a college going culture. It is also important to understand that a college going culture can put excessive amounts of stress on all students and can be particularly detrimental to

the overall well-being of underserved students, including those identified as first generation to attend college (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Martinez et al., 2020).

### ***Key Markers for Predicting a Successful Transition to College***

Key markers for predicting a successful transition to college include an early start to planning, intentional course selection, academic proficiency, and regular meetings with a counselor regarding college planning (Poynton & Lapan, 2017). Specifically, high school students who developed college aspirations early and were provided guidance and support with course selection and academic achievement were more likely to apply, attend, and persist in college (Poynton & Lapan, 2017). However, high school students also need access to high quality college counseling services by well trained professional counselors in order to increase the odds of aspiring to, enrolling, and persisting in college (Poynton & Lapan, 2017). In addition to course selection and academic preparation, it is important for high school students to have access to information about college and financial aid as well as social and behavioral supports needed to develop habits of mind such as organizational skills, resilience, self-efficacy, and persistence (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). In short, the transition from high school to college is about preparation and readiness.

The number of underserved students who are seeking college, including students who are first in their families to attend college (first generation), has increased in recent years. The traditional indicators of preparation mentioned above may be much easier to access for wealthier students. Finding the best “fit” college for underserved populations such as first generation students, is closely connected to determining if a student is prepared for college. “Fit” should include aspects of college that include cost, location, support services, diverse student population, and focus of study (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). These factors naturally lead us to

understand that underserved students, such as first generation or lower income students, have more difficulty making a smooth transition to college. Although many students express an interest in college, including those students who would be first in their family to attend, they are not sure how to “get there” (Temple, 2009). It is clear to see that many factors must be in place for all students to transition from high school to college, but for underserved students, such as those first in their families to access higher education, the impacts of making this transition are much more complicated and daunting.

### ***College Going Culture Defined***

A college going culture in high school is an important factor for determining if students go on to access higher education. The Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis spent 10 years speaking to students, teachers, counselors, administrators, and family members about what is most helpful in preparing students for college and one overarching theme was that students are best served by schools that exhibit strong college culture (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). College culture, more recently referred to as *college going culture*, can be simply defined as a high school environment that cultivates aspirations and behaviors conducive to preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in college (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). The ideal setting is inclusive of all students, regardless of background or socioeconomic status. Studies over the years have focused on several elements that are important to building college culture and access to higher educations. Those include college preparatory course offerings and college level classes (Advanced Placement or AP), the expectation that students will attend college, an academic plan that supports the transition, college counseling and guidance services (especially critical for first generation to college students), and a school system that supports this culture that includes teachers, administrators, family, and counselors (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). Promoting these

efforts, as well as addressing challenges that underrepresented students have, such as acquiring the needed academic skills and college knowledge, developing self-efficacy and motivation, are needed to navigate the college process for all students (Martinez, Lewis, & Marquez, 2020). Jarsky, McDonough, and Nunez (2009) expand the definition of a college going culture for underrepresented students to include college talk (what it takes to go to college), clear expectations, information and resources, a comprehensive college counseling model, testing and curricula information (coursework and SAT/ACT information), teacher involvement, family involvement, and articulation between counselors and teachers.

### ***College Going Culture Pitfalls***

While it is widely accepted that a college going culture that is promoted and supported by teachers, administrators, and counselors is an important part of increasing access to higher education, there is also risk that first generation, low income, and/or marginalized students can be negatively impacted by this environment (Martinez, Lewis, & Marquez, 2020). All students can be negatively impacted by a culture of getting to college at any cost, but first generation students and those from marginalized backgrounds can be left feeling overwhelmed and stressed by a college going culture that is narrowly focused on serving more affluent students. Students from marginalized backgrounds can feel overwhelmed by the academic and extracurricular expectations, fearful that they are not prepared and daunted by the financial implications of college. Culturally, they may also be conflicted by family expectations to attend college but also the expectation to stay close to home and/or help their families. These unintended consequences for underrepresented and first generation students must be considered when addressing a college going culture (Martinez, Lewis, & Marquez, 2020). One particular cultural phenomenon that has been studied is *familismo*, the firm belief held by Latin American communities that strong family

ties, with the family as the primary source of support, and loyalty to family, takes precedence over one's personal aspirations (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013). This is an example of cultural values that may come into conflict with aspects of a college going culture for first generation, immigrant students. When working with Latino students, educators should understand the cultural implication of expecting students to go away to college when family values may conflict with future plans. Educators should be aware that first generation and/or immigrant students who wish to pursue college may have emotional distress and depression and anxiety that arises when dealing with these conflicting feelings (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013).

### **Community Cultural Wealth: Counseling from a Cultural Wealth Viewpoint**

Cultural capital can be simply described as the often-unrecognized cultural strengths that first generation students possess (Yosso, 2005). One important element of cultural capital is social capital, intangible resources that students possess or gain from their relationships (Crawley et al., 2019). Cultural capital and social capital help describe necessary resources that first generation students need to help them access higher education. It is important for first generation students and those that are supporting them to understand the natural strengths students have and can access in the college choice process. Counselors can help with this by viewing cultural backgrounds of students as strengths rather than deficits. First generation students are often viewed as having struggles that need to be overcome, such as language and income barriers, when in fact they have a collection of cultural strengths that should be focused on. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model is an excellent framework to guide counselors in this regard. Social capital is more complicated and an important factor that school counselors can pay particular attention to. School based social capital that supports first generation student access to higher education can be directly influenced by high school counselors in a positive way (Crawley

et al., 2019). Although first generation students do have social capital from their connections to their communities and peers, they can also have low social capital regarding the information they need specifically to access the college choice and application process. First generation students can be supported by high school counselors in the need to increase their school based and community-based capital to access higher education.

### ***Community Cultural Wealth Model***

First generation and underrepresented students can often be viewed as coming from cultures of deficits, struggle, and poverty. Tara Yosso's six-part Community Cultural Wealth (2005) model steers educators away from white middle class communities as the standard by which all students should be judged and how they should judge themselves. Yosso's Critical Race Theory lens shifts the deficit view of students of color and first generation students, to one that focuses on strengths in the form of cultural and social assets. Many first generation students have cultural capital from home that has been nurtured by their families and communities, and these assets can be used to empower students to understand their strengths and talents they can call upon to help them access higher education. Yosso expands on the traditional definition of cultural capital to include six forms of capital that comprise community cultural wealth and focus on the often unrecognized cultural strengths that first generation students possess (Yosso, 2005). Those six forms of capital include aspirational (hopes and dreams), linguistic (multiple language and communication skills), familial (resources from family), social (peers and other social contacts), navigational (ability to navigate in an unsupportive environment), and resistance (engagement and leadership around social justice) (Yosso, 2005). Counselors view strengths of first generation and immigrant students through a community cultural wealth lens better support high school students with academic, college, and career guidance (Purgason, Horner, & Gaul,

2020). It is important to remember that although this can feel like a checklist of strengths that should be considered by counselors, a culturally responsive counseling practice involves a commitment to a culturally responsive practice that includes critical self-reflection about personal, cultural, and ethnic identities and how this impacts assumptions and perceptions about students and their families (Purgason, Horner, & Gaul, 2020).

While it is important to understand the six forms of capital described by the Community Cultural Wealth model above, my literature review continues with a more focused look at social capital. In the next section, social capital is defined. The focus here is on the counselor impact on social capital and connects to the importance of the practices and role of counselor.

### ***Social Capital Defined***

All students possess strengths (capital) and should not be viewed as coming from deficits. However, social capital is important for college access and can be positively influenced by schools, specifically teachers and counselors, especially for underserved students. Social capital refers to intangible resources people inherit or accumulate over the course of their lives (Crawley et al., 2019) and building social capital can increase access to higher education. Social capital for students can be created in two settings: social capital created in the family and social capital created in school; both have positive impacts on academic achievement and college access. In the school setting, caring agents such as teachers and counselors help develop school-based social capital thereby increasing college access (Crawley et al., 2019). School based social capital can be described as an asset, gained through social ties or relationships at school that improve outcomes, and schools are considered social networks where students are influenced by faculty and staff to attend college (Bryan, Rawls, & Woods, 2017). For many first generation students, parental or family support of college aspirations may be lacking, and students that

receive school-based support have greater odds of attending college (Hinton, 2008). Key school-based supports and resources that focus on the college choice process address the needs for social capital for first generation students to participate and complete college planning activities while also helping students understand feelings such as fear of rejection, pressure of high expectations, and feelings of “deservedness” (Hinton, 2008).

### ***Low Social Capital as a Barrier***

Low social capital can be a barrier to accessing college for some first generation students whose families are not familiar with how to access higher education. Research has shown that low social capital is a barrier for achieving higher education and social networks that are formed through family, peers, and school relationships play a significant role in the level of social capital students can generate (Crawley et al., 2019). Offering opportunities to increase social capital is important for first generation students as low social capital is directly correlated to lower rates of access to higher education. School-based social capital is important for first generation students even if their family has post-secondary expectations for their children. Students who are first in their families to attend college may not have access to the information they need to negotiate the college choice process, and school counselors are uniquely positioned to support students who have less access to the necessary social capital to understand the college process (Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2018). First generation students often have less access to social capital and benefit greatly from being identified early in order to build trusting relationships with counselors; these students often do not seek out the support they need to access college as often as their more advantaged peers (Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2018). However, it is also important to consider that with low social capital and attempts to improve social capital, students can feel conflicted by the “pressure to do better” and the difficulty “transitioning between two

worlds” (Hinton, 2008, p. 136). Improving social capital for students is complicated and building coping strategies around college access can also serve as a form of school-based social capital for first generation students (Hinton, 2008).

### **Multicultural Counseling and Counselor Preparation**

Over the last several decades, the numbers of students in schools from diverse backgrounds have increased (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004) and it has become more important than ever that school counselors be prepared to work with students from all backgrounds. Holcomb-McCoy (2004) describes a prediction that by 2020, a majority of students in public schools will be from diverse backgrounds. Today we can see the growth in this first generation student population. Recent cultural movements, such as the increased number of students of color in our schools, have magnified the need for counseling from a cultural lens. The literature presented here focuses on outlining multicultural counseling and considers how counselors are best prepared to meet the needs of diverse groups of students. In 1992, the Multicultural Counseling Competencies were developed and, in 2015, were revised and renamed as the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) (Ratts et al., 2015). The MSJCC framework focused on the intersection of identities and the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression that impact the counseling relationship; the framework addresses four areas that lead to counselor multicultural competencies: (1) counselor self-awareness, (2) student and family worldview (place in the world and community), (3) the counseling relationship, and (4) counselors as leaders and advocates. The following review of the literature follows these competencies with a focus on general aspects of multicultural counseling (Sue et al., 2019), counselors as leaders and agents of change, and the importance of trust in the counseling relationship.

### ***Developing Cultural Competencies and Multicultural Awareness***

Counselors need to understand and develop cultural competencies and multicultural awareness in their practices working with all students, but especially when working with students who are first in their families to attend college. It is important to consider that counseling practices (especially those in a predominantly white, affluent setting) can exclude other cultural groups and that effective counseling takes into consideration the cultural context in which counseling occurs and the cultural realities of the client (Sue et al, 2019). Sue, Sue, Neville, and Smith (2019) describe multicultural counseling competencies as falling into three categories. First, awareness is simply moving from being culturally unaware to being aware of one's own heritage and being respectful of differences. Awareness also includes being aware of your own values and biases and being comfortable with different values and biases. Second is knowledge that includes information and knowledge about a number of culturally diverse groups in the community (including first generation students), knowledge of the treatments of different groups in society, general counseling knowledge, and knowledge about the barriers that marginalized groups face. Lastly, Sue and colleagues describe the importance of certain skills for culturally competent counselors that include an ability to respond to culturally different groups, communicate accurately and appropriately, utilize intervention skills when appropriate, and understand and anticipate the impact of helping styles and roles.

When addressing school counseling, researchers found that when school counselors were trained in a culturally diverse experiential learning environment (working with first generation, immigrant students) that outcomes were transformative for the counselor and the student (Dutil et al, 2020). Listening to the stories of first generation students is imperative for meeting their needs. Skills to build include advocacy, awareness of own privilege, increased knowledge about

students from diverse backgrounds, and an increase in worldviews (Dutil et al, 2020). High school counselors can support underserved students by understanding cultural considerations that directly impact getting to college, such as the idea of *familismo* (or the importance of family and family relationships), challenges regarding the cost of college, and the pressure of high expectations (Martinez, Lewis, & Marquez, 2020). High school counselors can also support the specific psychosocial and emotional needs of first generation students which can increase their access to higher education (Lonn & Tello, 2017). Understanding the cultural characteristics of first generation college students described above as well as understanding what the college experience will be like for a first generation student are important to helping students make the transition from high school to college. Taking a strengths-based approach with first generation students, recognizing coping strategies and resiliency and the success of being first in their family to attend college, will help support the preparation and expectation for this transition. Counselors can also design interventions for first generation students that include intentionally tailored programs that consider the psychoeducational needs for college preparation, the information and the expectations that include the students' and family needs (Lonn & Tello, 2017).

### ***Counselors as Leaders and Agents of Change***

Counselors can help first generation students access higher education by taking a leadership role and by acting as agents of change. The role of school counselor, especially in predominantly white, affluent school settings, has historically focused on individual students and maintenance of current systems, with little change in training or professional development to address our changing schools and communities. Recently, there has been a change in the role of school counselor from serving a narrow list of individual needs of students to becoming school

leaders, change agents, and advocates (Bemak & Chung, 2005). Historically, counselors have served as moral, academic, and vocational advisors, but with the rise of recognition of school inequities, the counselor role has been acknowledged as a means for contributing to equity for and service to all students. Recent studies have explored the need for change in the role of school counselor to incorporate advocacy as a key component to decreasing the achievement gap and fostering equity (Bemak & Chung, 2005). This shift will naturally lead to greater access to higher education for underserved and first generation students. Specifically, there is a need for counselors to shift their roles to address the needs for change to school-wide systems that promote academic success for all students and that hold all students to the high expectations of academic excellence and access to higher education. In addition, in order to be a leader and advocate for change, counselors must maintain positive and professional working relationships with administrators and teachers. Counselors would benefit from professional development and/or training around being strong advocates for underserved and first generation students (Bemak & Chung, 2005). Bemak and Chung identify 13 guidelines for becoming advocates:

1. Focus on the goal of supporting all students.
2. Emphasize equity and equal opportunity and equal distribution of resources to all students including first generation students.
3. Focus intervention strategies on groups if there are large caseloads.
4. Provide first generation students and parents with tools to promote change.
5. Partner with students who need help advocating for themselves.
6. Help parents gain access to needed resources.
7. Forge partnerships and working relationships with school administrators.
8. Utilize school data to change roles and goals, to advocate for change.

9. Get leadership training through professional development.
10. Network with other school counselors to address greater needs.
11. Volunteer/participate in actions that promote reform and support first generation students.
12. Understand how to promote social action within the school and community.
13. Collaborate with community based agencies as needed for added support.

Much literature about the need for school counselors to be leaders in schools has been published, but given the changes in the diversity of our communities and schools, there is an urgent need for multicultural leadership in counseling. Multicultural school counseling leadership can be defined as leadership that considers cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews of culturally diverse students and that addresses systemic inequities and barriers impacting students' academic, social/emotional, and career development (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017), including access to higher education for underserved, first generation students. In order for school counselors to practice multicultural counseling, it is important to have a leadership framework that provides counselors with a model to address issues of oppression impacting students (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) framework was updated in 2015 and set new expectations for school counselors that encourage leadership roles (Ratts et al., 2016). The expectation is that school counselors will be trained and skillful at addressing the issues of power, privilege, and inequity impacting first generation or marginalized students. Multicultural competencies that leadership should develop include counselor self-awareness, worldview of the student, the relationship between counselor and student, and the development of counseling and advocacy interventions (Ratts et al., 2016). The combination of school counseling leadership and multicultural training is important within diverse school settings of today.

### *The Role of Trust*

First generation high school students who aspire to college may not rely on their parents or families for college information and must turn to high school counselors or mentors to guide them (Holland, 2015). The role of trust is important for creating successful student-counselor relationships that can support the college application process. The transmission of social capital is built from a collection of resources within the relationship between student and counselor and contributes to building trust and access to higher education. Distrust may exist due to a lack of a shared understanding regarding expectations and roles. An example of distrust would be the counseling practice that focuses on “self-help” directions to websites, forms, instructions, etc. It is a mistake to believe that this counseling practice is sufficient to provide equitable access to all interested students. Those students who were not participating in these self- help practices were found to be “not engaged, not invested” and thereby concluded as “haven’t made the effort” (Holland, 2015, p. 252). This practice excludes marginalized, first generation students who do not have the social capital to access an abundance of resources. The high schools in Holland’s study (2015) were highly resourced, had lower than average caseloads, and high graduation and college going rates. Still, in this setting, first generation students had more difficulty accessing the information they needed to participate in the college choice process. Even though the proper resources were available to all students in this setting, first generation students lacked the social and cultural capital they needed to equitably access information regarding college. According to Holland, the barrier here was trust and Holland explained that trust is formed based upon common understandings and expectations of relationship roles. While this forms the basis of trusting relationships between student and counselor, the intention behind one’s action in the social exchange binds people in a social setting. Holland’s research explains four elements of

intention as respect, competence, integrity, and personal regard. Personal regard is especially important in the case of the counselor-student relationship in that it is described as “extending oneself for others beyond what is formally required;” it adds an element of caring that goes a long way (Holland, 2015, p. 247). Counselors that spend time getting to know students, going beyond the minimum, and showing genuine care for them, develop trusting relationships that support and realize a college going culture for all students.

The above coincides with other research that states that high school counselors who work with Latina/o students should recognize the need to meet with students. In doing so, counselors provide an opportunity to build a trusting relationship with students and convey that counselors authentically care about students’ success in school and beyond (Martinez, 2013). Research by Martinez (2013) describes students who felt they could not depend on counselors because they had a closer relationship with others, friends, or teachers. Counselors can better assist these students by taking the time to get to know their students and form trusting relationships that would better support the college choice process. Clearly, there is a need for effective strategies to build trust between first generation or underserved students and counselors.

Holland’s (2015) research suggests that the multiple and conflicting roles that counselors often have—college counseling, course planning, scheduling, facilitating communication with teachers, mental health front line response—can interfere with building trusting relationships, often without a system in place that allows them to be selective in the services they provide and who they focus on. Mixed messages about college expectations and the support offered can hurt trust. First generation students can feel overwhelmed when information is presented but they are not sure what to do with it. Trust issues can result from mismatched expectations. First generation students expect counselors to support their college aspirations while counselors focus

on giving practical information, they expect all students to access. The bottom line, according to Holland (2015), is that first generation students may be looking for counselors to support their dreams for the future in different ways from the support sought by more affluent students.

## **Conclusion**

There are many studies about the access to higher education for high school students, a college going culture, and multicultural counseling and student outcomes and there are many strengths in the literature reviewed for this study. First, numerous and recent studies outline the consequences of a college going culture, both negative and positive. Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth model (2005) has been cited and reviewed in many recent studies and is closely connected to research regarding the importance of social capital in the educational setting. The literature on counselor training, multicultural competencies, and the importance of leadership and trust in counseling settings is relevant and important to my study. There are fewer studies about the negative impacts of a college going culture, especially on those from underrepresented groups such as first generation students and fewer studies regarding the impacts of multicultural counseling practices on first generation students' access to higher education. There is missing research (a gap in knowledge) regarding how culturally aware counselor preparation and professional development can improve access to higher education for first generation students that attend school in a predominantly white, affluent school and community setting. This describes the setting for my school, community, and place of work.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand high school counselors' perceptions about supporting first generation students with access to higher education. While there is plenty of research regarding cultural capital and cultural wealth in education, counselor education and the impacts of a college going culture, there is limited information regarding preparing

counselors to work with these first generation students in this particular context-a community of mostly white, privileged, well-resourced students. This study focuses on counselors who are working in the capacity of college counseling in our affluent community and on the struggles associated with serving underrepresented students. Specifically, I am interested in inequities among services and gaps in counselor preparation. Also of interest is how a college going culture creates obstacles for students to realize their dreams and has contributed to more concern for the social, emotional, and mental health of students.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

There is a need to understand how high school counselors can be better prepared to support all students, including first generation students, in their preparation and access to higher education. This is especially challenging in a mostly white, affluent setting. It is important to understand how counseling practices should address the need for more culturally aware, strength-based practices and provide students with relevant information, strong networks, and realistic goal setting (Crowley et al., 2019). The purpose of the qualitative study was to understand counselors' perceptions about their preparation to support first generation high school students to access college.

#### **Research Questions**

This study focused on counselor and first generation student responses to questions regarding their experiences in the college choice process and the process of preparing for and accessing higher education. The aim of the research was to understand those experiences and identify ways counselors can prepare to support first generation students in their desire to attend college after high school, especially in their mostly white, affluent school setting. There were three central questions that framed the research: (1) What does a successful transition from high school to college look like for first generation students at one college preparatory high school in Northern California? (2) How can culturally aware counseling practices improve outcomes for first generation students? (3) What preparation and training do counselors need to support first generation students' access to higher education? The following sub-questions describe the depth of the research:

- How can counselors prepare to support all students, including first generation students, to prepare for and access higher education?

- What does a successful transition from high school to college look like?
- How does a college going culture support the path to college and in what ways can it create obstacles for first generation students in an affluent, mostly white setting?
- How can counseling practices focus on strengths rather than deficits when counseling first generation students in the college choice process?
- How can a counselor contribute to the social capital students gain from their school community?
- How can counselors build practices that allow time and attention to building trust and alliances with all their students including those first in their families to attend college?

### **Description and Rationale for Research Approach**

The worldview that best represents the research is constructivist. In this qualitative study, I was seeking to understand the experiences and perspectives of counselors and students. Creswell (2018) describes the constructivist view as one that believes individuals seek to understand the world they work in and that they look for subjective meaning in their experiences. The role of researcher was to rely on the counselor and student views of their task of getting from high school to college. It was intentional to ask open-ended questions and to listen carefully to the stories of the participants, listening to what they say or do in their school and work settings (Creswell 2018). Counselors, in their work with a diverse population of students, will construct meaning of their experiences, as will the students they are working with. Both will try to make sense of their experiences based on their life, including cultural and social experiences (Creswell, 2018). The goal of this study was to seek to understand the context and experiences of the participants and gather information

and data by conducting in-depth interviews. As a constructivist researcher, I am interested in the process of interaction between participants; the foundation of understanding the meaning and feelings of the participants is always social, arising in and out of interactions (Creswell, 2018). My own experiences and background play a role in the interpretation of findings so I focused on the meaning the participants had about the experience they were having.

The design of the research was qualitative, utilizing a phenomenological approach (Seidman, 2013). A qualitative research approach is best utilized for exploring and understanding the meaning of the individual or group experience of a social or human problem (Creswell, 2018). This design was most appropriate for this study because open-ended individual interviews were the primary source of data collection and occurred within the participant's setting (Creswell, 2018). It was a primary goal to gather the experiences of counselors in their role guiding diverse students through the college choice and application process, as well as the student experience in how supported they felt. Qualitative research supports this goal in that the focus is on individual meaning (Creswell, 2018). Examining the lived experiences of counselors and students in this process and coming to understand the meaning of those experiences informed me of what is "real" based upon their lived experiences and their point of view (Seidman, 2013). The reconstruction of detailed experiences of counselor and student was important for this study. Giving attention to the experiences and the truths of the participants from their point of view (Seidman, 2013) gave their experience meaning. As the researcher, it was important that I focus on the meaning of the problem as seen by the participants, not the meaning perceived by me or that the literature brought to the research (Creswell, 2018). The essence of the experiences of the counselors and students that were interviewed culminated in the

stories of individuals who have all experienced the phenomena being researched (Creswell, 2018).

## **Research Design**

### ***Research Site and Entry into the Field***

This research was conducted at a private, Catholic, high school in Northern California. This school site was purposefully selected because I have been working at the site for 14 years and recently started a job as a high school counselor there. Given the years at this school site, I have working relationships with the counselor participants and some pre-existing relationships with the student participants. Of the seven counselors asked to participate, five counselors agreed to be participants. Of the six students asked to participate, four students agreed to be participants. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the school and participant names. This school serves 784 students in 9th through 12th grade. The student body comes from over 40 parochial, private, and public junior high and grammar schools. About 65% of students identify as Catholic, thirty-five percent as other religion or no religious affiliation. The school identifies as drawing from a broad, area-wide spectrum of social, ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds, but it also identifies as predominantly white and the setting is considered affluent. Graduation requirements are considered preparation for college and there are many offerings of Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. In order to access Honors and AP courses, students must maintain a minimum 3.0 GPA or better and a grade point average of 3.7 or better in the subject area for which the student is seeking Honors/AP courses. Ninety-two percent of graduates from this school matriculated to a four-year college in Fall 2021 (2021-2022 School Profile).

### ***Participants and Sampling Procedure***

Current or recently retired high school counselors who work or have worked in the college counseling capacity at the school site, as well as adult senior students or recently graduated adult students from this school were recruited for participation in this study. A total of four current counselors and three recently retired counselors were asked to participate and five confirmed interest in participation. Counselor participants range in age from 28 to 45 years old, three men and two women, all identifying as white and none identifying as first generation (first in their families to attend college). Counselor participants were purposefully selected because they were currently working or recently retired from the school site and work with first generation students in the predominantly white, affluent school setting. Counselor participants were made aware of the study in a counseling department meeting and/or contacted via email which provided a written description of the study. I followed up verbally with each counselor to confirm participation and scheduled an interview.

The student participants were purposely selected as students who were first in their families to access higher education, recent high school graduates or senior in high school, and over the age of 18. All students were provided with a written description of the study and confirmed their participation. A total of four first generation students volunteered to participate, two women and two men. They ranged in age from 18 to 21 years old. For both counselor and student participants, consent for their participation in the study was provided via signed consent forms.

These participants were selected because counselors in this setting were challenged with serving diverse populations of students, including first generation students, in the same school setting. The purpose for recruiting these counselors was to understand their practices when

working with diverse students in a predominantly white, affluent school setting, with the goal of students accessing higher education. The purpose for recruiting first generation students was to gain an understanding of their experience and story in this school setting. This group of participants allowed me to understand the problem and address the research questions (Creswell, 2018). All participants' questions were answered before the interview and they completed the informed consent form before participating.

### ***Data Collection***

The primary method of data collection was in-depth interviews with students and counselors. Interview questions (Appendix A and B) were designed to address the three main research questions. Counselor interview questions focused on questions regarding training and preparation, expectations of students, and notable barriers to college. Student interview questions focused on future plans after high school, counselor relationships, perceived support and barriers. The conversation was allowed to grow organically, based upon the stories being told and how the stories felt like they were connected as each interview progressed.

At the time and day of the one-hour interview, I met the participant in a casual seated setting. A brief verbal statement was provided about the purpose of the interview and the overall study:

*Thank you so much for allowing me to interview you today. I will be asking you some questions to better understand your experience in the college choice process as a counselor/student. My hope at the end of my research is to identify ways to better support all students successfully prepare for and access higher education. In the process I hope counselors will form trusting relationships that improve the social emotional wellbeing of all students.*

Next, each participant was provided reassurance of confidentiality and reminded that the interview was being audio recorded (using the researcher's iPhone). Then, each participant was provided some basic rules and expectations for the interview and reminded that they can stop the

interview at any time or choose not to answer any question. The interview then began (see Appendix A and B for questions). The conversation was facilitated by providing verbal prompts such as, “please elaborate,” “can you tell me more about,” etc. Attention was paid to body language and non-verbal cues in researcher notes. Once the interview was completed, each participant was thanked for their time and again reassured that everything discussed would be kept confidential. Each interview was then transcribed, taking care not to use participant’s names; instead, pseudonyms were used and the transcripts were kept in a password-protected computer. After coding the interviews and drafting the findings, snippets of quotes were shared with participants for the purposes of member checking.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis methods were used to analyze student and counselor open-ended interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and completely transcribed. I listened to the interviews and wrote analytic memos making note of themes, ideas, and phrases to capture any additional information. The transcribed interviews were open coded by hand by identifying similarities and differences as well as expected and unexpected codes in the data. This initial coding process was begun by identifying key units or segments of data that seemed important or meaningful (Maxwell 2013), specifically key words, phrases, and ideas. This segmented data was labeled with expected codes generated by the literature review as well as unexpected codes that emerged from the interviews. All three of Maxwell’s (2013) strategies for qualitative data analysis were used: writing analytic memos post interview, categorizing strategies, including coding and thematic analysis, and connecting strategies, or narrative analysis. Memos allowed me to compare multiple interviews based on both positive and negative experiences.

Before coding, I asked , *what is this participant talking about and what general ideas are they expressing?* The participants’ experience with counseling to access higher education was categorized as either an overall positive experience or overall negative experience. With the

student participants, I took note of what their thoughts were when they first arrived at high school (their expectations) as well as their thoughts about their experiences and feelings regarding counseling and the college choice process and their relationship with their counselor. With counselors, I noted both the expectations they have of their students as well as their experiences and their relationship with their students. It is important to understand expectations along with lived experience. Attention was paid to body language and tone, as well. Memo writing helped me remember where the interview took place and what the circumstances were like in case these factors may have influenced how the interviewee answered.

Before interviewing, I created a list of words and phrases that might be expected during the interviews. These potential code words included: preparation, transition, advocate, trust, frustration, support, encouragement, help, training, barriers, plan, expectations, future, and family. If these words or similar words were used, I asked follow-up questions with hopes of a more in-depth response and was then able to know where to categorize their interview. When a word or phrase was mentioned that needed to be remembered, it was noted. After the interview was complete, words were compared to the original list of code words, and I categorized them accordingly. I repeated that process again when listening to the recorded and transcribed interviews. This open-coding process was repeated for each interview.

Concept mapping was utilized for further exploration of the data by organizing the codes into categories in order to search for connections, conflicts, or gaps in the data. Themes then emerged from the concept mapping and notes made during the process. After concept mapping, the codes were indexed to piece together similarities and differences in the interviewees' stories. Data was added to a matrix that combined similar experiences (positive with positive and negative with negative). This made finding similar keywords and phrases

easier to keep track of throughout the process of interviewing and analyzing notes and quotes from the interviews.

Finally, I used focused coding by looking for themes in the words used by the interviewees. These words were either the most frequent, or stood out as the most significant. By finding these patterns, I was able to determine the words and ideas students and counselors use when describing both a positive and negative experience; in other words, I discovered what was most important to the interviewees who had either a positive or negative experience regarding the college choice process. Significant statements were noted from participants to develop a description of their experiences that could be highlighted to determine commonalities and noticeable differences. I also wrote descriptions and contexts for themes that connected to the research questions. Once transcripts were coded, codes were compared to identify themes that reflected the perspectives of students and counselors, and that were supported by evidence in the data (Creswell, 2018).

### **Validity**

As the researcher conducting this study, I also work as a counselor in the same high school as the counselor participants (they are my colleagues) and where the student participants attend. My own children also attended the same high school. This may have influenced data collection because of my personal interest in the work environment and effectiveness of the counseling department and how well it supports all students. Data collection could have also been influenced by my personal experience as a parent of students who attended the school. Reactivity is also important to consider, because my role may have influenced participants as co-workers/peers and in my position of power with students. Bias was considered given my own experience as the first in my family to attend college and how it influenced data selection. It was

important to be aware of researcher positionality and bias in order to understand the impact this could have on the validity of the study. I remained aware of my own bias throughout the study in order to keep the objectives for the research clear to ensure a valid study. Several strategies were implemented to address these validity threats.

Qualitative data was collected through rich descriptions of interviews with participants (Creswell, 2018). Rich data was collected and utilized through intensive interviews, preparing verbatim transcripts of the interviews and detailed, descriptive notes on researcher observations, thus providing a full description of the interviews that revealed what was going on (Maxwell, 2013). During the data analysis process, I was cognizant of searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases to ensure that researcher bias of wanting improved counseling preparation to improve the lives of first generation high school students did not go unaddressed. All data was rigorously examined to “assess whether it [was] more plausible to retain or modify the conclusion, being aware of all the pressures to ignore data that did not fit [my] conclusions”, and I “asked others for feedback on conclusions as a way to identify biases and assumptions” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 127). Lastly, I also used respondent validation (member checking) to solicit feedback about the conclusions from the participants. This ruled out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what the participants said and the perspectives they had on what is going on, thereby helping identify biases and any misunderstanding of the observations (Maxwell, 2013).

## Chapter 4: Findings

For one group of first generation students in Northern California, what does a successful transition from high school to college look like and how are students impacted by a college going culture? This qualitative project sought to understand this transition and culture; a second purpose was to understand how culturally aware counseling practices could improve outcomes for first generation students in their college choice and what preparation and training counselors need to support first generation students' access to higher education. Findings from this study demonstrate that all participants (counselors and students) agreed there were benefits to a college going culture, but only student participants raised areas of concern regarding the culture. Both groups agreed that transitioning from high school to college is about more than just getting to college. Counselors and students both recognized that counseling practices could be improved to better serve first generation students, but part of the struggle with identifying areas of growth was first understanding what role counselors were expected to play and how expectations for students and counselors were misaligned. Counselors and students homed in on common areas for counselors to be better prepared to serve first generation students at this school site and all participants suggested other areas of growth related to counseling practices.

Participants were made up of five counselors and four first generation students. Three of the counselors were currently working in the Northern California high school and two were counselors in the past that moved to other positions at the same school. One of the students was a high school senior and three were recent graduates from the high school, currently in college.

*Table 1**List of Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Sex</b>
Aaron	Form Counselor	Male
Emily	Current Counselor	Female
Nick	Former Counselor	Male
Sierra	Current Counselor	Female
Thomas	Current Counselor	Male
Carmen	Graduated Student	Female
Daniel	Graduated Student	Male
Miguel	Graduated Student	Male
Sofia	Senior High School Student	Female

Four dominant themes emerged from close examination of interview data. The first theme is the perspective of both counselors and first generation students on college going culture and a successful transition from high school to college. This theme included feelings about the “road map” or academic plan, which is a guide for students. The second theme is the view of current counseling practices. Strengths and areas of growth were identified. The third theme speaks to differences between how counselors and students view the role of counselor. This theme arose from questions regarding counselor preparation and training; it was clear that counselor preparation could not be fully addressed without first parsing out the role of counselor. This leads to the fourth theme regarding what is important for counselors to know and learn in order to support all students in their access to higher education.

The findings of this study homed in on the three primary research questions around the transition to college, counseling practices, and counselor preparation. The findings suggest that a successful transition from high school for first generation students included being academically prepared, including taking a rigorous course load and maintaining strong grades, but also achieving some self-understanding, personal growth, and acquiring life skills to support independence and autonomy. Self-determination and personal drive, as well as normalizing struggle and being willing to ask for help, were also needed for a successful transition. Negative implications of a college going culture for first generation students were also found. Findings also pointed to how culturally aware counseling practices might improve outcomes for first generation students in their college choice process. Lastly, the findings share what first generation students think counselors *should* know. These findings point to specific areas of growth and training for counselors, aimed at better supporting first generation students' access to higher education.

### **A College Going Culture and a Successful Transition to College**

A college going culture can be simply defined as a high school environment that cultivates aspirations and behaviors conducive to preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in college (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). A college going culture is widely believed to be important for engaging all students in the college choice process and most counselors believe this to be true. Both college counselors and students believed their school had a college going culture and that attention was paid to a successful transition to college. Students and counselors alike believed that there was a “roadmap” or detailed plan for students to follow that would lead to college. However, counselors seemed to not fully understand the unique pressures that a college going culture imposes on first generation students. The cultural pressure students felt was related to

pressures to attend a four-year college, family pressure to attend college, and fear of failure. Both counselors and students felt that a successful transition to college was about the “right academic plan” and good grades, but also about self-understanding and personal growth. Though, there were differing perspectives in the views of students and counselors, and students viewed preparation as primarily about self-drive and determination, as well as normalizing struggles that were unique to them. There was a lack of communication between student and counselor about shared goals of personal growth and how such conversations lead students to understand college as a path to a meaningful and productive future career. The roadmap, or detailed plan, that leads to college was an area of concern for both counselors and students and there was a misalignment between participants regarding what that roadmap should include. Concerns about access to information was a common theme and, for students, the roadmap lacked some key checkpoints.

### ***College Going Culture***

Both counselors and students described a college going culture at their high school, and while there was a shared belief that this culture was a positive influence on engaging students in the college choice process, there were unique pressures that first generation students feel in this environment. The counselors’ view of a college going culture includes college preparatory planning that starts freshman year, course selection and graduation requirements that align with college requirements, and that the path to college is expected and within reach for all students. For example, one counselor, Sierra, shared “well we’re a college prep school, we’re preparing students to get to college.” She continued to say that “we start with them freshman year to get to know them well, which helps with the selection process by the time they are juniors.” Another counselor who is no longer working in the department said, “I think it was very helpful for us that we have a built-in college prep schedule, that even if you’re meeting the minimum

standards, you're going to college." Other examples of college going culture that counselors mentioned included presentations to families and students to help them understand the path to college, individual and group meetings with students, and college representatives coming to meet with students on campus. Sierra described a college going culture as such "we help them sort of understand, you know, a little bit more about themselves and what they're looking for in a college, we start getting them thinking about college; it's very basic, which I think is fun." But one counselor shared that some families view that "four-year college is a golden ticket", which can lead to stressors that students and counselors alike described.

Student participants described college going culture as important to feeling like there was a path to college that was supportive of the students' and their family's value of education. For example, one student shared that her family felt that "school is the one thing, like the most important thing." This student, Sofia, went on to share that when she arrived at high school "the mindset of everybody was just like college, college, college" and "we see the banners that were out in the library, as was like, oh my god, like somebody's going there!" All students expressed that they wanted to attend college and that they started high school with college dreams. Carmen shared, "I started thinking about college at a young age" and "my parents, they emigrated from Guatemala, so their passion was to come to the United States to help their children receive a better education." Carmen noticed that when she arrived at high school that "everyone planned to attend college, everyone had parents that went to college" and expressed that she felt supported in her plan to attend college but that "it was kind of different; I wanted to go, but I had decisions that were relatively different than my friends."

But there were other things that students noticed about a college going culture that counselors did not talk about. All the students talked about how their families wanted them to

attend college and that there was pressure to go to a four-year college. All students described the subsequent pressure to receive good grades and that poor grades would not allow access to the four-year college. They felt that the culture did not address the things they had on their minds. Daniel described not wanting to deal with the pressure of figuring how he was going to be able to afford a four-year college. He describes putting off thoughts of college— “I like knew in the back of my mind, that’s like future Daniel’s problem.” He described feeling like the thought of college was “pretty hard to handle” at times and that “I just had to overcome the stigma of not going to four year from a private school.” Sofia explained feeling pressure to attend like her peers, “they go to university, so I’m going to go to university.” Miguel talked about hearing other kids talk about college and that “sometimes you feel like inferior, kind of ashamed” and feeling that if you can’t afford to attend a four year college right out of high school “people who you encounter at school who will judge you, like this choice is bad.” Miguel shared about family pressure he faced, which he felt arose from the college going culture. He said that his mom was hearing about others who were planning to attend college and he felt that “she is comparing me to someone else” and “when I explained to her how hard it is, she said she didn’t mean it like that...that’s hard as a parent.”

### ***A Successful Transition from High School***

There was a shared theme among counselors and students that a successful transition from high school to college included being academically prepared, meaning taking a rigorous course load and maintaining high grades, but also achieving some self-understanding, personal growth, and acquiring life skills to support independence and autonomy. For counselors, academic preparation was more about following the school’s academic path. That is, if students followed the predetermined path or roadmap and kept their grades up, that would enable a

successful academic transition, both in terms of having access to college as well as being prepared. For example, one counselor, Sierra, shared that “there is a place for everyone” and that “students want to go to college and when they graduate from high school, they are going to college.” Nick, a counselor that is no longer working in the department shared, “I think what’s helpful for us is we have a built in college prep schedule, that even if you’re meeting the minimum standards, you’re going to get into a college” and that “even our lower achieving students, they’re getting into college, right? It’s built in.” All counselors also talked specifically about life skills and whole-person development; for example, one counselor shared that students “need to be able to fend for themselves” and should have “some self-advocacy” and basic life skills that will allow for the ability to care for themselves. Emily, another current counselor, underscored the need for self-advocacy skills and added, “I expect them to be responsible adults” and that students need to “be a hard worker in whatever they do.” Thomas, another current counselor, spoke about helping students develop as a whole person. He mentioned asking students questions such as “who are you, what do you believe, what is your purpose?” and “what am I called to do?” He mentioned that having a purpose, whatever that might be, “that’s ultimately what it is about.”

The student view of a successful transition included many of the same ideas that counselors had, including attention to grades and personal growth, but there were other things not mentioned by counselors. All students shared that self-determination and personal drive were important qualities necessary for them to achieve a successful transition. They also valued normalizing struggle and being willing and able to ask for help. Miguel expressed shock when he realized that he was not as well prepared academically to get high grades in high school; he felt alone and it gave him the feeling that he was not making progress to being ready for college. He

shared, “I’m taking classes as a junior and there are sophomores and freshmen taking these higher classes. They will have a higher advantage than I do” and “that can affect your admission to university.” He felt like he was the only one struggling. He went on to share that he told his younger sister to “ask your teachers, they can help you, don’t be scared.” Sofia talked about her family telling her to “have the determination to keep going” and that “you need to go in and ask ‘hey, I don’t understand’.” Her family wanted her to know that his self-determination was what was going to help her achieve her goals and be successful in the future.

### ***The Roadmap***

College preparatory high schools often have an academic plan to college, a list of required courses for graduation that align with college requirements. This plan can be referred to as a “roadmap” to college and has coursework recommendations as well as other milestones to consider such as accessing honors or AP courses, taking board tests, filling out financial aid and scholarship forms and asking for letters of recommendations. These are described for each high school year (freshman through senior). High school counselors described leaning into the roadmap or planned path to college as both a guide for a successful academic transition to college and a way to provide relevant information regarding college to all students. Counselor participants expressed comfort in knowing the roadmap gave reliable structure to the path to college, but they also acknowledged areas of concern. If the plan is followed, there is a clear path to college, but the root of the problem lies in if the plan is accessible to all students and the rigid path it follows. Although counselors appreciated that the plan starts right when you arrive at high school and can get you to college, areas of concern for some counselors were that it is student driven and, in some cases, requires family support and intervention if some steps are not getting done. The path assumes all students understand what to do, can access the information and act on

it. It does not consider barriers that might exist such as language, access to technology or lack of help from parents or family to gather information needed to fill out forms, etc. Academically, the path assumes grades C and above and a rigid math track. An academic path concern was shared by a retired counselor who stated that students start with Algebra I and stay on that track with Cs and above; he shared “for some kids, they are not ready for Algebra I...they struggle and may not get the support they need to keep their grades up and stay on track.”

There is also little or no emphasis placed on the cost of college or resources necessary for the college application process in the roadmap, just on creating the opportunity to apply to four-year colleges. Examples of this viewpoint were shared by many counselors; for example, one counselor shared that “there are families in poverty. They don’t have the resources that a lot of other students here have and they have kind of really fallen through the cracks of the college application process” and “we can’t assume one type of parent outreach is going to reach every single parent...families don’t have the means to sit at home and do college applications with their kids...it’s like a resource and access issue.” Asking for information about access is important for counselors; Emily mentioned, “we need to be asking our students and our families what they need help with, what they have access to and what they don’t.” Another counselor shared that “for first generation students it might be a little more helpful to have some informational sessions about financial aid.” The community college track is an important option for some students but not included in the presentations as a planned path to college. Another counselor expressed support of community college with some reservation— “community college is great if you are pinching pennies for sure;” she expressed that this path works for students who are planning to stay at home.

The students also had various concerns regarding the roadmap that directly impacted the successful transition to college. All student participants expressed a particular frustration with the need for more information and support in order to understand the path to college and how to do the tasks along the way. All students also shared that while most of their classmates were able to rely on their families for help with questions about the process or to complete tasks, first generation students did not necessarily have that option; their parents may not know what to do or there may be a language barrier. For example, Carmen shared, “When you have immigrant parents, they don’t have that background knowledge of what college looks like” and “everyone [at my high school] had parents that attended college...it was kind of a shock.” Some roadmap tasks that first generation students expressed were difficult to access included visiting colleges, attending meetings that were in English only, requesting letters of recommendation, doing research to explore colleges, applying to college, applying for financial aid, signing up for board testing, and understanding which tests to take. Students who were not able complete certain tasks on their own were left to get help from family or friends or seek other outside help. One student shared that she was not sure how to start looking for colleges that she could afford— “I had to ask friends for help, people that had done the same thing in their families.” Miguel shared, “I remember thinking to myself, I don’t know how to do this. My parents don’t really have an answer for this, I don’t have an answer for this.” One of the most urgent struggles was the lack of financial planning as part of the college choice roadmap and in light of that, alternative paths to college, such as community college, were not offered. Daniel shared, “I knew I didn’t have the grades to get into my dream university, and how could I pay for that for four years?” He said he wished that he had been given more information about an alternate path to college but shared “I

wasn't exposed to that in high school." Miguel shared, "I know a lot of kids have money and all that is fine but there's people like us who don't have that same access."

### **View of Current Counselor Practices**

When exploring ideas from counselors and students regarding how college counseling practices can improve experiences for first generation students in the college choice process, it was clear that students and counselors had strong feelings about areas of strength and needed growth. Key areas include early identification of first generation students, better guidance around financial aid, improved equity in communications and more meetings where students were doing things versus being told what to do. This theme is helpful for addressing the areas of growth that both groups of participants felt were needed.

### ***Practices From the Counselor Perspective***

From the counselor perspective, there were many counseling practices that were going well. All counselors felt that building trust and rapport was a top priority given the time they had with each student. One counselor, Nick, shared, "I think it's student first, 100% that student trust, that rapport." Counselors all felt that the team approach was important and that they could rely upon and valued input from their colleagues. Counselors all practiced a student-centered approach and agreed this approach was important. Most counselors felt they could rely on their intuition to assess if a student needed extra support and that early identification and intervention of student academic struggles was helpful.

Counselors provided additional information about areas in which they felt their college counseling practice needed improvement. Most counselors expressed a need to identify students early that might need additional support, including first generation students, stating early outreach would be a best practice. One counselor, Thomas, shared the need to "acknowledge or

recognize kids that need certain support service from the time they get here.” He went on to share the importance of “recognizing gaps where we don’t have those resources and how we can make sure those kids are set up for success.” Most counselors also expressed that access to college is strongly tied to family involvement and that their practices do not bridge the gap for first generation students. Counselors felt better support could come from improved understanding of Community Based Organizations (CBOs), organizations that support students in need with the college process. They also felt improved support could come from enhanced communication including translated materials and a clearer understanding of what the college choice process looks like for first generation students. One counselor shared, “We can’t assume that one type of parent outreach is going to reach every single parent...what is our process for connecting these kids with CBOs?” Financial planning was expressed as a critical part of finding a “good fit” college for first generation students and counselors reported a deficiency in providing this information. One counselor talked about programming for first generation students and families— “it might be helpful to have some informational sessions about financial aid; ours is just informational. I have seen financial aid nights where you actually fill out the FAFSA.” Several counselors also expressed a need to provide more “doing” meetings and less “telling” meetings, as well as possible field trips to visit local colleges. One counselor shared, “doing camps or workshops...let’s provide those opportunities for kids” and “make it accessible to everyone and really push kids to be part of the process.” Some counselors also expressed a need for better cultural awareness around student expectations such as what is going on at home, absences, tardies, etc. Several counselors felt their practices would greatly benefit from regular input and feedback from students and their families regarding services and outcomes.

### *Practices from the Student Perspective*

Student participants identified counseling practices they felt were helpful. Students felt that counselors wanted to build trust and rapport; they valued being in a trusting relationship where they could speak openly. Carmen shared that her counselors were there for her and that they cared; they just were not able to help her much with college. For example, she shared that her counselor would meet with her and talk about lots of “little things” like how she is doing and signing up for certain classes— “little things like that... I think the counselors did an awesome job to help, it’s just [that they have] a lot of students. I think they cared.” All students appreciated the high value that was placed on education by counselors and the help with choosing classes and academic planning. They also expressed that “doing” meetings were very helpful. One student shared, “the doing part is best; the website is fine but how do you find some of that information?” All students expressed that they appreciated when counselors would check in with them “just to see how we are doing” and felt that counselors always tried to help and that they were kind. Daniel shared about his counselor— “I saw the effort she was putting in and I did appreciate it” and “I texted her when I got into college; I wanted her to know ‘cause I was like ‘you influenced me.’”

There was substantial conversation from students about areas they felt counselors could improve. All student participants spoke in detail about the counselor turnover, explaining that they had numerous counselors over their four years of high school. These students expressed that their counselor did not get to know them. Miguel shared, “I switched counselors like three times” and about his counselor senior year— “she emailed us and she said she was in Colorado, that she’s not here anymore; from there it kinda sets the tone like she’s kind of done with her job.” Carmen shared, “I think having a different counselor every time kind of threw me off; they

weren't really well informed." All students shared that counselors were not prepared to support first generation students, particularly in areas regarding financial aid and that they were not getting the same support from home that other students were getting. Daniel shared, "there was not enough financial guidance" and thought to himself— "how am I going to pay for that?" Several students felt presentations were not helpful, so they stopped attending, and those meetings did not help them understand the financial commitment and whether there was an alternate path to college besides applying to the four year college. Several students talked about feeling rushed and pressured to take the same path as everyone else; they did not feel comfortable asking for help or talking about their financial barriers. As one student participant explained, "I felt everything had to be in a rush."

### **View of the Counselor Role**

When exploring the need to understand how counselors can be better prepared to serve all students, including those first in their families to plan for college, not fully understanding the role/job description of counselor was a noticeable theme for both counselor and student participants. Participants expressed that understanding the role of counselor is critical to doing meaningful work, to providing students with reliable expectations, and to understanding areas to seek growth and professional development. After exploring viewpoints regarding the role of counselor, a misalignment between student needs and expectations and counselor role and the work they do became apparent.

### ***How Counselors and Students View the Role of Counselor***

All counselors shared that various roles were expected of them and the role of college counselor was just one part of the job. Most counselors described their role as two jobs—being therapeutic or school counselor and college counselor—with not enough time to do them both

well. “I feel like we have two jobs that are put into one job. You have every intention of walking in and meeting with three students about college and then you have something happen, discipline-wise, and you have to throw that out,” one counselor shared. Counselors described feeling “scattered,” that there was not enough time to do the job well. There were also no clear expectations of what exactly their role was and that families and the school community also did not know what specific services counselors were providing. One counselor shared that “[with] the disorganization of our department, things slip through the cracks... What are our expectations as a school?” Counselors described academic advising as a big part of the job and that early intervention and extra time was needed for students who are struggling. Social and emotional support for all grade levels was expected as well as guidance with personal responsibility and growth, including issues with discipline. Counselors also described themselves as supporting students with the college choice process starting in junior year, with the expectation that all students will go to college. Counselors are to provide the tools needed to apply to college and assist with the choice process including college fit. A former counselor stated “You say we’re college prep. So it’s like, if we say that, then yeah, the expectation should be we set our curriculum, we set our expectations around, that we are targeting to put you on the path to get to a four year university.” And also “I think we don’t really provide as much time as we probably should to the college process. Part of that is time, right? Just reality of that...I think we need to restructure how we look at that.”

Working with families is also an expected part of the counselor role but feels inconsistent and not inclusive. For example, one counselor shared, “the reason we don’t have time to meet with families, we’re doing all this other stuff.” Several counselors expressed feeling undervalued by the school community and administration. A current counselor talked about the college

counseling work— “I just don’t know how much the administration thinks it’s important,” another counselor added, “I don’t know many people on campus that actually have a good sense of what a college counselor does.”

Students felt a primary role of the counselor is building rapport and trust. They discussed one problem associated with this role—counselor turnover; students generally lacked a feeling of rapport, sharing that counselors “didn’t know me” and did not take time to check in. Students shared that they expected counselors to help with choosing their courses that would lead to college. They believed that counselors should be able to provide them with a college plan or roadmap that is tailored to their needs and concerns. Miguel shared his feelings about needing to find his own path that perhaps was not going directly to a four year college— “It’s more like finding an alternative” and “I feel like there is more hope because I learned about community college (after high school) and the path put like comfort and trust in the system.” Students expressed that they thought counselors should be able to help them understand how to apply to various colleges, apply for financial aid, and understand other paths to college that might be better for them. Daniel shared that “there was not enough financial guidance” and regarding information about different paths to college, “counselors should share that information.”

### ***The Misalignment***

There were some significant misalignments that were raised from what students expected and needed from the counselors and what counselors were able to accomplish based upon the job description and how their role has been allowed to evolve and expand over time. Counselors and students expressed frustration that the counselor role as they perceived it should be is difficult to achieve given what they can actually do. The role of college counselor is expected of all counselors, yet most have received no training in this area. This is a part of the job that has

grown and changed dramatically in recent years. This is especially concerning given that the research site is a college preparatory school. College counseling is not a part of the formal school counseling preparation, and the solution is that professional development can help counselors learn this role, but this takes time. One counselor talked about college counseling training, saying, “I didn’t receive any training for that” and “that is one area that I don’t feel like I have enough training to provide high level college counseling to students who need extra support.” Another counselor shared that when he started as a counselor and needed to talk about college counseling, he thought, “I have no idea what I’m talking about.” And another current counselor said, “I am kind of learning as I go” and wondered, “should I be doing something else?” Most counselors felt that time constraints lead to the inability to meet students’ expectations; so much time is being spent on crisis intervention, which leaves less time for rapport building and college counseling support and in the fall, when the focus is heavily on the college application process, not enough time is there for individualized attention. This is also an area of counseling that has become dramatically more demanding in recent years. A current counselor said that, regarding her dual roles, “we don’t have time to do both well” and another counselor summed the problem up by stating that “it’s a balancing act.”

Other examples of students feeling like counselors are not supporting them in the way they hoped is the noticeable counselor turnover and counselors not knowing enough about how to help them with the application and financial aid process. Counselors are focused on showing students how to access college information and not necessarily helping students actually get what they need done; the current process of accessing information about college and financial aid relies on family support, which is not a reality for some students. Sofia talked about the meeting where they started the Common App, one of the few meetings where students do something—

“Most of them [classmates] get out of the meeting and think this was useless, but they have older siblings and their parents have gone over it. For me, I needed that meeting.” Miguel talked a lot about his family not being able to help— “counselors just expect students to know the process, they have that background information from their parents and what they want already.” Some students relied on CBO help. One student shared— “I was super grateful for counselors, but speaking truthfully, they were not much help. 10,000 Degrees? that honestly set me up!”

Counselor participants also expressed that there is an expectation that first generation students will self-identify; this is not reliable. Counselors explained that there is no cultural understanding or language barrier assistance provided to them to help students with equitable college choice guidance and communication to families. Miguel shared “I remember thinking, once I figure out the COM thing and like four year college, if I would have just thought about all of this earlier...that would have helped me more.” Current counselor Emily said, “my expectation is the type of services we provide will vary depending on somebody’s cultural background. It’s an equity thing right?” Not knowing these students from the beginning hinders their ability to understand what they need to do and the counselor's ability to serve them equitably.

### **What is Important for Counselors to Know and Learn**

One important outcome of this study was insight into what first generation students and counselors see as most important for counselors to know in order to do their job well and serve all students. These findings may inform what preparation and training counselors need to improve their practices. The data indicated that all students and most counselors believed that they specifically could learn more to improve their support of first generation students by understanding their counseling role from a multicultural lens. In addition to understanding

multicultural counseling, there were a few areas of growth that both students and counselors thought would be helpful.

### ***Student First***

Given the data from both students and counselors, there are several key findings to report with regards to what key knowledge counselors should prioritize and know that demonstrate the importance of the student relationship. In short, counselors should be attentive to their relationships with their students, pay attention to rapport and trust, have high expectations of their students, meet students where they are, and be student-focused in all areas. A current counselor described his work as centering the student on “what do I value, who am I and what am I called to do” and “meeting kids where they are” but “they have to do the work, I can’t do it for them.” Counselors benefit from practices that reach all students and their families and they should know how cultural and financial considerations might impact each student. Counselors need to understand early interventions for students in need of extra support, various paths to college, and the financial aid process. One former counselor shared, “You learn a lot from that one little question, ‘who is at home?’” Findings also show that counselors need to value self-advocacy, self-drive and determination, and understand the cultural capital that all students bring. Students and counselors believe that although counseling is student focused, understanding and getting to know the family of each student, particularly understanding struggles at home that influence student performance and financial considerations, is important to know. Lastly, it is important for the counseling department to know the negative impact of counselor turnover on both student and counselor.

### ***Multicultural Preparation to Support First Generation Students***

There were areas that both students and counselors felt would improve the support of first generation students. One area was in support and improved communication with families. Both students and counselors shared that there is some work to be done in building the family partnership, including knowing what is going on at home, understanding where families might struggle to support their students, and keeping in mind that most families value education and hope for college for their students. One current counselor shared, “I need more training in reaching these diverse families” and a student noted that students “have no idea what they are getting themselves into, especially coming from a family with limited resources.” Another counselor shared her feeling that she was not serving diverse families as well as she should, “I basically just feel bad about it” and “I don’t have a lot of the same experiences that many of these students have.”

There was also a shared feeling of first generation students needing to be identified early and then offered support to create more equity in the college choice process. Helping students understand the academic path to improve their understanding of college requirements would be helpful. One student shared about not understanding what Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses were— “I guess it was more like a shock—I don’t think first generation people would know those types of things are possible right?” and “I wished I would have pushed myself to take harder classes, do better.” There was a shared idea among participants that equity often means more support for some students, but that this focus should always come from the lens of focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses. A current counselor said that “expectations are not the same for every student” and “some kids are going to need more support, that’s reality.” One student described her counselor complimenting her determination and thinking to herself, “hey guys, I’m actually doing this, I feel good!”

Participants discussed the need for counselors to be aware of the stigma that students feel about attending community college and that events, such as college t-shirt day and poster day where students share with the community what colleges they are going to. This kind of thing can exacerbate the stigma and that there are possible feelings of shame associated with financial barriers. Daniel talked about his conflicting feelings after purchasing and wearing this community college t-shirt on college day “It felt weird but I felt proud, I was like at this point I gotta own it, right, like if I’m going to rock something, if you’re doing something bad you might as well own it.” Counselors should understand that first generation students can have feelings of isolation, loss of hope, or even feeling “in the dark.” Participants shared that first generation students could benefit from sharing alumni stories of success. Daniel talked about a community college (CC) mentor— “He was literally the epitome of going to CC. He was a good inspiration, that’s what I needed, I was lacking that.”

### ***Other Areas of Needed Support for Counselors***

There were several other areas that both students and counselors felt growth was needed to better serve all students. Both students and counselors expressed concern and frustration over counselor turnover and counselors also expressed great concern over the lack of value for their department as well as a lack of strong and consistent leadership. Counselors expressed frustration over the lack of clear understanding by everyone about the role of counselor and how it aligns with the department mission. There is a significant issue of limited time that both students and counselors talked about and concern was felt by most counselors about how to juggle the mixed role of school counselor and college counselor. Some counselor participants suggested breaking the department into two areas of emphasis as well as creating more small group meetings instead of individual ones. The need for more professional development was a theme with all counselors;

they wanted training that relied less on “on the job” training and more time, in general, for taking advantage of professional development opportunities. Overall, counselor participants stated that counseling is a field in which there is a need for constant learning. Lastly, counselors said there is a need for data and feedback about understanding how they are doing at their jobs and how their students are doing both in high school and beyond.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from this study indicate that a successful transition from high school for first generation students included being academically prepared, meaning taking a rigorous course load and maintaining strong grades, but also achieving some self-understanding, personal growth, and acquiring life skills to support independence and autonomy. The student perspective pointed to aspects of a successful transition, including self-determination and personal drive, as well as normalizing struggle and being willing and able to ask for help. Findings regarding how culturally aware counseling practices might improve outcomes for first generation students in their college choice process were robust. Negative implications of a college going culture were apparent in the findings as were feelings of frustration regarding the various roles counselors were expected to fill and student expectations for college counseling often fell short. These findings point to ways counseling practices might improve, including offering training and professional development focused on supporting first generation students’ access to higher education.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Supporting first generation students in the college choice process calls for some specific training and understanding for high school counselors. The existing literature supports understanding what a college going culture and a successful transition looks like. It also guides educators and counselors to understanding best counseling practices such as building trust and rapport, focusing on strengths and cultural capital, the importance of social capital, and the need for understanding counseling from a multicultural lens. Areas of concern are raised in the literature and indicate unique stressors and barriers for first generation students. This study focuses on first generation students seeking college in a mostly affluent, white setting, a context not explored in the reviewed literature. The findings support the current literature and present other themes important to this topic. I believe these themes begin to address this context gap in the literature.

This discussion describes several similarities between the findings and the theories outlined in the literature review. The first significant consistency between the findings and the literature was the impact of a college going culture and what the transition from high school to college looks like. Students and counselors appreciated the expectation to attend college and a path that engaged students in the college choice process early and the literature supports that a college going culture is helpful in preparing students from all backgrounds (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). However, both the literature and the findings revealed stresses and pressures caused by a college going culture that can be unique to first generation students (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Martinez et al., 2020). Part of building a positive college going culture is supporting a successful transition from high school to college. The findings from the research revealed that a successful transition included being academically prepared (taking rigorous courses and achieving strong

grades), following the academic plan to college (roadmap), as well as personal growth, including an early start to planning, intentional course selection, and meetings with a counselor (Poynton & Lapan, 2017). These findings are consistent with the literature including in the area of developing strong habits of mind such as resilience, self-efficacy, and persistence (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

Another significant similarity between this research and the literature review was the importance of social capital. Specifically, the contributions counselors and other advocates make to social capital in the college choice process, and the barrier of low social capital that can occur for students whose families are not familiar with the college process or cannot access communication about the process. This study's data showed that the social capital created by schools and counselors, such as a college preparatory academic plan, meetings with counselors regarding college and high expectations, were appreciated by students and valued by counselors. This finding is consistent with the literature in that caring agents, such as teachers and counselors, help develop school-based social capital thereby increasing college access (Crawley et al., 2019). The literature also described first generation students who may have parents or family lacking an understanding of college aspirations and that school-based support improved odds of attending college (Hinton, 2008); the present findings describe students in this very situation.

Finally, the importance of college counseling preparation and training and a strong multicultural counseling practice in supporting first generation students through the college choice process was highlighted in both the literature review and the research findings. One specific area of continuity was the importance of the counseling relationship (Ratts et al., 2015) and of trust (Sue et al., 2019) when counseling through a multicultural lens. Students and

counselors spoke often of the importance of trust and rapport in the student-counselor relationship that can support the college application process (Holland, 2015). The need to learn more about college counseling, in general, but also understanding the college choice process for first generation students was a theme in both the literature and research-in particular, a focus on the goal of supporting all students, helping first generation families access needed resources, training through professional development, and collaboration with community-based organizations (Bemak & Chung, 2005).

### **Implications for the Literature**

While there is much scholarship about how high school students access higher education, how to support first generation students in the college choice process, and the role of counselors, there is a gap in the research regarding college access for first generation students in a predominantly white, affluent setting. The present study aimed to fill that gap by examining the experiences of first generation students and high school counselors in this setting. Specifically, the study aimed to address how counselors can better support these students through the college choice process. The literature is missing some key nuances that that this study identified. There is a need for individualized support on the path to college; the process cannot be the same for all students. Supporting students following a college choice process that is too rigid and not culturally responsive does not serve any student well, especially first generation students. It is easy for this process, in a predominantly white, affluent setting, to be focused to only serve the dominant population. The current literature is missing discussions about these topics and this study addresses these concerns.

## **Implications for the Practice and Policy**

Based on existing research and the findings from this study, it seems clear there is a need for counselors in this setting to be better prepared to serve all students in the college choice process, including students first in their families to seek higher education. In particular, the findings highlighted the areas of growth in the counseling practice and department policies, that could better support first generation students in their quest to college. I believe these findings can positively impact my counseling practice and the experiences and practices of my fellow counselors, as well as my students. Bringing awareness to the needs of first generation students in my school setting is the first big step to making change. Although it can be challenging to acknowledge feelings of unmet expectations, frustration, and exclusion, naming those feelings and addressing them as not personal shortcomings but need for systemic change helps us begin the path to improving the outcomes of all students and the professional well-being of counselors. Counselors can understand the value of learning more about counseling from a multicultural lens, the need for flexibility and personal consideration of the path or roadmap to college, and note the need to improve communication so that the partnership with all families is strengthened. Counseling practices will improve with a clear understanding of the role of counselor and with professional development in the areas that align with the counseling roles. Lastly, continuing to focus on the strengths of the student, including cultural strengths and meeting students where they are, will continue to be important for improving counseling practices.

The research findings draw attention to a few school policies that could be implemented that could improve outcomes for first generation students. First would be a commitment to consider all families in the school-wide communication, with consideration for possible language barriers and conflicts with required student and parent meetings. Another important change

would be in the early identification of first generation students and other students with family or cultural barriers that might need to be known by the school and college counseling team. The earlier student needs are known, the better positioned the counselor will be to support the individual needs of students. Changes to the college choice path (the roadmap) that school counselors follow with students and their families from freshman to senior year should be updated with checkpoints that support the needs of first generation students. Related, different types of meetings should be offered, specifically ones that add more robust support for financial planning as well as workshops that feature “doing” versus just being told what to do. Finally, making the whole school community, including faculty, administrators, students and families, aware of the specific role of counselors will be helpful in creating a time management plan for the counseling department that better fulfills the expectations of all stakeholders. This may also improve the counselor turnover that has been noted in the findings by students, and the well-being and sense of work fulfillment felt by counselors.

The above implications would contribute in a positive way to the social changes needed for first generation students seeking higher education. The findings shine a light on the particular feelings of exclusion, shame, and hopelessness that first generation students can feel in an affluent, mostly white setting. Addressing the stigma these students feel being surrounded by peers with unlimited resources when their college choice process relies heavily on financial and cultural considerations, is important and should be addressed. Taking the approach that first generation students not only come with cultural strengths they can lean into, but also emphasizing that diversity is important for a robust college environment will help bring about social change to higher education. These findings support the ways counselors can create more

opportunities for all students to access higher education and improve the futures of these students and their families.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations to this study. First, if there was more time to collect data, a second interview and possibly a survey would offer more data to better answer the research questions, particularly in the area of specific preparation and training for counselors. After analyzing the data from the first interview, it became clear that there was substantial conversation regarding the feelings of students and the role of counselor. The study also could have been strengthened by exploring student feelings regarding all areas of Community Cultural Wealth, as well as particular aspects of Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies discussed in the literature review. The counselor participants did not include any counselors that were immigrants or individuals of color and none were first in their families to attend college; this lack of diversity in counselors' backgrounds limits the generalizability of data. Student participants were also all Latino/a and therefore the study is missing perspectives from first generation students of other ethnic backgrounds.

Since I work with the counselor participants, my personal/working relationship may have influenced some of the interview responses. The research site was a medium sized, Catholic school and perhaps the findings would be different in other school settings. A likely factor that may have significantly influenced the data in this study is the way the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the experiences of both counselors and students. Experiences, communication, support services, and connection were influenced by the pandemic for the participants and the impacts of COVID-19 are not addressed in this study. Lastly, my biases and positionality likely impacted my view of the data and the direction of some of the interview conversations. I am a first

generation woman of color with my own experiences that I have been reflecting on during the process of working on this study.

### **Directions for Future Research**

There are notable directions for future research that should be mentioned. First, new gaps in the literature that the research uncovered and that might be explored in the future could include the influence of a Catholic or faithful school environment on the experience of first generation students in affluent settings. A similar possible area of future research is comparing private and public school contexts regarding differences in support of first generation students. Student participants talked about their families seeking this particular school setting with the expectation of improving or ensuring a path to college. Another area of needed research is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the outcomes of first generation students. Student and counselor participants mentioned the importance of what is going on at home and felt that immigrant families were hit harder by the negative impacts of the pandemic. Finally, the findings indicate that there is important research to be done regarding the experiences of first generation students before and after they are in high school. Following students through college and beyond to understand how outcomes may or may not be influenced by a community college choice or the way college debt is managed, for example, would provide a deeper understanding of long-term implications related to these counseling experiences.

### **Conclusion**

“My parents immigrated from Guatemala, so their passion was to come to the United States to help their children receive a better education...a college degree was very important” but “when I came to high school, everyone had parents that already attended college, I’m like that’s great, I don’t know what to do.” This was a small part of the conversation from one of the first

generation student participants. One of the counselor participants shared “we are coming out of an era where a four-year university was, and I do believe this still to be true, on a level is a golden ticket.” There is a stark contrast between white, affluent students and first generation students and their ability to confidently access college. Counseling these students in the college choice process in this setting poses unique struggles for students and counselors. Unfortunately, one of the norms may be to have lower expectations for these students or to view their struggles as a weakness and barrier to their preparation and access to higher education. Much of the present study discusses issues that many educators are familiar with—equity, inclusion, diversity, empathy, compassion, trust, access, culture, social capital, support, etc. We understand these aims, but we are not doing the things we need to do to support all students—learning more, listening to the experiences of students and counselors, finding the time and resources, as well as making it a priority to address the needs of all students in their preparation and access to college. This study came about because I wanted to understand the experiences of first generation students in the college choice process and the unique pressures they might be facing among their affluent, college-going peers. Intellectually, this was something I wanted to learn and understand. I found myself thinking deeply about their path that was not a straight line like many of their peers. Practically, I wanted to understand what I could do or learn about improving the outcomes of these students and the well-being of counselors who may be feeling conflicted or uncertain. When considering the intersection of the intellectual and practical understanding of the human experience, I think it’s important to remember that human beings can grow and change. The intellectual understanding can grow into the practical by simplifying the goals and then practicing them. It is time to take action in areas that we know need improvement. Counselors must remember that our role is first and foremost to support student well-being, plain and simple.

Making some intentional, specific and simple changes can improve the well-being of students and counselors and help realize the dream of college for all students.

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**Appendix A**  
**Interview Questions for Counselors**

*Dominican University of California*  
*Interview questions for Counselors*

1. Describe your work as a college counselor. Who do you ask for help when you need it?
2. What preparation or training have you received to guide students in the college choice process?
  - a. What have you done personally to prepare for success in this area of your work?
3. What do you expect from your students when they finish high school?
  - a. How do your expectations differ for each student?
4. Do you approach college counseling differently with students that come from different backgrounds?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. What is challenging about this?
5. What barriers have you noticed in your work as an effective college counselor to all your students?
  - a. What things can interfere with you feeling successful in your role as college counselor?
6. What struggles or barriers have you noticed students face related to accessing college?
7. Are there other individuals or organizations you refer students to who might need help accessing support or information about the college choice process? Share some of those resources.
8. Describe any professional development you can access to improve your college counseling practice.
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your role in the college choice process?

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Questions for Students**

*Dominican University of California*  
*Interview questions for Students*

1. Can you tell me about your plans after you finish high school?
  - a. Is college a goal for you?
  - b. What influenced your decision?
2. Have you noticed any barriers to your college goals?
3. What information does your school give you about college?
  - a. How has your counselor played a part in your plans for college?
  - b. Please describe how counselors or the process made you feel (and what you have done to try and address those feelings).
4. Describe some of the support services you have received from your counselor and school to prepare you for college.
5. Describe your relationship with your counselor.
  - a. How was trust built in the relationship?
  - b. Did these conversations make you feel hopeful? In what ways?
6. What were your expectations about accessing college when you were a freshman?
  - a. How have those expectations changed?
7. What would you like to see changed about the college counseling support students receive at this high school?
8. How has your counseling experience led to your feelings about going to college and about your future?
9. What advice would you give students who are thinking about their future and considering their plans for college?