Operationalizing Public High Schools as
Institutional Agents for College Access in New York City

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Abstract

We present a conceptual framework that bridges theory to practice by concretizing the role of schools as organizational institutional agents in the college planning and application process. We apply this framework to characterize how college-going culture takes root at seven non-selective public high schools in New York City where we conducted ethnographic research amidst a city-wide "college for all" policy shift. Our paper brings into focus the types of cultural capital schools can deliver as organizational entities that do not reproduce social inequality in post-secondary access. We hope both researchers and practitioners will find the conceptual framework fruitful for guiding future studies and program development with regard to the role of high schools in democratizing access to higher education.

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"We really want the majority of our students to follow a college track and I think some of the conversations [the counselor] and I have are about how when you start taking college off the table for some students, it's really easy to take it off the table for a lot of students…it's another example of a gatekeeper in our society: who is college educated and who isn't." (Principal, Brookdale High School)

In the United States today, going to college is a nearly universal aspiration (Holland, 2019). As the principal at one of the high schools in our study reflects in the quote above, access to higher education is a pressing civil rights issue: although college is increasingly important to social mobility, it continues to be stratified across race and class lines (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009) with gaps in college attainment by family income increasing over time (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). A vexing contradiction lies at the center of attempts to level this educational playing field. While schools in this country are touted as democratizing forces, a range of subtle and not-so-subtle disparities in access to the economic, social, and cultural resources necessary for educational success account for the continued reproduction of unequal outcomes (Anyon, 1997; Bourdieu, 1986; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Lareau, 2000). For high schools trying to realize a "college for all" mission, impediments include issues of residential mobility and financial exigencies that face low-income students (Cox, 2016), lack of provision of clear strategies for families and students unfamiliar with the landscape of college (Shamsuddin, 2015) and misreading on the part of middle class educators of the motivations and experiences of poor and working class students (Author, 2007).

Study Objectives

Is it possible for secondary schools to counter these reproductive patterns in post-secondary access? Students who are first in their families to attend college rely on their high school, rather than their family, to guide them through the highly complicated college application

process (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). Schools can produce different post-secondary outcomes by changing the "organizational brokering" of students' access to information about college and to social connections (Holland, 2019). Understanding and providing the resources needed by these students – not on a case-by-case basis, but as part of the organizational structure and culture of the school – is critical to broadening post-secondary access. Numerous studies have documented schools attempting, but failing, to give their poor and working class students the necessary support to access higher education (Shamsuddin, 2015; Cipollone and Stich, 2017; Farmer-Hinton, 2008). The question of *how* schools can democratize access to college remains only partially answered. To this end, we pursue two aims in the current paper:

(1) Introduce a conceptual framework that translates social capital theory to educational practice to concretize how schools can realize the goal of broadening post-secondary access, and

(2) Apply this framework to describe the evolution of college-going culture and college planning structures over the course of two years at seven non-selective public high schools in New York City.

Conceptual Framework

Our study draws significantly on the work of two scholars: Patricia McDonough (1997; 2004), whose seminal research looked at the organizational contexts and status cultures of high schools; and Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (1997), whose social capital framework lays out the structural barriers facing low-income students of color as they attempt to access "dominant" capital inside the institutional structures of schools.

McDonough (1997) observed that high schools' organizational arrangements help define and mediate individuals' achievements and aspirations. It is through these arrangements that

schools affect student outcomes. One school she studied was successful at getting working class students to college because the "counseling environment is proactive, providing information and alternatives to students at all levels…the college counseling program's strategy is self-consciously educational and supportive" (p. 68). More recent research (including McDonough 2004, 2005) spells out some of the necessary particulars students need, such as school networks that saturate them with the importance of going to college (Farmer-Hinton 2008), sufficient academic context to understand the relationship between grades and college measures (Shamsuddin, 2015; Cipollone and Stich, 2017), and multiple and intersecting streams of information from school adults (Bryan *et* al., 2017).

We argue these suggestions do not make fully legible the steps schools need to take in confronting the overwhelming economic, social, and cultural barriers that underserved students encounter as they embark on their post-secondary journeys. Stanton-Salazar's social capital framework (1997) is critical to helping schools better understand why they so often fail to meet these students' needs. He points specifically to how the "mechanisms of contemporary institutional life operate in subtle yet powerful ways to engineer and reproduce exclusion and subordination" (p. 3). This happens in schools, in part, through the primacy of bureaucratic processes over the needs of children and the constraints these processes place on the establishment of trust and attachment.

Yet, the organizational arrangements of schools do not have to be this way. Stanton-Salazar (1997) outlines possibilities to shift these mechanisms: "generalized exchanges leading to authentic mentorship relationships would, in fact, be one way to compensate for the problematized position in which these children find themselves" (p. 19). Central to his argument is the importance of supportive relationships with adults who serve as *institutional agents*. These

are individuals who transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, specific forms of cultural and social capital that he refers to as *institutional support,* which allows young people to successfully navigate mainstream spheres and supports them to manage the stresses of this navigation process. Through relationships with institutional agents, "a segment of society gains the resources, privileges, and support necessary to advance and maintain their economic and political position" (p.6). Interestingly, Lareau (2015) highlights a similar role adults can play as "cultural guides" who assist lower status individuals in the navigation of dominant institutions. She distinguishes this type of cultural capital, which she refers to as cultural knowledge, from soft-skills such as "grit" or "resiliency": cultural knowledge is the informal and formal rules of institutions.

In our research, we explore how Stanton-Salazar's concept of authentic mentorship by individuals functioning as institutional agents can be broadened to encompass the work of schools *as organizations in the context of post-secondary access*. Table 1 outlines the forms of institutional support as described by Stanton-Salazar (1997) and what each form of support represents at the school level in terms of the college process. Table 2 breaks down the specific types of funds of knowledge provided by institutional agents and what tasks in the college application process these knowledges correspond to.

Methods

In 2016, New York City Mayor Bill deBlasio launched a "College Access for All" initiative, directing attention and resources to helping schools focus on building greater support for post-secondary access. From 2017 to 2019, we conducted qualitative research to capture the experiences and voices of people in public high schools who were working to build college-going cultures and college planning structures within this context of a City-wide "college for all"

shift. We selected seven focal schools because of their varying assets, challenges, and locations within NYC (see Table 3 for descriptive information; school names are pseudonyms). In the 2017-18 school year, we conducted over 70 hours of observation across the seven schools, producing field notes from watching counselors meet with students in the college office, observing teachers engage in professional development, sitting in on college preparation classes, and participating in team meetings where small groups worked to design and implement college access programming. In the 2018-19 school year, we conducted interviews with a range of staff members at all seven schools ($n = 26$) as well as with a small group of seniors ($n = 11$) at three of the schools across six different points throughout the year as the college application cycle unfolded. From 2016-2019, we also tracked school-level rates of college applications, FAFSA completion, and matriculation, and collected surveys from students ($n = 3,332$) and staff ($n = 233$). The current paper focuses on the field-based observations and interviews conducted with staff.

Our partnerships with these schools were formed through the organization at which we work, College Access: Research and Action (CARA), a university-based non-profit that conducts research on the post-secondary pipeline and supports high schools in NYC to develop college planning cultures and structures in schools that serve low-income students of color who are also predominantly first-generation college goers. We did not have a role in delivering intervention in the form of coaching or programming at the schools where the research was conducted.

Results

Our preliminary analyses provide evidence to support the power of schools functioning as institutional agents (see Table 4 for representative responses). In schools undertaking significant changes in their organizational structures in relation to college-going, a range of staff articulated

not only *doing* different things, but *understanding their role* differently. Rather than simply seeing their job as passing along concrete information, many spoke about more consciously helping students to navigate institutions and mediate the challenges they encountered.

Preliminary findings also point to the college-going "funds of knowledge" that the schools were able to transmit – and those that they struggled to transmit, particularly in relation to limitations of the standard classroom settings in which students and school staff spend so much of their time during the school day. Schools that had or created alternative structures for the transmission of non content-based knowledge (e.g. institutionally sanctioned discourses; network development) had greater success in restructuring adult roles in relation to their students, as well as beginning to transform the outcomes for the young people they serve.

Our research also highlights an important role for college student "peer leaders" working alongside counselors in the college office. In schools where they were given sufficient responsibility and visibility, these college students (who were alumni of the school and returned to work in the college office throughout the school year and over the summer) appear to possibly combine roles as institutional agents and as *protective agents*, who Stanton-Salazar (1997) describes as located principally in family or community-based networks. These peer leaders improved the ratio of counselors to students in the college office, but also delivered certain forms of institutional support in ways that were qualitatively distinct from adult institutional agents. We observed evidence that this form of support is unique and potentially differentially effective, especially in building the schools' capacity to realize the "college for all" mission through the trust peer leaders can build with more vulnerable students who may not see themselves as college-goers, including low-achieving students and undocumented students.

Significance

Despite almost two decades' worth of attention to post-secondary access, research continues to find that the vast majority of schools are failing to reorient their organizational structures in ways that significantly change outcomes for students who have been historically underserved by the education system. As these studies find, schools working to build a "college-going culture" are most often trying to do so mechanistically without a clearly articulated understanding of the institutional support needed and the multiple forms of highly complex cultural knowledge required to help students successfully engage in the college application and selection process. Instead, too often, schools undertake the most surface-level ideas of building college-going cultures - t-shirts or classrooms named after colleges - and are then frustrated by a lack of change.

In many ways, this state of affairs is unsurprising and fits with the very outcomes predicted by social reproduction theorists. However, for those working in schools serving low-income students of color – many of whom are dedicated to the futures of those young people - the cold calculation of theory *cannot* be the final word. Our research introduces a conceptual framework that bridges theory and practice in making tangible how schools can realize the goal of broadening post-secondary access. Our findings using this framework to analyze two years of ethnographic research lends preliminary support to the concept that, with sufficient effort and attention, schools can move towards functioning as institutional agents for democratizing college access.

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Table 1

Forms of Institutional Support Translated to the College Application Process

	Stanton-Salazar (1997) Definition	Translated to College Application Process
Provision of funds of knowledge	Providing knowledge associated with the ascension within the educational system, including implicit and explicit socialization into institutionally-sanctioned discourses	Giving concrete information about what college is like and types of college, how to college application process works, how people pay for college, and connections between interests/skills, college majors, and career choices
Bridging to gatekeepers	Acting as a human bridge to gatekeepers or social networks and opportunities for exploring various mainstream institutions, like university campuses	Connecting students to other adults with institutional roles (inside or outside the school) who can help them with particular tasks or problems related to applying to college, picking a college major or career, and being successful in college
Advocacy/personalized intervention	*additional detail not provided*	Using knowledge or one's role as an institutional agent to intervene to create opportunities or solve problems related to college access for an individual student or particular group of students
Role modeling	*additional detail not provided*	Using/talking about one's own college application, choice, transition or adjustment experiences to help students connect to or make sense of an experience that they are undergoing or about to undergo
Emotional and moral support	*additional detail not provided*	Listening to a student(s) feelings, worries, problems related to accessing college and helping them feel like they are not along with those problems
Guidance, advice, feedback	Deliver feedback, advice, and guidance that incorporates thoughtful transmission of funds of knowledge	Offering ideas, information, or recommending a particular path to students in relation to a particular problem or decision around the college process

Table 2
Funds of Knowledge Translated to College Application Process

	Stanton-Salazar (1997) Definition	Translated to College Application Process
Institutionally sanctioned discourses	Socially acceptable ways of using language and communicating - these are formal discourses that allocate "social goods" like money, prestige, status, credentials.	How to communicate with unfamiliar adults (ie. writing emails) in a professional manner/in ways that facilitate access to "social goods"
Content-specific knowledge	"Academic task-specific knowledge" ie. subject area knowledge	Knowing the landscape of college and how to use that information to match/fit themselves to colleges, ie. institution types (community college, four year college), the Ivy League and elite institutions, features of campus life
Organizational/ bureaucratic funds of knowledge	Knowledge of how bureaucracies operate - chains of command, resource competition among various branches of bureaucracy	FAFSA, how to fill out application and online forms, how to write short and long essays, knowledge of deadlines and how to manage time to meet deadlines
Network development	Knowledge leading to skillful networking behavior; knowledge of how to negotiate with various gatekeepers and agents within and outside school environment; knowledge of how to develop supportive ties with peers who are well integrated in a school's high-status academic circles	How to seek information from more knowledgeable others and how to figure out who the right people are depending on the task, developing ways of asking that are going elicit support that is needed.
Technical funds of knowledge	Computer literacy, study skills, test-taking skills, time management skills, decision making skills	Skills necessary to making an informed post-secondary choice, including research skills (ie. looking up online), financial aid literacy
Knowledge of labor and educational markets	Job and educational opportunities, requisites and barriers to entree, knowledge of how to fulfill requisites and overcome barriers	Knowledge about the connection between interests/talents to majors to careers, capacity to engage in exploration process in choosing major and career
Problem-solving knowledge	Knowing how to integrate the first six forms of knowledge for the purpose of solving school related problems; making sound decisions; reaching personal or collective goals	The ability to use all of the above to solve problems in the college access process and to succeed in college

Table 3
Descriptive Information for Seven Focal High Schools

School	Location	Student Demographics (%)					Post-Secondary Outcomes (%)			
		Low-Income	Latino/a	Black	English Language Learners	College Enrollment	CUNY 2-Year	CUNY 4-Year	SUNY 4-Year	NYS Private 4-Year
Murray High School for Technology	Queens	39.3	50.6	15.4	2	80.6	26	18	15	18
Haywood High School for Computers	The Bronx	73.3	55	34.9	6.7	62.1	10	16	21	12
Newcomers High School	The Bronx	94.7	81.3	11.5	85.6	39.6	19	10	1	4
Brookdale High School	Brooklyn	61.6	6	92.7	3.1	43.1	31	10	0	0
Julia de Burgos High School	Manhattan	69.2	64.7	24.2	2.4	69.1	26	15	20	5
Performing Arts High School	Manhattan	58.1	52.4	34.1	1.2	87.3	26	18	15	18
Wallenberg High School	Queens	63.4	48.4	10.9	25.2	41.5	14	22	2	2
	Average	65.7	51.2	31.9	18.0	60.5	21.7	15.6	10.6	8.4

Table 4

Preliminary Themes and Representative Responses that Characterize Participating High Schools' Role as Institutional Agents for College Access

Theme	Respondent Role and School	Representative Responses
Role modeling	12th grade English teacher, Newcomers High School	I wanted them to understand what a PWI felt like, it's really hard to explain until you experience it - because in a lot of ways, they are really spoiled… like, do you know how much we do for you here? How comfortable you actually are? Do you know how uncomfortable you would actually be if you were in an environment where everyone was white and everyone had tons more money, because it's both right its race and class. I wanted to show them that there was another level or layer of society they haven't been exposed to, and that what's Kenyon did for me, it exposed me to this other part of society I never would have been exposed to. I remember being in my American Studies class and everyone is laughing, they are making all these references, now I get it - yes, different subcultures, I get it, but at the time, I just didn't get that people had different references. I wanted them to see that. I mean, and yeah most of them will go to CUNY and it will be like here and they will continue to be really comfortable. But for some, someone, they have to realize that there are workplaces that are different, where people don't speak Spanish, where you'll be the only one, what is that going to feel like for you to look around and not get the jokes?
	Assistant principal, Wallenberg High School	It's really about prioritizing. There are a lot of priorities in the building, and it's really about having someone who's willing to prioritize this work in the building. Having my voice say that for PD day, even though have 50 million other initiatives that the city is rolling out - we have district priorities, we have Chancellor's priorities, we have school goals, we have an instructional focus - we have 50 million things - the fact that it's so important that we are going to spend dedicated time for this work. And every time that there's a PD, we're going to spend even more time on this work. So it's not a one and out, it's the dedicated, sustained messaging that this work is important. And then people keeping hearing it, hearing it, hearing it; they see the success and then they start to buy into it. But it's a daily grind to get the message out - and to stick with the message, even if you have any type of set back. Or if things don't seem to be going as well

as you want them to go - if the students you want to go to a SUNY end up going to a CUNY community college then - it's the persistence. It's a lot of persistence. Cause there's a lot of competing interests at the school level.

Provision of organizational/bureaucratic funds of knowledge	College counselor, Performing Arts High School	But it's never our trip. We're just kind of piggy-backing off of someone else's trip that didn't have enough people. I feel like we need to take the reins and say, "Ok, this seems like a really great opportunity for our kids, let's make this happen." And they would go, and they would be interested and they would be invested. You know I have kids applying to Boston University and some of them have never been to Boston. So, there's that missing link. They're very limited to within a certain radius. CUNY, SUNY, upstate, because of the performing arts some of our kids are applying to Cali, L.A. So I have a couple of kids that are applying that far out. But otherwise it's in this area. But why? Is there any reason we're not exposing ourselves to more. I just think they haven't gone anywhere.
Guidance, advice, feedback	Peer counselor, Murray High School for Technology	.It's very heavily emphasized on academic counseling, but there's definitely like a huge component of emotional counseling that goes into it. As well as mentoring. I don't really see the mentoring consciously but then in the long term like, when students are like coming back to me to like, like let me know how things are going and then, I had a student the other day, um, who, like I was helping her with totally like different subject. Like, I was helping her with like a presentation and she was outlining the speech for it and in it, she like cited me as her mentor so that was like, that was like the first time that i really had that experience where i was like, woah, this is how a specific student of mine is like responding to me. So, i thought that was really interesting.
	Peer counselor, Performing Arts High School	There was one student in particular that a lot shifted after I told him about my experience and he heard my story - because I transferred a lot. His name is Wade. At parent-teacher conferences I was actually there, I met his mom, and we were talking about him and how he never comes into the office or always comes in unprepared, forgetting usernames and passwords. And we were talking about how he needs to apply to CUNY, and he was just totally against it. And I was like, "Listen, it's a great back up, I didn't think I was going to come back from a private school and go to

		CUNY, and that's what I did. And he was just like, "Whoa, that's really what you did? You've been through this, this and this? You're right, maybe if it worked out for you, it could work out for me". So, sharing that with him, so now he comes to me all the time - all the time. And I worked with him to fill out his CUNY application.
Bridging to gatekeepers	Peer Counselor, Wallenberg High School	I have a student named Olivia. She's VERY stubborn person. So, the first time I checked in with her she was very blunt and she straightforward, oh I don't want to talk to you, I just want to do my stuff and wait on the counselor. I was like oh okay, and give her some space, but I would always check back in with her and see, are you okay. Time flew by, she started opening up a little bit. I started a conversation with her and made her feel more comfortable. So she started opening up more. And she had to do some paperwork for SEEK. She went and she brought all the paperwork that I told her to bring. But the office, it was a lady that got her mad or something. So she came back the next day saying, oh this lady she was very mean, she threw away most of my paperwork she said it wasn't the right paperwork and she didn't tell me what paperwork to do and she was having a little nervous breakdown… but she was very nervous because she didn't want to tell her mom [to get the right paperwork]… So I scheduled a day with Olga to go with her to City Tech just to get all her paperwork done and just making her feel comfortable, like it's not the end of the world.
	Advisor and Asst. Principal, Murray High School for Technology	I do think in part of my role as the assistant principal, i think that - in full disclosure be an admissions advisor at Purchase College which has a film program that a lot of our students like. And so I've been able to facilitate for a lot of students, both in my advisory and not, just connecting them with others within institutions that can help sort of get them to where they would like to be or what they want to do.