BENEATH AND BEYOND OUTCOMES: AN EXPLORATION OF COLLEGE CHOICE IN THE NO EXCUSES CHARTER SCHOOL SETTING

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ABSTRACT

BENEATH AND BEYOND OUTCOMES: A STUDY OF COLLEGE CHOICE IN THE
NO EXCUSES CHARTER SCHOOL SETTING

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This study aimed to understand how 35 focal students in a No Excuses high school, a charter school model designed to promote social mobility, made decisions about if and where to go to college. This study draws on college choice, cultural capital, and performance management literature to understand how the high school context at the focal school influenced students' college choice processes. Drawing on data from interviews, observations, and documents, this exploratory study found that Performance High provided extensive college resources and support to its students, which was consistent with how researchers conceptualize a "college-going culture" in high schools. Further, the high school used a performance management approach, in which administrators held teachers and students accountable for meeting particular college related metrics, such as the number and types of applications students were required to submit. The study found that focal students submitted applications and enrolled in college at high rates. Thirty-four of the 35 focal students planned to attend college the following fall. However, rather than exhibit the sense of entitlement and expectation that research describes for students who benefit from dominant forms of cultural capital, most of the focal students' college choice processes were characterized by hesitation, ambivalence,
and doubt. Further, the findings suggest the performance management approach assimilated students to one model of college choice that did not easily accommodate students' preferences. These findings highlight the difficulties for schools in providing cultural capital for students independent of their families, and suggests the need to reconceptualize "college-going cultures" to not only consider the college outcomes and the density of resources in the high school context, but how well students absorb cultural capital, which may be important for social mobility.
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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Though college going has increased over the last several decades, college access remains stratified by characteristics like race/ethnicity, income and socioeconomic status (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Baum et al., 2013). Young people from low-income families and whose parents have not attended college, as well as those of African American and Hispanic descent are less likely than other young people to enroll in college (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Perna, 2006, Baum et al., 2013). When they do enroll, these students find themselves concentrated in lower priced institutions, such as public two-year colleges and less-selective four-year colleges and universities (Ellwood & Kane, 2000; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003, 2004; Baum & Payea, 2004; Thomas & Perna, 2004). This inequity in college access reinforces and exacerbates the growing economic and social disparity that exists in this country between the rich and the poor, therefore it is critical to understand the forces that contribute to it.

College choice literature aims to understand how students make decisions about if and where to pursue post-secondary education. Researchers argue that the student decision-making process that determines college choice, which McDonough (1997) succinctly describes as "who goes where to college," is embedded within, and influenced by, several layers of context (Perna, 2006). Among them, the high school context has been identified as a critical aspect. According to Engberg and Wolniak (2010), “Recent studies focusing on institutional networks and historical feeder patterns have shown that the high school context may structurally determine students’ academic orientations and educational choices, and that these effects may differ by racial and socioeconomic
groups” (p. 133). Several studies have shown that one important factor is how the high school context facilitates and restricts students' college related decision-making processes which are related to college enrollment and choice (McDonough, 1997; Weis, Cipollone, & Jenkins, 2014).

Researchers who study how high school contexts influence the college choice process argue that the college transition process is a site where class and privilege are negotiated, reproduced and preserved (McDonough, 1997; Weis et al., 2014). The high school context can influence where students go to college, which is a matter of great importance in relation to reaping the benefits of higher education related to social mobility. Where a student attends college influences the chances that he or she will persist in and eventually graduate college, which vary depending on the characteristics of the institution, as well as by student group (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Stephan, Rosenbaum, & Person, 2009). For example, researchers note that selective institutions have higher graduation rates (Astin & Oseguera, 2005), and graduates from selective schools are likely to have access to better opportunities, whether it be jobs or graduate school (Carnevale, 2012). Further, higher income students complete college at significantly higher rates than low-income students (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011), and the former also tend to be concentrated in more selective colleges (Thomas & Bell, 2008; Mullen, 2010). Though enrollment in college is increasing across demographics, attention to where students go to college is critical to examine in relation to the role that college plays in social mobility. Though there is a growing body of research that considers how school contexts, as well as the behaviors and choices of actors within those settings influence if and where students go to college (McDonough, 1997; Hill, 2008; Weis et al.,
2014), few systematically consider No Excuses charter schools, which aim to close the achievement gap and make these benefits accessible to students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

**School reform, charter schools and No Excuses**

Charter schools are an integral strategy for the school reform movement, which aims to increase the efficacy of public education in the United States. Over the last few decades in particular, there has been an increase in the implementation of market reforms like performance incentives, high-stakes testing, teacher evaluation, and school choice. School choice is intended to give parents the power to choose what school their child attends, and charter schools have proliferated as one alternative to the traditional neighborhood school model.

Though they are publicly funded, charter schools are freed from many of the typical legal and bureaucratic restraints that traditional public schools are beholden to, and are, in exchange, expected to meet the terms of their charter, which typically lasts three to five years. Their charter is overseen by an authorizing agency, like a school district or university, and is renewable if and when the authorizing agency declares that the school has met the enumerated obligations or has made sufficient progress towards them. If the terms of the contract are not met, or if the school has demonstrated mismanagement, the charter is not renewed or it is revoked (Finnigan, et al., 2004; Zimmer, et al., 2003). This contractual agreement is intended to give charter schools more latitude in making curricular and organizational decisions, which some argue make
them better suited than traditional public schools to increase college related outcomes for underrepresented students (Almond, 2013).

Charter schools are currently the fastest growing school choice option in the United States. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2014), from the founding of the first charter school in Minnesota in 1992 until 2014, the sector grew considerably to more than 6,400 charter schools that serve more than 2.7 million students, over 5% of the total enrolled in public school. From 2009 to 2014, charter enrollment grew by 70%. In 2014, seven districts had more than 30% of public school students enrolled in charters (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014). The positive public opinion of charter schools (Bushaw & Calderon, 2014) as well as the fact that there are more than one million students currently on charter waiting lists (Kern & Gebru, 2014) indicate that these numbers will most likely continue to rise. Further, data from 2013 reflects that charter schools educate a higher proportion of students in poverty and of Black students than all public schools (Cremata et al, 2013).

One particular type of charter school is what Ben-Porath (2013) characterizes as "totalizing schools," and others have called No Excuses schools (Cheng et al., 2014). These mission-based non-profit charter schools aim to improve educational achievement and attainment for mostly poor and minority students through strategies like increased instructional time, strict behavior processes, character education, and a focus on objective and measurable results, such as test scores and college enrollment rates (Ben-Porath, 2013). Such schools are often part of Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) like KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program), Harlem Success Academy, and Mastery Charter Schools. McDermott and Nygreen (2013) call the approach used in these schools "new
paternalism" for its close monitoring of student behavior. Proponents argue that this model emphasizes middle-class norms and values, which can help students achieve upward mobility (Whitman, 2008). Critics argue that such an approach represents "deficit thinking" (Valencia, 1997) in that it assumes that the cultures of students who are from low-income or minority groups are inherently inferior. Others have argued that these school environments restrict student opportunities for civic participation, exercising personal agency, developing moral compasses, and engaging personal interests (Goodman, 2013; Ben-Porath, 2013, Sondel, 2015). Though many No Excuses schools focus on students making "good" choices, Goodman (2013) questions the notion of choice in such regulated environments, where young people are responding to a strict set of norms and a schedule of rewards and punishments. McDermott and Nygreen (2013) contend that students' experiences in these schools are more nuanced than the proponents or critics acknowledge, that there are strategies that help enable students to navigate the "power culture" without being oppressive, and that "even scholars who are deeply critical of deficit thinking tend to agree on the need to help low-income students learn to navigate and negotiate mainstream institutions successfully” (p. 91). Indeed, research consistently reflects that White, middle and upper class students more typically have the kinds of social and cultural capital that are valued in the college choice process, to their significant advantage (McDonough, 1997; Weis et al., 2014).

**No Excuses approach to college choice**

Though many scholars argue that, on average, students in charter schools do no better or worse than their counterparts in traditional schools (Woodworth et al, 2013;
Tuttle et al., 2012; Davis & Raymond, 2012), there is some evidence that No Excuses charter schools have increased academic achievement of low-income and minority students, especially in math (Angriest, Pathak, & Walters, 2013; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Cremata et al, 2013). There is also some evidence that these schools have specifically increased college-related outcomes for their students (Angrist et al., 2013).

Given the focus on accountability and student achievement in the school reform movement, and the pressure on charter schools to perform well and fulfill their contracts, performance management plays a central role in shaping the school environment at No Excuses schools. According to Armstrong & Baron (1998), “Performance management is a strategic and integrated approach to delivering sustained success to organizations by improving performance of the people who work in them and by developing the capabilities of teams and individual contributors" (p. 7). In synthesizing the literature, Gentle (2001) presents four characteristics of performance management. First, performance management is a process that permeates the culture of an organization rather than occurring as discrete events (i.e., an annual review). Second, the performance management process is used to establish a common understanding of what the organization is trying to accomplish and how. Performance management is also a way of managing people to ensure that goals are achieved through appropriate lines of accountability. Finally, people within the performance management process share in the success that the organization achieves. Performance management originated in the private sector but has increasingly been used as an approach to social sectors as well. In No Excuses schools, this regimented approach to the school environment is related to their goal of promoting social mobility. By strictly monitoring and measuring student
behavior, schools aim to provide students with the kinds of knowledge and skills typically associated with White, middle and upper class families that can be transformed into educational and economic resources. Whitman (2008) describes No Excuses schools in the following manner:

They are highly prescriptive institutions that assert their moral authority both to define good character and to teach adolescents how to behave, much like a firm but loving father. These schools go several steps further than the many schools that purport to teach “values;” they unapologetically preempt misbehavior by obliging students to live up to a detailed code of conduct based on middle-class values and the Protestant work ethic. Unlike most inner-city schools, the new paternalistic schools have little tolerance for disorder—they sweat the small stuff. (p. 260)

He argues that this approach is effective because it enables schools to transmit capital that underprivileged families aspire to and value, but are unable to transmit to their children.

Scholars have considered how performance management is related to teaching and learning, specifically in the areas of student achievement outcomes like test scores and teacher evaluation reforms, including merit pay (Perryman et al., 2011; Gleeson & Shain, 1999; Ball, 2003). This dissertation builds on previous studies about college choice in charter schools (e.g., McJunkin, 2010; Almond, 2013) to describe and examine a performance management approach to college choice, wherein students and counselors strive to meet college-related targets for which they are held accountable. As McDermott and Nygreen (2013) have concluded, we lack critical empirical evidence about the actual college-related practices at No Excuses schools and how students experience and interpret these practices. This dissertation addresses this knowledge gap.
Purpose of the study

No Excuses charter schools aim to decrease the achievement gap and help students access higher education through systematic institutional practices that can be replicated across schools. While many researchers (e.g. Angriest, et al., 2013; Chabrier et al., 2016; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2004) have examined the large-scale impact and implications of this strategy, few have sought to understand the day-to-day enactment of college choice in these settings.

In order to address this gap in the literature, this study uses ethnographic methods to explore the college-related practices of one No Excuses charter school and how these practices influence students’ perceptions, behaviors, and decision-making processes around college. Performance measures around college -- that is, the goal that a specific percentage of students apply to and enroll in particular types of institutions -- are an unexamined dimension of No Excuses schools. Often performance indicators go unexamined because they are veiled with what Mahoney & Hextall (2001) call a "cloak of technicism," that is, they appear to play no role in constructing the thing that they intend to measure (in this case college choice) but only to assess them. Yet, these standards help to structure a worldview that determines the courses of action that are feasible and reasonable within that world. At a time when No Excuses schools and performance management models are proliferating, this study takes a closer look at how that logic is translated into practice in one school. It considers the underlying values being communicated and negotiated in relation to performance management, and explores how that might influence students’ perceptions and decision-making around...
college. This dissertation also aims to understand if and how this No Excuses high school provides students with the kinds of cultural capital that advantage some students over others in the college choice process.

**Organization of the dissertation**

This dissertation examines the college-related practices of one No Excuses high school, and how these practices influence the college choice process of 35 focal students embedded within it. Chapter Two presents an overview of the theoretical framework that informed this study. It explicates Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice, which provides the groundwork for this study. This chapter also reviews the literature about the ways in which high schools in general, and charter schools in particular, influence academic and college-related outcomes, and college choice for students. It provides an overview of literature around cultural capital and performance management as a lens through which to understand the college-related context and practices at some No Excuses charter schools.

Chapter Three provides a detailed description of the research design and how the design relates to the conceptual framework of the study. The research interests and decisions are carefully described, including those about methodology, including sampling, research relationships, data collection and data analysis. This documentation will increase the transparency of the methods used, as well as the systematic process through which the claims in this dissertation are derived. This chapter also includes a description of the community in which the focal school resides, as well as a description of the school itself. Finally, as ethnographic research conceptualizes the researcher as a tool
or lens through which the research is conducted and understood, Chapter Three also discusses the role of the researcher, and how personal experiences and perceptions may influence the work.

Chapter Four focuses on aspects of the school environment that emerged as important for understanding school practices and student perceptions and experiences around college going. While the literature describes a dearth of resources in schools that serve low-income students and students of color (e.g., Oakes et al. 2006), the focal school provided an extensive network of college supports, including information about and exposure to college, as well as practical support in the college application process. Chapter four documents the process by which the school tried to transmit cultural capital to its students in order to facilitate their college choice process. It also documents the accountability policies related to college going at Performance High. These characteristics provide the context for students' college choice processes, explored in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Five discusses how the pervasive college message, dedicated resources, and regimented college program at Performance High influenced how the focal students decided whether to go to college. As one would expect in a school with a robust college-going culture, nearly all of the focal students (34 out of 35) planned to attend a two- or four-year college the fall after graduating from high school. Like students in elite schools (Weis, 2014), most of the focal students took for granted that applying to and attending college was the next step for them. However, the majority of the focal students' college plans were characterized by hesitation and doubt rather than a sense of self-confidence and entitlement to college. The latter are forms of cultural capital that tend to privilege
White, middle, and upper class students in meeting the evaluative standards of institutions (Reay, 2004; Lareau, 2011).

Chapter Six discusses how students made decisions about where to go to college. The findings illustrate the ways that the college program at Performance High emphasized acculturating and assimilating all students to one model of college choice. This approach steered students toward applying to and enrolling in the colleges that students saw as "sanctioned" by their counselors and school. About a third of the focal students reported that the college program bolstered their college aspirations and facilitated their college application process. However, the college program did not transmit cultural capital or shift the worldview of all students, as some students remained dubious about whether college would help them to access the promised benefits and not all students believed that college was the best way to reach their goals.

Chapter Seven discusses the implications of using a performance management approach to college choice in schools. While the study does not have data documenting outcomes that would have occurred in the absence of the college program, the college program at Performance High appears to have increased enrollment outcomes for the focal students. However, the findings highlight the challenges associated with transmitting cultural capital to students. Simply providing information, support, and resources was insufficient to change college-related attitudes, dispositions, and expectations of all students, in ways that align with the attitudes, dispositions, and expectations of students from more privileged backgrounds. Students in this study reported that some aspects of the performance management approach fostered tension and distrust that undermined the college mission at Performance High. The findings from
this study demonstrate the need to expand notions of "college-going cultures" to include attention to how students absorb and embody cultural capital, as well as the need to move beyond the narrow focus on college enrollment outcomes in understanding how to promote college access for underrepresented groups.
CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Framing

This chapter reviews and summarizes what is known from prior research and theory about how the high school context influences college choice. The chapter argues that, to understand how students make college-related decisions in a charter school setting, we must first examine the increased attention to managing and measuring performance in some charter schools, as well as the process by which schools transmit cultural capital to students. The chapter first portrays how scholars conceptualize the complex factors that structure, facilitate, and limit students' decision-making processes in relation to college going, especially for students from underrepresented groups. Second, it synthesizes the recent literature about the mechanisms by which the high school context can exert influence on how students make decisions about college. It reviews the current research on what is known about how charter school contexts influence college readiness and choice. Finally, it presents literature about cultural capital and performance management as a lens for understanding the college-going practices of some charter schools.

College choice

This study uses Perna's (2006) proposed college choice model as a foundational framework. The model combines economic models of human capital, theories of social and cultural capital, and explicitly situates college choice in several layers of context. This framework is useful for understanding college access and choice for students from groups that are historically underrepresented in higher education. Central to this model is the assumption that decisions that students make about college going are influenced by
their habitus, or system of values and beliefs in which they are embedded, and that because of this, the college choice process plays out differently for different groups of students. The model is represented below in figure 1.

![Conceptual model of college choice](image)

Figure 1 Conceptual model of college choice  

To understand students' college-related experiences in No Excuses schools, this study conceptualizes students as nested within this model, which portrays "college choice" as encompassing three phases: developing aspirations or a predisposition to
attend college, the search and creating of a choice set, and the final decision. During the predisposition stage, students develop attitudes and preferences in relation to higher education. The search phase includes the sources of college-related information that students rely on to create their "choice sets," or the number and types of institutions to which students consider and/or apply. Search activities include weighing attributes and characteristics of different institutions, as well as learning about which characteristics may be important to the decision. Students evaluate and rank their choices within their choice set and eventually make decisions among them by weighing the characteristics of potential colleges, such as tuition, location, and financial aid, as well as the costs and benefits of alternative post high school plans (Perna, 2006). The model assumes that students make these decisions as predicted by human capital theory, acting rationally in order to maximize their utility given the context. Using this lens, a person chooses to attend college, and selects a particular institution, if he or she perceives that the benefits collected over a lifetime outweigh the costs.

Perna’s (2006) model also incorporates attention to the constructs of cultural and social capital, other resources thought to increase productivity. Drawing from the work of other scholars, Perna (2006) describes cultural capital as "the system of attributes, such as language skills, cultural knowledge, and mannerisms, that is derived, in part, from one's parents that defines an individual's class status" (p. 111).

Though cultural capital and social capital are closely related, social capital refers to the resources that are available through relationships (Perna, 2006), and is helpful for understanding how actors access and deploy resources that are available through relationships in order to achieve particular goals. For students, networks may be made up
of relationships with family, friends, school personnel, church members, or individuals in community-based organizations. Robust social networks facilitate an individual’s access to human and cultural capital, as well as to other information and resources. This access influences the likelihood that actions will result in successful outcomes (Coleman, 1988; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

Perna's (2006) model is especially useful when considering the decision-making processes of groups that are traditionally underrepresented in colleges and universities because of its delineation of the many layers of context that exert influence on college choice. Layer 1 reflects the habitus, or “the system of values and beliefs that shapes an individual’s views and interpretations” (Perna, 2006, p. 115). This layer includes attention to students' demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity), cultural capital (e.g., cultural knowledge and value of college attainment) and social capital, (e.g., information about college and assistance with the college process). Layer 2 reflects the school and community context, including the availability and the nature of resources, as well as structural supports and barriers. Layer 3 reflects the higher education context, including how schools disseminate information and institutional characteristics. Layer 4 reflects the social, economic and policy context, including demographic, economic, and public policy characteristics of the state and nation in which a student lives.

Although all of these layers are important for understanding students’ college-related choices, this study is particularly interested in the high school context, which research demonstrates is important for populations who are underrepresented in higher education because students from these groups heavily rely on their schools for information, resources and support in the college transition process (Venezia & Kirst,
2005; Wimberly, 2002; Ceja, 2000). As reflected in Perna's (2006) review, factors related to the high school context that have been found to be important include the availability of supportive/knowledgeable adults and assistance in creating a curricular plan, the extent and nature of school guidance counseling, and the availability of college-related information. Perna and Titus (2005) found that a student's likelihood of enrolling in college is related to the volume of resources that can be accessed through the social networks at his or her school.

**College-going and cultural capital**

As portrayed in the college choice research, one way that high schools are thought to facilitate college choice is through the mediation of cultural capital. For Bourdieu (1977), cultural capital comprises a wide array of preferences, dispositions, competencies, and manners. Drawing on Bourdieu, Lareau and Weininger (2003) define cultural capital as a broad set of skills and understandings that advantage certain groups over others in meeting the evaluative standards of institutions. Such skills and understandings can include attitudes, behaviors, knowledge and credentials (Lamont and Lareau, 1988). Cultural capital is instrumental and context-based. That is, the value of cultural capital is in how it is used to access sought-after resources and cultural capital is valued differently based on the circumstances.

Although what counts as cultural capital depends on the context, scholars argue that levels of confidence and entitlement are key dimensions of cultural capital across social fields (Reay, 2004; Lareau, 2011). For example, in Reay's (2004) study of mothers negotiating with gatekeepers in educational settings, she found that confidence,
ambivalence, or a sense of inadequacy mediated the mothers' ability to navigate the interactions to their benefit.

Scholars argue that cultural capital is a critical component of understanding inequality in education, including how privilege is gained and maintained for particular groups (Lareau, 2011; Reay, 1998). Researchers find that, even after holding constant characteristics that are related to cultural capital like economic resources and academic ability, measures of cultural capital are positively related to the likelihood that students will be successful in educational settings. Children and parents use their cultural capital with institutional agents like teachers to secure resources, negotiate interactions to their advantage, and/or receive preferential treatment (Farkas et al. 1990; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lareau and Weininger, 2004). Understanding the "rules of the game," developing particular dispositions, and navigating elite settings with ease afford dominant groups advantages in education and beyond. For example, Rivera (2012) found that hiring in elite firms was a process of "cultural matching" in which elite employers had a preference for candidates with dispositions and self-presentation styles similar to their own.

The transmission of cultural capital through one's family and habitus contributes to social reproduction and the maintenance of privilege across generations, although the mechanisms by which cultural capital is transmitted are not entirely understood. Scholars contend that cultural capital is implicitly inherited through a process of socialization, as well as intentionally transmitted through grooming and mentorship (Bourdieu, 1977; Lareau, 2011; Jaeger, 2009). Bourdieu uses the concept of the habitus to describe individuals’ acquired worldview, including cultural practices, norms, expectations and dispositions. Because cultural capital is a part of their habitus, individuals display
familiarity with these nuanced high status norms and dispositions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). In contrast, those from lower social classes tend to have fewer opportunities in their homes and communities to develop the cultural skills of dominant groups that are privileged in educational settings (Lareau, 2011; Calarco, 2011). Though this process of socialization typically occurs within families, scholars have found that institutions can also mediate and transmit cultural capital (McDonough, 1997; Reay, 1998), as well as shift students' habitus (Horvat & Davis, 2010). Jaeger (2009) argues that, for students to benefit from cultural capital in terms of educational outcomes, cultural capital must be transmitted, absorbed by the children, and converted into educational capital.

The college choice process is a battleground where privileged families deploy their resources, including their cultural capital, to secure educational capital and opportunity for their own students (Lareau, 2010; Weis, 2014). McDonough (1997) argues that this cultural capital influences students' values and attitudes about college, their access to information and support in navigating the application process, and students' willingness to invest the time and energy it takes to access college. White, middle- and upper-class families often use their resources to secure positions in selective and/or prestigious colleges and universities. In concert, the college choice processes of middle- and upper-class students have the effect of creating a collective class advantage.

Scholars contend that schools can create college-going cultures that facilitate college choice for students who do not have access to dominant forms of cultural capital through their families. A college-going culture is characterized by information and resources about college, comprehensive college counseling, a pervasive college message,
and high school partnerships with colleges, among other factors (Jarsky et al., 2009; Corwin & Tierney, 2007). Socialization into such a culture can nurture students' aspirations and dispositions toward college. Further, scholars argue that a college-going culture can help students navigate the institutional standards associated with college applications and provide the necessary resources to make informed postsecondary decisions (Jarsky et al., 2009). Though there is a rich body of research that demonstrates that cultural capital is important to educational outcomes and college choice, it is unclear if and how this gap in resources can be bridged for students who are underrepresented in higher education.

**College choice in the high school context**

Some researchers have used quantitative methods to consider how the characteristics and practices of particular school contexts influence college outcomes for students (Hill, 2008; Palardy, 2013; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). In one such study, Hill (2008) developed a typology of three distinct "college linking" processes employed by schools: traditional, clearinghouse and brokering. Schools that employed the traditional process had limited college resources, and a limited role in facilitating access to resources for students and families. Those that reflected the clearinghouse process had substantial school-based resources for college planning, but a limited role in distributing resources. Schools that used the brokering strategy had both substantial resources, and a commitment to the equitable distribution of those resources in order to support the college choice process. Drawing on data from the High School Effectiveness Study derived from ELS data, she found that Black and Latino students in the sample were
more highly concentrated in the traditional schools, while brokering schools served students with the highest levels of parental income and parental education. Further, these strategies were associated with patterns of college enrollment, which varied from a high of 49 percent for students in brokering schools to a low of 11 percent for students in traditional schools.

Palardy (2013), using data from the Education Longitudinal Survey (ELS) of 2002 and controlling for various other student and school factors, examined the relationship between high school socioeconomic segregation and college outcomes for students. He found that the socioeconomic composition of schools (SEC), which measures the average socioeconomic status of students attending a school, influenced college enrollment. Students who attended high SEC schools were found to be 68% more likely to enroll at a 4-year college than students who attended low SEC schools. He identified peer relationships, as well as school emphasis on academics, to be factors that were important for mediating the positive relationship between SEC and college enrollment. Engberg and Wolniak (2010), also drawing on data from the 2002 ELS, came to a similar conclusion about the positive relationship between the aggregate socioeconomic statuses of students within a school and enrollment in four-year colleges. Other school level factors that they found to be important were academic preparation, peer networks, and parents' involvement in the school.

While quantitative research investigates the relationships between school characteristics and student outcomes, qualitative researchers have illuminated how individual and collective behaviors and activities within the school context contribute to college related outcomes. Researchers have studied college choice in the high school
context as a way to understand the reproduction and maintenance of social and economic privilege across different racial and class groups (Weis et al., 2014; Cipollone, 2012; Jenkins, 2011). One such study (Cipollone, 2012) was a year-long investigation that relied on interviews, observations and document review in order to understand the college choice practices of focal students from the professional middle and upper middle classes. Cipollone (2012) found that school and family influences combined to create identities for students as "selective college-goers." Students' behavior and decisions related to college going, like in selecting classes or applying to particular colleges, reflected these identities.

Jenkins (2011) also considered college choice in privileged high schools, but she focused on the experiences of 27 Black students across gender and social class, attending elite, private and primarily White secondary schools. Through analysis of qualitative data, the study considered the layers of opportunity to which students had access, depending on their social, cultural and economic capital. She found that the participants were simultaneously privileged and marginalized in these settings. On one hand, students were marginalized by the negative assumptions that school staff had about the academic capacity of Black students, which lead to school practices that disadvantaged this group of students (e.g., less access to advanced level courses). At the same time, the students benefitted from rigorous academic environment and easy access to college knowledge and resources that permeated the school context.

Weis et al. (2014) conducted a cross-case analysis that drew data from the two previously mentioned studies by Cipollone (2012) and Jenkins (2011), as well as additional data. In the study, the authors documented the day-to-day activities of students
attending elite secondary schools who aspire to be accepted to elite universities. They found that the struggle to maintain class positioning through college choice varied depending on school sector, as well as with the individual student's positioning in relation to the opportunity structure and organizational habitus of the school. One difference was in who initiated and lead the college choice process. Among participants in the top 10% of their class from an affluent public school, the parents initiated the process with early positioning of students, and subsequently, transferred ownership of the process to students. In the second group, drawn from the top 20% of their class in a private school, the process was micromanaged by the parents throughout, and then ultimately, student outcomes depended on the further investment of the individual student. The third group was a sample drawn from Jenkins' (2011) data, but only included low-income Black students. The participants experienced the college choice process as "outsiders-within" and their college processes were largely self-managed. The study found that across the cases, schools catered to students who were at the top of the opportunity structure, including those who had good grades and test scores, and White students were "doubly privileged" because of their class positioning and their proximity to opportunity structure. The Black students were "doubly disadvantaged" by their class background and low position in the opportunity structure.

In contrast to college choice in privileged institutions, Bloom (2006) documented the college choice processes of students in three small, urban schools in New York City, two of which were predominantly minority and low-income and one that had a more mixed student population. Bloom's study reinforced the literature that reflects how cultural, social and financial capital create access and barriers to higher education
differently across race and class, but it is unique in its portrayal of how particularly located students experience these barriers, and how complex factors coalesce to create specific outcomes. In relation to the college choice process, Bloom notes that for the middle class students in her study, this process was a matter of deciding where to attend college, whereas lower class students weighed the costs, benefits, and significant risks in order to decide if higher education was worth pursuing.

**College choice in charter school settings**

To this point, this dissertation has considered how the high school context, in general, influences college choice and college outcomes for students. Though there are fewer studies that consider charter schools in particular, those that do often try to understand how charter schools influence college outcomes for students who are randomly selected for enrollment versus those who are not selected. Several quantitative studies have explored the relationship between charter school enrollment and college going by using large administrative datasets. For example, Dobbie and Fryer (2011) examined applicants who were selected by lottery to attend a single charter middle school in the Harlem Children’s Zone and found that lottery winners were more likely to go to college than their counterparts who did not win. However, the number of applications was not so large as to have a substantial pool of "losing" students. A study by Booker et al. (2008) used statistical controls and distance instruments to identify the relationship between charter school attendance and high school graduation and college enrollment. They found that, controlling for student characteristics and test scores, students who attended a charter middle school who went on to attend a charter high school were 7 to 15
percentage points more likely to earn a standard diploma than students who transitioned to a traditional public high school. Those who attended a charter high school were 8 to 10 percentage points more likely to attend college. The reasons for the increased college enrollment for charter school students is unclear, though the study controlled for school size as well as differences in student achievement, neither of which fully accounted for the positive relationship.

Finally, a study by Angrist et al. (2013) also suggested college-related gains for charter school students. The study tracked students who applied to Boston charter school lotteries from 2002 through 2009. Most of the schools employed the No Excuses school model. Researchers compared students who were offered seats in charters against those who were not, drawing from Massachusetts' public school district administrative data. The study found that attending a Boston-area charter school increased rates of passing the high-stakes graduation exam and the likelihood of qualifying for a state-sponsored college scholarship. Attendance also increased the likelihood of taking an Advanced Placement (AP) exam, the number of AP exams taken, and scores on AP Calculus tests. Charter attendance was also related to a substantial shift in enrollment from two-to four-year institutions, though the effect on overall college enrollment was modest. Angrist et al. note that the effect of being offered a seat at a charter school was only explored for students who were already interested in attending a charter school and might vary for other types of students.

Deming et al. (2009) also found increases in college-related outcomes for students who participated in school lotteries and won positions in their first choice schools versus those who had low quality default options, even when the schools in question were not
charter schools (Deming et al., 2009). In studying a new open enrollment policy in one school district, Deming et al. (2009) found that those who won admission to their first choice school had gains in grade attainment, and high school graduation. Female lottery winners were more likely to attend and persist in four-year colleges.

Regardless of whether the estimated effects in the studies mentioned above are related solely to the charter effect, to particular school characteristics, or a combined effect of charters with specific characteristics, the results demonstrate the utility of research that considers the influence of school contexts on outcomes beyond test scores and student achievement and enrollment statistics.

Qualitative studies have presented a more detailed and descriptive picture of college preparatory charter school settings, and the culture, practices, and college-related activities within them (McJunkin, 2010; Almond, 2013; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009). Almond (2013) conducted an ethnographic multi-case study in which she investigated the practices and collective beliefs that support the college preparatory missions of two different charter school contexts. Almond's study documented aspects of the culture such as "college talk," the availability of information and resources, and clear expectations, and considered how these elements operated in each setting. In another study, Farmer-Hinton (2006, 2008) collected and analyzed interview and focus group data to understand the kinds of school-based social capital needed to facilitate students' college choice processes. In this multi-year case study of a college preparatory charter high school in Chicago, Farmer-Hinton's findings emphasized the importance of a clear college preparatory school mission, personalized college planning, and curriculum-based college enrichment activities. McJunkin's (2010) case study of a college prep charter
school also focused on the how the organizational habitus of the school influenced college choice, but focused particularly on the development of college aspirations. His findings indicated that peer influences, family pressures, and beliefs about financial aid and educational expenses were important in the study participants' college choice processes.

Taken together, the themes that emerge from these studies reflect that, within college preparatory charter school settings, the forces that emerge as important mirror those that have been established as predictors of college choice in general, namely financial resources, academic preparation and achievement, support from significant others, and knowledge and information about college and financial aid (Perna & Jones, 2013).

However, findings from these studies also suggest that students' decision-making processes in these settings may differ from college choice models where aspirations precipitate search and sort activities. McJunkin (2010) found that, in one charter school, the college choice process was supported by a strong college-going culture, where culture was defined by access to information and resources about college and technical support with applications. Though their teachers and counselors supported students through the application process, McJunkin described their college aspirations as "fragile" and "unstable" as they were tentative and often changed throughout the process.

Similarly, in her study Farmer-Hinton (2008) describes the participants' initial college aspirations as "vague" and "abstract." Though students in these settings have not necessarily developed or solidified intentions to attend college at the time of the application process, the data reveals that the majority of the students complete the process
anyway, often through a required college-related seminar (McJunkin, 2010; Almond, 2013). In some cases, college-related activities are also required for graduation, such as taking the SAT, filling out the FAFSA, and applying to a predetermined number and type of college (McJunkin, 2010; Almond, 2013; Farmer-Hinton, 2008). Almond (2013) documented that in one school (IMHS), students were required to apply to two and four-year schools in order to graduate. In the other school (JA), students were required to apply to three four-year colleges in order to graduate. Both schools reported 100% college acceptance rate, the prior for the last three years and the latter for the past eight years in a row. Participants in the study explained that Washington DC charter schools were evaluated by a framework that included college acceptance rates. In order for a school to be rated "high performing", 65-100% of its students must be accepted to 2 or 4-year colleges. Because of this, schools were incentivized to employ strategies to increase acceptance rates, though they were not evaluated by matriculation or persistence data. IMHS did not have available data for matriculation or persistence in college. For JA, only 26% of eligible alumni actually graduated from college from 2005-2011.

No Excuses in college choice

McDonough (1997) asserts that, "Cultural capital is exactly the knowledge that elites value yet schools do not teach" (p. 9). Scholars argue that schools play a role in shaping and mediating cultural capital (McDonough, 1996; Reay, 1998), however, No Excuses schools aim to provide students with cultural capital independent of families. Whitman (2008) suggests, "Implicit in the schools portrayed here, is that the poor lack the family and community support, cultural capital, and personal follow-through to live
according to the middle-class values that they, too, espouse" (p. 35). He argues that No Excuses schools are effective in instilling in students middle class knowledge, behaviors, and values through the careful regulation of their behavior. No Excuses schools use a performance management approach to shape the day-to-day enactment of this endeavor, as well as to measure their progress in securing the social mobility that these tactics are meant to promote.

Schools across the western world have been increasingly concerned with performance management in education, especially as the idea of the "knowledge economy" continues to play a significant role in how education is conceptualized. According to Armstrong and Baron (1998 pp. 44-5) performance management systems communicate objectives to employees, set individual performance targets related to the larger vision, and feature formal reviews to assess how well the targets are being met. These evaluations are intended to drive improvements. Proponents of the performance management approach argue that it makes outcomes explicit and transparent, which is useful for stakeholders. A performance management approach can ensure that everyone is on the same page about what success looks like, and the role that each person plays within that setting. This increases the likelihood that each person has a clear idea of what is expected of him or her, and because the roles are differentiated, allows for more efficient and targeted training (Gleeson & Husbands, 2001).

In a performance environment, "quality" is defined as the best equation achievable by minimizing inputs and maximizing outputs (Lyotard, 2000). Subsequently, economy, efficiency and effectiveness are of the utmost importance and are measured by performance indicators. This type of measurement assumes that quality can be described
and measured in the language of indicators. Activities that cannot be captured by instruments are not considered (Ball, 2001; Gleeson & Husbands, 2001).

In education, there is an increased focus on managing and measuring performance, which is reflected in policies that emphasize accountability, system development, and outcomes. Broadly, this translates to policies about school structure, prescribed curricula, and prescribed assessment. At the district or school level, there is a focus on effectiveness and improvement that results in interventions in pedagogy and new kinds of professional development and teacher evaluation (Gleeson & Husbands, 2001). There are also rewards and sanctions in place in order to hold people and institutions accountable for their performance. This is reflected in practices like merit pay for teachers based on student achievement indicators, Race to the Top's national competitive grant program designed to encourage and reward states for adopting standards and assessments and tracking student data, and school choice initiatives where there is a "marketplace" that rewards high performing schools with federal funds that travel with students who select these schools.

Performativity theory is closely related to the idea of performance management. Ball (2003) describes performativity as a technology, culture, and mode of regulation concerned with the performance of individuals by measuring their productivity or outputs, and tying them to incentives and sanctions. These measurements reflect the value or worth of individuals and their work within a field of judgment. Performativity is concerned with achievement, measurability, effectiveness, efficiency, entrepreneurship and the marketplace (Ball, 2003). The performative culture was once associated with maximizing outputs in the private sector, but recently scholars have been concerned with
how this approach has encroached upon the public sector, including in education. Ball (2003) has considered how measuring the work of teachers and tying measurable data points to compensation changes teaching and learning, as well as teachers' roles in relation to their students. He argues that such a sharp focus on performance indicators casts teachers as technicians rather than professionals with experience, judgment, and the ability to make decisions and to reflect.

Scholars such as Golann (2015) aim to understand how the strict, regulated behavior policies for students commonly associated with the performative cultures of No Excuses schools influence educational outcomes. Golann (2015) argues that the emphasis on incentives, rewards, compliance, and deference to authority undermines the development of cultural and noncognitive skills that are important for success in college. In synthesizing the literature about the role of noncognitive skills in social stratification, she found that schools and teaching strategies for working class students prioritized conformity to behavioral norms (compliance, deference, punctuality, and obedience) while those geared towards middle and upper class students emphasized interactional skills (negotiation, assertiveness, independence). While Golann (2015) notes that these differing practices contribute to social class reproduction, her literature review also found that an emphasis on behavioral norms can increase academic achievement and learning.

Scholars have considered how performance environments and performativity shape the work of school leaders (Mahony & Hextall, 2001; Blackmore, 2004), as well as teaching and learning (Troman & Raggl, 2007; Jeffrey, 2002). In relation to college choice, achieving targets like high percentages of students filling out FAFSAs, taking the ACT, or applying to college seems like a logical approach to leveling the playing field for
underrepresented students, as the college application process itself is a linear series of steps. However, Perna's (2006) model of college choice assumes that the college choice process is actually a complex social phenomenon influenced by several layers of context. Of performativity, Ball (2003) argues, "...the technology of performativity appears as misleadingly objective and hyper-rational. Central to its functioning is the translation of complex social processes and events into simple figures or categories of judgment" (p. 217). Just as a culture of performativity can fundamentally change the work of teachers, it also shapes and structures the college choice process in the school context, and the roles of students and counselors within it. For example, Farmer-Hinton (2008b) found that in one college prep charter school "...the focus group respondents said that if they wanted to apply to schools perceived by staff as incompatible with their “potential,” they were required to find other schools; or, if they wanted to apply to schools perceived by staff as outside their academic range, per their grades and academic skills, students were required to find more realistic options" (p.147). Both McJunkin (2010) and Almond (2013) found that the school requirements about college applications influenced the number and types of schools that students applied to, and contributed to high rates of college acceptance at these schools. This dissertation extends this work by systematically describing and analyzing how the performance environment in one school influences student perceptions and experiences in this particular school context, and how students make decisions about college.
Gap in the literature

Existing studies that consider how and why the high school context influences college-related decision making emphasize the ways that schools mediate important forms of cultural capital (McDonough, 1997). They also pose that students make decisions about college that make sense in relation to their habitus, by observing those around them to ascertain what is acceptable and appropriate. Researchers have found that students believe they are entitled to particular college experiences based on their family, school and community habitus or class status (McDonough, 1997; Weis, 2014). This dissertation builds on prior research to examine the forces and characteristics of No Excuses school contexts that shape individual student behavior. More specifically, this dissertation examines the influence of college application policies and embedded curricula around college going that have recently emerged in charter school settings with the intention of promoting college access for students from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

Collectively, studies about college preparatory charter schools describe settings that strive to provide college related information and resources, as well as practical support for the application process (Almond, 2013; Farmer-Hinton, 2006; 2008). Researchers who look at college choice in these environments argue that the creation of a "college-going culture" is critical (Almond, 2013; Farmer-Hinton, 2006, 2008). This study examines the ways in which the practices and college-going culture at Performance High facilitated and restricted the focal students' college-going decisions, and highlights the difficulties the school faced in transmitting the cultural capital that privileges students from middle- and upper-social class in educational attainment processes.
The attention of these schools to regulating student behaviors and activities pertaining to college is a distinctive approach with likely implications for the organizational habitus of the schools and the experiences and outcomes of students attending the schools (McDonough, 1997; Weis et al., 2014). Goodman (2013) notes,

The single-minded focus of CMOs (Charter School Management Organizations) on preparing students for college, with every activity geared to that end, differentiates them as well from schools with strong missions (cultures) whose codes of behavior are characterized more by a set of normative expectations and aspirations than by a complex of detailed rules enforced throughout the day. (p. 119)

There is much debate about the efficacy of this particular model, as well as the unintended consequences (Cheng et al., 2014; Ben-Porath, 2013; Lack, 2009). This exploratory study contributes to this body of literature by using ethnographic methods to examine how the performative environment of one selected school shapes students’ perceptions and experiences around college choice.
CHAPTER 3: Research Design and Methods

As the previous chapters document, although some data suggest that certain No Excuses schools increase college-related outcomes for students, especially in terms of high school graduation and college enrollment, little is known about how students perceive and experience the practices of these schools. Existing research is also unclear as to if and how institutions can provide cultural capital for students in the absence of such resources in the home. To address this knowledge gap, this exploratory study relied on qualitative methods, which are uniquely suited to understanding human experiences and exploring complex phenomena occurring in particular contexts (Maxwell, 2013). Because this study is concerned with describing and interpreting the shared patterns of perceptions, behaviors and beliefs of a culture-sharing group, an ethnographic approach is ideally suited for its methods (Creswell, 2012).

Characteristic of ethnography, I immersed myself in the daily context of the focal school in order to understand what participants experienced as meaningful or important in this setting. I sought to understand how participants feel, perceive, and act in order to understand their social worlds and their lives (Loftland & Loftland, 2006). I formulated a detailed plan for data collection before entering the setting, collecting data with Maxwell's (2004) understanding that no evidence is inadmissible. Characteristic of ethnography, the data collection took a relatively open approach wherein a variety of data sources were collected that were related to and reflective of college choice practices at the focal school, and how students perceived and experienced them (Maxwell, 2004). According to Maxwell (2004), research design falls into four critical categories: 1)
research relationships, 2) site and participant selection, 3) data collection and 4) data analysis. This chapter describes my methods in relation to those four categories.

**Research Relationships**

When I began data collection in February of 2016, it was the very first time I had ever been to the school site, and the first time I met anyone employed at Performance High. It was clear that there was an understanding that I would be doing the study under the full cooperation of the central office and the adults in the building were receptive and helpful from the beginning.

The administrators were aware of my presence in the building and made a point to introduce themselves, but my contact with them was limited. The teachers varied in their receptiveness to participate. All of the teachers I approached agreed to allow me to observe their classes, but some asked that I email in advance or declined to be observed on particular days. While I made the purpose of the observations clear, some of the teachers seemed self-conscious about the planned activities and declined to be observed on particular days because they were not “doing anything interesting” in class. Ten teachers invited me to drop in at any time and welcomed me warmly when I did. The teachers also agreed to sit for interviews when asked, but three were not responsive when asked to schedule a time. Several teachers were interested and engaged in the study, asked me often about what I was finding, and were genuinely curious about how the study could improve school practices. The three school counselors were completely open to the study and provided whatever information they had at their disposal in a timely manner. They negotiated access to spaces in the school, materials, data, and participants.
Negotiating relationships with students was a challenge. Students were used to seeing strangers at their school dressed in professional clothing, typing on computers in the back of their classes and being lead through their lunchroom and other activities. These strangers included staff from the central office, potential funders, researchers, and graduate students. Students were extremely friendly, often introduced themselves and offered to explain their school context. However, it was clear that they were cautious about what they said and several mentioned that they knew that how they behaved might have implications for their funding. I quickly learned that it would be of benefit to the study to keep a neutral stance, and to make sure that students knew that I was an independent researcher, that I did not work for the network, and that they could feel free to share their thoughts and feelings without consequence. I dressed a little more informally than other visitors, never commented on student behavior, and tried to have as many student-led and initiated informal conversations as possible. Because of this positioning, I was never fully an "insider." Rather, I mainly observed and took notes slightly outside of the circle during whole group activities in classrooms and clubs, and then had informal conversations with students in between, during group work, at lunch, on trips, etc. Many students knew who I was and why I was there and addressed me as "Ms. Noll." I was also visibly pregnant while collecting data, and that acted as an icebreaker, as students rushed to find me a chair when I came in, marveled at how large I was, and asked me how I was feeling. By the time I interviewed students in late May/June in 2016, I knew many of them by face and name. By June, some of the support personnel thought I worked there and asked me how long I would be out for maternity leave and when I would return to school.
Site and Participant Selection

This study took place at a charter school in a large, urban school district on the East Coast. Data in this district reflects relatively low rates of college attainment. In the district, of those who entered 9th grade in 1999, only 10 percent had attained a degree 10 years later. At the time this study took place, the city's mayor pledged to reduce the high school dropout rate by half and double the percentage of adults who attain four-year college degrees. Data from the school district showed a strong correlation between where students attended high school and the likelihood that they would go directly on to college.

Also of concern in this school district were low high school graduation rates. Although high school graduation rates had improved over the last eight years, the on-time graduation rate was still only 65 percent citywide. Policymakers and practitioners saw lagging graduation and college enrollment rates as evidence for the need for more rigorous schools, which was perhaps one of the drivers for the increase in charter schools over the past decade. In 2013-2014, this city was in the top ten for cities with the highest percentage of public charter school students by school district (30%), as well as for the highest number of public charter school students by district (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014). The high rates of charter school attendance and promising data about college-going rates for students attending charter schools made this district a good location for examining the nature of college choice in these settings.

School Site selection

For this charter school network, one central goal was finding the most efficient way to close the achievement gap, measured primarily by test scores, high school
graduation and college enrollment rates. In order to meet these targets, the network implemented what they considered to be high impact strategies that were replicable across schools. Such an approach for managing and structuring schools is useful for charter school networks like Performance Network, who take over an increasing number of schools and are under pressure to rapidly "turn them around". Consequently, instructional strategies, behavior systems, curricula and messaging were similar across schools in the network, as well as across classrooms within Performance High. In terms of college choice, the performance indicators, the processes and procedures and even the curricula were shared across schools, and the messaging around college was unified.

Because of my interest in No Excuses schools, I looked for schools that met the criteria set forth in Cheng et al.'s (2014) meta analysis. This analysis categorizes No Excuses schools as having: 1) A culture of college going and "high expectations," 2) Strong disciplinary and dress codes, and 3) A longer school day and/or school year. Given my interest in school contexts that produce promising college-related outcomes for students, I identified No Excuses high schools with above average high school graduation rates (85%<) and college-bound rates (70%<). I only considered schools in which the senior class had attended the school for all four years of high school with the reasoning that more established schools were likely to have philosophies, policies, procedures and cultures that were more codified, and students attending these schools were likely to have experiences more reflective of the school context than students attending schools that were in flux or more recently established. I also aimed to select a school that primarily served low-income Black students, as this population is disproportionately served by No Excuses schools more broadly (Cremata, 2013).
In order to select a school site, I drew up a table of all the schools in the selected school district that fit the criteria and sent emails to personnel at the qualifying schools. I considered the relationships I might have at each site only after this step. Subsequently, I mined my personal and professional networks for contacts at the schools that fit the criteria. One school counselor replied to a blind email I sent expressing interest in the study. At another school, I was able to access the assistant principal of instruction for a phone interview before she agreed to pass my contact information on to the counselor. The former changed her mind right before the study began and declined to participate. The latter put me in touch with the school counselor, who expressed enthusiasm about the study. The central office at the latter school was reluctant to host the study because they were already hosting several researchers, which put a strain on their resources. In addition, researchers in the past who had gained access to the organization had written critical pieces and personnel at the central office were wary of the motives of researchers. However, the counselor lobbied his principal, who lobbied the central office on the study's behalf. Though I had a few casual acquaintances at the central office as well, the counselor's interest in the study and persistence on its behalf were the main factors in gaining access. After informally gaining permission to execute the study, the process of submitting the proposal and data collection protocols, obtaining three background clearances, and drawing up the memorandum of understanding and having it reviewed and approved by lawyers took several months.

The focal school, Performance High School, was a part of a charter school network that was founded over a decade ago, and which operated several elementary, middle and high schools within the school district. The mission of the network was to
ensure that "All students learn the academic and personal skills they need to succeed in higher education, compete in the global economy, and pursue their dreams." As stated on its website, the network's number one priority was student achievement, which the network defines as a “civil rights issue” and the reason the network was in existence. The charter network operated traditional charter schools as well as turnaround schools, in which the CMO took over schools that were perceived to be failing, and introduced comprehensive interventions intended to produce rapid and dramatic change. The central office provided each school in the network with administrative support.

In addition to student achievement, other network goals included providing a rigorous college preparatory curriculum, fostering teacher leadership, and using assessment and data to drive decision-making. Students took common-core aligned benchmarks in all primary subjects at the end of every nine-week report period. They also used a system to measure student growth that considered student performance in relation to value added, or the change in growth relative to their previous growth trajectory. The value added measure was used to assess both student and teacher performance. Characteristic of No Excuses charter schools, the graduation requirements for schools in the network were higher than for non-charter district schools. Students had to earn a 76 or above in each subject to pass. They also had to complete an internship in their sophomore year, as well as 100 hours of community service. All district schools required a senior project in order to graduate, but the nature of the project was determined by the school. At Performance Network, the senior project was college-related. Network schools aspired to have a very structured and orderly school environment. Students wore uniforms or other school spirit clothing. Each school had a network of support staff including deans,
attendance officers and other administrative staff to support school culture. Each school implemented a behavior system that employed incentives and consequences and an explicit protocol for their distribution. Within a few years prior to this study, the network had initiated a more student-centered teaching method, more restorative practices in relation to behavior management, and more attention to socio-emotional learning than were traditionally associated with No Excuses schools, but the approach had taken root unevenly throughout their schools.

The focal school, which was located in a White working class, urban neighborhood, had been in operation for over 10 years. The network was invited by the district to take over what the district had perceived to be a low performing middle school and turn it into a charter school serving grades 7-12. The students remained the same, but the school replaced the staff and implemented a new set of policies and procedures. In 2009-2010, the school held its first graduation and had its first graduates enroll in college. School documents reflect that 100% of the first and second graduating classes were accepted to college, and two thirds of their graduating seniors attend four-year colleges.

In 2015, there were 660 students in attendance across grades 7-12. Half (50%) of the students were Black, 19% White, 18% Asian, 7% Hispanic, and 6% other. The on-time high school graduation rate was 86%, while the college bound rate was 72%. A majority (71%) of the students were considered economically disadvantaged.

These statistics reflect that the school had achieved some level of success in serving the low income and minority students who attended and who might otherwise have been at a disadvantage in the college choice process. However, data collected internally in the following years revealed that, though Performance Network students
were enrolling in college in relatively high numbers, their rates of persistence and completion were low. For the first graduating class of 2010 at Performance High, only 25% of students who enrolled in two or four-year institutions graduated within 150% of program time. These data reflected national statistics as well, which show that increased enrollment in the last few decades has not been followed by increased graduation rates in general (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2010; Perna & Jones, 2013).

**Participant Selection**

Consistent with other studies that consider the college choice process in high school contexts (McDonough, 1997; Weis et al., 2014), participants were purposefully selected (Patton, 2005). I selected students who were in their senior year of high school, as these students were well positioned to reflect on various stages of their college choice processes, as well as how their school experiences influenced their choice sets and plans for applications. Because this study is interested in the influence of the high school context in particular, I originally intended to purposively select students so as to control for variations in students’ academic ability, academic preparation, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, as the literature reflects that such background characteristics are related to variation in college choice (Perna, 2005; Perna & Kurban, 2013). However, it proved to be difficult to identify students beforehand who fit the many criteria, so instead I widened the net and invited all students who identified as African American to sit for an interview. With this approach, I interviewed more students than I had planned (35 rather than 25). In analyzing the data, student decision-making did not seem to significantly
vary based on any of these characteristics, so I kept the additional students in the data set for analysis.

I began observing the seminars in March 2016. After a few weeks, I made an announcement about the study in all of the senior seminars. I explained what I intended to study, and emphasized that student voices were often absent from the literature and it was a chance for them to have their say about their school experience. Out of 106 seniors, I interviewed 35 participants in all, 13 male students and 22 female students. According to administrative data, their GPAs ranged from 2.5-4.09. The mean GPA was 3.18. The ACT ranged from 12-28 with the average being 18. Students' ACT scores, in general, did not meet the target that the ACT sets forth as correlating to a high probability (50% chance of getting a B or better, 75% chance of getting a C or better) of being successful in college level courses. Of the 35 focal students, 33 took the ACT (the two that did not were sisters); 14 reached the "college ready" benchmark in English, 7 in reading, 6 in Math and only 3 in Science. To get a sense of family income, I looked at students’ eligibility for Pell grants. Of the 34 students who filed for FAFSA, 26 were eligible for a Pell grant. I collected information from students about whether their parents had attended college, but it became clear that the information they reported was unreliable. Many confused technical school, trade school, and college, or were uncertain whether their parents had actually graduated. For their final choices, 5 students planned to attend 2-year schools, 29 4-year schools, and 1 trade school (cosmetology). By the time I conducted the interviews, which was in late May and early June 2016, the majority of the seniors were 18 years old. I told them that if they were 18, they could sign their own consent forms and, if not, they had to get parental consent. I did not have any students who were under
18 bring in parental assent forms. I interviewed all three of the college/career counselors. I interviewed four teachers, two who taught juniors and two who taught mostly seniors. All four were teachers who taught core classes and who participated in college-related activities with students, as they would have more insight on college-related practices at the school.

**Data Collection**

Consistent with ethnographic methods, multiple sources of data were drawn to address my research interests. In addition to the interviews and informal interactions with students, staff, and teachers, I also collected documents, student data, photographs and other artifacts, and observations captured by writing field notes.

**Documents and artifacts.**

I developed an initial sense of the school context by identifying and reviewing institutional documents from the school site, including the school mission and website. These documents contributed to understandings of the school context, and helped situate and triangulate student experiences, perceptions and college choice processes within the school context. I also collected curricula, assignments and handouts from college-related classes, as well as flyers, articles and other documents that were given to parents and students. I took pictures of the physical environment, as well as of artifacts, like care packages that teachers made for students before their ACTs, which further helped me to understand the school practices around college going, and contextualize students' perceptions and experiences. I collected administrative data about the senior class, including each student's GPA and ACT scores, financial aid information, the schools to
which each applied and was accepted, and the school to where each student intended to matriculate. This data was used to ascertain whether there were notable differences in student experiences or perceptions based on student characteristics. This data was also used to understand what choices may have been available to students based on their academic and/or financial contexts. All of the documents were public record, supplied by staff, or collected at the field site.

**Observations and field notes.**

To understand the college choice process in the school context, I spent 150 hours observing college-related activities from February through August 2016. College-related activities included seminars as well as academic classes, staff trainings about college practices, the college fair, family meetings, lunchroom, teachers’ lounge, extracurricular activities, elective classes, and student presentation nights. During these observations, I recorded field notes. These notes included observations of the physical environment, as well as any relevant informal interactions between students and school staff that related to college going. These observations informed my understanding of the dimensions of the school context that may have influenced students' college related experiences, as well as to develop relationships with teachers, counselors, students and staff. This rapport helped me to recruit participants for the study. I used *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011) and *Analyzing Social Settings* (Lofland et al., 2006) to guide my observation and note-taking procedures. My work in the field consisted of watching and listening, taking down jottings and participating in daily activities, as seemed appropriate. I recorded details about the physical setting, emotional expressions,
and verbatim quotes of conversations. In my notes, I tried to avoid making evaluative statements and relying too heavily on summary. As students were used to adults observing and typing in a classroom setting, I usually typed these notes directly on my computer. I wrote notes by hand when typing seemed intrusive, like in meetings with families or during emotional community meetings. After recording handwritten notes, I typed them immediately after leaving the school, filling in any gaps. I chose this form of data collection to better understand the school's culture and practices around college, and in order to witness firsthand the interactions between student participants and school staff. These observations also provided context to frame the interview protocols and understand student experiences and perceptions, especially those students alluded to but may not have felt comfortable elaborating on.

**Interviews.**

This study relied on data collected from semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, and counselors. These interviews were between 30-55 minutes in length, and were digitally recorded. I also took notes about key ideas. Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of participants, and in some cases the characteristics of informants are masked where participants wished for their comments to remain anonymous.

Interviews with students were conducted during the spring of students' senior year of high school, a time period that coincides with important college-related actions and decisions. The seminar teacher offered extra credit and/or service hours for students who volunteered to do an interview. I left a signup sheet with the counselors, and I signed students up myself when I had individual conversations with students who seemed
interested. I offered students snacks, and I suspect that many also signed up to get out of class for an hour. The counselor also mentioned that students reported that they enjoyed the interviews, so I got volunteers who heard about the study from friends. The protocol for students is in Appendix I. The protocol asked about students' perceptions and experiences of their high school in general, college aspirations, search and sort process, and how they made their final choice. I followed up with students in the winter of 2017, conducting a subsequent round of interviews with 24 students. I interviewed students on their college campuses, in coffee shops, fast food restaurants and libraries, and in their homes. Data from the second round of interviews are included in this dissertation only to inform understanding of students' actual college destinations.

The counselor and teacher interviews took place in the conference room or the supply room. The protocol for counselors is in Appendix II. The protocol for teachers is in Appendix III. These interviews asked about the school context related to college going, including the school mission and philosophy, policies and procedures around college, embedded supports (e.g., classes and seminars) that exist, and the landscape of college-related activities. These interviews helped to further situate students’ experiences, perceptions and decision-making in relation to college.

**Data management and analysis**

I maintained a database in a secure online document storage site where I uploaded all documents, memos, transcriptions and artifacts in chronological order. I transcribed all of the student interviews myself, verbatim. The adult interviews were transcribed by a
trusted transcription service. I kept hard copies of documents in binders in my office and printed out all field notes and stored them chronologically.

Throughout data collection, I made notes about emerging themes and summarized my impressions after each visit. After all of the interviews were complete, I read through all of the interviews, field notes, memos and artifacts in chronological order, and made notes as I went. After the holistic reading, I began the coding process. I used NVivo software for the data analysis. Initially, drawing from the literature review, I coded the data using codes that reflected the three phases of college choice, which included "aspiration development," "search and sort phase," and "choice" (Perna, 2006), as well as "school influences" and "out-of-school influences." These codes are what Maxwell (2013) calls "category" or "topic" codes, and were intended to be an organizational tool. From there, within each topic, I used inductive strategies that allowed additional codes to emerge "from the ground up" (Creswell, 2012). These codes were primarily descriptive. For example, in the "aspirations" category, I sorted by how long students reported to have had aspirations (longstanding, developed later, no aspirations, etc.) and characterized their aspirations as related to career plans, gaining the "college experience," exposure from pop culture and sports, among other categories, until all of those categories were saturated. I collapsed codes across topics for codes that showed up across phases of college choice (stress, race, diversity, etc.) and coded these categories descriptively as well, revealing patterns across phases.

I engaged in several procedures to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. As Maxwell (2004) advocates, I wrote bi-weekly memos to analyze the themes that were emerging, and sent them to members of my committee and other
thought partners to frame discussions about what I was finding. These conversations influenced and clarified the analysis of the data as well. As themes like race and uniformity emerged, I revisited the entire data set to code for that particular theme. After the open and focused coding, the field notes were revisited for a “fine-grained, line-by-line analysis on the basis of topics that have been identified as of particular interest” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 143). I wrote analytical memos to examine the patterns within each code. NVivo allows all of the data from interviews, field notes, documents and memos to be in one thematic file, and that formed the basis for the analysis chapters.

**Role of the researcher**

My interest in charter schools and college choice stems from my professional experience as a teacher in an alternative school in New York City that served over-aged, under-credited students, as well as my experience working for a Charter Management Organization where the latter had a "by any means necessary" philosophy on facilitating students to and through college. At the alternative school, there was virtually no mention of college in the high school context, aside from an occasional personal conversation between a teacher and student. At the latter, students were supported, enticed, coerced, and flat out bribed to do the college application process, which resulted in high college enrollment for students. At the same time, the organization was finding that, like most other programs that were seeing success in enrolling students who are historically underrepresented in higher education, persistence and college graduation rates were still alarmingly low.
My own college choice process was completely different than that of my students. I attended a high performing, predominantly White public high school where there was virtually no college application support embedded within the school context, yet most of the students who graduated went on to some kind of postsecondary schooling. My mom is a Filipino immigrant who highly values education and has encouraged me to attend college since I was little, yet was unable to provide practical support in the application process, other than taking me on visits to the three colleges to which I applied. I initiated and managed the entire process by myself. I applied to and was accepted to three schools, and chose one based on the visit alone.

My experience, as well as those of my students, led me to wonder about the influence of different school contexts for school-dependent students like me, who may not have had access to college resources outside of school. Charter schools are often a polarizing topic of conversation in education, and this is true in regards to college access as well. Some (e.g., Whitman, 2008) pose college preparatory charter schools as the "answer" to inequity in college outcomes, and others (e.g., Bracey, 2002) see charter schools as the dismantling of public education in order to create another layer of privilege, further disadvantaging the most vulnerable students, in relation to college and otherwise. I approached this study through the lens of my experience, with a genuine curiosity about the role that this type of intervention may play in college choice, but specifically from the perspectives of students who these interventions are supposed to serve first and forem
CHAPTER 4: The College-going Context at Performance High

The arena was filled with hundreds of students, who looked like blocks of color in their various uniforms, seated by school. Above the center of the court, the monitors flashed senior photos of students smiling in formal attire, with the names of the colleges each would attend beneath. Dozens of rows of folding chairs filled the floor where all the seniors in the network were seated in alphabetical order by the college they planned to attend in the fall. When the emcee announced their college, students stood up and cheered, waving signs with the names of their college in bold letters proudly over their heads. The rowdier students jumped in each other's arms, banged their chests together, and climbed on the chairs and danced in excitement. In between announcements, cheerleaders led the crowd in school cheers, a step team performed an energetic routine, and a children's choir sang the Black national anthem. School leaders, a congressman, and a network alumni made speeches that enumerated the accomplishments of the class of 2016, wished them well, and implored them to come back to lift up their communities once they graduated. 726 seniors graduated, earning a collective $28,424,288 in scholarship dollars, and were poised to engage in 113 postsecondary options, the majority being 4-year colleges. The elementary school students in the stands looked on to witness what would be them one day. This day was a tradition at Performance Network, modeled after the day that professional athletes committed to their new teams.

This chapter describes the college-related practices at Performance High that undergirded this moment. For Performance Network, college was a key strategy for promoting social mobility for their students, students who were predominately from low-
income families and of color and who typically lacked the types of cultural knowledge, skills, and resources that privilege middle- and upper-class students in the college choice process. Providing a robust system of college resources and support to bridge this gap in cultural capital was central to Performance Network's mission. The context at Performance High reflected what researchers describe as a robust college-going culture, which included a college-going mission, information and support, comprehensive counseling, family engagement, partnerships with universities and faculty, among other characteristics (Jarsky et al., 2009; Corwin & Tierney, 2007).

This chapter first describes the organizational mission and overall approach to college going at Performance High. Then it describes the pervasive college message, and the related information and support system that were embedded within the everyday school experience for students. It highlights how the college approach at Performance High was influenced by perceptions of the most important barriers to college going that their students were most likely to face, especially in relation to finances and affordability. Lastly, it describes how the school’s regulated and monitored approach to college was intended to break down the complex social phenomenon of college choice into discrete, measurable steps in order to achieve the larger goals of the organization.

Organizational mission and approach to college going

Walking into Performance High, I immediately noticed the school mission posted on the wall in the entrance: "All students leave with the academic and personal skills to succeed in higher education, compete in the global economy and pursue their dreams."

There was a row of tables set up in the entrance, with two deans greeting students,
checking their bags and their uniforms and scanning them in before they were allowed to enter the building. The students wore uniforms, gray polo shirts, navy pants and black shoes and belts, with solid socks. The seniors stood out in royal blue shirts and khakis, their different uniforms signaling their special status within the school. An older Black woman with short hair sat at one of the tables. She managed student attendance at the school, but joked with students about her decades of experience in law enforcement. After entering, students headed to their lockers to deposit their things. They were not allowed to carry bags in the school building. Teachers and deans walked around the clean, bright halls purposefully, communicating with walkie-talkies and wearing lanyards with ID and keys attached. Even the guest bathroom was orderly, prominently displaying a laminated sign with the expectations for the space, including "Only toilet paper goes in the toilet" and "Make sure the water is completely off." Inspirational quotes adorned the walls. One read: "Even if you are on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there" -Will Rogers. Another: "It is not that I'm so smart. It's just that I stay with problems longer" -Albert Einstein. Above, college pendants hung from the ceiling in the halls, classrooms and lunchroom. Bulletin boards in the hallway displayed scholarships that seniors had applied to, as well as the colleges to which they were accepted. Along another hall there was a bulletin board displaying the plans of the class of 2017/2021. The graduation dates reflected a school motto: "At Performance Network, we graduate twice," meaning both from high school and from college. The physical environment manifested two important characteristics of the school: highly systematized school practices, and a commitment to sending students to college.
The college practices, including college-related taglines and curricula, were developed in the central office of the network, in collaboration with scholars and administrators on the post-secondary initiatives team, and then passed down to the personnel at schools to enact. From its inception until about three years prior to this study, the "College for All" mission of the organization was prioritized and pursued across schools. However, the network had internally shifted its philosophy on college from "College for All" to "Postsecondary for all; College for Most." The counselor explained that this shift was in response to data about the college persistence and graduation rates of the network's first graduating class in 2010. While 78% of that class enrolled in college, only 25% of students who had enrolled in college graduated within time and a half of their program length. Network leaders felt that low college persistence and graduation rates signaled a need for more support for alternative routes for the students who chose other pathways, as well as a shift to focus on socio emotional skills, like developing grit and problem solving skills.

Central to Performance High's approach was to embed college-related behaviors and skill building into students' every day experience at school. Whereas middle or upper class students might pursue extracurricular test preparation courses for college entrance exams, or enlist a teacher or mentor's help in writing a college essay, students at Performance High performed these activities as part of the requirements for their core classes. The college search and sort process was also part of the curriculum for their seminar classes, which were required to graduate. Network data drove many of these practices. For example, all students took the ACT rather than the SAT, as the data showed that students did better on the former, and the administrators at the central office
wanted to streamline the test prep efforts towards one test. Counselors also advised students to apply to schools that have historically admitted large numbers of Performance High students and offered them financial aid.

Attention to affordability and financial planning were central to Performance High's approach to college advising. The counselors and administrators designed the curricula, processes and procedures with the aim of alleviating potential financial issues, to the extent that it was possible, at the forefront. For example, the school provided hands on assistance with filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), comparing and contrasting finances aid offers and the net cost of attendance, and advising families about their finances, a role that school-based college counselors do not typically play.

**Pervasive college message**

Scholars have found that the degree to which students see themselves as college bound is related to the expectations of the adults around them (Jarsky et al., 2009; Weis et al., 2014). These expectations can be communicated in verbal and nonverbal ways, through interactions with adults, in school decor, mission statements, job descriptions and through curricula (Corwin et al., 2004; McClafferty et al., 2002). At Performance High, messages about college were pervasive throughout the high school context. The "college talk" and other messages infused throughout the context communicated the expectation that students would go to college. As described in the previous section, the physical environment (bulletin boards, quotes, college pendants) was rife with college
paraphernalia. Teachers often wore college gear and had their own alma maters displayed in their workspace.

College was a topic of conversation in academic classes, the lunchroom, and during extracurricular activities. In elementary school, each cohort of students was named after a college or university and referred to by that name. I often observed teachers use “college” to explain why learning a skill or enforcing a rule was important. For example, when students in one course complained about the percentage of points taken off for late work, the teacher explained that her policy was lenient in relation to college. She said, "In college, professors won't even let you turn something in one minute late. Everything is time stamped. It won't fly." In another class, the history teacher, who himself had gone to Harvard, held long lecture classes where students were expected to take notes. He explained that he wanted to expose students to methods of teaching he felt were common in college. He talked animatedly in front of the class, wearing a navy blazer and suede loafers with no socks, while a third of the class had their heads down on the desk. There was even a club called Performance High University, where students earned metaphoric "credits" by taking part in college-related activities.

Though the official philosophy about college had changed, many of the former institutional practices aimed at "College for All" were still in place, and the focal students did not perceive that shift in philosophy. Ms. Peters, the junior English teacher, talked about how the new language passed down by the network emphasizing postsecondary institutions rather than college did not always align with school practices.

Actually no, there are the people who oversee it [in the network central office] and then they do trainings and then, in schools, we try to adapt. Performance High is very much, common language for everything. So, if everyone is using post-
secondary as opposed to college, but then I struggle because I'm having kids write their college essays. And we used to call them personal statements so that it wouldn't feel like it was just about college, but then kids were like, "Well, what am I using this for, if I'm not using it to apply to college?" That's a good point, but then I talk about how it's important to still be able to write. You should still be able to write.

Mr. Hartnell, the history teacher, joked about how the new language did little to moderate the pervasive college message. He said, "Most of the kids are like, post-secondary institution? That's another word for college, right?"

In addition to these explicit mentions of college, the importance of college was reinforced by the volume of resources dedicated to college preparation and the application process. For instance, there were three college and/or career counselors for high school versus one that handled therapeutic counseling for the whole school (7-12th grades).

**Information and resources**

Scholars cite a lack of school resources as one way that students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education are disadvantaged by their high school contexts. Often in under resourced schools, there is a lack of college counseling (Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas et al., 2008), high student-counselor ratios, (Clinedinst et al., 2011) and overburdened counselors who do not have enough time for college counseling with all their other pressing responsibilities (McDonough, 2005; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas et al., 2008).

In general, low income and minority students tend to attend schools with a dearth of college resources (Oakes et al., 2006; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). In contrast, at Performance High, there were extensive resources devoted to college-related activities
including college and career counseling, exposure to colleges, and explicit support for navigating the financial aspects of college choice.

**College and career counseling.**

The college and career classroom was spacious and divided into two parts. The front was set up like a classroom, with the tables facing the front of the classroom where there was an overhead projector and a whiteboard. The back portion of the room housed three large desks for the sophomore, junior and senior counselors. Dozens of college banners hung from the ceiling and predated the tenure of current counselors. Many students hung out in the college room when they had free time. They ate lunch there, or helped sort papers or make gift bags for an upcoming event. Meanwhile, they talked to their counselors about their lives, asked them for advice, or showed them funny videos on their phones while the counselors multitasked. They stayed past when the bell rang, until one of the counselors had to usher them off to their next class.

During the spring, several students who had graduated came back to visit and were greeted warmly by the students and counselors. In one instance, a tall slim Latina student with long hair in jeans and Nikes burst into the room. She pulled a chair up to Mr. Webb's desk and talked to him about college while he typed on his computer, getting ready for his next class. She talked with another student about her college experience.

Another day an alumna stopped by wearing a button-down shirt and blazer. She explained that she was interviewing for the Network's resident teaching program that was designed to encourage Network alumni to come back to the city after college and teach at Network schools. She explained that the program was intended to build ties with the
community and encourage alumni to bring their talent back to enrich their community. She had just finished teaching a mock lesson in one of the very classrooms she had sat in as a student. The counselors gathered around her and asked her about her mother and her siblings. After years of college seminars and working closely together, the students and counselors knew each other well.

*Counselors.*

The sophomore counselor, Ms. Wilcox, was a Black woman who appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties. She wore her hair in braids and often wore clothing reflecting her alma mater, Howard University. She kept what her students called her Howard "shrine" near her desk, next to a collection of elephants in different shapes, sizes and materials. In addition to managing the career counseling, Ms. Wilcox was an adviser for a popular club to which many of the focal students belonged. They described it as akin to a sorority or fraternity, and members wore matching jackets with patches sewn to them and their last names across their backs. The club was dedicated to leadership development, community building, and providing a forum for students to talk about their experiences, as well as social issues that affected them. She also connected individual students with extracurricular opportunities for jobs and internships as she heard about them, which students talked about in their interviews.

Because she encountered students in the 10th grade and spent a great deal of time with them in class as well as through clubs, several focal students described having a close relationship with Ms. Wilcox and seeing her as a mother figure. Whereas most of the adults' philosophies about college advising reflected the organization's emphasis on
affordability, Ms. Wilcox perceived more nuance in finding the right match for students. She argued that understanding their experiences and perceptions, and advising the "whole student" was critical for improving the school's college-related outcomes. Often, students expressed interest in attending colleges that were not the most affordable amongst their choice sets. The following commentary by Ms. Wilcox highlights the challenges the counselors faced in weighing students' personal preferences and affordability in advising students about their final decision:

So then, you get to senior year, maybe you're with a college adviser who's trying to help you make these very huge life-changing decisions without knowing who you are. So then they'll come to me and they're like, "Ms. Wilcox, what do you think?" And I'm like, "I see where the college advisers are coming from and I understand the financial piece, but then I'm looking at the student and I'm looking at their experiences. I'm looking at them, knowing who they are, who they were as a sophomore, how they transitioned because I watch them and I maintain relationships with them. I'm looking at their heart, I'm looking at their spirit, I'm looking at their self-awareness and their cultural awareness. And then I'm thinking differently when I'm looking at this. And it gets difficult because I'm not going to go against one...I'm not gonna say, "No, you can't go to these schools." I'm not going to do that. We're a team. So I have to be a team player. [chuckle] While at the same time, trying to make sure that they're gonna get an experience where they could have the most fulfillment at college.

Because of Ms. Wilcox's longstanding relationships with students and her openness to considering a range of possibilities for students, students came to her for support and advice when they encountered difficult decisions in the college choice process.

The Junior counselor, Ms. Olsen, a short, White woman with straight brown hair, grew up not too far away from Performance High, in a working-class neighborhood. She was a first-generation college student who had attended Catholic high school. She had a long list of things to accomplish in the two days a week that she was at the school and could be seen rushing around with an armful of materials, pausing in the corner to shovel
food into her mouth during a three-minute transition between classes, to get it done. She made herself available to students day and night. The day before the juniors took the ACT, she encouraged them to call her if they needed anything. "Even at 5 in the morning," she said. "Even if you just have feelings you want to share." She had been working for Performance High since 2009, and had had many conversations over the years with families who, after the college application process, found that they could not afford to go to any of the options that were available to them. Because of these experiences, Ms. Olsen took the affordability aspect of college choice very seriously in her role. She described one such instance that stood out to her:

And this is a result of not applying to two schools that are financially affordable. I've been in some of those meetings where the kids cried, the parents cried, the kid and the parent have cried. And a kid sticks out, Damarion Price. Him and his mom, the mom sobbed and sobbed and sobbed because he was a great kid, a great kid. Very quiet, just a really great kid and was smart, did his work, went home after school. He's close to his mom and Lori, she didn't have $10 to contribute to his college education. So there was, even though his EFC was zero, the places that Damarion should have gone to, with the mind that he had, and the kind of kid that he was even with the scholarships and the grants and the loans, the gap was still, any gap, it really is...There was, and there was no way that she was... And she cried and cried and I hugged her and he started to cry. And he ended up at community. That was a few years ago so I'm hoping now, and he's been on my mind, and I'm hoping now, that he's now out at four-year.

She often suffered pushback from students, for whom these low price institutions did not always reflect their ideals for the college experience. Nevertheless, she persisted through the opposition in hopes that she could help to prevent students from having their "dreams crushed" like Damarion, because they lacked the knowledge and skills to navigate the search and sort process in a way that allowed them affordable choices in the end.

Mr. Webb, the senior counselor, was a tall, slim White male in his mid twenties, with curly hair and glasses. He went to Villanova, and after they won the NCAA
championship in 2016, he goofily wore a Villanova cape for a week. As he walked through the halls, students often stopped to talk or joke with him. One student asked him if he was going to the championship parade, explaining that his distant relative was on the team. Mr. Webb laughed and joked, "Well if you have a relative on the team, then I guess I do too..." The student responded, patting him on the back, "Because you and me are practically cousins!" A little bit further down the hall, another student said, "Mr. Webb, my dad said you called the house last week?" Mr. Webb explained that there was a financial aid workshop at another campus over spring break and he wanted to make sure the student knew about it. Mr. Webb spoke proudly of the work the college office did. In the following statement, he described how he saw the role of the college and career center.

I like to see the college and career center as our own little business. Like we have our own little office and we provide a very different service from what the rest of the school provides, and so I see us as consultants that in another school, students don't have anything near the level of support that they do. We provide an incredible level of like, college and career decision-making process, connections to internships. Like Wilcox goes out on her own and finds mentors and tries to match them the best she can. The amount of attention paid to each of our programs respectively is not something I've seen in any school but a Performance Network school. In fact, a lot of the college advisers on the side will do one-on-one college advising with wealthy families in the area and you can get paid like $100 an hour for that stuff. It's crazy ho much they will pay. And our students are getting that for free.

He also talked about strategies to improve the team's college outcomes. In particular, he was concerned by the low college graduation rates. He mentioned that he planned to sit down and analyze the quantitative data the network had collected over the last 5 years to identify trends that may be important for improving college retention and graduation rates, but he had not been able to find the time.
Though there were low student to counselor ratios at Performance High, each counselor had an immense workload, as they were intimately involved in every aspect of the college choice process. Most of the advising took place in the whole class setting, and Mr. Webb lamented that he was unable to spend more time individually counseling students. He said:

The amount of work that each of us is handling....the sheer volume of organizational work with processing applications and managing the things that have to happen. Plus, shooting for at least one, one-on-one meeting with every student, plus family meetings. It feels like a ton. So I think in that, there's stuff that gets dropped and often times it's easier for me to say something to the entire class because I have that opportunity than it is for me to pull an individual student one-on-one for those follow up conversations like, how did you feel about that? Because then the students don't have, they have someone to tell them this is what you need to do...but they don't always have someone to follow up and say, I know this is really stressful, but you are going to be okay.

Ms. Olsen described the school staff members as inexhaustible in their pursuit of the school mission. She said:

I've been around a long time now and I'm a fairly type A person, or I certainly thought I was before I got here. And then I came here and I was the slacker in some of the circles. And I was like, wow, how does, wow. And I still am, I have tendencies that are very Type A, but I think like, so many of the people work here do. And that, that drive, that never stop, that dusk till dawn and that like, so many of the staff members exhibit those and it shows in everything they do. Though Ms. Wilcox, Ms. Olsen, and Mr. Webb take somewhat different approaches to college advising, they all work tirelessly to provide their students with the information and resources to help them gain access to college. However, their hectic workloads interfered with their ability to address all of the students' individual needs, questions, and concerns.
Seminars.

Though teachers emphasized college-going throughout elementary and middle school, the college seminars officially began during sophomore year. The sophomore, junior, and senior seminars were a mandatory part of the curriculum for all students. The curriculum for each seminar was designed by staff in the Network central office, but counselors could adapt it and supplement it as they saw fit.

The sophomore seminar was a formal, graded, yearlong course which students attended four days a week. The class was dedicated to helping students develop college and career aspirations, and explore careers, as well as practice professional skills. A major component of the sophomore seminar was the internship program, where students were placed in organizations throughout the city. Ms. Wilcox forged local internship partners and coordinated the program. She tried to match students to placements that reflected their interests, but that was not always possible. Students could also arrange their own internships, but that was less common among the focal students. Examples of internships included placements at PAWS, where students worked with animals, at an architect office, and a primary school where students tutored or cared for children. Every Wednesday, students left in the early afternoon to go to their placements, which were intended to help students develop workplace skills, and connect with mentors. In the class, students also created resumes and did mock interviews. The sophomore seminar culminated in a presentation by each student in the class in front of a panel of three people, including teachers, counselors, administrators or community members. The presentation included a reflection of students' high school performance, and an overview
of their tentative college plans. There was also a reception at the end of the year for the students and their internship mentors to celebrate the completion of their internships. Many of the focal students reported that it was during their sophomore seminar that they first started thinking seriously about college.

A few years prior to this study, Performance High had a full time junior counselor, but because of cuts to the funding, during the 2015-2016 school year the junior counselor split time between Performance High and another school in the network. The junior seminar took place once a week during English classes, and covered the logistics of applying to college, including taking the mock ACT, search and sort strategies like finding good personal, academic and financial fits, and the intricacies of financial aid. In their English class, students wrote college essays that went through five rounds of review and revisions, with feedback from their teacher and other members of the school staff. Other core classes like Math and Science incorporated ACT preparation as well. At the end of their junior year, students did a presentation reflecting on their college choice process, again presenting a tentative college plan.

For senior seminar, students met twice a week. The main focus of the senior seminar was the college application process. In the spring, students worked on their Capstone projects, a requirement for graduation, which included submitting the FAFSA, researching and applying to college, applying to three scholarships, an essay about how students chose their schools, and a cross analysis of financial aid letters, among a myriad of other college-related activities. Mr. Webb also reviewed strategies for once students were in college, like how to navigate campus resources and manage their time effectively. At the end of senior year, students did another presentation in front of a panel
of teachers about their plans, with a focus on how they planned to finance their postsecondary choice. The senior seminar was conducted much like a class, where a lesson was presented and then students worked independently, while Mr. Webb walked around and helped individual students and tracked their progress. In the senior seminar, students used Naviance software to support their college choice process. They used it to take strength assessments and search for colleges with particular characteristics. It was also used as a clearinghouse for college-related documentation like transcripts and letters of recommendation, which the counselor sent to schools through the system. In this database, the senior counselor could see in detail the progress that each student made towards enrolling in college. Mr. Webb also provided students with hands on support with their FAFSAs during the senior seminar. He gave each student a financial aid checklist, with dates for each step in the financial aid process, which began in the fall. Students created an ID, completed a demo FAFSA, completed a FAFSA with their 2014 tax information, and then completed another with their 2015 tax information. The counselors asked families to fill out a form with their necessary personal and financial information to complete the FAFSA so that they could file them with students at school, and most of the families complied. Students sent Mr. Webb their student aid reports. His goal was to get 95% of students to file their FAFSAs by the end of October, which he accomplished. Mr. Webb kept track of each student's progress with the financial aid process.

The school offered honors level versions of both the sophomore and senior seminars for students who wished to go above and beyond the required seminar curricula. For example, the honors senior seminar went on a Habitat for Humanity trip where they
traveled to North Carolina to build houses for families in need. To access the class, students either expressed interest in joining, or their counselors recommended it to them. Interested students submitted applications, did an interview and the counselors accepted or denied students for the advanced level course. Over the last few years, student interest in the honors level had grown. During the 2015-2016 school year, there were four senior seminar classes, and one of them was an honors level class.

**Exposure to colleges.**

The college program at Performance High gave students many opportunities for direct exposure to colleges, beyond the college seminars, including college trips, visits from representatives and the college fair. These interactions were meant to reinforce students' college aspirations, help them assess and choose a good fit, and inspire further discussion about the college choice process.

**College visits.**

Students had the opportunity to go on many college trips from freshman through senior year. The counselors arranged college trips for students in their own schools, and students were also invited to join trips led by other schools in the network. During the fall of their senior year, they could sign up for trips that ran every Wednesday. There were several multi-school overnight trips, and students also described attending college trips through their extracurricular activities, as well as trips arranged by teachers who took small groups of interested students to visit their alma maters. Students were also notified of trips organized by the universities, who provided bus transportation to and from the city for any interested students from different schools. They were excused from classes
for college visits, whether the visit was through the school or on their own. The focal students had all been on three or more trips, mostly with their school, but also with family, siblings, and friends.

Mr. Webb selected colleges to visit that had average net costs below $12,000. He noted that other schools in the network traveled to HBCUs more often than Performance High because their student populations were predominately Black, and the families expressed interest in them, though the average costs for HBCUs tended to be high. Ms. Wilcox arranged an overnight trip for 20 Performance High students to a mix of HBCUs and PWIs through her club for over spring break. For that trip, students were on a payment plan to cover the cost, which was $225. Mostly sophomore and juniors attended the trip, but a few freshmen also joined. Students also talked about a trip they had gone on, a three-day overnight trip to the state’s public four-year schools.

Visits from college representatives and partnerships.

Students were also exposed to higher education institutions through visits from campus representatives who came to Performance High and gave presentations, which students could choose to attend. These visits were arranged by the Network central office, which kept a large list of college contacts and sent an email blast inviting any interested institutions to do recruiting sessions at individual schools and to attend the college fair. Colleges stood out to students when the rep was particularly dynamic or friendly, and were put off by representatives who they perceived were indifferent or hostile towards them. A few students described having relationships with reps over the course of a few years.
In the several years prior to this study, Performance Network had also been forging university partnerships, which McClafferty et al. (2002) identified as a key strategy for promoting college going for underrepresented youth. During the 2015-2016 school year, the Network had eight university partnerships. Six of them were private, in state institutions, of which five were more selective and one was less selective. Two were public, out-of-state schools that were both more selective.

Originally these partners, which were largely engaged through the connections of administrators, were committed to providing at least two students in the network with full financial packages and on-campus academic supports. In turn, the Network provided the university with excellent candidates, typically minority students of interest to schools who hoped to put together a diverse class of incoming students. In the following quote, Mr. Webb described the partnership arrangement.

The central office will say here's your list of students who meet the schools, and there's like X's that say this student meets that one and that one, but not that one. Um, you guys should evaluate, do you think they would be a good representation of Performance High? Are they generally like free of disciplinary problems? Like, we only want to put our best foot forward. Sort your list accordingly. And then it's our job to send out invites to the student to the kick off. I've never cut a student from the list based on, as long as they meet the GPA and SAT cause I think it's an opportunity for them. Like, listen, maybe you haven't been that great in the past but here's an opportunity for you, you should take advantage of it.

Mr. Webb described some confusion among the students, counselors and central office administrators about the nature and benefit of the partnerships. He said:

It's super confusing. It's super confusing even in the central office because a lot of the schools get cross-shopped by non-partnership students also. Like two of the schools, their admissions standards are on the lower end. One has been giving fantastic financial packages to like, every student that applies whether they are partner students or not. That gets really confusing to [the administrator in the central office] who's like, what's the point of this partnership? Like is there
really one? You're doing the same thing anyway. Why are we designating that these six students were any different than those ones?

Counselors mentioned partnership schools during seminars in relation to applications, but also presented summer opportunities, or scholarship opportunities for those particular schools. The partner schools also had a prime position in the college fair, all in a row as soon as students entered the room.

**College Fair and partner event.**

The sophomores and juniors attended the network college fair in May. During the year of this study, over 90 schools, including trade schools for cosmetology, automotive, and culinary, set up tables in the gymnasium of one of the network’s other high schools. Buses arrived with hundreds of students from the Network’s six high schools, and students rotated through the college fair in predetermined timeslots, with each group having one hour to visit with the representatives.

Most students visited the different tables and interacted with school representatives, but during every timeslot I observed a group of boys who only superficially talked to reps and then sat in the bleachers for the remaining time. Students from other schools had worksheets to hold them accountable for gathering information about the colleges; the group of boys from the other schools laughed as they made up answers for their assignment.

All students from Performance High interacted with college reps for the entire hour, and did not have an assignment associated with the event. Many of them wore professional attire and carried notepads and pens and some had their resumes. During the debrief in their junior seminar class, the students from Performance High complained that
it was too crowded, too short, and too difficult to get face time with the reps they wanted to talk to the most.

After the college fair ended around 3pm, the majority of students left the building to travel back to their neighborhoods on public transportation. About 120 students stayed for the partnership school kick off, a more intimate event where the partnership reps met and spent time with what an administrator called "the cream of the crop" of the students from Performance Network. These students, through their GPAs and ACT scores, were identified as "partnership students" and were eligible for admission at one or more of the schools. Network administrators provided the students with pizza and drinks. After, the network administrators facilitated icebreakers in which the students broke off into groups with school reps to answer questions like, "What was your favorite part of the year?" Or, "If you could be an ice cream flavor, what kind would you be and why?" Then students participated in break out groups where they discussed what characteristics were important to them in choosing a college, and the reps told them more about their schools.

**Engaging families in college choice**

Mr. Webb described the families of Performance High students as supportive of their children's college application process. He noted that most parents did not have knowledge about the landscape of post secondary institutions, the intricacies of financial aid, or how to navigate the application process. 71% of students who attended the school were considered "economically disadvantaged," and many students described themselves as the first in their families to attend college, both groups that typically lack college resources and information (Pascarella, 2004; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001).
Performance High engaged with parents primarily through family meetings. Two of these meetings, were called "Family Fit" meetings, named for the task of making sure that students match with colleges that are the best academic, personal, and financial fit for them. The first Fit meeting took place for the rising seniors the summer before senior year and all but 10 students attended their meetings. The meetings included Mr. Webb, the student and a family member, usually a parent. Students brought their lists of prospective schools that they developed in their junior seminar, along with the average GPA and test scores for admitted students at each potential institution, as well as each school's graduation rates and the graduation rates for the student's demographic (where available). Mr. Webb made sure that each student had a list of schools that maximized the possibility that they would be accepted to, and be able to afford to attend, at least one of their choices. He made suggestions for students to look at additional schools, and made sure that the parent or guardian understood the list and agreed with the choices. Finally, he asked parents and students to think about finances. He asked, "What budget do you have each year that you can sustain over the four-years?" If they were unsure about what they could afford, he showed them a chart outlining the average net costs of different schools and talked about what the payment schedule might look like. He asked the parents which schedule of payment looked feasible for their budget. Mr. Webb said that asking families to disclose their financial situations was sometimes uncomfortable, but for the most part, the parents found it informative and helpful.

The second Family Fit meeting took place in the spring of the 2015-2016 school year. It was dedicated to choosing an institution from among the schools that students were accepted to. Students were expected to bring their acceptance letters and financial
award letters, as well as a form they filled out to help them compare true costs across schools. Each meeting was facilitated by a teacher or counselor, each of whom received training from Mr. Webb about how to have conversations with families about the cost of college. In the training, teachers and counselors went over frequently asked questions from families and how to answer them so that their advising would be uniform. Every member of the senior teaching team conducted meetings, as well as a few administrators from the central office. The counselors and teachers knew the students, as they had them in their classes. The administrators from the central office had met many of the students but did not know them well. The meeting facilitators were instructed to flag students who seemed like they would be graduating with over the national average in debt. Most of the meetings were attended by parents and students in person, but a few were conducted over the phone when family members were not available.

During these spring meetings, the counselor or teacher talked candidly to parents about the amount that the families would be responsible for out-of-pocket, and asked parents explicitly how they planned to pay. Some parents reported that they had been saving for college for years, or had older children in college and understood the reality of paying tuition. Some did not have a plan, but said that they would "find a way" to cover the gap. Most parents let the teacher or counselor take the lead and deferred to their advice, but a few pushed back with their own belief that their student should be able to pick the institution they wanted, regardless of cost. The majority of the students, along with a family member, attended both meetings. Many students had incomplete information, were missing award letters or had issues with their FAFSAs that prevented them from being able to fully assess the net costs across schools. Teachers and counselors
tried to address those issues then and there. They asked students to step out into the hall and call schools about their letters. They logged into students' FAFSA accounts to check on their statuses, or in one case, Mr. Webb helped a students fill out her FAFSA right there in the Family Fit meeting. In one case, a tall girl with gold hoops and a hooded sweatshirt came in with her parents, all three of them looked grim when they told Ms. Olsen that they did not have any financial aid letters. The girl had angry tears streaming down her face by the time she explained that her parents had filed their taxes too late to get the FAFSA in on time. Ms. Olsen said, "Okay, this is a very serious situation that needs to be handled immediately but it might not be too late. Worst case scenario, you live at home and commute the first year." The girl shot an angry look at her dad, who had his hands folded in his lap, and said "I don't want to live at home." The whole family stayed and filled out the FAFSA with Mr. Webb's help right there on a school computer.

The teachers and counselors debriefed after the family fit meetings, and also periodically held meetings to discuss each student's circumstances, and determined the best way to advise students based on their combined knowledge. The senior teaching staff and Mr. Webb met often. In the spring, they had formal and informal meetings almost weekly in order to discuss students, do trainings for letters of recommendations, or discuss the students' eligibility to graduate. These trainings provided in-depth guidance on each step. For example, in the training for letters of recommendations, Mr. Webb provided a slideshow outlining how to write letters of recommendation, and what to include for different types of schools. He shared sample letters for strong students, "trouble" students, and students who had not participated in extracurricular activities. Many of the senior teachers had lunch during the same period and most of them ate
together every day in an empty classroom. Mr. Webb joined them during this time when there were college issues to discuss. They especially shared information about students who were at high risk in terms of the amount of debt they planned to take on, and agreed on consistent messaging to consider other options.

**Relationships with teachers**

Teachers also provided information, resources, and support to students in their college choice process. Teachers provided formal support for the college application process, like preparing students for the ACT in their classes, writing the recommendations and judging their seminar presentations. Before each ACT test, teachers gave students ACT kits that included personal notes from teachers with sentiments like, "You must believe in yourself. You have made great improvement in so many areas. I know that you can persist through this test and do your best. Do not doubt yourself or give up."

Teachers had many informal interactions about college with students. Many students knew where their teachers had gone to college and shared their teachers' college stories with me in their interviews. Many students described first hearing about particular colleges of interest from their teachers, or were influenced by their teacher's advice. For example, Pam said that stories from a teacher she was close to reinforced her desire to go to school out of state.

Lori: How do you feel like the support structure at Performance High helped you navigate this process? Or helped you choose which schools you wanted to go to in particular?

Pam: Um, because we have teachers with so many different backgrounds, they kind of influenced me. So that's why all these schools are kind of random. Like
Washington State, um, his name is Mr. Preston. I guess he kind of influenced that decision because he was saying he didn't know where he wanted to go, but he ended up like, he was at Penn State, he ended up there, but before that he was doing like what is it like, what is that thing you do after high school with, like you do service? AmeriCorps? He did that in different places and if he had the chance to go far for college he would have did that. So that's why I was interested in Washington State.

Beyond information and support, students typically felt supported by these relationships, which helped students emotionally and helped bolster their confidence in making decisions for themselves. These relationships also made some students feel confident that this support would be extended to them even after they left the school.

Dante said:

The connection between the teachers and the students. No matter if you’re you know, you leave the school, um at any grade as long as you've made, the teachers try to take the form of, I'm going to try to make a connection with this student even if they don’t like me. I still want them to know that I'm here. So if you leave the school, if you ever need help, with anything when it comes to schoolwork or anything. Including the Deans. You can call them right up. You have pretty much everyone's contact information. So I really like that.

One student even ended up living with one of her teachers when her foster mother kicked her out and she suddenly found herself with nowhere to go. That teacher also cosigned a loan for her to help her pay for college.

**Accountability policies**

Some scholars argue that in addition to a college mission, a strong commitment to college requires that staff set college-related goals for students and counselors, and measure the progress made towards those goals. Corwin and Tierney (2007) state, "A college mission statement is based on a high school's expectations for its students. The
mission statement includes college expectations, goals, benchmarks and an action plan" (p. 5).

Consistent with this recommendation, administrators at Performance Network sought to assess whether the Network was achieving its goals by making explicit what "good" outcomes were for students and establishing "mission metrics." These metrics, which were passed down to the counselors from the central office, required students and counselors to meet particular college related targets throughout students' duration in high school. The targets were embedded within the curriculum of college and career seminar courses, and the counselors established a set of specific incentives and consequences to encourage students to adhere closely to the specified school-wide college-going process. The metrics drove daily enactment of the network's mission to promote social mobility, and measured their effectiveness in doing so.

Each counselor's metrics were unique to their position, and compensation was tied to achieving them. The counselors' progress towards the metrics was assessed by a Network administrator on a biweekly basis, and each counselor was given a green, yellow, or red rating for each metric. The senior college adviser's goals included: 95% of his students file a FAFSA, 80% of seniors accepted to a four-year school, 80% of recent graduates enrolled in two or four-year programs or the military, and 85% have a documented postsecondary plan. The Network administrators tied each mission metric to a data point that represented what counted as successful progress towards the metric.

The deliverables for postsecondary plans were evidence that students had submitted deposits at four-year schools they planned to attend, had taken placement tests for two-year schools, had received a class schedule, showed a pay stub for evidence of
employment or a letter from an employer that demonstrated intent to employ the student, or a deployment date for those who chose the military. The junior counselor's goals were related to students taking the ACT, writing college essays, participating in summer opportunities, and securing letters of recommendation. The sophomore counselor's metrics were related to students' performances in mock interviews, the number deemed "ready" to progress to their internships, and the number of students who passed their end-of-year presentations. For the sophomore presentations, a panel of teachers, counselors, and administrators used a rubric to measure how well students explained their chosen career paths and why they chose them, the completeness of their information about postsecondary choices, and how well each broke down the costs of their plans and explained how they would cover them. Students were also scored on how well they anticipated roadblocks on their postsecondary paths, and identified people who could support them. For each category, they were given a score from 0-3. The sophomore counselor's metrics were more subjective than the junior and senior metrics.

The central office broke each goal down into sub-goals for each counselor and assigned target dates by which each goal should be accomplished. These periodic goals were tied to student deliverables. For example, in their senior year, every student who had above a 2.29 GPA was required to submit six college applications by a certain date in the fall. If a student had below a 2.29, they were expected to submit three applications by the same time. At least two of their applications had to be approved by their counselors as a "financial fit" school, where only public in-state universities, community college, schools that meet full need, or network partner schools qualified. Students tracked their progress on an application tracker, where they indicated whether they were within a .5 of
the average GPA of admitted students, and within 3 points of the average ACT score.

Students were also required to take the ACT twice, apply to 3 scholarships, and complete a senior Capstone project outlining their postsecondary plans and how they intended to finance them. Once the counselors’ received their sub-goals and target dates, they set the target for students much earlier, to give themselves time and leeway to follow-up with students who were lagging behind the deadline. Though most students perceived that they had to complete their metrics to graduate, Mr. Webb explained that that was not strictly the case.

Lori: All these students say "Oh, we have to do all these things to graduate!" Is that a real threat to them?"

Mr. Webb: Artificially. Like I could declare it to be so. I could say a graduation requirement is that you take the ACT twice. In fact, that's when I came in that was the rule of thumb but then when it came down to it, I didn't feel like enforcing that any more. It didn't make sense to force some students, like, if it's already October of your senior year and you have a 2.0 GPA, and the community colleges you're applying to don't need the ACT, I am not going to force you to take it. That doesn't make sense. So the only ones that, almost all of the ones that were graduation requirements, were kinda just taken away. It used to be a graduation requirement that they had two family meetings each year. Now it's more like, here are all the benefits of why you should have a family meeting. I will give you a graduation ticket if you come to it.

In general, Mr. Webb had been moving away from the more punitive enforcement of the requirements. The only non-negotiable requirements were that students had to complete 50 hours of service, and submit the Capstone project which was required by the state for graduation (though the nature of the project was determined by the school). The other metrics were perceived by students to be required for graduation, but were actually just highly encouraged and reinforced by incentives and consequences.
Activities inherent to the college choice process, like researching schools, weighing college characteristics, and completing the college essay, were assignments that counted toward the final grade in their seminar or academic classes. For example, The Math, English, and Science teachers gave students assignment credit in their classes for taking the ACT. If a student did not take the test, he or she was given a zero for the assignment, and marked absent in the class. In senior seminar, students took quizzes about their "college knowledge," including such topics as types of financial aid, budgeting, and living on campus. Students also had to do case studies of hypothetical students in college where they were given the student's high school and college transcripts and descriptions of problems they were facing in college. Students had to develop a plan to address the issue in the case study using resources available on a college campus for a school they were considering. Other activities like attending Family Fit meetings and attending the college fair, were incentivized with extra high school graduation tickets, extra credit, and leaving school early without being marked as truant. Two graduation tickets were given to students as "freebies" and the others were earned by completing their targets by particular dates. Students also had to submit a form finalizing their postsecondary plans and explicitly explain how they would pay for it, to be approved by their counselor and the Network central office. If the estimated bill did not seem feasible or had incomplete information, the plan would not be approved and students would have to submit a back-up plan, signed by their families.

Students were expected to meet with Mr. Webb over the summer after high school graduation, and submit a completed checklist of items to be completed toward their post-secondary plans. If students were planning to go to college, Mr. Webb discussed tuition
deposits, term bills, loan counseling, health insurance, orientation and placement testing. This meeting was intended to prevent "summer melt," a term for students who pay a deposit with intentions to attend a college, but do not actually matriculate. Those who plan to go to the military or into the workforce also meet and discuss progress towards their goals.

The counselors at Performance High were successful at meeting their metrics. Of the 10 he was given, Mr. Webb met or exceeded nine of them, though he talked about how intense it felt to be measured and scrutinized. He said:

It's very hard and very, it makes me feel like, how some of the students feel because I'm like, give me some agency. Give me some room. I can do this, but I don't need, not everything has to be a number. But I get it, I get like, I'm very data driven too and I shoot for those because it bothers me if I'm not going to meet them, because it's on paper and it's a number and I can hit a number, but it's easy to lose sight of the unintended consequences. Like what does this number mean?

Ms. Olsen also talked about how she strived to meet her metrics, but struggled with some of the implications of pursuing the metrics at all costs. For example, she talked about one instance where she held a mock ACT so students could practice their test taking skills, and many students did not meet the criteria she had set forth to participate. She struggled with whether it was more important to give students that experience and meet her metric, or whether students should experience the consequences of their actions in order to learn from them. She decided to turn several students away. She said:

So I knew I didn't meet my metric on Saturday morning. And that doesn't sit well with me, right? So the scanning deadline for those bubble sheets for the mock ACT was Wednesday. We knew the scanning deadline was Wednesday and we had a makeup day on Tuesday, so I meet my metric. And so it is a piece of that. I also wanted to target those kids specifically though, because a lot of them are the ones that needed to have the pretend experience of taking it. So it kind of is a win-win in that way but in terms of the credit that they receive for taking it, you didn't
participate. I turned, which kills me too 'cause I know I'm not meeting my metric, I turned probably at least eight to 10 of them away on Saturday morning. They were either between two and seven minutes late or they did not have an ID or they did not have their admission ticket. So I turned them away and I sent them home.

In the moment she decided to turn students away, but she held a make up exam for students so that they could have the experience and she could also meet her metric, which was important to her.

**Support for persistence**

Beginning within a few years prior to this study, Performance Network developed a new team at the central office that tracked and supported the over 3,000 alumni of the Network in their postsecondary placements, with the goal of addressing high rates of college attrition. The three-member team, called the Alumni Team, did site visits at colleges, connected students with resources and, in some cases, were a presence on campus to extend the support network. One member was stationed at a local community college where a large percentage of network students attended. Students were asked to sign waivers with their colleges to have student data released to the Alumni Team so they could be better supported, and so the network could collect data for their mission metrics and program development.

As they progressed through the application process, seniors updated their college-related forms and document their college choice process on the Alumni Portal. The network and the Alumni Team tracked trends in college outcomes over time through the data collected in this database. Seniors were also able to access alumni from Performance
Network if they wanted to get in touch with students at schools of interest for questions or advice.

Conclusion

Researchers predict that a strong college culture cultivates aspirations and behaviors conducive to preparing for, applying to and enrolling in college (Corwin & Tierney, 2007), but the mechanisms by which cultural capital is transmitted through institutions have not been established. In trying to understand how cultural capital is transmitted to children by their parents, some researchers attempt to measure parents' stock of cultural capital by assessing the volume and types of reading or educational materials in the home (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Teachman, 1987).

Consistent with this approach, the high school context at Performance High contained an impressive array of college-related resources.

Nonetheless, Jaeger (2009) argues that in addition to understanding the stock of cultural capital, it is also critical to examine whether and how resources are transmitted to and absorbed by children. To better understand if and how students absorb cultural capital through the college-going culture at Performance High, the following chapters provide a descriptive analysis of how the focal students made decisions about if and where to go to college.
CHAPTER 5: Deciding Where to Go To College

College-going cultures such as the one I observed at Performance High are thought to foster and encourage students' college plans, aspirations and expectations. Researchers argue that these cultures substantially increase the likelihood of engaging in college-related behaviors, including taking a college preparatory curriculum and enrolling in college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Oakes et al., 2006).

As prior research predicts, students at Performance High reported that the pervasive college message influenced their college choice processes. For some students, the school’s culture reinforced their desires to go to college. For others, it encouraged them to consider college as an option when they might not have otherwise. Thirty-four out of the 35 students planned to attend college the following fall. One student, Cherise, enrolled in a local cosmetology program with the goal of attending college the following year while working as a stylist to offset college costs. In the fall following their high school graduation, almost all of the students had enrolled in the colleges or universities they had reported that they planned to attend in their interviews. One student, Quantisha, did not enroll in the selective four-year school she had planned to attend. Two others did not achieve their stated goal of enrolling in a community college because they were unable to pass the placement tests.

At Performance High, the pervasive college message and abundant college resources were intended to create a culture where college was assumed to be the next step, and where all students engaged in the required steps to enter and succeed in college. Like in many middle- and upper-class school contexts, the decision to go to college for
most students in this study tended to be what Weis et al. (2014) describe as a "non-decision." Students could not pinpoint when they had made the decision to attend college; the moment descended on them unnoticed. While Reay (1998) describes middle-class students' taken-for-granted orientation towards college going as "too true to warrant discussion," (p. 525) the focal students' decisions to go to college were not so certain, nor were they reflective of the self-confidence and sense of entitlement that researchers conceptualize as reflective of cultural capital (Lareau, 2011). Oakes et al. argue that students who have internalized strong college cultures,

...see college going as integral to their identities; they have the confidence and skills to negotiate college without sacrificing their own identity and connections with their home communities. They recognize that college is a pathway to careers that are valued by their families, peer groups and local communities. (2004, p. 12)

In contrast, most focal students, even those with strong academic records, reported feeling hesitation and doubt about attending college. These doubts were related to the poor college outcomes they saw for their peers and siblings, and worries about affordability and the sufficiency of their academic skills and habits.

This chapter describes how the college-going context at Performance High influenced students' decisions to go to college, and how students' experiences of the college context varied depending on students' college aspirations and beliefs. It also discusses how students perceived the school’s college messages to converge and diverge from those of their families. For the majority of students, whether they had a strong desire to go to college or not, their families' educational and life experiences, as well as their hopes and expectations for students, influenced their decisions to go to college. Of the 35 focal students, only one student reported that one of her parents discouraged her
college choice. Kayla's dad preferred that she go to technical school rather than nursing school, but her mother encouraged her plans to go to a four-year school and pursue nursing (which she did). Students with strong aspirations tended to describe how the high school context reinforced their families' hopes that they would go to college. The five students who did not believe that college was the best path for them all stated that they planned to attend college despite their stated preferences, and attributed the decision to their desire to please their families, especially their mothers.

In short, the college-going culture reinforced the college aspirations and expectations for students who, along with their families, saw college as part of their plan. While it influenced the plans of students who would not have considered college otherwise, the college-going culture played a limited role in changing students' worldview and dispositions about college, or students' beliefs about the benefits college could secure for them. While most students decided to pursue college right after high school, follow-up data on their status in the fall after graduating high school raises questions about how well the "College for Most/All" message served the needs of students.

**Reinforced aspirations**

About a third of the focal students described having considered college as an option, or imagined themselves going to college, since childhood. They described these aspirations as being influenced by their families and friends, portrayals of the "college experience" in popular culture, college sports, extracurricular activities, and their desired careers. These students found that the pervasive college message and regimented college
program at Performance High reinforced their college plans. Though several of these students described the emphasis on college as "repetitive" and "annoying" they were grateful for the resources and support. They explained that the messaging and supports bolstered their expectations about college, and kept them focused on the tasks and timeline related to the application process.

For example, Jaleen, a fast-talker who enthusiastically stumbled over her words, described her aspirations to work in broadcast journalism. She saw her interview for this study as a good opportunity to hone her skills for her desired field. Of her decision to go to college, she said:

I, it was kind of, I grew up with that mentality, basically because I would be the first one to go to college. So my mom and my grandmother, they kind of instilled that in me. Um, you know, not basically making the decision for me, but having it as you know, a back up, a choice in my mind. You know, like college would be a good thing for you. And actually coming to Performance High, that's all you hear is "college, college, college, college." So I knew that that would be a great thing for me as well.

Even though no one else in Jaleen's family had gone to college, her family’s support and her interest and experiences in Journalism influenced her to pursue college. The school's college message reinforced Jaleen’s assumptions that college would be the best next step.

Like Jaleen, Milan, a tall girl with a serious demeanor, also described Performance High as reinforcing her family's expectation that she would go to college, especially because her parents had not had that opportunity themselves. Her family emigrated from Gambia in order to give her and her siblings more opportunity and her parents had a strong desire to go to college themselves, but lacked the resources. Though she was born in the United States, she and her family had gone back to Gambia to live for several years. She described college as being necessary to becoming a nurse, her chosen
career. Her parents' values and her own experiences in Gambia shaped her college aspirations. She said:

Yeah, they really value education cause like, I've been in Gambia too, so it's like I had an experience of seeing people who didn’t have a lot of opportunities, so coming over here with a lot of opportunities, I want to pursue my education.

Further, she described Performance High's college-going culture as influential in bolstering her own aspirations, especially in being surrounded by other students who were driven to do well academically.

I think Performance High played a really huge role in like, me wanting to further my education, going to college and it's like a lot of schools I know a lot of students in other schools think it's cool to be out here in these streets and stuff but here, it's like a challenge. It's a competition. Everybody wants to say, oh I have a 3.5, I have even better, a 3.6...Everybody wants the best for themselves and we like, challenge each other.

Milan described how she and her family shared the expectation that she would go to college. She explained that her family’s move to the United States was largely motivated by the expectation that she and her siblings would benefit from a college education in this country. She described her school, and the academic orientation of the students within it, as reinforcing these expectations.

For Dante, the most influential aspect of the high school context was how it reinforced his expectation that college could lift himself and his family out of poverty, an idea that originated with his mother. He said:

And ever since I was young she [his mom] was like, I want you to go to college so bad because I don't want you to have to struggle like I am. I am struggling for simple things. For a pack of toilet paper. Sometimes I have to run around and ask, and she hates asking people for things, to do things for her. And I see that every day and that was a big thing. Like, my, I don't want to struggle like that. I want to be able to do things for my family. I want to be able to do things for my mom when she gets older. And then a lot of the males in my family haven’t gone to college. I mean like, within my generation, I'm going to be the first male to go to
Dante described his worldview, which reflected a dichotomy between what he perceived as clear paths: Either he could go to college and be successful, or follow in the footsteps of the men in his family and maintain the status quo for his family. He described how his high school, especially the physical environment, served as a constant source of motivation in his struggle to pursue economic security:

And then something that really kicked in for me like oh, like a lot of the quotes on the walls, they’re all talking about being successful and Performance Network’s thing on being successful is getting to college because that’s the way you’ll be set. And a lot of those quotes are just like, like you know this is what you do. This is how you become successful. You get to college and you still remember these quotes and it keeps you going. It gets you out of high school into college, and out of college into real life and it keeps you going.

Dante believed that going to college would necessarily lead to better life outcomes, and Performance High reinforced his views.

For Jaleen, Milan, and Dante, the strong college-going culture at Performance High bolstered the assumption instilled in them from their families that they would go to college. Though none of their families had had the opportunity to pursue higher education, they vocally encouraged their children to do so.

Yelena, a soft-spoken student with clear skin and drawn-in arched eyebrows, attributed her college aspirations to her parents, but talked about Performance High as providing resources for her decision about where to go to college. She said her parents had her when they were very young and were relatively poor while she grew up, so both of her parents struggled to get an education. Her parents attended college on and off for
her entire life, and both would soon graduate from their bachelor's programs when she
was graduating high school. She attributed her college aspirations to her parents'
emphasis on education, as well as her ability to do well and succeed in school.

I think, my parents giving me the opportunity and things like that. Even though
growing up, we didn't have the most money. They made sure my education was
like, locked down and like, in stone. Like I was going to school, and like, I was
going to try my best and I was going to work really hard and actually see my hard
work pay off. So I think that that watching myself achieve things and do well at
things makes me want to do well.

She described her education as "in stone," as if it were predetermined that she would
work hard and do well in school. She emphasized the role of her family in influencing her
college aspirations, while she said her school helped her more with the decisions about
where to go. When asked about how her school influenced how she was thinking about
college, she said:

Um, it really made me look at the schools I was applying to and see what
mattered to me. Like, I think that when I was going, when I visited I was like, I
like this I like this, but I never really like sat back and analyzed it. But the college
program here was like, look at it, analyze it and digest it, now apply it....It really
helped me look at everything big picture like, I have all these options and that's
great but what's the best one for me. So like, looking at all of that helped.

Her experience in her high school mirrored her family's expectation that she would go to
college, and further, it helped her make nuanced decisions about which school would best
fit her needs and expectations.

All of these students identified aspects of Performance High's college culture that
reinforced their decision to go to college, such as the pervasive messaging, the college
oriented students, and the resources that emphasized finding the right college fit. For
students who described having longstanding, positive dispositions toward college, the
college-going culture reinforced, supported, and supplemented their college choice
process. This finding is consistent with prior literature describing college-going processes for students in more privileged school settings (Weis, 2014; McDonough, 1997).

**Compelled to college**

For the other two thirds of the focal students, the college approach at Performance High influenced them to consider college as an option when they might not have otherwise. These students also talked about how their families supported or influenced their decisions, but they tended to describe their family members as supportive of them and their decisions in general, rather than as advocates for them to go specifically to college. For this group of students, Performance High’s approach encouraged students' plans to go to college, but was limited in its ability to substantively change their expectations and worldview related to college.

When these students described how the pervasive college message influenced them to apply to and go to college, rather than describe themselves as excited and inspired to go, they described how they took the path of least resistance in accepting college as the next step. In responding to questions about when they had first made the decision to go to college, these students described the step-by-step process by which they prepared for and applied to college through their school program rather than talked about their reasons and motivations for going to college.

For example, Joseph, a slight, soft-spoken boy who kept his jacket and backpack on for the duration of his interview, described how he had been "disrespectful" as a child. He was often in trouble, suspended for fighting and given demerits for all kinds of behavioral infractions. He thought his behavioral record might preclude him from
attending college at all. When asked about his decision to go to college, he talked about
how he had been inundated with messages about college by his school.

Lori: How long, when did you first decide you wanted to go to college?

Joseph: I mean at first I really didn't really pay it no mind because it was 7th
grade and I wasn't thinking about college. I was just worried about passing the
grade and moving on. But then 9th grade, that’s when they really, really urge you
with college. College is like every other sentence that they say and then it goes on
and you hear more and more college.

Lori: What do you think about that?

Joseph: I mean, it's annoying in a way, but at the end of the day it's going to help
you. So...

Lori: In what way?

Joseph: I mean like, it's like, college is just like, they make college seem like it's
going to be the best thing for you in the future, which to me, sounds like it is. But
I haven’t experienced it yet, so I don’t know. So it’s...college, I think is a good
thing.

Lori: How do you think they advise you?

Joseph: Whatchu mean?

Lori: On how to make decisions?

Joseph: Oh they, they do a lot of like, I don’t know, I don’t know how they do it
(laughing). But like, I’m about to just... I'm a tell you how I think they do it.
Based off how much college they put into you, it makes you, it made me think
about literally going to college because at first I didn’t think I wanted to go to
college back in 8th grade because of money and like, I didn’t know what college
would accept me based on my behavior.

Joseph described his decision as a product of "how much college they put into you"
rather than relating the decision to his own beliefs and preferences. Performance High
provided Joseph with information about costs and requirements and influenced his plans
to go to college, but he remained uncertain as to whether college was really the next best step for him.

Like Joseph, Terrell also tentatively accepted that college was the best decision. Terrell seemed uncertain about whether the college messages at Performance High, that college would help him to be successful and to earn money, were true.

Terrell: After that I went here and it's like, cool congrats you're going to college actually. Cause everybody...

Lori: Everybody does what?

Terrell: Goes to college now. It's more like, you feel like you have to go if you want to be successful and if you don't go then it's like, you're not going to be successful.

Lori: Wait, do you want to go to college?

Terrell: I mean, if I want to be, if I want to have money, then yeah, yeah I guess I do want to go to college.

Lori: Okay, I didn't ask you if you want to have money. Clearly, if I said do you want to have money, the answer is yes (laughing). You answered that. But do you want to go to college? When you think about going, are you like, yes, I'm going to college.

Terrell: Yeah...I can’t wait to go to college. I'm thrilled. Yeah. I'm really excited.

Lori: Is this sarcasm? Or are you really excited?

Terrell: I mean, I guess I'm excited. It's just like, it's just more school. I don't know how happy you can be about that. It's awesome. More school, yeah.

This interaction reinforces that college going is a norm at Performance High, which influenced Terrell's decision to go. Rather than assert that college would help him to be successful, Terrell said, "You feel like you have to go if you want to be successful," which raises questions about the extent to which Terrell believed that college was the best next step for him.
Malik talked about how he never questioned whether he would go to college as a result of attending Performance High. He had not really thought about college until the school college program officially began in the 10th grade. When he was in elementary school, his mom was taking classes online and talked to him about college, but he did not remember having internalizing the idea and actively decided that he too, would go.

Lori: How long would you say, like when did you first consider going to college at all?

Malik: I don't even know. It was just like my dad didn't go. He went to a trade. And my mom, she did go to college but when she went, when she was on campus, I don't think I was born. And then she was online and stuff when I was around. She was always telling me about college. But then when I got to Performance High, they just banged it into our heads that college is the next step. So I never really like, questioned, oh I'm not going to college.

Lori: So when you were a little kid and you're mom talked about it, you were like, oh I'm going to college?

Malik: Yeah, but I didn't really think about it. It was like, I'm not nowhere near college. And now I'm at Performance High, from like middle school on up. And they just always bump college. They got flags everywhere and they named, like before they used to have cohorts and they named them after colleges. Like, if you didn't know what it was, you probably found out.

Malik was introduced to the idea of college by his mother, as a result of her pursuing her own education. However, he did not cite his mother as a primary influence in his own decision to go to college, rather, he said he assumed he would go to college because of the pervasive college message in his school environment.

Justin, a tall student with an athletic build who wore his hair in twists, had considered alternatives to college, especially joining the military. In response to the very first interview question, intended to elicit a general description of the school, Justin described his school as having "forced" students to go to college.
Lori: So the first thing is, can you describe your high school to me? What is it like going here?

Justin: Um, going here? It's different like, compared to some of the high school my friends go to. Like, to me, this high school is more strict. They force you to do more things than other high schools. So to me it's not a traditional high school, but it's not a bad school.

Lori: What do you mean they force you to do more things?

Justin: To me, the school kind of forces you to take the, to take, forces you to go to college instead of putting certain people on career paths instead of college.

Lori: How do they force you to go, do you think?

Justin: I think since 7th grade they just instill it in your head like, college is the only way to success.

Lori: And how do they do that?

Justin: Like college this and college that, and every time you get in trouble, 'well this is not going to go in college'. Or 'make sure you correct your behavior before you go to college'. And stuff like that. Basically, they try to use college as an excuse to, for everything.

Lori: Are there other things you dislike about going here?

Justin: Uh, no not really.

For Justin, the pervasive college-going message was a defining characteristic of his school, which differentiated it from "traditional" high schools. He said that his twin brother had left Performance High because he did not like it, but Justin had had a relatively positive experience at Performance High. Justin's dad was a veteran, which he said influenced him to think about following in his footsteps. However, the fact that his sister had graduated from college influenced his decision to go.

Lori: I've been interested, I haven't met any students who are going to the military. I'm just wondering how college wins out on that decision?
Justin: I don't know. I think my sister, actually. I think when my sister, when I was in 10th grade she graduated so that made me feel like, if she could do it, I could do it. Why not go to college?

Justin said his dad was supportive of either pathway, especially because his dad's military benefits would help cover his college costs. Justin did not identify any concrete motivations for attending college, but since his sister went and it was an option for him, he decided, "Why not go to college?"

In talking about their decisions to go to college, Joseph, Terrell, Malik, and Justin described having neither a strong desire nor an aversion to college as children. None of them reported believing that college would be beneficial to them. They all described their decisions to attend college as having been significantly influenced by the pervasive college message at Performance High. Like students in privileged school environments, these students knew that they were expected to apply to and attend college. However, unlike students in elite schools, they did not articulate well-developed college identities, or a sense of entitlement in relation to college. Instead, they seemed to suspend disbelief about the messages about college communicated to them by their counselors, teachers, and school environment. It is unclear to what extent these participants understood and/or believed that college was the best next step for them. The absence of strong commitment to or understanding of the benefits of college may have negative implications for their college persistence.

On the other hand, two students described a significant positive change in their beliefs and dispositions about college as a result of attending Performance High. Damien and Leo described how they enthusiastically embraced their school's message that college was a means to success. Damien described his experience at Performance High as "life
changing." He talked about how he had disciplinary problems when he was younger, but over time developed a close relationship with a dean at the school, who came in to school on the weekends to play basketball with him. The dean encouraged him to take on a leadership role within the school as sort of a junior Dean, which Damien described proudly. These positive experiences and the message at the school that college would help him earn more money, influenced his decision to attend college. He said:

At first, no. I thought I was not even going to go to college. I thought probably I, I'm just going to be out of school trying to find a job that is best for me then save my money and move out. Then it was like, Performance High and my sister. It was life changing. Performance High gave me the preview of like, if you don't go to college, this is how much less you will make. If you do go to college, this is how much more you will make, And I'm like, life is all about money so I guess I'm going to go to college.

Watching his sister and his friends go to college solidified his view that college was a feasible option for him. Though his sister had recently left college and hoped to enroll in another school, he continued to hold as role models students that he knew and perceived to be happy and succeeding in their first year. For Damien, Performance High shifted his worldview to see college as instrumental to achieving his goal, and as a feasible option for him.

Damien: Performance High actually push you to do something with your life. Even if you decide not to do something, they're just like, just try. Even if you don't like it, just try and then change your mind. I actually seen people change their mind.

Lori: Really?

Damien: Like, some people that graduated from here were like, I never seen myself going to college. They went to college, they said they're having the best time of their life in college. They don't want to leave college. Their grades is wonderful. If someone is messing up, they go to get a tutor. It's like, they said Performance High was the best thing for them. I was like wow.
Lori: Interesting.

Damien: I was like, how I seen this person act, I didn't expect to see him go anywhere. I didn't expect him to go anywhere. I expect him just to get, like, I have no bad wishes for nobody but I thought he'd get retained and graduate when I graduated but he actually got his act together. Went to summer school. Graduated on time. And hopefully they can graduate on time in college.

Damien had models of students like him, from the same high school context, who had not considered going to college or were resistant to the idea, whom he perceived to be happy and thriving in college. Damien also described being close to his dad, and described his dad as supportive of his interest in attending college, however, his dad was mainly focused on how he would finance it. Damien described that before attending Performance High, he did not have college aspirations, plans, or expectations, nor did his family have specific expectations that he would go to college. For Damien, the college-going culture, which did not necessarily align with his home habitus, influenced a change in his attitude towards college.

Like Damien, Leo also attributed his decision to go to college to his high school, and specifically the pervasive college message and embedded college curricula.

Leo: Yeah, like, if you see all these colleges and they are constantly repeating, putting in your head, we want you to go to college. College, college, college, college college, college. I remember we had to take classes on, about college. Like last year we had to take a class about college, about FAFSA. We had to take a core class explaining college and the process of um, what we went through this year, applying to schools and all that.

Lori: How do you think that influenced your perceptions or decisions about college?

Leo: I think it just, kind of like made it like, it kind of, at first it was like, yo! This is a lot. What do you ya'll, like, what are you making a class on going to college for? What is this? (laughs) I don't know. I was just, I was cool with it though. It really made it, inspired me to go to college. Like, I'm really happy I chose this school.
For Leo, the pervasive college message inspired him to pursue college, a choice he might not have otherwise made. In his interview, he talked about how his mom was supportive of his decisions in general. He said, "My mom, well yeah, she is supportive but she is, she supports me whatever I do, if I go to college or not. But she's happy I'm going though." Performance High inspired Leo to go to college, and influenced his dispositions about college even though his family did not necessarily expect that college would be his next step.

Both Leo and Damien described a significant shift in their worldviews in relation to college as a result of the college culture at their school. However, for most students, the college culture at Performance High reinforced existing dispositions or influenced students' college plans without significantly changing their expectations and dispositions.

**Conflicting goals**

For a handful of students, the pervasive college message and practices at Performance High conflicted with their own preferences and goals. But, only one student, Quantisha, stated out right that she did not want to go. Four other students vacillated between explaining the reasons they did not want to go and listing the reasons that they planned to go anyway. The most influential reason offered for attending was the hopes and opinions of their mothers. All five of these students applied to and planned to attend college, but they stated that, based on their assessment of their abilities, long-term goals, and cost of college, they were highly doubtful that college was the best path for them.

Quantisha was one of the most vocal students in her resistance to the pervasive college message and program at her school. She wore her hair in braids and slouched in
her chair while she spoke. She had a 3.4 GPA and a 16 on her ACT, and planned to
attend a private, selective college in the fall. In her interview, the first thing she said was,
"You want me to be honest? Or you want me to lie?" She compared her school to a
prison, but at the same time, she described close relationships with many of her teachers
and said that Performance High was the only reasons she knew how to "apply herself."

Of the pervasive college message at her school, she said:

Oh my God. They make every...that's one of the things I, I can't stand about
Performance High. Like I understand you think college is the way out for
everybody but not necessarily. Like me, honestly, I really don't want to go to
college but I'm forced to do college stuff to make me go to college because they
make it like, even senior seminar class or like sophomore seminar, everything is
designed to send you to college and they don't understand that everybody doesn't
have to go to college and everybody doesn't want to go college. I know everybody
think like, oh you need college to do this and that, that's not necessarily true. You
can do other things there's other ways that you can succeed in life. Success is
different to you it's different to me, so who are you to tell me that I need to go to
college to be successful?

For Quantisha, being successful included working in the music industry. She said that she
wrote songs, played instruments, made beats, and wrote lyrics. She was not sure that
college was the best way to achieve her career goals, and she was tired of academics and
wanted to "take a break." In describing why she decided to go to college when she clearly
did not want to, she said succinctly, "Like my mom, she sacrificed a whole lot to make
me happy. So I came through for her. That's why I'm going."

Like Quantisha, Jason also talked a lot about why college was not the best path
for him. His main goals were to help support his mom, and earn a good enough living to
move out of the city, which he perceived as unsafe. His sister had gone to college and had
dropped out and left his mother in debt. His sister's outcomes contributed to his belief
that college was not the best way to achieve his goal of economic security.
Jason: Everybody is focused on big names, but honestly, college is, and I say you could have the same degree as someone else but they'll get a better job than you could.

Lori: Yeah, why is that?

Jason: Because it's not equal opportunity based on college. You get the degree, you feel fulfilled but ultimately you're going to be in debt and who says you're going to get the job that you want? Or that you're going to enjoy the job that you want? The best thing for me would be the military or workforce. So that's why I'm giving myself two years to get myself together to figure out whether to go to college and experience college or would I go to the work force and actually know how to have a career and make money.

Lori: Yeah, if you feel like military or the workforce is actually a better option for you, then how did you end up enrolling in community college?

Jason: Because, I just didn't want to disappoint my mom at the end of the day. I didn’t want her to think that oh, I'll just be living at home with her. I actually want to be working and go to community college at the same time. I mean, making money and I'll also be getting, continuing my education.

Jason does not believe that going to college will necessarily afford him a better job, or to make money. He chose to attend college, but he decided to go to community college to mediate the costs if it turned out that college was not for him.

Like Jason, Brianna was unsure about the role that college would play in helping her to achieve her goals. She also wanted to earn a good living, but she was not sure about her career path, and was afraid that because of that uncertainty, the costs of college would outweigh the benefits. Though she did not want to go to college, the college program and her family's expectations both contributed to her decision to go. In the following conversation, Brianna talked about how she broached the subject of taking an alternative path with her History teacher.

Brianna: Yeah, like, the main reason for me asking that is Performance High is like you gotta apply to six colleges, you gotta do this, you gotta do that. What if I don't want to do none of that? What if I want to leave high school and just sit on my mom's couch or uh, not do nothing with my life. You know what I'm saying?
Lori: So what if?

Brianna: What if? He [the History teacher] said, I don't know. I think he told me even if you apply you don't have to go to them or something like that. But I don't see the point of wasting everyone's time if I didn't want to go. I just don't like that, how they force you to do this. You see what I'm saying?

Lori: Do you seriously want to be an exotic dancer?

Brianna: No, I can't. I'm not built for that. I don't know.

Lori: Is that how you feel? That it's wasting a lot of time?

Brianna: Yes because me and my friends talk about it. Strippers make so much money and they don't go to college. What's the point? Like, I don't understand.

Lori: But you're going to college. So how do you explain this? How do you explain that?

Brianna: I'm going to college because first, well I'm going to college because I want to make my family happy. I'll be happy too you know, but deep down inside I just be thinking, what's the point. I had to pay $400 [for the deposit] like, that $400 could have went to somewhere else. Uh!

Lori: You didn't see it as an investment?

Brianna: Uh uh. I just seen it as like, the more they are going to take my money. Oh God, college is so expensive. Oh my God.

Brianna tried to push back against the idea that college was the best option, and her History teacher advised her to just go through the application process in her seminar and she could decided later whether she wanted to go. Though she described sarcastically posing to her teacher that she wanted to lie on the couch or become a stripper, her concerns about college were rooted in serious concerns about whether for her, the costs would outweigh the benefits. In fact, she said she would be happy to go and have the "college experience" if it were not for fear of the cost.
The regimented college program at Performance High ensured that even students who were resistant or apathetic to college were eligible to attend. As a result, both Quantisha and Brianna planned to attend selective colleges in the fall, even though they voiced resistance. The other three students who expressed resistance to the idea of going to college planned to attend community college. For all five students, when they had their college acceptances in hand, the hopes and feelings of their families influenced them to go to college, despite their own preferences.

The transmission of cultural capital through a college-going culture is thought to nurture students’ aspirations and help students navigate decision-making and application processes. With the information and support provided by the school, all of the focal students successfully submitted college applications and most planned to attend college. However, students' descriptions of their college aspirations and expectations highlight the difficulty in changing students' worldviews in relation to college.

**Challenges for the pervasive college culture**

Scholars argue that one integral characteristic of a college-going culture is shared positive beliefs about college going (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). These beliefs about college are an important form of cultural capital. This study revealed that at Performance High, while many students, teachers, and counselors had hopes about college, the college choice process was also characterized by shared fear and doubts. In addition, a further challenge was students' perceptions that the college program at Performance High was highly uniform, and designed to serve particular types of students who were invested in pursuing college as a postsecondary plan rather than serving all students.
Shared Doubts.

For students, these fears were related to their perceptions of their academic abilities and habits, their ability to finance college, and their perceptions of the poor college persistence and graduation rates of their peers and siblings. Various aspects of the high school context fostered these shared fears. For example, students were aware of low graduation rates of Performance High alumni and/or had witnessed college graduates with whom they had relationships graduate with debt and fail to obtain good jobs. About two thirds of the focal students mentioned the Network's low college graduation rates in their interviews, and described hearing about these low rates primarily from their teachers and counselors. Whereas Oakes et al. (2006) describe students who internalize college-going cultures as believing that "...college is for them and is not only reserved for the exceptional few who triumph over adversity to rise above all others," (p. 10) many focal students feared that only the elite from their school would persist in and graduate college.

About half the focal students mentioned some worry about their academic preparation, experiences or habits. Students mentioned low grades or test scores, difficulty reading, time management and procrastination, study habits, self-regulation habits (like getting up and being on time), and a lack of experience with lectures, taking notes, and writing longer essays. There also was a shared narrative at Performance High that students were too reliant on the highly regulated and supportive environment at the school, and that this reliance crippled their ability to navigate difficulties on their own. This narrative intensified students' doubts about their academic abilities and habits.

In addition, the emphasis on affordability in the college program made students acutely aware of the reality of the costs of post secondary education. Many of the
students mentioned these factors as minor doubts, but for about a third of the students, one or more of these factors combined created more significant fear.

Because most of the college counseling took place in a classroom setting, these fears were not discussed in depth as part of the formal program. Mr. Webb only had two individual meetings with each senior, and those were family meetings focused on discussing institutional fit. Like in Brianna's experience, when students expressed their doubts about college, their teachers and counselors generally advised them to proceed with the process and keep their options open.

Danielle described going to talk with the therapeutic counselor at school to work through her fears about college. She was a relatively strong student who had a GPA of 3.9 and an ACT score of 23, all of which she achieved while working 30 hours a week at a grocery store. She had serious concerns about her ability to afford college, and the outcomes she saw for her sister. She said:

Danielle: I think she was just going because, again, Performance Network drills college into you even if you don't want to go. You are going to go spend all that money then you're going to come back. Like you're going to drop out and it's just going to be like, I did all that for nothing. Yeah...she [her sister] did a lot just to get there and she came back the next year. I'm just always thinking about how I'm going to make it through college, how I'm going to pay for it. It's just, I don't want to end up like my sister. I'm scared to death of ending up like her. I don't want to go away and then just have to throw it all away and come back home.

Lori: What are uh, what are your particular fears?

Danielle: Meeting new people. The um, complexity of the material and the money. That's the three things that scare me.

For Danielle, her sister is emblematic of the risks of bowing to the pressure to go to college without having a strong desire to go. Though Danielle was a capable student, had
a strong desire to go to college, and had been saving money for college, her sister's
desire still worried her in terms of her own ability to persist in college.

Similarly, Jason's fears about going to college were related to his sister's negative
outcomes, which had a negative impact on his family's finances. He said:

My sister, my sister is like a free spirit, but she, she only went because everyone
was saying 'you have to go to college' and then she dropped out. But she went to
Montclair University and I don't know what she was doing in there, because
that's basically architecture school and she's not an architect and I guess she got,
she just didn't feel like she could do it.

Neither Danielle nor Jason identified a single reason that their siblings did not complete
college. For each, there was a confluence of factors that were not entirely apparent to
them. The factors included financial concerns, choosing the wrong school, and feeling
overwhelmed. Jason was also concerned about whether he was academically prepared to
go to college. Weighing his perception of his academic preparation against the risk of
going to college, he felt college was not the best decision for him.

Calvin also talked about the outcomes for his peers and uncertainty about his own
academic habits and readiness in relation to college. Hearing the low college graduation
statistic for Performance High students caused Calvin to compare his own skills and
abilities to his peers, as if they were in competition to be among those who graduated.

Calvin: Oh, cause our government teacher was telling us, I forget the percentage
but a high percentage of students who go to college won't even finish college.
Some high percent, like 80% or something crazy high number.

Lori: Yeah, what did you think about that?

Calvin: It was...kind of discouraging. It's just like, it could be my, I could be 80%.
And the other 20% could be like, the top 10 people in our grade who actually do
their work and are actually studious and are actually quick to adapt. And those are
to me personally, not to be like segregation or whatever, but those are the
geniuses. They get stuff so quick. I feel like I learn normally, but obviously there
are people who are really fast. And like I said, they adapt quickly to their environment. They make their schedule easily. They know how to get up in the morning. That's obviously simple stuff, but when you're doing it in a new environment, it's difficult.

Calvin had a 3.33 GPA and an ACT of 23, and planned to attend a more selective private school in the fall. His academic credentials seemed to indicate that he was capable of being successful in school, yet the outcomes of his peers created doubt about his own capabilities.

Like Calvin, Joanne talked about her school's low persistence and rates. She described what she saw as a contradiction between the college message at her school and the students' poor outcomes. She said:

I think that um, Performance Network shouldn't like, I don't want to use the wrong word, I think that Performance Network shouldn't like give people dreams and hopes up. Like, they give people too much hope. Cause it's like, you got all these college, like you got all these banners hanging around and it's like, you know nobody from here is like, get into Harvard. You know nobody in here is going to get into Dart...Dartmore or whatever. So it's like, why do you have these banners up? Like, most of the people like, I think that most of the people that graduate from here don't even go straight to college. They drop out. So stop beating around the bush when you know most of the seniors...for me, I don't think these seniors are ready for college.

Joanne felt that college paraphernalia and the college approach gave students false hopes about the types of institutions that were accessible to them, and their likelihood of graduating from college. Joanne herself had a mediocre GPA (2.5) and a low ACT score (15). Though she asserted that she did not think the seniors at her school were ready for college, she did not talk explicitly about her own academic preparation.

All four of the teachers I interviewed shared students' doubts about whether students were prepared for college, both academically and in terms of their other skills.
and habits. Ms. Peters talked about the challenge of teaching her students, who were often significantly behind grade level in their reading levels. She said:

I've worked here for many years, it's still challenging after many years, because of the expectations of what we are supposed to accomplish with getting kids, who are significantly below grade level, like on grade level or closer to grade level, especially as an upper level teacher. That's kind of a scary thought, when I have kids sitting in front of me who are at a fourth or fifth grade reading level, and I'm thinking about them reading rigorous text and going to college, and doing that without me.

Ms. Peters worried about how they would navigate college without the intensive support she provided in her class.

Ms. Shipley also expressed doubt about whether Performance High students were academically prepared for college, and wondered how well the school's "College for Most/All" mission addressed the needs of their student population. Ms. Shipley said:

I think, these kids are smart, but they've just not, they don't have the same kind of education as kids from the suburbs. The teachers here, we do our best but sometimes I see them going off to college and I wonder if we're doing them any favors by sending them out there. But I'm just glad I'm not the one making those decisions.

Like many of the staff members, Ms. Shipley saw herself as part of a team working towards explicit goals, though she acknowledged that she had some doubts about the appropriateness of the established goals.

Mr. Hartnell shared Ms. Peters' and Ms. Shipley's doubts about whether students were prepared for college, and he said he did not believe that education should be instrumental to the goal of college. First and foremost, he believed that Performance High's mission was to provide high quality education for students who did not have access to it, a mission he whole-heartedly embraced. He said:
College, that's the part that I don't share. Not to say that I don't want my students to go to college. It's just that I wouldn't say that the reason they need high quality education is because we need to get them into college, like that college is the next obvious step and... I think that makes sense for a lot of students. I don't share that objective for all students. College is a great thing but I don't think it's right for all of them and I don't think we should sort of like, pass over the fact that, you were good for Performance High but you're not ready for college. Let's try to get you set up doing something else.

Mr. Hartnell had gone to elite private schools his whole life. He explained that his education shaped his view that there should be some intrinsic value for learning in and of itself, and that the school should encourage students to be active citizens and good people. If the ability to be accepted to, persist, and graduate college was a proxy for measuring whether the organization was successful at fostering lifelong learning and participation in democracy, then yes, he endorsed the goal of college as well. However, he suggested that in either case, the low college graduation rates reflected that the students at Performance High were largely not prepared for the rigors of college.

Some teachers shared doubts about how whether their Special Education students were prepared for college, and how well the college program served their needs. Ms. Peters felt that the shift from "College for All" to "College for Most" would better serve students with special needs. She said:

It used to be that everyone went to college. It didn't matter who you were, which is not realistic because college is not the right option for everyone. It's also, particularly, a difficult thing about the "everybody goes to college" piece, because when 20% to 25% of our student population is special education [that percentage is unverified] that might not be. So, the message has changed over the years, which I think is great, where everybody needs to have a postsecondary plan. So, the wording of it has changed this year from "college" to "postsecondary plan." Going to community college before was not something that was celebrated. It was just like, "Well, at least you're going somewhere."

Though as Ms. Peters described, the orientation of the organization had changed, the
students still perceived that the message was that all students should go to college. Two of the focal students identified themselves as having special education designations, and both said they felt pressure to go to college, a path that was complicated by their academic and learning challenges.

Ronnie expressed a great deal of fear about whether she had the academic skills to go to college. She had small dark eyes and looked down at the table, mumbling when she spoke about her college plans. She said she had a learning disability that seriously impaired her performance on tests, as well as her ability to keep up with her schoolwork. She said:

Honestly, it was moments here at school where I didn't feel like I was college ready. Cause like, the benchmark scores. They say don't worry about them but they still like, I still get upset by them. So, at first I wasn't considering going to college because I didn't think it was right for me or I wasn't smart enough to go. But then I just looked at the other factors. Like what school can I go to that can help me and make me feel like I can succeed in college?

Ronnie was heavily influenced to enroll in college by the norms at Performance High, so much so that she had little knowledge of other pathways. She had taken the path of least resistance in the college application process and though she was unsure that college was right for her, she could scarcely imagine other possibilities. When asked what other options she was considering, she said:

Um, that's why I got upset. Because I hadn't considered anything else but that. I just considered me going to community college and that was it. But then, that was really tripping me because I didn't have a plan B. I had A, and that was it.

One Special Education teacher at the school, Ms. Palladino, expressed concern that students with special education designations were required to go through the same process as the other students, but in her view, there were not any post secondary
institutions that were both affordable and offered the level of support that many of her special education students would require in order to be successful in college. She said:

Nobody wants to be like, you're all going to college, every one of you. Well no, not you. You're Special Ed. You know, high expectations and they want to treat everyone the same. But it's actually not the same and it sets these kids up for failure when you don't even say out loud that they are different. They are going to have different needs and they are going to have different challenges, so no, you can't just expect them to go off to college the same exact way everyone else does.

Unlike Ms. Palladino, Ms. Olsen felt that the uniform process was a strength of the program, as there were high expectations and opportunities for all students. She said:

I think Performance High has a very all-inclusive program and that is no matter who you are, what your learning ability is, what your level, we hold you to the same. And in terms of like even our SPED kids, they're... While they're... It might change a little bit, like they're not applying to six schools, maybe they're just applying to three community colleges or maybe... But nothing changes the expectation and the bar is still high, regardless of who you are and what you bring to the table.

The college program supported both of the students who identified themselves as Special Education students in submitting college applications, and they both intended to attend community college in the fall. However, both of them failed the reading and writing placement tests needed to enroll. The college offered them a six-week reading program meant to help prepare them for retaking the test. Questions remain about how well the college program at Performance High supported students with differing needs in preparing for college, and accessing institutions that best meet their needs.

In almost all of the interviews with staff, and in many informal conversations, the adults at Performance High mentioned concerns about students' socio emotional skills and academic habits. These concerns were mentioned at a greater frequency than concerns about their academic preparation. There was a narrative at Performance High
that the school's intense supports for network students created what the adults called
“handholding” that undermined students’ ability to operate independently and navigate
difficulties on their own. Three of the four teachers I interviewed felt that the
"handholding" at Performance High undermined the development of skills that students
needed to be successful in college. Ms. Shipley acknowledged that, while there were
consequences for providing such intensive supports, she feared that students would be
unwilling or unable to meet the expectations without the reinforcements the school
provided. She said:

I also believe that there are other factors at play and since we're being anonymous,
I think that we don't do a good enough job of letting go with them, and teaching
them how to survive and function in classes with assignments and grades on their
own. I think and I'm sure you've heard this, that we do a lot of hand holding here
and they'll tell you, they are not shy at all in kind of saying that. I think that we... I
really honestly don't know the answer of how we try to instill in them the work
ethic and the drive and the motivation without doing a lot of the things that we do,
and chasing after them for missed work, and, "You missed this deadline, I'll still
give you half credit."

For Ms. Shipley, the supports were intended to help students develop work ethic, drive,
and motivation. Similarly, Ms. Olsen feared that if the counselors were not so emphatic
about the deadlines, students would not take them seriously. One day when the juniors
were panicked about turning in their college essays and taking the ACT, Ms. Olsen said,
"They are freaking out! It's because we push so hard and make such a big deal out of
everything, but if we didn't, I don't know if they would take it seriously."

Ms. Peters felt that what she perceived as coddling the students undermined
students’ ability to be successful in college. She explained how the metrics for teachers
and counselors contribute to that dynamic. She said:
I think that we coddle them too much, because we are so focused on meeting our metrics that we do too much for the kids and give them a false sense of what life is like when they leave here. They understand how hard the academic stuff is. But then we also, I think we lower the bar sometimes, by giving kids multiple opportunities to do things. Which sends the wrong message about deadlines and things like that. 'Cause in college most professors are pretty like, "No, this is how it works. You can come to me and tell me whatever story you want, but this is when things are due." And I think a lot of kids, the professors who've given feedback to Performance High about students, is that they're just... Both academic skills but also soft skills wise, are just not prepared for what they need to be able to navigate when they are in college.

The teachers had their own metrics like the counselors, related to student achievement. Ms. Peters view was that giving students multiple opportunities to meet deadlines in order to meet the metrics undermined the development of time management skills and developing productive work habits.

While Ms. Peters described the intensive supports as "coddling", Mr. Hartnell described it as "codependency on adults." He suggested that giving students unlimited opportunities stunted their ability to grow and reflect. He said:

We, we, are countenancing and allowing a whole lot of students to develop codependency on adults um, and thus not sort of cultivating those interpersonal skills. So for example, it was not, my first year here, it was totally common for students to come up at the end of a report period to come and say "what can I do for extra credit" and I'd say, "You can't do anything." But that was the norm. Um, and I think that is a good example of the types of codependency that were accidentally created.... In a system where there is never ending opportunity to make up for what you did poorly and never sort of confront what you are not doing well and forced to grow in order to get beyond that. Even like the idea of, I failed Hartnell's class, what did I do wrong? Just the idea of asking that question was never on any of the students radar....without those skills, by the time they went to college and they were confronted with a whole lot of expectations that are like, the opposite. You didn't do well on that paper or test or whatever it might be, and you can't make it up and there is nobody to turn to.

Ms. Peters and Mr. Hartnell linked their perceptions of student "handholding" to scenarios in college, where students are faced with a challenge that they cannot navigate,
and there are no supportive adults to usher them through it. Over the course of my time at Performance High, I observed several adults and students make similar statements. For example, in Jason's interview, he said:

It's like, they put so much stress on college and all this is how it's going to be in college. It's going to be like this in college and then you feel like, they were on us too much and now that they're in college they are just totally by themselves so now you feel like, oh well, I'm by myself. I have nobody to run to, I have nobody to check my paper for me and it's not the same.

These statements by students and teachers reflected the shared concern that the practices that were intended to support student achievement and access to college actually contributed to attrition for Performance High alumni. These doubts about students' ability to persist in and graduate college conflicted with the message at Performance High that college was the next best step for all or most of the students. These doubts also contributed to students' hesitancy and equivocation in their beliefs about college and whether pursuing college would result in the benefits and positive outcomes that the school suggested.

**The challenges of uniformity.**

A widespread criticism of charter schools is they underserve the most vulnerable student populations, including Special Education students, English Language Learners, and students with behavioral problems. Critics also argue that charter schools "skim" the more resourced students because their parents are more likely to seek out and be able to navigate the lottery process (Forman, 2010). Consequently, critics say, they can more easily increase student achievement and college outcomes. Though Performance High is a charter school, it is an open-enrollment neighborhood school that must give preference
to all of the interested students in its catchment area. Additional students are admitted through a lottery if there is space, but there is no system for sorting and selecting neighborhood students; it serves them equally. However, this study found that one challenge of the pervasive college message and the uniform college program was that many students perceived that Performance High was designed to serve particular types of students, specifically those that saw themselves as college bound. Students saw Performance High as a "good fit" for those students who had a college-going worldview, and felt the school was not designed to develop and nurture students whose dispositions toward college differed from the school's college mission.

Though most of the focal students perceived that all of their teachers and counselors believed they should go to college, none of the staff interviews reflected that belief. In fact, Mr. Webb described the new "College for Most, Postsecondary for All" approach as a result of a "trickle up" effect, where the counselors at the different network schools expressed to the central office that the "College for All" approach was not serving students. Mr. Webb said:

The advisers on the college team, the postsecondary initiatives team now, the advisers since I've started have been asking for that shift in saying it's unreasonable and unfair to be pressuring our students so hard towards a four-year school when it's not right for so many people. And then thanks to [the organizational shift] it opened the door for change. Then the leadership of the postsecondary team was able to say okay fine, that's what we're doing.

The 2015-2016 year was the first full school year where the shift was implemented. Instructed by the Network central office, the teachers and counselors shifted the terminology, and "college" was replaced with "PSI" (post secondary institution) in written materials and in the school setting. The central office also shifted the advisers'
metrics to include post secondary plans for joining the workforce, trade school, and the military. The central office was working to create partnerships with job training programs and connect with other resources to offer students who desired other options. Meanwhile, the resources for other pathways were scarce during the time of the study, and the "College for Most" metric, to achieve 80-85% in four-year college acceptances, required an intense focus on college to achieve.

The focal students perceived that Performance High had a uniform, monolithic culture to which they were expected to adapt, rather than a program that was designed to meet their needs and preferences. Almost half of the participants talked about how Performance High was a good "fit" for some and not for others, or how students were expected to adapt to the culture. For example, when asked to describe her school, Jaleen said:

Um, I actually, sometimes this school is not fit for everyone, so it's, there's different difficulties for everyone, so. For me personally, I actually feel like the school is well for me. It's college preparatory school, so you come to learn and for them to help you get ready for college. Some of the things may be very strict, but it's how the student adapts to it. For me, actually having me apply for college for schools earlier, having me apply for scholarships, and you know being on top of my senior project is very helpful for me because also, prioritize is helping me organize. Jaleen had longstanding aspirations, and a family who reinforced her drive to go to college. She described how Performance High provided resources and support to help her achieve her goals. In short, she saw the school as "for" her, versus for other students who may not share her orientation to college.

Similarly, Yelena took advantage and appreciated all of the college resources that were available to her. She talked about how the school was a good fit for her, but like Jaleen, she conceded that it might not be for others. She said:
I think the model worked for some people but not for others, because there may not be people like me who see college as part of their plan. Like for the rest of their life or something like that. Or maybe they don't feel ready. And that's okay, but I don't think the Performance High model is set up for those kids to create a track that works for them, like if college is not what they want.

Yelena described the advising program as a "model" with a particular orientation towards college. She noted that she was one of the students for whom the program worked well, but that it was not "set up" to accommodate kids to pursue non-college tracks.

In addition, several students talked about the need to adapt to the school culture at Performance High, and described accepting college as the next step as central to that culture. For example, in response to the first interview question, Brianna said that she had adapted to the school culture.

Lori: Okay, the first question I want to ask you is, can you tell me what it's like going to this high school in general?

Brianna: Well, I've been going here since 7th grade and I basically adapted to the whole Performance Network system, like you know, go to college and do your work and demerits and all that, so um, it's not bad. I think it's pretty good.

Brianna identified going to college, doing work, and the behavior system as key components to the school culture. She said that she had adapted to this culture, but her interview revealed that though she complied with all of the college application requirements, she did not actually see college as part of her plan for the near future.

Like Yelena and Brianna, Tanaya described her school as having set characteristics that met the needs of some better than others.

So being at Performance High, just being a Performance High student, you're already coming in with a lot of preset expectations. So for some kids, it's hard to adjust and for others, they just follow suit and do what's expected of them.
Together, these three participants described their school as having a predetermined structure, which students fit into, learn to fit into, or face difficulties. A few participants saw this strong, uniform messaging about college as silencing for students who had ideas and preference that did not align with the college message. Ms. Peters felt that some of her students lacked the confidence to assert themselves if their ideas diverged from the dominant narrative about college at Performance High. She said:

"Plus the seniors and the juniors, most of them have been here since seventh grade. So when they were here, those kids had, they had cohorts, and they had college names as their cohorts. Because it was about inundating them with that culture, and that's why I'm wearing a college t-shirt. Because every Friday I can wear a Performance High and a college t-shirt. Because they want the visibility of college names. But then we have students that that kind of like, isolates, because then if they wanna have those conversations about like, "I don't wanna go to college." A lot of students are not confident enough to say that, when they just see everywhere that this is what they need to do.

Ms. Peters felt that the pervasive college message in the school context dissuaded students from engaging the adults at Performance High in conversations about possible alternatives to college.

Cherise perceived that the adults at her schools assumed that all the students would go to college, and did not initiate conversation with students about their plans and interests. She said:

"I feel like they should have asked us first, like what are our plans? I feel like they should have saw what we were most interested in before just saying, oh you have to go to college. Like, just studying us maybe to see how, I don't know, what would be more beneficial to us. Like, they're like 'college, college, college' and people are like 'I don't want to go to college.' I feel like they should have made it where you have the decision whether or not if you want to go to college.

She argued that whether college would be the most beneficial path depended on the characteristics of students, which her counselors did not take into account. In contrast to
this view, she also described her counselors as having been supportive of her decision to
go to cosmetology school after she graduated. Because of the strong, uniform messaging
around college, Cherise believed that the college program "forced" students to go to
college, even if that view did not align with her own experience. To make sense of how
her advisers supported her decision to take another path, she said that her teachers and
counselors only accepted her decision because she applied to and was accepted to
college, and planned to go the following year.

Corey also saw the college program as problematic, in that the strong message
and regimented process put students, many of whom were uncertain of their plans
and desires, on the path to college. He said:

Corey: They're prepping you more for college, so even if you came in here with
the idea of you know what, maybe I'll just become a plumber or something. Or a
trash man, nothing big. But like, your thought process can easily, if you come in
here wavering about anything, Performance High will easily snatch you up and
change your mindset to think about, how about college? With college, you can do
this, you can do that.

Lori: Do you think that's necessarily a bad thing? Or...
Corey: I'm not necessarily saying that's a bad thing, but I'm not saying that's the
greatest thing either because then its like, its tainting people's thought process
about what they want to do with their life. Can you imagine right now if I decided
career choice based on the choice of like, a career planner or something like
that? Without, like, majorly looking into it just because the school said you know,
based on the kind of person you are this is the best choice for you. So its like,
you’re trying to plan your life to a certain extent. And that's what I don't like. It's
like, it's like they're playing this third person omniscient character in your life, and
I don't feel that it's very good.

Corey had strong college aspirations, and it was not the school's focus on college going
that he objected to. Rather, he argued that the school deprived uncertain students of their
self-determination. Cherise and Corey described a process by which Performance High
compels students to college even when attending college might be inconsistent with students’ characteristics, plans, or worldview.

Some students perceived that students who were unable to adapt to Performance High would be expelled, prevented from graduating, or somehow pushed out. The extent to which students actually saw this as a threat was unclear, but several students mentioned in interviews and informal conversations students that had left because they did not conform to the college culture, or stories that they had heard of the same nature. Two focal students told me about their brothers who left the school, which they attributed to their refusal to adhere to the college criteria. One of them, Sheldon said:

I don't think that should be...I feel, for example, my brother used to go here and he applied to other schools. He had some scholarships as well but he didn't want to go to college. He didn't have the desire to go to college but since he didn't want to go or he didn't want to do the six applications, because he knew he wasn't going. They didn't want, they didn't let him graduate...He got retained and then he left here.

It was unclear whether Sheldon perceived that his brother had to transfer because he did not want to meet the application requirement, or because he did not want to go to college. Regardless, he perceived that the school would not let his brother graduate if he did not adhere to the college expectations, and that he had to go to another school to finish out the year and get his diploma.

Quantisha talked about her view that Performance High had a rigid school culture in general (not necessarily related to college) and that students who did not fit their "method" were unwelcome there. She said:

I think sometimes, I think the method works for some students or like, certain types of students. Not everybody, they designed it thinking it is going to work for everybody and if it doesn’t work they go straight to okay well, expulsion, or this or that. Like you have to find other ways to deal with kids because everybody is
not going to be robotic how you want them to be. And I don’t think they understand that, and I don’t think they are willing to change their method because you can't tell Performance Network nothing.

Like many other students, Quantisha believed that Performance High was designed to serve certain types of students, and that the school was unwilling to use other methods in order to better serve other type of students.

To some degree, the teachers also felt that to work at Performance High meant that they had to conform to the college mission and practices. Mr. Wilcox noted that though she disagreed in some sense with the dominant advising strategy, she recognized that she was part of a team and working towards particular goals. Mr. Hartnell and Ms. Shipley both expressed some doubts about the mission and practices, but adhered to them as well, as the expectations at the school about the role each teacher would play was clearly outlined.

Further, Mr. Hartnell said he talked with students about his perception that in choosing to attend Performance High, students implicitly agreed to comply to college as the norm. He said:

This is...we believe this is important, if you don't that's fine. I have had students who said this year and year's prior, what if I don't want to go to college? What if I don't want to do any of this? And they say specifically, you just made me take a bunch of tests and go through a whole bunch of like admissions processes and whatnot for something I don't want to do. And they don't realize it when they're saying it but I'm saying yeah, you are saying that you had no agency in this decision. Except for the fact that somebody did. Somebody decided to send you here and you have maintained that. So yes, once you're here you assume that you, you have bought in and that's it. They are saying they have no agency and my response is, you never had to stay.

Mr. Hartnell extended this philosophy to his own work, as he also did not necessarily agree with the network's orientation towards college himself. However, in agreeing to
work at the school, he understood that he was expected to support their mission. Mr. Hartnell did not return to teach at the school the following fall. Establishing a college mission and regimenting the college choice process created shared practices around college going, but was limited in influencing the deeper and more nuanced beliefs of students and staff regarding students' college going.

In contrast to Mr. Hartnell's view, several of the adults at Performance High were surprised that many students perceived that they were all expected to go to college. In one informal conversation in the teacher's lounge, I told the sophomore English teacher that a group of her students had told me in the lunchroom that they felt that the teachers would be disappointed in them if they did not go to college. She said, "Huh. Now that is surprising to me because as far as I know, none of the teachers here think that all the students should go to college. And I tell them all the time that college is not, that there are other...college is not for everyone. And that is fine."

Mr. Webb and Ms. Olsen suggested that part of the emphasis on college, especially on attending four-year schools rather than community college, came from the students and their parents. Mr. Webb said that during the family fit meeting, "Sometimes the family says it's 'four-year or bust' and that's not a good fit for the student. But I have other families who are open for whatever path is the right one." In talking about the shift to "College for Most", Ms. Olsen said the counseling staff still had work to do to convince students that college alternatives were also respectable options. She said:

I think we still have a little bit of ways to go with the students in terms of making them realize that it is still okay that you're making the decision to go to a trade school, to go to a community college, because we're fighting that stigma is really hard. I think it's hard. And I think that they are listening to us more now. But they
still, I feel like put up the wall with that in terms of like, "Well, no. I'm not gonna do that." They only see success built around a four-year school.

Though the teachers and counselors at Performance High do not claim to individually endorse the idea that all (or in some cases, most) students should go to college, the students for the most part perceive this message in the high school context.

**Conclusion**

As you would expect in a school with a robust college-going culture, the majority of the focal students take for granted that college is the next step, and planned to attend college in the fall after graduating high school. The college culture reinforced the expectations of students who reported positive expectations and dispositions about college from their families. But, the school practices played a more limited role in shifting the worldview of most students, as these students tended to remain tentative and doubtful about college rather than confident in their preparation and abilities. Though a robust stock of resources related to college going is provided by the school, some aspects of the college program (e.g., simple and uniformly-applied rules about the number and characteristics of college applications) were counterproductive to students' ability to absorb and convert it to educational capital.
CHAPTER 6: Deciding Where to go to College

Scholars conceptualize aspirations as "behavioral intentions" in the college choice process that predict behaviors (McJunkin, 2010). This perspective assumes that the desire to go to college precedes the information gathering, search and sort and evaluative activities related to choosing a college. Consistent with this perspective, Performance High required every single student to complete the necessary steps and apply to college, regardless of their aspirations or attitudes about attending. Students were provided with information about college and practical support for the college application process.

In addition to having information that helps them navigate institutions, Khan (2010) notes that students in elite schools are socialized and taught to feel effortlessly at home in elite spaces. He argues that this type of knowledge can only be developed through repeated experiences in particular settings. Khan says:

The distinction is between learning rules, which are easy, and learning practices, which are far more challenging, as they require living the relations in question. The nearly ingenious trick - if I may call it so - is that the mark of privilege, corporal ease, is anything but easy to produce. What appears a natural, simple quality is actually learned through repeated experiences in elite institutions. The result is a near invisible barrier. (2010, p 84)

While the focal students at Performance High had what Khan (2010) calls "cognitive knowledge" about the college application process, particular institutions, and factors important in choosing a postsecondary pathway, they did not possess the corporeal ease of students who embody college-going cultural capital. Reay (2004) contends that this type of self-confidence, fluency and comfort in institutional spaces materializes as not only having a disposition to make choices for oneself, but also in the ability to get the choices one wants. Rather than draw on rich college resources to make
decisions about college that fit their characteristics and preferences, students tended to comply with the school's accountability policies and defer to the authority of their counselors in choosing institutions that they perceived were "sanctioned" by their counselors.

This chapter reviews characteristics of students' choice sets, and outlines their postsecondary choices. Then it considers the themes that arose around the characteristics students preferred in potential schools, and how their preferences aligned and departed from the school’s application criteria. On one hand, students' adherence to the accountability policies contributed to high rates of college acceptance and enrollment. Some students perceived that the regulated, explicit process helped them meet deadlines and access college when they might not have otherwise. On the other hand, the regimented process that de-emphasized students' preferences fostered students' distrust and resistance toward their counselors and the school’s college program. As a result, some characteristics of the performance management approach worked to undermine the college mission at Performance High.

**Outcomes**

Network administrators and counselors at Performance High built college-related steps into the curriculum. They also specified criteria that students' applications must meet in order to meet the Network’s goal of having high percentages of students be accepted into and enrolled in college and increase the likelihood that students had affordable college options to choose from. The criteria set forth in the senior seminar for colleges and universities that counted as "affordable fits" and as "academic fits" had a
strong influence on most of the students' choice sets, as well as on their final choices. These criteria shaped students' perceptions about which choices they saw as sanctioned by their counselors and those that they perceived were discouraged.

Of the 35 focal students, 34 planned to attend college in the fall. One student, Cherise, planned to attend a one year cosmetology program in the fall, and then attend community college after, while working in her field to offset costs. Twenty of the 35 students planned to attend public, state or state-related institutions in the fall (two locally). Of the students who went to in state, public schools, many went to three different institutions. Seven planned to go to one less selective, rural school that was 76% White. Five planned to attend a selective, suburban school that was 80% White, and Four planned to attend a third, less selective, suburban school that was 65% White. Five students planned to attend the local community college, and one a local, less selective private school. Seven students planned to attend school out of state, two of which received full scholarships to do so (one at a partnership school), and four of which planned to attend HBCUs.

All of the students submitted at least six applications, as their school required. Students reported to having submitted 230 applications in total, but there was some question as to whether some applications were withdrawn, and there were some that students could not remember. To meet the requirement, the counselors instructed students to apply to at least two schools that were an "affordable fit," which the network and counselors defined as being in state, public universities, community college, schools that met full need and partnership schools. To meet the requirement, their applications were also expected to be good academic fits, defined as schools where the Performance High
student was within .5 GPA points and 3 ACT points of the average admitted students to that school. 169 (73%) of the focal students' applications were to schools that fit the school's definition of an affordable fit. 136 (59%) applications were to in state, public universities. There were 32 applications to HBCUs from 18 students (seven applications were both to HBCUs and fit the affordability criteria). There were high volumes of applications to particular in state, public schools. For example, 18 of the 35 students applied to one particular in-state public university, 11 and 10 students applied to two others. Though it is not unusual that students apply to schools in their city or state, the percentage of applications to particular schools was striking.

Most of the students' actual college destinations in the fall following high school graduation aligned with the plans they had stated as high school seniors. One student, Quantisha, did not end up enrolling in the selective, out-of-state college to which she planned. Two students were unable to pass the community college placement tests which would enable them to take even remedial classes. In the winter following high school graduation, one student was still taking enrichment courses through the community college, hoping to pass on the next try. She mentioned that the instructor suggested that she may need an adult reading program to make any further progress. The other student said that she had fallen into a depression after being unable to pass the test after multiple tries. She was neither working nor going to school, and said she was thinking about going back to Performance High to ask for a job.

The rest of the students had enrolled in the colleges they had talked about in their senior-year interviews. By winter break of the first year of college, one student had stopped taking classes at the community college he had been attending and another had to
transfer from a four-year college to community college for financial reasons. In these follow-up interviews, several students mentioned issues they were facing related to finances, academic and/or social difficulties and racial stress. A handful of students said they were planning to transfer to another college after the spring semester. The following table reflects the characteristics of the focal students, their postsecondary plans and their statuses in the winter following high school graduation.

Table 1.

Focal Students' Characteristics and College Destinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>GPA/ACT</th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>Pell Grant/EFC</th>
<th>Post Secondary Plans</th>
<th>January 2017 Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cherise</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>trade school (cosmetology)</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>community college</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>community college</td>
<td>no longer enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michaela</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>community college</td>
<td>never enrolled (unable to pass placement test)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronnie</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>community college</td>
<td>never enrolled (unable to pass placement test)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrell</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>EFC 1426</td>
<td>community college</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malika</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>EFC 19,032</td>
<td>private, in state (in city), less selective</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled, low GPA (wants to transfer, racial issues)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>EFC 14221</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanelle</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>EFC 10,740</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damien</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled, financial issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriet</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>EFC 1143</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled, low GPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>GPA/ACT</td>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Pell Grant/EFC</td>
<td>Post Secondary Plans</td>
<td>January 2017 Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James (M)</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>EFC 2856</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne (F)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled, academic probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin (M)</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leo (M)</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole (F)</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>EFC 28,331</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled, low GPA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha (F)</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>EFC 10,425</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>transferred to community college due to financial issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheldon (M)</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled, low GPA, social issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra (F)</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>public, in state, less selective</td>
<td>enrolled, social issues, low GPA, academic probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dante (M)</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>public, out of state, less selective (HBCU)</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle (F)</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>EFC 1726</td>
<td>public, out of state, less selective (HBCU)</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam (F)</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>public, out of state, less selective (HBCU)</td>
<td>enrolled, wants to transfer, fit issues, financial stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla (F)</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>EFC 1860</td>
<td>public, in state (in city), selective</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milan (F)</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>EFC 748</td>
<td>public, in state (in city), selective</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris (M)</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>EFC 26,500</td>
<td>private, in state, selective (partner)</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantisha (F)</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>private, out of state, selective</td>
<td>never enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanaya (F)</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>private, out of state, selective (HBCU)</td>
<td>enrolled (wants to transfer, fit issues)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brianna (F)</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>EFC 1957</td>
<td>public, in state, selective</td>
<td>enrolled (academic probation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corey (M)</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>EFC 24016</td>
<td>public, in state, selective</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ebony (F)</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>public, in state, selective</td>
<td>enrolled, (wants to transfer due to racial issues)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>GPA/ACT</td>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>Pell Grant/EFC</td>
<td>Post Secondary Plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Janae (F)</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>EFC 5349</td>
<td>public, in state, selective</td>
<td>enrolled (low GPA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaleen (F)</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>EFC 1642</td>
<td>public, out of state, selective</td>
<td>enrolled (financial stress)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina (F)</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>EFC 1756</td>
<td>private, out of state, most selective</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yelena (F)</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>EFC 0</td>
<td>public, out of state, most selective (partner)</td>
<td>enrolled</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The gray shading indicates students I conducted follow-up interview with. For those students, the follow-up statuses are self-reported. For others, their follow-up statuses came from administrative data, where it was available. Low GPA indicated students who reported to have GPAs lower than 2.5, but were not on academic probation.

School application criteria and students’ preferences

In their interviews, the focal students talked about their personal preferences for a college to attend. They described these preferences as having been influenced by factors like their personal experiences in their school and community, perceptions about the safety of their neighborhood, and the racial composition of their school. Adults at Performance High and the accountability criteria communicated messages about the types of institutions that the adults felt were reasonable choices. Most of the focal students complied with the policies and deferred to the expertise of their counselors in selecting postsecondary institutions.

In their junior and senior seminars, students learned to assess whether schools were academic, financial, and personal fits for them. The counselors communicated the norms and expectations around applications in a classroom setting, and through particular assignments that students turned in for credit. If for some reason students wanted to apply to schools that did not fit the criteria, they had to justify their choices for approval from
their counselors to receive credit. Another option was that students could apply to six schools that met the criteria, and then apply to additional schools of their choosing. In their interviews, the counselors described the search and sort process as beginning with personal fit. Students identified many different factors for searching for and selecting a school, including the size of the school, graduation rates, the "vibe," whether schools had particular programs, majors, and activities, Greek life, good food, and nice living facilities. Across interview, the three factors that came up most often were affordability, location, and racial composition of the school.

**Affordability.**

Almost all of the students said that affordability was a major factor in their choice. Only one student, Sheldon, said that he perceived that finances were "not an issue" for him and his family. About half the students said it was the main concern above all else, and many of those students said cost was their parents' main concern. The students' concerns about affordability aligned with the college program, and for many students the advising at Performance High increased their perception that affordability was essential.

For example, when asked how the college program at Performance High influenced how she was thinking about college, Nicole said:

Well, it made me scared to be in debt. Like, I'm not ready for that part. Mr. Webb, he really does help us out with financial aid and making sure we meet our deadlines so we can get money for scholarships and he does a really good job with submitting us scholarships so we can apply to them. Um, cause a lot of time, we try to get scholarships but we don't know which ones to apply to or where to find them. So he does a good job sending us links by email. The only thing I think he really influenced me was about the cost of [the state school she planned to attend].
Like Nicole, the majority of the students noted in their interviews that the school counselors were helpful in helping them to understand the financial aspects of going to college.

**Location.**

Almost all of the students also identified location as one of the most important factors in choosing a school. A little more than half of the students specifically said they wanted to live near home. Of those students, most preferred to live within driving distance, a few hours from the city. Students said they wanted to be able to come home easily if they needed anything, if their families needed them, or to be nearer to sick family members. Some also perceived that they would be less homesick if they stayed relatively close, and some wanted to be close in order to reduce the cost of travel. For example, Calvin said he wanted to be near in case of emergency. He said:

Yeah. I knew I didn't want to go out of state because it would be cheaper but I knew I uh, also I didn’t want to go out of state because I want to be close like, I could get home if there's an emergency or something like that. I didn't want to go real far.

Calvin's desire to be within a few hours of home was influenced by his perception that in state schools were cheaper (though he planned to attend a private university), and in case of an emergency.

Like Calvin, Samantha also wanted to be a few hours from the city. Her major concern was transportation in visiting with her mom. She said:

Yeah, so I just want to stay close to my mom but I just want to have a couple hours distance. So it's easy for her to get on a greyhound bus which is $40 round trip, so it's just easy for her. So it's easy for her to get up there and she doesn’t drive on highways.
Several students mentioned that public transportation or school-run shuttles to and from potential schools was a motivating factor for them.

For Janae, the location of the school was the most important factor. She said:

Oh no, it wasn't...it was always about where I wanted to go. Like, the only thing I was really worried about was the distance. I wasn't really worried about, I was worried about the tuition but not as worried as the distance cause if something goes wrong I want to be able to come home without a problem.

For students like Calvin, Samantha, and Janae, their preference to remain in state, a couple hours away from their homes was aligned with the affordability criteria that emphasized in state public schools. Though partnership schools and schools that met full need were also acceptable, many students did not have the academic credentials to meet Performance High's criteria for academic fit for those schools.

Two thirds of the students explicitly expressed a desire to "get out" of the city or state. This desire was related to getting the full college experience, and having new experiences and growing as a person. For some students it was also related to safety, and escaping negative family and community dynamics that students felt would be counterproductive to their success in college.

All six of the students who said that safety issues influenced their search and sort process were male (6 of the 13 male students). Leo explained that all of the schools he applied to were outside of the city, because he perceived that staying in the city would be unsafe. During his interview, Leo took out his phone to show me a video of a gun that he found in an alleyway on his way to school that morning, in order to underscore how vital it was for him to leave.
Leo: I want to get out of this city. I was walking down the street this morning and, and seen, sheesh, I want to show you this. I'm sorry.

Lori: It's all right!

Leo: This is what I seen, just walking down the alleyway this morning. (shows a video of a gun on his phone)

Lori: You just saw a gun?

Leo: A gun with an extended clip on it. Bullets all on the ground. Just sitting there, sitting in some, sitting in the alleyway. And that was a real gun!

Lori: Just on your way to school this morning.

Leo: Walking to school this morning. And I'm thinking like, I sent my sister that video, I'm like Yo! I don't want my nephew growing up around here. A kid could just come out here thinking it's a toy or something like that and accidently shoot his head off.

Like Leo, Jason also brought up his perceptions of the safety of his city, and related it to his decisions about whether and where to go to college. He said:

Jason: I mean but ultimately I want to make sure I get out of [this city]. That's all I want to do.

Lori: To get out of [this city]? Well you just spent a whole lotta time talking about how you wanted to stay in [this city].

Jason: I mean, not for college, I'm talking about after college.

Lori: Why?

Jason: It's not safe anymore.

Lori: What do you mean by that?

Jason: I mean the neighborhood that I live in and just seeing everything on the news, it's just not safe anymore. I just want to make sure my family is safe.

Lori: And do you see college as a way to do that?

Jason: Yeah, I see it as a chance for me to make money. And then baseball, I see it as a way to get them out of [this city]. Like if I make enough money, maybe I
can move my mom out, to a nice house cause she's done everything and that's all I want to do.

Jason's ultimate goal is safety for himself and his family, and his college choice process was focused on if and how he could best use college as a vehicle to serve that purpose.

Pam and Corey related their desires to leave the city to the ability to grow and thrive. They both had complicated family situations and felt that staying too close would be antithetical to their success in college. Pam described how she had found herself in multiple foster care situations in the past few years. At the time of the interview, she was staying with a teacher from her school and had been for several months. Though she described being close to her mother, she felt overwhelmed by her situation and imagined college as a way to get away and start a new life. She said, "And I've been here my whole life. And I feel like I, I'm kind of doing an injustice to myself if I don't get away for college. I feel like college is my way, or my only way to, you know, get away." Pam perceived that leaving the state was the best way to achieve her goals.

Corey also wanted to leave the state, which he related to his desire to just "worry about himself" in college. He saw college as an opportunity to move away and grow. He said:

Cause there's more than just [this city]. I love [this city]. It's a great place. Like, when you’re like a person that lives here, things start to go like oh, this is a great place for someone who has never been here. [City U] is a great place for someone who has never been here. [City U] would be a great place for someone who was from out of state, but it was like since I've lived here, I know [City U], there isn't much more to discover here or like, like do and it just feels like I would have peaked and it just wouldn’t feel right feeling like I would have squandering like, my chances of like growth, being in the same place.
Corey related leaving the city and the state to the opportunity to grow and thrive, even when talking about out-of-state schools that were actually closer to the city than the in-state schools that he was considering.

I often observed teachers and students having conversations about students' perceptions and experiences of their city, and their desire to use college as a vehicle to leave. Though the adults listened to students' concerns, many struggled to reconcile students' desire to leave with their own perceptions and ideas about students doing so.

The following field note illustrates this dynamic. This conversation took place in an elective class the day after a Performance High student had died as a victim of gun violence. Rather than teach her lesson, the teacher had students arrange their chairs in a circle to share their feelings about the incident.

*The teacher sits in her chair with her legs crossed and a notebook in her lap. She asks her class, "How many of you are planning to go to college?" Almost all of them shoot their hands in the air. "How many of you are planning to move back after?" All but two students put their hands down. The teacher looks at a Black, female student sitting next to her and says, "Is that the answer then? For young people to leave?" The girl points to herself and then looks around her. She says, "Are we the problem? I'm sure no one here has shot anyone before. What is that gonna do?" The teacher continues, "Don't you think this city needs its young people of color to come back and..." A male student jumps up from his seat, interrupting her. "This is not Candy Land! People get killed over here! Over percs [reference to prescription drugs]. I go over to people's houses and have to move the gun on the couch in order to sit down." The other students laugh. A girl covers her mouth and whispers something, shaking her head. Several students are talking over each other. A girl starts talking animatedly to the boy sitting next to her about how a man came up to her and demanded that she give him her phone. The teacher shakes her head, laughs and says, "See, I don't understand that...I would just give them my phone. I'd be like, here's my phone...my credit card..." The male student yells, "Because you have money! You have a job! We don't." A female student adds, "Then you're just giving people permission to do that to you." The teacher was quiet for a second and then said, "I don't know that leaving is the answer though."

The students in the class tried to emphasize to their teacher that their desire to leave the city was rooted in their perceptions that in staying, they faced grave, imminent threats.
The teacher's response reflected her own perceptions that educated students returning to the city was critical for revitalization.

Ms. Olsen reported that many students shared their hope to "get away" with her as well. She expressed her view that regardless of the reasons behind students wanting to move away, the financial aspects of college were a limiting factor. She said:

That they wanna, "Well, I need to live away, I wanna go away." And whether it's, "My mom, my grandmom, my dad, my aunt, my uncle, whatever, or it's the actual neighborhood that I live in," it's something I find that they a lot of times want to escape and get away from, and I also don't wanna make it sound so negative. For them, a lot of them know from hearing us preach for so long that it's a real full college experience when you are able to do that. Some of them say that for some... That's the reason some of them say that. But for others, it's, "I need to get away from here because... " And there're just too many distractions or there are just too many things here, family commitments or responsibilities here that will prevent me from succeeding if I stay anyway." So for them I think that they ultimately love... But now we're finding that the affordability piece is so big that living home is the only way sometimes to be able to afford it. And now we're kind of trying to work through that a little bit with some of them which is hard because we preach for so long about how, like, "Hey, you can do whatever you want, you can go away, you will find a way, we will help you." Really? No. There's only so much that we actually can do, and so that's hard, that's a hard pill to swallow.

Ms. Olsen's comment reflects an awareness of students' different rationales for wanting to leave the city. Ms. Olsen suggested that the college messages at Performance High contributed to students' desires to leave the city, and fostered their belief that college was a vehicle by which they could do so. However, she felt that in reality, affordability often limited their ability to leave the state, or even the city, depending on their financial situations

Racial Composition.

All of the students mentioned race in their interviews, whether in describing their high school or talking about their preferences in a college, or both. The majority of the
focal students cited race and/or diversity as a factor that was important to them in selecting a college. Many students described their high school as diverse, and more than half of the students said that they wanted to go to a diverse college. It was clear that for most, "diversity" meant that the institution not be overwhelmingly White, but a handful also stressed that they did not want to "be around too many Black people," or stated that they had "been around Black people my whole life." Students related diversity to feeling "comfortable," and to the opportunity to learn about new cultures and ideas.

For example, Nicole had a positive experience of the diversity in her high school, and believed that experience would help her in college. She said:

I like the diversity, like there is a lot of people here like, of different races. So that's pretty cool you get exposed to that type of stuff um, cause that's what you're going to do when you go to college. You're going to meet people of a lot of backgrounds so it really is a good diversity here.

While Nicole had a generally positive experience at her high school, Joanne described a mostly negative experience, with the exception of her positive experience of diversity at the school. She said:

You asked me what I like about this school? I think the one thing I really like about this school is diversity. And I picked diversity because everywhere I look it's like, oh there's a Black person, oh there's a White person. There's an Asian person. Oh, it's a, you know, it's back and forth. And we're in a middle of the city and its diverse and if you look outside it's like, all these people right here? They're Caucasian. This side is a Caucasian area. I think this it's good because it's diverse and I like that and that's why I wanted to go to a state school, because it's diverse. So I was like, I think that would be good.

Joanne related her positive experience of the diversity at her school to her school choice. (However, the school to which she enrolled was ranked below the national average in terms of racial and geographic diversity. The student population was 75.8% White.)
Like Joanne, Yelena related her desire to attend a diverse college with her high school experiences, especially her membership in a multicultural club. She said:

What I liked about each of these schools is that they are diverse. Because I am in hospitality multicultural club, and I have been in that club for three years and it's something that's really important to me, so I wanted to make sure the schools I applied to had that and then I also wanted to go to, I was like, I don't really, size wasn't a big factor. So I was like, if it's big or small I don't mind. Distance from home, I wanted to go out of state just because like, new experiences and I didn't want to be in state because, not to say that I'm trapped or anything, but just somewhere different.

Yelena said that diversity and distance were two main factors that influenced her school choices.

Ebony also said she wanted to attend a diverse school, but emphasized that she wanted to learn to interact with people of other races. She said:

I just feel like, I've always been around Black people, so I'm just putting myself more, when I get out of there, there is going to be more than just Black people. I am going to have to interact with other people (laughing) I want to be able to be more comfortable outside my race.

Though many students, like Nicole, Joanne, and Ebony said they wanted to attend diverse colleges, they did not describe their conceptions of diversity. Further, all three of them enrolled in colleges that were > 75% White and had low geographic diversity. Students rarely described looking at statistics of the racial composition of their schools. Rather, they judged the diversity based on their experiences in visiting the schools, and how comfortable they felt there.

The Performance High context influenced the focal students' perceptions about race and college in other ways too. Like in many No Excuses schools, the staff at the school was predominately White, while the student body was predominately made up of students of color. The student body at Performance High was relatively diverse, with
students from many backgrounds, including Asian, White, Latinx, and Black students. The staff at Performance High recognized that race was an important aspect of how students perceived and experienced the world, and aimed to give students space to explore issues of race and culture. There was an elective at the school called "Cultural Context" where students discussed issues that affected them, as well as situated their experiences in social and historical context. They talked about many educational issues related to college, including the achievement gap, school reform and charter schools, race and privilege in schooling, as well as the college outcomes for minority students. Several of the focal students were in that class, which was unique to Performance High and considered a pilot in the Network. Five students talked about the class in their interviews.

The administrators in the Network central office also implemented bi-monthly "Cultural Context" professional development trainings for the teachers at all Performance High schools, where they talked about topics like trauma, generational poverty, and the "intent versus the impact" of their actions in relation to teaching mostly minority, low income students. Pam described the diversity of her school and the cultural context class as a response to the first question in the interview, meant to elicit a general description of the school. She said:

Um, I think Performance High in general, I think we're more diverse and I think that being the most diverse campus helps students in the environment learn better. I think that we’ve done a good a good job of offering cultural context, like I'm in a class called cultural context and we have meetings with teachers. Like on Wednesday we had a meeting with a teacher, with teachers, the whole grade team. And we did activities like bring race and the culture of the school into one so we're not just looking at how, we're not just looking at how, not how but why they react that way. So we try to make sure that teachers are more aware and that students are more aware.
She identified both the diversity and dialogue about race in her school as characteristics she liked about her school. Days before I interviewed Pam, students from the cultural context class had facilitated a workshop for their teachers during a professional development session. The students prepared activities in their cultural context class meant to start a dialogue with their teachers about the students' perceptions that the Black and Asian students in the school were treated differently, especially in relation to the behavior system. Characteristic of No Excuses schools, Performance High employed a rigid and strict system where students were given rewards and consequences (merits and demerits) for specific behaviors. Many students perceived that the system disproportionately targeted Black students and rewarded Asian students. For example, students who met a certain criteria (attendance, GPA etc.) wore yellow lanyards and were afforded privileges based on this status. These students were allowed to be late to class, and were given privileges in terms of the dress code, among other things. Because of their prominent yellow lanyards, some students felt it was clear that the majority of key students were Asian students. Many students, both Asian and Black, explained that African American students got demerits for subjective things, like "disrespect" and "insubordination" when they tried to explain why they felt that they had been wronged.

While students were preparing to facilitate the workshop, an Asian student, who would help moderate the workshop, explained to me that the goal was to help the teachers understand how the students were experiencing the discipline system, as students of color. He said:

I don't mean to be disrespectful by saying this...but notice that the student body here are all students of color, but the admin and that level, they are all White. And the deans, and the women behind the desks are Black. So there's tension there.
When a White person is disciplining a student, and depending on how they're doing it...there's tension. But that reflects the world.

One session of the workshop included an activity where students established four corners (agree, strongly agree, disagree, strongly disagree) and asked teachers to go to a corner to represent their views on statements like, "Not counting my status as a teacher, I have privilege in this building based on my race," and "I treat my students equally, no matter their race." Students and teachers described the conversation as contentious and uncomfortable, but also reported that they felt these conversations were important to have, despite their difficulty. Tanaya brought up the workshop in her interview, and talked about how one teacher perceived that a particular student moderator was aggressive in the training. To her, this workshop reflected her teachers' inability to understand the experiences of Black students. For Tanaya, the racial dynamics at her school influenced her desire to attend an HBCU.

Tanaya: Um, for me, I feel like. Well, like I said. I feel like, it's important for the teachers to immerse themselves in the culture of the student. None of them knows what it feels like to be a student here and to be reprimanded, disciplined, anything like that nature. And she [the student moderator] has been subjected to a lot of that. So to me, I knew what place it was coming from. And I was able to, like, empathize with her in that way. So I don't really like, I could tell her tone was a little aggressive. Not aggressive, that's the wrong word. A little defensive from her standpoint because it's like, these teachers, I feel like they look at me like this, I need to have my guard up. Like, I was able to immerse myself in her experience. And as teachers, I think that's something they need to be able to do because if not, then you have that disconnect. Y'all feel like she's attacking you instead of thinking, okay, what has somebody's experience been like in this building and why may she be feeling like she has to be defensive. Where is this coming from? So even if she was being like that, I just feel like as a teacher, that's what you should do. So it shouldn't be like, a battle between you and the student. It should be like, we need to have a conversation with you so we can work through this.

Lori: That was the point of the workshop.
Tanaya: That was the point of the workshop, but it was like, they couldn't even do that in that instance.

Lori: Do you feel like, that dynamic influences the way that you are thinking about college or choosing a college?

Tanaya: Oh yeah. I don't want to be at a PWI. And that's all that like...I mean Performance High is really for the state schools because it's in state tuition. You get more money and but, there are only two HBCUs in state and they're not like from my caliber, like education wise, I need something rigorous like, I'm in all APs, my GPA is high.

Lori: And you think going here has influenced you to not want to go to a PWI?

Tanaya: I feel like being in the world has influenced me but Performance High didn't make it any better.

Tanaya's commentary about the importance of understanding that people's experiences of the world and behavior are influenced by race, culture, and power was influenced by her participation in conversations about race in her school context. I observed her taking part in conversations about race and privilege in her cultural context class. Students also had conversations about these themes in their English and Government classes, and in their extracurricular activities, like in Ms. Wilcox's club. Participation in these conversations influenced students differently in relation to their college plans. Tanaya described how she perceived that going to an HBCU and having teachers that understood her experience as a Black woman would help her to be successful in college. She said:

I feel like at a PWI, I would just be like, at a disadvantage because not only do I have to learn what it is to be a college student, but learning what it's like to be a college student around a bunch of White people that might not necessarily care about me or understand my experience. Like, they don't have the same lens as me. And even at an HBCU just because we all Black, we all got different cultures so they have different experiences but they know what it's like being Black in America. And my teachers know what it's like being Black in America and how they can help me to grow and understand the world in a better way and be more empowered.
These conversations about race at her high school contributed to Tanya's certainty that racial composition was the most important factor for her in choosing a college. After having attended a school where she felt that most of her teachers and counselors did not understand her experiences as a Black woman, she felt that she would be better supported at an HBCU. All of the focal students who talked in depth about race and the racial dynamics of their school in relation to college, like Pam, Corey, Amanda, and Tina, reported to having had influential conversations about race with adults in their school (and/or I observed them participating in such conversations).

Ms. Peters, a White teacher, felt that race was an important part of students' school experience, and said that she felt that these conversations were important. However, she said that the school was also trying to do other "big work," presumably in relation to academics and college going. In her view, these two goals were sometimes in competition for time and resources. She said:

So, Performance Network has been a historically White organization in an urban environment, where we're trying to help kids get access to things that they might not have if they go to another public school. So, this is the neighborhood alternative. But when you have mostly White teachers and administrators, and then you have a population of minority students, there's this kind of tension up there, and no one addressed that tension for many years. And now, it's become something that we, as staff, are openly discussing and then trying to bridge that gap with, "How we discuss that with students," which we realize is actually very difficult, 'cause kids are very aware of things that we might not be aware of that they experience all the time, or the way they interpret things and... We talk a lot about impact versus intent and how teachers don't have intentions to harm students or make them feel that they view them as a stereotype, but students perceive things that way. And there's all of this undercurrent that's there, in addition to the fact that we're doing all this other big work, but then there's that... which is more important, and which one deserves the spot, and how to manage that.
Ms. Peters was aware of students' perceptions that many of their White did not understand their experiences. However, the teachers had their own ambitious metrics to meet regarding student achievement, and having these workshops about race was an additional commitment on top of their teaching loads and college related duties, which may have influenced Ms. Peters' perceptions that there was tension around which goals at Performance High were "more important." Regardless, Ms. Peters said that she felt that having such conversations was important, and that she felt that they also helped prepare students for college. She said:

> Because a lot of our students who have gone away to schools have dealt with very covert racism, from people they go to school with and with professors. So I do think that some of it is helpful for them, to learn how to have more of these neutral "You're not right, I'm not right, we're all just saying where we're at" conversations, because kids feel a little bit more empowered to advocate for themselves in that way, or feel comfortable engaging in a conversation. Because if you've never engaged in a conversation with someone who's very opposite from you, it can be hard to do. And doing it here, where you do have support from some people, I think is helpful.

Ms. Peters felt that students participating in these difficult conversations with adults at Performance High would be better equipped to handle racial issues and advocate for themselves in their colleges.

For other students, the desire to attend an HBCU was also related to experiences outside of their high school. Two students reported that their parents suggested they consider HBCUs because the parents perceived that HBCUs provided a superior education for Black students. Danielle said that she had always wanted to go to an HBCU, which she attributed to a show she used to watch when she was young. She said:

> I just feel like, I can't see myself at a PWI. I don't know. I just, I always pictured myself at an HBCU since I was younger, watching A Different World. I just love
my culture. I like to be submerged in my culture. I feel like if I was in a PWI I would lose sight of that. And I just want to stay in touch with my culture.

Mr. Webb did encourage Danielle to consider other schools, because the HBCUs she was considering were less selective, and she had a strong academic record (3.9 GPA, 23 ACT), but Danielle was certain that she wanted to attend an HBCU.

Tina was also a strong student (4.09 GPA, 25 ACT). She was considering an HBCU because she wanted to go to medical school, and her primary concern was finding an institution where she would be successful in achieving her goal. She said she applied to a particular HBCU because, "As an African American who wants to go into medical school, they have the highest um, percentage for African Americans that are successful that go into medical school and become doctors. So that's what they are known for."

When she talked about one predominantly White school that she was considering, she said, "It being a PWI, it was a bit, I won't say intimidating, but it really made me think about being African American and probably going through some type of racial I won't say discrimination, but some type of racial issue with someone." Though she did consider that she may not feel as comfortable on a predominately White campus, her main concern was each school's track record with helping students in her demographic graduate go on to their desired professions.

Amanda related her desire to go to an HBCU to a negative experience she had during a school visit to a predominately White, public state school she had visited.

Lori: So it seems like race is a major contributing factor to your choice and that's like sort of the thing that is causing you pause about it.

Amanda: Only because when I had went there, one time for when we got to sit in a classroom. It was like, it was weird because when I was walking back, I mean when we was the first ones there, they sent all the kids to separate classrooms and
based off of your major and I was the only African American person in there. And like, the students had to like, we had to sit at a separate table and then the actual students who went there had to come in and sit at the tables with us and it took them like a long time and I’m just sitting there, like is anyone going to sit at my table? And like everybody else was sitting at the other tables. And once there was no more space left, they sat there and I was like, no. I don't have time to go through this. But it's not nothing that I can't face or anything.

Lori: Nobody sat at your table?

Amanda: They end up, cause at the end, it was like the last table that was getting filled up so they like, had no choice. Then when I was trying to talk to them they was being real snobby and I'm like, I don’t know if it's because it's their last year or what so they don't need to talk to me, so. Yeah that’s what made me like, question it. But I had talked to some lady uh, Caprice Burrows or something like that. She works there, and she was telling me how like, I can seek out to her for help. Like, they have this thing called multicultural events or something like that and the, like that's how you find other people related to you and all this other stuff. Which is, I feel like on a campus you shouldn't have to do that. Like I feel like everyone should just be...yeah.

This visit reinforced Amanda's fear that feeling uncomfortable in a PWI would interfere with her ability to be successful in college. Amanda was already worried about her ability to be successful in college, and did not want to face the additional challenge of navigating racial dynamics at a school where she would have to seek out support as a minority student.

The teachers and counselors at Performance High had different views as to how students were advised regarding HBCUs. Ms. Wilcox said that in the past, Performance Network discouraged students from applying to HBCUs, but that the philosophy had slowly shifted. She said:

Yeah. So, when I first arrived here in 2011, the message that was being sent was very... I mean, I don't care what anybody says. It was very much so, state schools, no HBCUs. Even if it wasn't verbalized, that was a very strong message that was sent. I remember being in my first PD and the conversations that were being had, and me coming from being the only one that came from the HBCU, I'm offended. [laughter] And at the end, the argument at the time was, "Well, they're not
providing a lot of financial aid, so we're just not... " You're completely neglecting such a huge piece of who our students are. And that was just mind blowing to me. So I think, when I first came, of course, I'm promoting Howard, and our students are saying, "Whoa, somebody is promoting an HBCU. What is this?" So, I kind of introduced concept or that possibility of HBCUs when I first came here, and it wasn't very... I could see it being frowned upon by certain people.

Ms. Wilcox talked about her own positive experiences at Howard, and provided students with information about HBCUs. She also included HBCUs on the college trip she took with her popular club. However, she said she did not directly suggest that students attend HBCUs, because she understood that they were often not the most affordable option, and she also did not want to undermine the advising of the other counselors. For the most part, she acted as a non-judgmental sounding board for students who were grappling with their desire to attend an HBCU with all other factors.

On the other hand, the White teachers and counselors I talked to who had conversations with students about HBCUs, like Mr. Webb, Ms. Olsen, Ms. Peters, and Mr. Samson, said that their advising around HBCUs revolved mainly around financial issues. Ms. Peters said:

And students are counseled not to not go to HBCUs, but students are counseled to make smart financial decisions about college. And there's not always the funding for HBCUs, 'cause they can often be very expensive. And if they're out of state, and they're privatized institutions, then students from here would be looking at a $40,000 a year bill. And if they're just stuck on, "I wanna go to an HBCU," they feel like we're not operating from their best interest by trying to tell them, "We don't want you to take out $200,000 in student loans, because that will set you up to potentially have a really difficult life when you graduate. Or even worse is, if you only go for two years and you end up dropping out, and then you have the debt with no degree, which is even worse, because you don't have something to show for it." And employers don't really care if you went to school for two years, and you don't have a degree, they wanna know why you didn't finish. And then, you're automatically eliminated from...
Like Ms. Peters, Mr. Webb began his advising with the assumption that the most affordable option was the obvious choice, and he encouraged students to articulate why an alternative choice would be better. He said:

The conversation I've had is not so much about not wanting kids to go to HBCUs. It's just that, if you are academically eligible for these schools that promise you that you will have no debt, I need to really understand why the HBCU is more important to you than a school that maybe you're not fully considering the options for. It's just not a name that you've heard, or it's just something that you have already just blocked out because it's not one of the schools that you have your heart set on. But I think it is also important for students culturally, that they go some place that they feel comfortable.

Mr. Webb believed that it was important for students to feel comfortable in their college settings in relation to race, but also implicit in his comment is the expectation that students justify their choices and preferences to their counselors if they want to attend HBCUs as opposed to other options.

As Perna's (2006) model of college choice suggests, students' family, school, and community contexts and their perceptions and experiences of them influence their dispositions toward college, the development of their aspirations, and their decision-making processes. While the college program at Performance High helps students access information about college, the uniform approach to providing information and preferring particular institutional characteristics does not accommodate for students’ individual and varying preferences.

**The decision making process**

Despite having preferences and ideas about the kinds of schools that might be a good fit for them, there were several factors that limited students' ability to draw on the college resources, conduct a cost/benefit analysis, and select schools based on a careful
weighing of important factors. The inflexible accountability policies and deadlines restricted students' decision-making process, as did students' perceptions that they would be unable to navigate the application process without support from their counselors.

Ms. Olsen described the search and sort process and curriculum in junior year at Performance High as beginning with students' preferences and personal fit characteristics, and then editing that list down after considering which among those adhered to the affordability and academic fit criteria. She said:

"I need to go to a small school where I can talk to the teacher all the time." Then we do... "I've been in cheerleading my whole life and I need to go to a school where I can continue to do this," or, "I've danced my whole life," or, "I've played basketball my whole life." So those all... Those personal fit things. And last year, what we did was, "Okay, so if that's the case, let's go on SuperMatch, on Naviance and let's put in all those personal fit criteria that you've just come up with, location, size, activities, those kinds of things, and see what comes up." And then we created a list on paper, actually. And then the following week, we moved on to academic. And then we whittled the list down that way: GPA, ACT. "Are you within three points of the ACT? Are you within point five of the GPA? If not, there better be a really good reasons why I should let you keep that school. Or why we should, we have to talk through that school a little more." And then you'll see those lists become really shortened based on the academic fit. And then we move to financial fit. And we usually mandate they have two financial fit schools in their list of six or seven... Right. And I think when you phrase it to them, that's really important rather than the jamming down their throat. I think some of it is, You know why we do this? We do this so that in March, we have options. If these other four schools come back and there is no way in the world, I'm not saying this is gonna happen. I'm not saying that, but I am saying that it's possible that none of these are affordable. We need other options because you need to be somewhere in August.

In their interviews, most students described the accountability policies, rather than their personal preferences, as driving their initial search and sort process. About a third of the students reported that they started the search and sort process in their junior year with ideas about schools to which they wanted to apply. These were usually "dream schools" schools they had visited through college access programs when they were younger or on
Performance High college trips, were familiar with through sports, or were located in cities or states they were interested in living in. These schools were often selective and out-of-state, and very few students actually applied to those schools against the advice of their college advisers. In fact, most of the applications students submitted were to schools that fit the affordability criteria, even though students were only required to have two applications that reflected affordable fit. There were several factors that contributed to the high volume of applications to in state, public universities and other schools that students perceived as sanctioned by their counselors.

For one, students were motivated by the accountability policies. Most of the students, regardless of their personal preferences, submitted six applications that fit the criteria. Students who pursued other options often did so above and beyond the six applications. In the following comment, Ms. Olsen noted that students were not only motivated by grades in the process, but they wanted to please their teachers and counselors. She said:

They are motivated by grades, for the most part. They wanna do well. They really wanna do well and they wanna make us happy. And I know that and they're motivated by grades, let's just say that. 'Cause I think a lot of times these kids get a very bad... That they don't care about it and that is not the case. And I think that's a credit to Performance High, a big credit to Performance High, that we teach them that this is important work and what you're doing matters and I think that they do buy into that. I think that that's a big thing.

Ms. Olsen felt that the college culture at Performance High helped foster students' desire to meet the metrics and do well in their classes.

Another factor was that the deadlines for their six applications were early in the fall of their senior year, and about a third of the students reported that they felt rushed in
doing the research and submitting applications. Mr. Webb noted that the deadline was early, but he told students that the first six were just a start. Of this he said:

If you're applying to schools in September and you're not sure, that's okay. Use it as practice and then later on find the ones that you are really passionate about. So I try to balance the buy in, if you create six you will have more options. You'll be able to have safety matches and reaches, so you can have a great chance of getting in. I'm pushing myself, but I have financial fall backs.

However, 25 of the 35 students ended up applying to exactly six schools.

Another factor that limited students' choice sets was the bevy of bureaucratic and technical issues that students faced in submitting applications. Rather than nimbly navigating this process or having their parents provide individual, tailored support, students relied on their counselors to help solve these issues. The repository for documents streamlined the process, but students needed their counselors to send transcripts and letters of recommendation to colleges through the system. In addition, students were supposed to send their own ACT scores, but after the first three colleges, there was a fee to send each additional copy. Colleges would take an unofficial copy, but only if it were sent directly from a school counselor, therefore students also depended on counselors to send their score reports. There were often issues with the system where it would verify that a student's information was transmitted to the school, but the school would notify the student that their applications were incomplete. Mr. Webb said that all of the counselors and the administrators at the central office faced similar issues with this software. He said:

So, I have the same issue with, we talk about the same issue, all of the advisers and the central office team. So Naviance is what controls all of the documents being sent and there have been times for any of us where we'll go through, so the process is a student hands in a transcript request, I log in to their application and click submit I go into Naviance, I click send for that school and it sends all the
attached documents automatically. Then Naviance will update it to materials have been sent and it will confirm those checkmarks. Sometimes I have a confirmation on my end that says it went through, and the student gets notified that it didn't go through. We contact the college, They say they didn't get it. I contact the college and say, I have a confirmation right here, they say send it again. There are just all these issues, constantly.

The counselors were overwhelmed by the volume of applications, and could not address all the issues that came up with submitting materials. In addition, several students had complicated ongoing issues with financial aid applications because they were in the process of being emancipated from parents, they were adopted or in foster care, or because their families had late or missing tax forms. Almost all of the focal students reported at least one administrative issue related an application or the FAFSA that they needed a counselor's or teacher's help to address. As a result, many students reported that they ruled out or withdrew applications that their counselors were unable to address, or that presented additional difficulties.

Joanne's application process was emblematic of the kinds of issues that students faced with their applications. Two of her colleges did not receive her application materials, even though Mr. Webb told her that he sent them. Several of them did not receive her FAFSA information, and she said Mr. Webb had lost her FAFSA login and password, so she said she could not fix the issue herself. Also, the school she wanted to attend had not sent her an award letter and she was not sure why. She said:

He [Mr. Webb] keeps emailing me, like you need to call them, you need to call them. I've called them at least 20 times. I'm not going to keep calling. If they don't want to talk, they don't want to talk. And the other school, he [Mr. Webb] told me that he was going to send it to me so I could send it to them. I was like, as my college adviser, you are supposed to do that yourself. But I sent it to them and they never got back to me and I've been calling them and they never like, you know....Maybe he's [Mr. Webb] overwhelmed because there are so many of us and our projects are due tomorrow.
Mr. Webb was managing these kinds of issues for at least six applications per student for over a hundred seniors. It seemed that the applications that had been submitted earlier were more likely to be resolved than the schools that students applied to later. This might have contributed to students' perceptions that the school counselors did not help or support students with schools that they perceived were not aligned with the affordability and academic fit criteria.

With the assistance and structure provided by counselors, students each submitted at least six applications. But they did not navigate this process with confidence and ease. Students tended to defer to school policies and counselor recommendations rather than take the initiative to find schools that might better meet their individual preferences.

**Choices aligned to the criteria**

Though students had access to information about college, this information was filtered by the school's messages about what types of schools were best. For the many students who wanted to go to affordable schools that were close by, they internalized the message that schools that fit the affordability criteria were the best way to achieve that, which contributed to many choice sets that reflected most or all schools that fit the criteria (rather than only the two that were required). Students narrowed their field of consideration to schools that fit the affordability and academic criteria, and then considered which schools best fit their preferences among those options.

Milan employed this strategy in her search and sort process, and was able to accommodate all her most important preferences. She wanted to find a school that was affordable, close by, was diverse, and had a nursing program. Of the process, she said:
I think also because they tell you about how you have your fit schools, your reach schools it's like everything is broken down for us like, I just want to apply to this school this school, this school. You end up not getting accepted to any. They’re very realistic. You have a 3.6, look for schools that have a 3.5 or 3.7, around your range. You have a 22 GPA look for schools, everything is broken down step by step. We have resources that we can go to resources where we can ask for help. That’s why a lot of us go to college because we have that support system like, realistic step-by-step process for us.

Milan applied to four in state, public schools (one local), one partnership school, and one local private school, where she figured she could live at home to defray costs. She got into all of the school except for the private school, and chose to attend the local state school that fit all of her preferences.

Similarly, Janae wanted to attend an affordable, diverse school that was relatively close by. She also narrowed her field of choices to schools that fit the affordability and academic criteria, and then tried to assess which of those schools fit her other preferences. However, because Janae would not consider staying in the city for school, none of the other options fit her preference for attending a diverse school. She chose to attend the most selective choice from the six state schools to which she applied and was accepted. While she was excited about her choice, her concern about the racial composition remained.

Lori: And what did you think about it when you went [to visit]?

Janae: I liked it. I liked the environment and stuff. It's diverse, kind of. I'm not worried about it but I don't know what it's going to be like (laughs) it's like, it's predominantly White there and I like, it's diverse here, but it's diverse with like, Asians, like that kind of diverse. I don't know how it's going to be next year around like, a lot of White people because I'm not used to it.

Lori: It's a predominately White institution? And how did you feel when you went to go visit there?

Janae: I wasn't uncomfortable but I was just like, how is this going to be?
Lori: Are you afraid of, is there anything in particular you're afraid of?

Janae: Like, I'm not scared of it, it's just like, (laughs) it's just like, um, maybe I'll be like...I don't want to come off as raunchy to them. That's probably what they think when they see Black people, but yeah. I don't want to come off like that.

Lori: What do you mean by raunchy?

Janae: Like, I don't want them to think that like, I'm ghetto or something.

Lori: Cause you've never been in a predominately White environment before?

Janae: Yeah

Lori: But even though that is a concern of yours, you still liked West better?

Janae: Yeah, it is like some Black people there, and I'ma be there with my friend. One of my best friends, so...It shouldn't be that bad then. Like, that's how I'm looking at it. Like I'ma be fine.

Janae wanted to attend a diverse school, but after applying the affordability and academic criteria, there were only predominately White schools available to her. The school she chose to attend had a student body that was 80% White. Though she was worried about the racial composition of her future school, she reassured herself that she would be okay. Like many students at Performance High, Milan and Janae assumed that schools that met the affordability criteria would be the best financial options for them, and conducted the rest of their searches through this lens.

About a third of the students described feeling rushed in the application process, and described hastily choosing schools that fit the criteria in the fall. They only looked further into their choices and considered their options among the schools to which they had already applied.

Sheldon and Brianna had done summer programs on multiple college campuses through college access programs as children, and described wanting to apply to some of
the schools they had liked. However, both said that they felt discouraged from applying to their choices, and subsequently, they hastily chose six schools that fit the criteria to meet their seminar deadlines.

Sheldon said that he was uncertain as to why Mr. Webb discouraged his choice, because he perceived that he was within the academic range of accepted students and could afford to go.

Lori: How come you applied to all in state schools?

Sheldon: Cause, Mr. [Webb]. Seriously he, he like, not saying he doesn't make us want to apply to out of state schools, but the way he speaks about it makes you apply to in state schools.

Lori: And what way does he speak about it?

Sheldon: Like, it's not like a, it's like, I can't really describe it. But it's like, when I told him I was going to apply to a school in Connecticut...when I spoke to him it was like, he didn't directly say no but it was like he was implying no, you shouldn't. I don't know.

Lori: What was your sense of why not?

Sheldon: I don't know. I honestly I didn't even ask the question because he was the authority. He knew more than me when it comes to college so I'm going to just listen to you. I just cut that off my list immediately.

I pressed Sheldon about what particular characteristics interested him about the six schools to which he applied. Finally he said:

Sheldon: Honestly, the reason I applied to those six schools, is because we had to do it. We had to get them six done. So I think I just filled them in just to do it. That was my mindset. I was like, all right, I don't have enough time to look at each school. Look at everything.

Lori: Why did you feel like you didn't have enough time?

Sheldon: Because we didn't and we had to have six done by a certain date.

Lori: You should just felt like you picked whatever?
Sheldon: Uh huh

Months after he submitted his applications, Sheldon considered his preferences among his choices schools more carefully. In the end, he was happy with his choice and looked forward to attending college.

Brianna also described feeling discouraged from applying to a school she was interested in, and so subsequently chose six that she perceived where sanctioned by her counselors.

Brianna: Cause, it was like they make you apply to six schools and like, the school in Maryland, the one I really wanted to go to, you know like, I didn't want to go no more. So I just picked six schools.

Lori: And, so you loved Maryland and you wanted to go and Mr. Webb was like no, it's not good. And so you just didn't apply? How come you didn't, like...

Brianna: He made me feel like if I applied, I would definitely not get in. Also with the other school, he said if you don't have a 3.4 you might as well not apply. So he like, if I knew that I was not going to get in so that would have broke my heart so I, I might as well not apply, you know.

Similar to Sheldon, I asked Brianna to tell me about why she had chosen the six schools that she had applied to, and she seemed to know very little about them. She had applied to schools that her friends had submitted for their seminar, and only knew about and was interested in one of the schools that was her friend's first choice.

Lori: You did not care about any of these schools, did you?

Brianna: No, I did not. It's just, you gotta pick six, you gotta have your award letters, so.

Lori: So what would have happened if you didn't get into the school you wanted?

Brianna: If I didn't get in there, I would have probably checked out these other schools more.

Lori: You didn't know that much about these schools?
Brianna: Not really.

Brianna got into the school her friend wanted to go to and she was somewhat satisfied with that option, though the lack of diversity at the school remained an issue for her. She said: "Umm, huh. One of my biggest concerns is being one of the only Black people on the campus, but, after uh after some time. I went there and there was like a looooot of White people. And I didn't really, I didn't see no Black person on the campus when I went." In hastily creating her choice set, Brianna reported that she applied with very little consideration of her preferences.

Like Sheldon and Brianna, Chanelle also quickly applied to schools, and when she later learned more about them, realized most did not fit her preferences for a potential school.

Chanelle: I am definitely not going there [an in state, public school]...She [her friend who had attended and dropped out of that school] was like, um, she only told me, she was like, I can’t remember. It was something like they were screaming nigger or something like that, or they had a parade or something like that.

Lori: Are you serious? So why did you apply there then?

Chanelle: I applied there because we needed 7 [she thought she had to apply to seven schools] and then I heard other people, my friend sister go there, and she's like, it's fine up here...

Lori: You couldn’t find seven colleges that you kind of like, even a little bit?

Chanelle: It was so rushed, I was like oh okay, whatever.

Lori: I hear this all the time. You really felt rushed?

Chanelle: It was fast paced. I'm not sure if it was because I wasn’t on pace, or it was just going too fast or I procrastinated. But I was like, oh, I guess these...
Often students like Chanelle, Brianna, and Sheldon, who felt rushed in the application process, applied to schools that were most visible in their high school context, and that they were sure would easily be approved for their class. The majority of these applications were to in state, public universities.

A handful of students applied to and chose schools that fit the affordability criteria even though they had strong preferences to the contrary because they perceived that the college program and the counselors did not provide the resources, support, and information to enable them to do so.

For example, James wanted to go to an HBCU, and he perceived that this choice was unsupported by his counselors. He related his preference for an HBCU to the racial incidents that had been occurring recently on college campuses. He said:

When we was applying there was so much stuff happening, so it was like, I kind of want to be a little bit more comfortable so...like, uh, racially. There was like a lot of deaths and killing with police and everything and then it was like it was one article I saw about like, it was a back student union. They were protesting about how the, how the White students treat them, I guess and how they get treated by the staff and everything and I was like yeah, I don't want that problem...

Though James specifically wanted to attend an HBCU, five of his applications were to predominately White, public, in state institutions and only one to an HBCU. He attributed this to the fact that he did not receive support for HBCU applications at his school.

Lori: Yeah. Interesting. All right. Is there anything you want to add about your school? About your college process? Or how your school influences like, what you’ve decided to do with yourself?

James: I talk to Mr. Webb about it. But I didn’t like how, I didn’t like how for out-of-state schools students didn’t get that much support. So it was like, with in state schools it was like oh okay, cause that's what that's the, the in state schools are more likely to be in the financial range then when you talk about out of state schools, it's a whole 'nother story. So it's like, I didn’t really get that support.
Lori: The school support?

James: Yeah. So I relied mainly on myself, so that's kind of why I only have like one application for out of state schools.

James perceived that he did not get support for his out of state, HBCU applications, and therefore he felt that he was unable to apply. Instead, he said he applied to five schools that were on a list that his counselors had given him, which he thought were partner schools [they were not].

Lori: And are you a partnership student?

James: Uh no, well I would, I guess technically cause the school is like, works with a lot of partnership schools ... I don't know.

Lori: You don't know. But they gave you a list and they were like, what did you think about that, like them giving you a list of partnership schools?

James: I didn't like it because I wanted to ...when they were talking about the college search and everything I wanted to genuinely find a college to look into but they gave me a list and it caused me to be like here's the schools that they have, so let me apply to these and then, and some of them I only applied to because we needed six in order to pass.

James had applied to the in state, public institutions in order to meet the requirement for his class. He applied to one HBCU that he had seen in the movie Drumline. He said the school was his first choice, but he chose not to go there because he never got an award letter. He said:

I had to call so many times about like, when they was going to send me the award letter and then they would be like oh it should be at this time, then it never came, then I would call again. And they actually sent me an email and gave me an extension to where, to what the, uh when I could pay because they didn’t send me my award letter. So the way I thought about it was if this is, if this is how the staff works then how am I going to get the help that I need at that school?
James ended up choosing the school that he liked best among his five other choices. He was happy with his selection and was looking forward to attending, even though the racial composition of his school remained a concern for him.

Corey also chose to attend a school that he perceived was sanctioned by his school, though that was not his preference. Corey's main criteria for a school was that it was a drastically different context from what he was used to, and that it would help him learn and grow. He explained to Ms. Olsen, "What is college if not to be challenged? I want to be constantly fed, like I'm learning and growing every day. I don't want to skate by. I want to find out who I am." He perceived that attending an HBCU, an out of state school, or a school that he perceived as rigorous, were the best options to satisfy his preferences and he did not feel that any schools that fit the affordability criteria also satisfied his own preferences.

In submitting his six applications, he mostly chose schools that he perceived would be sanctioned by his counselors. He applied to five in state, public schools (one local) and one HBCU. Corey said that he did not have much interest in any of the schools to which he applied, even the HBCU, though he preferred it to the others. I asked Corey why he did not seek out schools he was interested in, and he attributed it to his advising.

Lori: But you chose which schools to apply to!

Corey: I know! But with heavy influence from the school. They, they, cause it just makes you, like, once they start talking to you about these things, they made you like second guess even yourself. So I was going to apply to my dream school, which was UCLA, but it was just like all this financial stuff dududududud da you know, their ACT score is like a 2 something, I only have a 19, even with a 3.2 thingy, I still wouldn't even be in range so its just like.

Lori: How come you weren’t just like, oh I'll just apply and see then.
Corey: Cause like then, I feel like I wouldn’t get the amount of help that I would of if I would have applied to these. Or they wouldn’t be trying to help me as much with that. So it's just like, I would have been like, in my own little box of like you applied somewhere we can't really, don't have any connections or anything to tap on, so it's like do the best you can. And it's just like, I understood, it's just like that would be the case and out of the fear of like, not being able to like handle it on my own I didn’t apply. Now I truly regret it because like, you know what? I have friends who had even lower grades than me, lower GPAs than mine, lower ACT scores than mine apply to somewhere very prestigious or somewhere they truly wanted to apply where I even wanted to apply to and its like, they get in. It was like, they weeded, slow weeding out of...keep you here so we feel another student, who has a better chance or a super bold student here while you just stay in this little loop we have.

Corey perceived that he was reliant on his counselors for information and support in the college application, and that they were unwilling or unable to provide the types of support they would help him to achieve his preferences for a school. He regretted that he had deferred to his counselors and the criteria in his applications after he saw some of his "super bold" classmates get into schools he had been told were not viable options.

Further, Corey had a difficult time choosing among his options because he had a high EFC (24,016). In his fit meeting, his mom explained that while she had a good job, finances were tight because she had cancer and was trying to work and earn money for her family while she was still able. Nonetheless, she wanted Corey to go to the school that would make him the happiest. The following field note reflects the conversation between Ms. Olsen and Corey's mom about his final choice.

Ms. Olsen holds Corey's award letters in her hand, leaned over the phone where his mom is on speakerphone. She explains the letters to her, comparing the net costs. She [Ms.Olsen] says that Corey got into City U, which is a great school. Ms. Olsen says they've given him a grant, so that's a sign that they really want him there. Ms. Olsen says, it looks like it's not cheap either, but he could save the cost of room and board if he lives at home. She says, "You don't have the letter for [HBCU] but I am going to tell you right now, that's out of state tuition and they're not giving anyone aid. That's upward of $80,000 in debt." Corey's mom sighs and sounds exhausted. Corey's mom says she can't believe they're expecting them to pay so much. Corey has worked so hard and done so
Corey, staring into his lap adds, "It's like they put forth this giant gap and gave me this tiny piece of rope and told me that I need to get over the gap with that. I just can't get there." Finally Corey's mom says to Ms. Olsen, "I understand that you are trying to help, but with all due respect, I want Corey to go where he wants to go. If we have to take out loans, if we have to pay interest, whatever it takes we will do that. He deserves that." Ms. Olsen says, "Okay. I hear you loud and clear. I see him sitting here in front of me. He looks miserable and that must be hard as a parent." When they hang up, Ms. Olsen and Corey are silent. Finally she says, "I'm just worried about you. I'm worried you are going to get a bill in August for $10,000 and how are you going to pay for that?" He shrugs, "Well, in a pinch..." Ms. Olsen cuts him off, "I don't mean to be blunt and harsh, but you are going to be in a pinch."

Corey had not made his decision yet by the end of the school year, but he ended up enrolling in an in state, public university about 45 minutes north of the city where he felt it was feasible to commute if he encountered financial struggles.

Amanda chose to go to an in state, public university even though she had a strong preference to attend an HBCU. Like Corey, she also attributed her decision to pressure from the counselors at her school. She applied to four in state, public schools which she said Mr. Webb helped her with, and she applied to four HBCUs. She perceived that she had to go elsewhere for support in applying to the HBCUs. She said:

Amanda: I know but the HBCUs was on my own for real, because they [the counselors] don't support us with the HBCUs.

Lori: Why do you say that?

Amanda: Cause they don’t. I don't...they don't.

Lori: What do you mean?

Amanda: Like in the parent Fit meetings, like when I brought in my award letters they basically told me like, Clark is not an option. That made me want to go more. No, seriously....Clark was already my top choice so then once I had told I was going there, after that I felt like I didn't have help anymore. I felt like they wasn't like, willing to help me as much as willing to help me get scholarships or like, helping me understand what's going on. How much money I was going to have to pay and stuff like that. I had to seek out like, and go to other teachers that went to HBCUs.
With help from other adults at her school, Amanda was able to navigate the other four HBCU applications on her own. In talking about how she perceived that her counselors would not help her with HBCU applications, she said she felt that because they were White, they did not fully understand her desire to attend an HBCU. She said:

Well, a lot of my teachers are like, Caucasian, so they don’t understand the identity crisis that African American students go through, especially ones that want to be successful in the real world. And like, the stuff that we would face on campuses that's dominated by White people and how they would have more opportunities than the African Americans on the campus and that's why I feel like I want to go to an HBCU and even visiting them like, that was the best fit for me because I felt like. I don’t know. I felt more comfortable.

When the time came to make her decision, she realized that the HBCU would be significantly more expensive. That fact, and the pressure from her counselors influenced her to choose the state school instead of the HBCU.

Lori: Wait, so how did you end up going to [state school] after this?

Amanda: I don't know. I just...maybe I was thinking about it too hard, like I was just thinking about it and I started thinking about the stuff they [her counselors] were mentioning like the debt and stuff. And I was asking myself like, am I willing to take on that debt? And is it worth it? And then, yeah, like that's what I was thinking.

Amanda described her counselors as "going so hard, trying to convince us to go to state schools" and said that the pressure influenced her to doubt her own preferences. The decision was complicated further because both of her parents wanted her to go to the HBCU, despite the fact that it would mean they would take on significant debt.

Amanda: yeah, she [her mom] was kind of mad at me when I told her that I changed my, that I changed my decision. But I like,

Lori: Why was she mad?

Amanda: Cause, she wanted me to go with my heart. Go where like, I feel was the best fit for me and not be stalled by all the other stuff that could get in the way of
it. And yeah, like she is very supportive when it comes to my decisions. Because she trust me with like, a lot of, she trusts that I will go there and do the right thing. And that's with any college. That's why I was telling her, don't worry about it. I got it. I'm good. I made this decision and I'm just going to stick with it. Same with my dad.

Amanda attributed her decision to go to the state school to the fact that her counselors did not support her choice to attend an HBCU, the pressure they put on her to go to a state school, and her own doubts that maybe her counselors were right about the implications of taking on so much debt.

James, Corey, and Amanda were vocal about the kinds of institutions they felt would best suit their needs and preferences, yet they were unable to access those choices. They were unable to negotiate with the counselors to obtain the results they desired and they did not feel free to pursue other options without the support of their counselors. The structured and uniform messaging influenced these students to second-guess their desires and choices. Their efforts to reconcile their own worldviews with the views advanced by the school’s accountability policies and dominant advising created struggle and tension, rather than the corporeal ease that Khan (2010) observed of students in elite settings.

Though most students chose to attend colleges that fit the affordability criteria defined by the school regardless of whether these institutions fit their own preferences, many students were satisfied with their choices and looked forward to attending college. Only a few students, like Corey and Amanda, reported to feeling unhappy about the institutions they were likely to attend the following fall.
**Choices against the grain**

Several students perceived that they had made application and choice selections that did not align with the dominant advising at their school. A few of these students felt intense pressure to comply to the requirements and make choices they disagreed with, and felt they had to find support outside of their counselors to bolster their decisions and choose other paths.

For example, Tanaya, who had a strong desire to go to an HBCU, complied with the requirements of her senior seminar class even though she knew she would not consider attending PWIs. In the following comment, she talked about how she felt pressure to consider a PWI, but stayed firm in her choice.

Tanaya: Like you get stuck, like, most Performance High students go to state schools. When you go to signing day, you gonna see so many people stand up for those schools. You going to be like, oh, the whole room going there. And that's what it's been like ever since I was here in 9th grade going to signing day, we see everybody stand up for those schools. And that's pretty much because that's the culture here. I don't know, they aren't really educated on HBCUs like, so I yeah, I got a lot of little, because at my fit meeting and I only had these three award letters and she [Ms. Olsen] was like, where are these guys at? I was like Ms. Olsen, I did not get award letters from them. I did not follow up with them because I did not care to go. You all told me to apply, I got accepted and that's it. Like, I didn't seek anything further with them because I know I am not going to a state school and I know I am not going to a PWI. And that's, they're both of those things. But every day she'd be like, well no, before I got my parent plus loan, she was just like I don't know how you are going to afford it. I don't know how you are going to get the loan. We need to call the state schools. I would just look at her like, you crazy, I am not going there. If you're not strong-willed, you can get coerced into doing something you don't want to do. Cause they even got my mom a little bit.

Lori: You think that's what happened with your mom?

Tanaya: Ever since then all she talk is numbers. Before then it was like, we gonna make a way, I believe in God. I got faith in you and your abilities...and now.
Tanaya complied with all of the accountability policies, but applied to several additional HBCUs. She drew on all of her skills and resources to find support and practical help with her additional applications and was accepted to both Howard and Spelman. At the time of her interview, she had started an online fundraiser entitled "Help Tanaya go to Howard!" Just as she had found a way to navigate the application process, she hoped she could draw on her resources to find a way to pay the tuition. Though she mentioned that her mom wavered at the cost, in the end she chose to enroll in Spelman, and her mom took out a private loan in order for her to do so.

Tina's main focus was finding a school that would help her achieve her goal of going to medical school. In searching for schools, she looked for rigorous schools, that were affordable and that had high graduation rates for Black students. She did not want to apply to any state universities, because she perceived she would be "settling." She met the affordability criteria by applying to two schools (more and most selective) that met full need, but she perceived that her counselors were not supportive of her list because they did not include any state system schools. She went to other teachers for advice about whether she should apply to state school even if she did not want to.

Tina: Um, I was, when Mr. Webb he really did advise a lot of kids to apply to state schools. For, he also advised me too, but I’m just like, those are good colleges for people that want to go there. But for me, if I were to apply to those colleges I most likely would get accepted but in reality, is that the college literally for me? Am I going to get challenged the way I got challenged here? And I'm just like whatever, for whatever, I'm not applying to none of them. I told him no. I'm not.

Lori: Really? Why didn’t you apply to any? That's right. You didn't apply to any.

Tina: I just didn’t want to. For me, I just didn't think those schools was really gonna help me for my future and help me with, deep down I think I’m smarter than a lot of those schools. I wanted to really challenge myself. So I just went to
the next level. Actually they were actually hesitant to send in my application to Duke. They were really scared.

Lori: Really?

Tina: Yeah! I remember Ms. Olsen saying, I sent in your application. And she was like, I was so scared because this is Duke we're talking about but I'm just like, you only live once so I gotta do something. Lori: Yeah, you feel like you got support for this list of schools like you would have if you would of applied to schools that more people applied to?

Tina: Um, I got more support for this list from Ms. Grate and Ms. Marcum, and a lot of the teachers that I'm close with. Ms. Grate and Ms. Marcum were just like, applying to the [state] schools, they are a lot of the schools that Performance High has contracts with you know. That's the schools that they would like most Performance High kids to go to because kids are most likely to get accepted there. But, they was just like, you need to think about college. Is this something, do you want to go to...I'm not trying to say [state school] is bad. But do you want to go to a state school? Like, no, I want to try something new. I want to be different, you know.

Lori: You feel like the counselors advise you towards state schools, but the larger school community...

Tina: Honestly, I feel like the larger school community still wants you to go to state schools. Each, each um, I have a bunch of friends that go to different Network schools, a lot of them are going to one of the state schools. And they didn't really apply to schools outside, like outside.

Tina applied to a mix of schools, three selective, two more selective and one most selective. Four of her schools were out of state schools, and one was an HBCU. I had observed Mr. Webb mention to Tina that she should apply to two or three Ivy League schools, yet because of the emphasis on state schools at Performance High, she still perceived that her counselors wanted her to go to a state school. Tina was surprised and confused when she got into Duke, the most selective school, but got waitlisted for one selective school and rejected from another. Even after receiving a full scholarship to Duke, she considered going to Xavier because she wondered if their success with Black
students going to medical school would serve her better then going to a PWI. However, she made her decision to go to Duke after attending an admitted students weekend for Black students that convinced her that she would have a good support system at Duke.

A few students complied with the accountability criteria, and then applied to additional schools of their choosing and chose HBCUs. These students considered their counselors' advice as one source of information, and did not report to having felt pressured to make other choices. For example, Danielle and Dante both chose to attend an out-of-state HBCU. Danielle had described always wanting to go to an HBCU. She applied to four state schools and two HBCUS. When it came time to make her choice, she was weighing her two HBCU options. Her first choice was Howard, but it was a much more expensive choice and offered her very little financial aid. She considered her counselors' advice that affordability was important, and chose the cheaper of the HBCUs, though attending a state school would have been less expensive. Of her counselors' advice she said:

I know, this is not a bad thing, but college advisers' job is to help you go to the most affordable school. That is what they're trained to do. They are trained to tell you to go to the most affordable school...I don't feel like it's wrong of them. I feel like, it's the safe thing to do. And, yeah, it's the safe thing to do. And a lot of students I know are going to schools they cannot afford and they are going to be like, $100,000 in debt or more than that and they're just going because they have that fire in them that they just like, I am going to go there. I am going to be in debt. I don't care. Money is not an option. But they [the counselors] are trained to tell you that's not smart. You need to have, you need to get a career first. It's just too much money. It all comes down to money.

Danielle followed the requirements, applied to schools that met her own preferences and then weighed her counselors' advice and her own preferences in choosing DSU. Though
she perceived that it was her counselors' job to advise her to go to the least expensive option, she compromised in choosing the least expensive HBCU.

Dante went through a similar process. He applied to schools that met the requirements, and applied to other schools that met his preferences. When it came to make his choice, he was choosing between two options, an HBCU and a local state school. For Dante, it came down to wanting to leave the city and extricate himself from neighborhood dynamics that he felt would be counterproductive to his being successful in school. He said:

City U was, it was in the city and I don't want to be in the city. I've been here my entire life and I don't want to, I've never been out. And I really didn't want to stay in the city. And then it's up in the north part, and I didn't want to. I just know a lot of people up there and the community is really bad. I understand I'm going to be on the campus but as soon as I walk right off campus I'm in the north and I'm like I know too much up here. I don't want to be in the same circle. So um, City U was already, I only applied to City U because I had to have six schools in order to graduate. So I was like okay, City U is just not for me.

Dante chose to attend the HBCU, which he said would be the lowest gap in terms of cost as well. Neither Dante nor Danielle perceived that they were discouraged from applying to HBCUs, and they felt comfortable applying to schools above and beyond the two affordable fit schools. They perceived their counselors and the college program as helpful and supportive of their choices.

The data reflected that the way that teachers and counselors defined and talked about affordability, and the way students understood those messages, had a strong influence on how they shaped their choice sets. Many students deferred to their counselors in accepting that schools that fit the criteria would be the most affordable options, but their interviews reflected an incomplete understanding of the financial
aspects of college. For example, Chris and Malik both said that they applied to all in state schools because of affordability concerns, but they ended up going to private schools that did not have different tuition rates based on residency. Both Pam and Tina said that they were surprised to learn that many highly selective private schools provided full scholarships, even though "schools that meet full need" counted towards affordable fit for their metrics. Pam mentioned Tina's scholarship in her interview and said:

    Yup and she's got a full ride too, so she doesn't have to worry about finances. Because schools like that, they have the resources to do that. He doesn't tell you that. He doesn't tell you that you could have the opportunity to get a full ride because your family doesn't meet a certain need and because the school has more money they can provide more money for you to go there. That's another thing he doesn't really, I think if students knew that, then we would be more open to applying to out of state schools.

The counselors did not emphasize schools that met full need because most of the seniors did not have the academic qualifications to be admitted to more selective schools.

However, the emphasis on state schools influenced all of the students to apply to state schools, and perceive that they were required to do so. When I mentioned this perception to Ms. Olsen, she said:

    Well, they're not exactly wrong. They have to have affordable fits and many of them are like, 'I'm not going to community to college.' Um, they don't qualify for the schools that meet full need, their academics, so in a way, yeah, I guess they are required to apply to state schools.

This study found that various aspects of the application requirements like the timeline and the definitions of "affordable fit" and "academic fit" had a strong influence on students' application process, regardless of students' preferences. Students saw themselves as reliant on their counselors for technical support in submitting applications, and for information and resources about colleges, which further influenced their decisions.
to apply to schools they saw as "sanctioned" by their counselors. This resulted in high numbers of students applying to and enrolling in particular schools.

**Student perceptions of adversarial versus supportive advising**

The college approach at Performance High was characterized by a pervasive college message, a regimented approach, and accountability criteria that were not always aligned to students’ goals and preferences. Many students found that the program reinforced their aspirations and supported their goals. However, an unintended consequence of this approach to college choice was that for many students, it fostered the perception that the school counselors and many teachers who were trying to help and advise them were adversaries rather than collaborators and supporters. Even some students who described the program as useful perceived some aspects of the program as obstacles they had to overcome rather than supports. This tension and distrust was counterproductive to students absorbing the cultural capital that the school tried to transmit, as students resisted the college message and were suspicious of the school’s motives for creating a culture that assumed all students would go to college.

The following field note is a reflection of many conversations I observed, where students talked about the college program with resentment. The teacher had just shown the students a video clip about an activist who started a school with the premise that college was not a productive goal for Black students. Rather, his school would teach them practical life skills that would help them to obtain economic security. The class was discussing the clip.

*The students sit in a circle with their teacher, a young woman with fair skin and bright red hair twisted up in a bun. Four Black students' hands shoot up in the air. Ms. Collins*
nods towards a boy with a freshly shaped haircut. He says excitedly, "Yeah, I think they push us too much towards college. (Several other students snap their fingers in agreement) They bring us opportunities that aren't college, like you could do this or that. (A student interrupts and yells out, 'Yeah! Like two weeks before graduation!) But basically, it's just 'college college, college' all the time. And then when kids get there, they don't finish it. They're preparing us for a different academic level, but not for life, life skills. The only one who is preparing us for life is Mr. Boyd, when he taught us about AIDS. How do they even know I'm going to college? And if I said I wasn't, they would shun me and treat me differently." A Black female student with long eyelashes, wearing a shiny bronze headscarf adds "College is forced upon us so much so that it stresses me out. What if I grow up and I am nobody? I need a break! I'm like, can y'all stop?" She leans back dramatically in her chair, putting the back of her hand to her forehead. The first boy says, "We need classes about life, and vocational things too. It's fine if we want to go to cosmetology school or culinary". Ms. Collins presses, "Well why...why do you think they do it?" The boy answers, "Just because of the stereotype that if you go to college, you make more money." Another male student chimes in, "Like the guy on the video said, it's the dominant narrative. That's what we have to do to be successful and that's not true." The teacher laughs a little. "Is it never true? I know people who have gone to college and gotten good jobs so I'm wondering..." A female student laughs loudly and points at Ms. Collins. "You? Why are you a representative for the White man right now?" Several students join in laughing. A tall boy in the corner, who had been quiet up to that point says quietly, shaking his head, "They just do too much. And not a lot of kids from here who go to college graduate. And [the CEO of the network] When it comes down to it, he don't care about us. Or he don't care about individual students. He just does it because he wants to look good and get more money. That's all so they only teach to the test here and if I have a question that has nothing to do with the tests, then we don't have time for that, And we need high grades on the tests to go to college. He don't care. Basically. Another student says, I agree with you and several students snap in agreement. Another boy adds emphatically, "Even if [the CEO of Performance Network] were sitting here right now, it wouldn't change."

During this conversation, different students expressed that they felt "forced" to go to college, that their teachers would "shun" them if they decided to take a different path, that the Network had ulterior motives (to "look good" and "make money") in advocating for college as the next step, and that nothing they could say would change their high school environment. These themes echo those that were apparent in the interviews with focal students, and contributed to some students' framing of the college program as adversarial.
Several students perceived the extensive requirements as barriers to their success in graduating high school rather than a support system for achieving their goals. In talking about meeting the requirements, many students focused on the potential consequences (e.g. not graduating, not earning graduation tickets) rather than what the requirements were actually intended to achieve. For example, Quantisha questioned the logic of making college applications an obstacle to graduation, when the purpose of helping students with applications was to help them to be successful. She said:

Quantisha: I don't like it. I don't. How, class is like so stressful and it irritates me so much.

Lori: Why is it so stressful?

Quantisha: Because like, I hate senior Capstone and like I think like, it's so like, pointless. Like why are we doing all this just to graduate? I feel like they put like, stuff in our way like, I think the system is designed for us to fail. Honestly.

Lori: The...which system?

Quantisha: Like Performance High's system. The system period, like it's just the way this school goes about things is designed for us to fail. Like I don't know. A lot of stuff is just not fair or like a lot of stuff I don't thoroughly understand and it's important to them [the counselors] but it's not important to us. It's just like why...

Lori: What's important to them that are not important to you?

Quantisha: Like this whole senior Capstone thing. We can't graduate if we don't do that. And if, and if we fail it we can't graduate. Like, why are you, if you actually want us to graduate, why is Capstone or why does a test determine whether or not we pass?

Quantisha was overwhelmed by all of the requirements for the Capstone project, and she mentioned failing three times in her comment. Her negative perceptions of the requirement were related to her feeling that the seminar work was not aligned to her
goals. Further, she questioned whether the requirements were designed to facilitate success, or obstruct it.

Like Quantisha, Amanda questioned whether the requirements and the timeline were helpful or hurtful to students' college choice process. She noted that the rushed timeline had negative effects for many students' application process and objected to the fact that they were given grades for application activities.

It's too much input. And like, I could see if it were input but it weren't a grade, because when it becomes a grade, for instance, for like FAFSA and stuff like that. I feel like this year wasn't as organized because like, they would tell us to do it and then I watched so many kids rush and do stuff and mess up because it's a grade and it shouldn't be a grade if it's college....I feel like, if you're going to help us, help us out of generosity. Don't do it, don't force us to do it. Don't let it like, it's a grade, everything is a grade. How is FAFSA a grade? How is me sitting here completing a financial aid, a grade?

Her negative perceptions of the structure of the program influenced her to question the motives of her counselors, and whether they were helping students out of "generosity."

Similarly, Joanne was more focused on the consequences of the college program rather than the benefits.

I disagree with it because you shouldn't push somebody to do something that you know, what if that person don't want to go to college? But they still have to, in order for them to graduate. Like somebody here, they don't wanna go to college. I know them personally. This person don't wanna go to college but Mr. Webb made them do six applications to schools they don't even want to go to. They wasn't even thinking about just to get, just for their parents to come to graduation. If they didn't do the six applications, one of their parents wouldn't be able to come to graduation. Like, you know, so it's like. It's not fair. I don't think the whole system is fair at all. You makin' people do things they don't want to do. He made me apply to community college. I didn't want to apply to community college. But you made me do it. It should be that person's choice.

Quantisha, Amanda, and Joanne saw aspects of the program, like enforcing artificial application deadlines and withholding graduation tickets from students, as antagonistic.
In these comments, they do not perceive that the college program was meant to serve students, or to give students options. In fact, Joanne had a low GPA (2.5) and ACT score (15), therefore, there was some chance that she would not be accepted to any of the four-year schools to which she applied. In light of the fact that she wanted to go to college in the fall, her counselor's "making" her apply to community college served her own goals, but she did not see it that way.

Further, only one of the focal students explicitly stated that she did not want to go to college, and only five expressed that college conflicted with their own preferences, yet many more than said that the college program at Performance High "forced" students to go to college rather than using terminology like "helped" or "supported."

In their interviews, students described having good relationships with their teachers and counselors and generally perceived that the adults at their school wanted to help them and support them to achieve their goals. However, they struggled to make sense of why the adults did not seem to consider their feelings and desires in relation to college going. As a result, many students perceived that the uniform college program and dominant advising strategies must serve some self-interest of the counselors or the Network. In light of their positive relationships with their counselors, many students held the simultaneous belief that their counselors were trying to help them, and that they were serving their own interests in their advising as well.

Corey believed that the emphasis on certain schools had something to do with an organizational strategy for the growing Network.

Corey: I think it's because Performance High wishes to grow a connection...so, Performance High compared to a lot of other schools is like a baby. They don't really have that much like, roots in high school. They don't have a great history of
like Central or something like that. So what they need to do right now is build something. So what are they trying to do? They’re trying to push all the students because the majority of Central students is most likely in their couple of years of existence, the majority of their students go to state schools like, they’re trying to force us to go there to build some connections so they can get something out of this later, for a next generation.

Lori: What do you think they want?

Corey: I can't even begin to explain to you what they want. I'm not sure what they want. Some type of dual enrollment program like, funding, money possible job outlets, internships?

Corey had some awareness about Performance Network's plans to expand, and he used this knowledge to try to contextualize the uniform approach to college advising. Because of his EFC, Corey faced large bills at whichever institution he attended, and his mother explicitly stated that there were not funds to cover the costs. However, because Corey perceived that counselors advised all of the students the same, he perceived that these methods were intended to serve the interests of the Network, or of future generations, rather than him specifically.

Amanda perceived that the school earned a commission for sending students to predominantly White or state schools. She said:

Well, for one I mean, they want us to go to school in state so they can have some kind of benefit from it. I guess that's like, a Performance High thing, if you get kids to go to a PWI, or a state school then you um, I don’t know, maybe they get some kind of money from it. I don’t know.

Corey and Amanda both had college choice experiences where some of their preferences were misaligned with the dominant advising philosophy at Performance High, which perhaps influenced their perceptions that the counselors had very targeted end goals in mind for students' choices for reasons other than students' best interests.
James also felt that the counselors must have had an ulterior motive for not supporting his desire to go to an out-of-state school. In senior seminar, Mr. Webb told the class to apply to regional scholarships rather than national scholarships, because they would have a better chance of winning the former. James assimilated this information into his theory about Performance High's ulterior motives. He said:

Lori: Mm hmm why do you think that is that, that they don’t really support out of state choices?

James: When I was thinking of it spitefully, it was just cause ya'll get more scholarship money for, at signing day when you tell how much money people get in scholarships.

Lori: Oooohhh...but you're the one getting the scholarship!

James: Yeah, but then I was like, at the same time...

Lori: That's interesting. That's an interesting theory.

James: Yeah

Lori: They just wanna be like, a hundred million dollars! (laughing)

James: That’s kind of what I was thinking. Is that why you all don’t give me that support? But honestly, it's just that, it's because like they want to make sure that everything is fine.

Lori: In what way?

James: Financially. So you have, you have a system that you can rely on financially for your school. So, that way, you’re not at school and you gotta drop out because you don’t have the money.

James simultaneously held the belief that the college program served the Performance Network's desire to advertise success and gain credibility, and that the strategies were intended to ensure that students had a sound financial plan.
Terrell held similar simultaneous beliefs that the school "forced" students to go to college in order to boost their reputation, but also to give students the best chance of having a good future.

Lori: And why do you say they force it on you then? Why do they force it?

Terrell: I guess to boost their reputation? I heard something about that. Performance Network has such a high percentage of sending their kids to college and it's just like, I guess they do it cause like, it's good on them. They feel like they've done their job once you go to college. Making sure the kids who go here, in the city, have a good future. So, yeah.

Tanaya believed that the school might get compensated for students to go to state schools, but she did not feel that that is the primary reason for the uniform advising. She said:

Some kids feel like, oh they want us to go to safe schools because they get a check if we go to state schools. I don't feel like that's true. I don't know. They might really get a check, but I don't think they push us to go there because of that. So I don't think it's nothing malicious. I just think she doesn't want me to you know, get hurt or feel like I failed because I can't go back or, I think they got good intentions.

The belief that Performance High earned commission was so widespread at Performance High that when I mentioned it to students in other classes and grades on several occasions, student responses were always along the lines of, "So they don't get money for us going to state schools?"

A handful of students perceived that the uniform advising strategy was related to the counselors' negative perceptions of students. Three students felt that the emphasis on affordability reflected counselors' perceptions that their Black students did not have money, or their parents did not have good jobs. Of this, Amanda said:

Oh, the money pricing. But my mom has a good job. My mom works or a university so if she's not complaining about the money, then why are you complaining about the money? And it's like, I don't know. Like, I feel like they
put the stereotype on all Black people like, we broke and like, if you go there you not going to be as successful and stuff like that. Which is not true.

Amanda said that even her mom was resentful of what she perceived as the implication that they could not afford the school that their daughter wanted to attend, and she reported that they encouraged her to attend the HBCU despite her counselor's advice.

Similarly, Brianna said that her mother felt that her counselors discouraging her from applying to her dream school was a reflection that they did not believe in her ability to get in and afford the school.

Lori: What did your mom say about this list? How did she feel?

Brianna: Uh, not really. I don't think I told her. I told her I didn't apply to Maryland. She was like why? Cause my college adviser. And she don't like, even when we were in college adviser meetings, she don't really like what he does cause he, really makes you mad. Like you really can't, like I can't do something. You see what I'm saying. Like, I can't get into a school, or I can't afford that.

Lori: And what did she say about that?

Brianna: She does not like that. She, she don't even want to talk to him no more. She would rather go to the college and ask them their perspective on it.

Lori: What did she, like, what do you think his reasons are behind talking like that?

Brianna: I think, I think he does try to look out for us and everything. He don't want us to like, jump into something...He shouldn't say, oh you shouldn't do it. He should say like, you could try and see what happens.

Brianna reported that her mother's perception that the counselors had negative views of Brianna and her abilities caused her mother to distrust the counselors' advising, and influenced her to disengage with them. However, Brianna also noted that Mr. Webb's advice was intended to help her.
In general, Tina was full of praise for her teachers, counselors, and school. She had a great experience at Performance High, and she had close relationships with the adults at her school. Yet even she believed that the reason her teachers and/or counselors uniformly advised students to go to less selective schools was because they did not believe in their students' capabilities or credentials.

I would say, I think it's probably because it, maybe I'm wrong for thinking this, but maybe they probably don't think you know, we have what it takes to go to those schools. Or because the chances are so low, that you might as well not waste your time on a school where your chances are low. Instead, try to go where your chances are high to get in. And I'm not saying, I don't know if it's a bad or good thing. But their mentality, but honestly it's on the kids. If you are very certain that you want to apply to this dream school, then you go ahead and apply to that dream school. That's why I'm not going to waste my application or my fee waiver on a school that's good but it's not good enough for me. So I'm going to take this chance and I am going to apply to a school that's great and I'm glad you all paid my fee waivers so that way if I get rejected I'm like, at least I didn't waste money on it.

Tina believed that even though counselors dissuaded students from applying to their dream schools, it was "on the kids" to take the initiative and apply to the schools they want to go to, like she did. Tina perceived that she was able to apply to and get a full scholarship despite the belief of the advisers that applying would be a waste of time, rather than citing the program as a support in achieving her goal (besides the fee waiver).

For some students, the uniform advising and perception that their counselors had negative views of their capabilities influenced students to develop an oppositional orientation to their counselors and their advising. I heard several students note that they would apply to out-of-state schools or HBCUs just because their counselors did not want them to, or to prove their teachers wrong in their belief that the student could not get in.
For example, Pam applied to and enrolled in an out-of-state school, and cited defying Mr. Webb as a motivating factor for pursuing that option. She said:

And so Mr. Mr. Webb, he's good for making sure that you're in state and I would say that he's a good teacher and he helped me in a sense with college, but I think he also helped me not want to be in state, if that makes sense. Because he pushed it so much on me, that it just made me, I'm like, I'm not going to be in state. Just because you want me to be in state, I'm not going to be in state. And because I know that I could have, I know that I can be out of state. I'm going to try my best to be out of state....So I feel like the goal for him is to get every single kid to college. Not to get kids to the college that they want to go to.

For some reason Pam perceived that in discouraging out-of-state choices, Mr. Webb was suggesting that she was somehow incapable of going to an out-of-state school, and she wanted to prove him wrong.

The following field note reflects a similar oppositional response from the juniors, when Ms. Olsen talked about the upcoming college fair and partnership kick-off event where students would have the opportunity to interact with recruiters. Many students exhibited resistance to even attending the event and hearing more about the opportunity because they perceived that the partnership schools were being forced on them.

A female student raised her hand, flipped her long hair over her should and asked, "Do we have to go?" Ms. Olsen said, "Yes, every 10th and 11th grader has to go." She persisted, "What if we don't? What if I want to go to the military?" Ms. Olsen sighed and responded, "There will be a military recruiter there." A male student in a bomber jacket called out, "Can we leave after, even if we got invited to the partnership thing?" Ms. Olsen said puzzled, "I don't know why you wouldn't go....I just can't figure that out." Another student chimed in, "Because I'm not interested in any of those schools!" Ms. Olsen said, "We'll talk about that..." Students start talking among themselves. She paces back and forth a bit, with her mouth set in a line. She suddenly drops her pile of folders and notebooks on the table with a slap. In a stern voice, she says, "I want to tell you that I am zero percent happy with the attitudes I've been seeing lately. We do so many things for you on a daily basis to help you through this process, and frankly...you sound ungrateful and disrespectful. Is it something that we are doing? Because if it's something I'm doing, I need to know that." A quiet female student with a headscarf raises her hand and says, "With all due respect, I don't think it's you or anything you did. This is a stressful process and I think they're aggravated and annoyed at the process and not at
you. There's no not-stressful way to apply to college." From the back of the room where their English teacher is sitting and grading paper, she says, "Yeah...but she's trying to help you so the process isn't so aggravating...A male student joined in, "Also, the ones speaking disrespectfully don't represent all of us." Ms. Olsen sighs and said, "Okay...that's good to know." Another female student says, "Also, I don't have this problem, or I don't feel this way personally. But what I have heard is that you guys, Mr. Webb and others in the [college office] are pushing students towards partnership schools that they don't want to go to. They want to go to other schools. So they're frustrated (students snap to signify agreement.) Ms. Olsen said, "My job is to let you know all of the opportunities that are at your feet. I was a first gen college student. No one outlined all the opportunities available to me. My job is to say, here's where you qualify. Here are the benefits. With the partnership schools, you have the opportunity to get a world class education and not have to pay for it. If someone offered that to me, I would seriously consider it, but that's just me. If you can tell me why they don't interest you and why you're not even considering applying to them, I'm all ears. It might be schools you have never heard of or don't know much about. If I was invited, you can be sure I'd be doing research on those schools. It's my job to tell you you're accepted, you qualify, if you still don't want to go, we can have a conversation about it." The students sit silent during her speech. There's a long pause after. Then Ms. Olsen picks her stack of papers back up and continues writing on the board.

This incident took place in the spring of these students' junior year, when students were at the very beginning of their search and sort process. They had only just started gathering information and thinking about their college lists, and yet they were resistant to even the idea of meeting and talking to recruiters of partnership schools because they perceived their counselors were "pushing" them to attend those schools against their will. Most of the students in this class were not even academically eligible for the partnership scholarships, and yet they were vocally oppositional towards Ms. Olsen. However, it was unclear how these negative perceptions of the program influenced how students made decisions about college.

This study found that the regimented college program had a strong influence on how students made decisions about college, assimilating students to one model of college choice. Most of the students planned to attend in-state, predominantly white, less
selective state schools or the local community college, though these destinations often were not aligned to how students described their preferences. For example, 18 out of the 35 focal students expressed interest in and submitted applications to HBCUs, but the affordability policies at Performance High, and the dominant advising approach discouraged attendance at HBCUs due to issues of affordability. Though affordability is a critical issue for students, cultural adaptation is also a significant obstacle for low-income and first-generation students, and students of color (Hoxby & Turner, 2013). Studies have shown students from the aforementioned groups have described themselves as isolated and alienated on college campuses, and are more likely to view their school environment and professors as unsupportive and unconcerned about them (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Engle and Tinto argue that,

The extent to which low-income and first-generation students can participate in and transition across these two worlds – which can be aided or impeded by the level of support available at home and on campus – has a significant impact on whether they can be successful in college. (2008, p. 22)

Decisions by the focal students not to attend HBCUs, despite their belief that HBCUs would provide them with better support for their cultural adaptation to college, may have problematic implications for students’ likelihood of succeeding in college. Further, many students felt that the school’s uniform approach to advising discounted their preferences. Perceptions that White counselors discounted students’ racial and cultural experiences contributed to students' distrust of their counselors’ advising strategies, and undermined the extent to which student benefited from the many college-going resources ostensibly available in the high school context.
CHAPTER 7: Discussion

This study reinforces research (e.g., Booker et al., 2008) that suggests that No Excuses schools can promote college-going outcomes for students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education, as students at Performance High had high rates of college acceptance and enrollment. However, this study unearthed important findings about the complexities of using accountability systems to increase cultural capital for students. It also highlights the challenges of an approach that relies on schools to provide students with the kinds of cultural capital that are valued in the college choice process, without the involvement of students’ families. As such, this study contributes to the literature that considers the implications of the totalizing approach to schools for students (Golann, 2015; Goodman, 2013, Ben-Porath, 2013). Understanding the day-to-day enactment of school policies and practices is critical for interpreting student outcomes, and in considering the role that No Excuses schools can play in achieving their stated goal of promoting social mobility for students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners endorse accountability systems as a strategy for promoting college choice. McDonough, who has done important work around college choice and social class, argues for the necessity of accountability systems for increasing organizational effectiveness in relation to college choice. McDonough writes:

A fundamental principle of organizational effectiveness is that if a task is important, it has to be written into the mission statement and organizational structure through the job descriptions of appropriate staff members, including organizational leaders (Scott, 1998). Moreover, an accountability system for ensuring completion of key organizational missions must exist. Across the
spectrum of public systems of K-12 education, the college enrollment of graduates is not built into any school accountability system. Few staff members have college preparatory responsibilities as their main job, nor is there a regularly identifiable k-12 staff member who is held accountable for graduates’ enrollment. (2005, p. 69)

McDonough's statement assumes that strategies that are used for organizational effectiveness can be employed in schools to increase outcomes for students. Findings from this study illustrate the need to consider the complexities of implementing these policies, as well as the potential unintended negative implications of these strategies for students.

**Strengths of the performance management approach**

High schools create and impose norms around college going that students internalize, and that determine the college-related behaviors that students see as reasonable and feasible to pursue (McDonough, 1997; Weis et al., 2014). McDonough (2005) argues that one important way that school contexts influence college choice for students is by influencing students’ expectations, intentions, and aspirations around college going. The role of the high school context was clear for the focal students at Performance High, as most students were influenced by school strategies to consider and pursue college as the next step. The college culture and regimented process ensured that students, even those who had not considered college until that point, had access to college resources like test preparation, hands on help with the FAFSA, and experiences on college campuses. The pervasive college message reinforced the aspirations of students who had a strong desire to go to college, and the accountability measures for the students and counselors created stakes that motivated other students to complete and submit
college applications. Students at Performance High, even the resistant ones like Jason, Brianna, and Quantisha, went through the college application process as part of their school curriculum. In a school without this approach, missing a deadline or losing motivation at a critical moment could easily derail college attendance, especially for resistant students.

The school’s accountability system also contributed to organizational effectiveness as measured by students and counselors meeting defined metrics. The school mission was operationalized, with particular indicators and timelines that were measurable and observable. The system gave students, teachers and counselors constant feedback about their progress toward meeting the measures, thereby providing time to make necessary corrections. In emphasizing particular metrics, all staff members knew their roles, were held accountable for their contribution, and could make targeted improvements to increase their performance. Mr. Webb and Ms. Olsen reported that they met more than 90% of the goals the network had set for them in the 2015-2016 school year.

Having the same performance measures for all students may have reduced the "gatekeeping" function reflected in the literature about school counselors (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996) whereby counselors’ personal assumptions and perceptions determine which students are "college material." At Performance High, there were fewer opportunities to reinforce differential access to college support based on race and social class that have been documented in other studies (Jenkins, 2011; Gandara and Bial, 2001), when every step of the application is regulated and structured into a classroom environment. For counselors at Performance High, every single student counted toward
their metrics, regardless of their perceptions of that student's ability, background characteristics, and aptitude. Though the adults did not function as gatekeepers in determining which students should go to college, they did mediate the kinds of information that students had access to and played an important role in interpreting information about college for students.

**Challenges and limitations of the performance management approach**

One limitation of the performance management approach is the assumption that the performance indicators can be employed across cases and contexts, and that the underlying assumptions remain constant (Mahony & Hextall, 2001). In such a context where fidelity to the performance targets was of utmost concern, achieving performance targets and serving the goals and personal preferences of students were not always aligned.

Perna's (2006) model highlights the importance of considering context in relation to college choice. Perna (2010) argues for the necessity of providing individually tailored information that recognizes students' cultural backgrounds and other contextual characteristics. The college program at Performance High, designed for efficiency, required students to meet requirements that would maximize the number of students who were likely to be accepted into "affordable" colleges. Definitions of "affordable fit" and "academic fit" were useful for advising in a classroom setting, for a large group of students who did not bring nuanced knowledge about different types of institutions, the types of students institutions were likely to admit, and the intricacies of financing postsecondary education. However, the system was not well suited to provide
individually tailored information and resources based on students' goals, desires, financial situations, and academic preparation and achievement.

Performance High was unable to alter the students' worldview related to college by providing college-related resources and support. Students' doubts about their own academic achievement and habits, as well as their perceptions about negative college outcomes of their siblings and peers fostered uncertainty about whether college would lead to the privileges and benefits of college that Performance High suggested. Students' perceptions of the types of colleges they felt would best serve their needs and motivations were influenced by students’ perceptions of the safety of their neighborhood, their family dynamics, and the racial dynamics at their school. Performance High encouraged students to apply to and select local institutions that the school defined as most affordable, even if a student perceived that he would be unsafe staying in the city, or stated that safety is a primary motivation for attending college. The uniform approach to college advising at Performance High considers only a narrow set of institutional characteristics, rather than helping students find institutions that suited their individual needs and preferences.

Even when Performance High encouraged students to believe that college would result in benefits, students often lacked the academic preparation and achievement necessary to enter the types of schools that were most likely to provide the benefits they desired. Few students were able to win scholarships to offset the costs of HBCUs, or were admitted into the selective schools that tend to have supportive school environments and high graduation rates.

Another challenge for employing accountability systems in a school setting is
defining and measuring abstract and context-based concepts. Defining "success" in terms of promoting social mobility is a difficult task. The central office defined success in terms of a particular set of indicators, with an emphasis on admission to and enrollment in four-year colleges, a measure that did not necessarily reflect the personal beliefs of the students and adults at the school. Further, the definition of "affordable fit" as public, in-state schools, community colleges, partner schools, and schools that meet full need had a notable influence on how students shaped their choice sets. However, these institutions were not always the most affordable option for every student. Three students received substantial scholarships to attend private, out-of-state institutions that brought the net cost of attendance below that of any of the types of schools that Performance High defined as meeting its affordable fit criteria. Hoxby and Turner (2013) argue that high achieving low-income students typically attend less selective schools, even though selective colleges tend to cost them less and provide more support. The advising practices at Performance High might contribute to this pattern. Further, the school’s emphasis on affordability above all ignores other institutional characteristics that may be important for students' adjustment to and persistence in college, like living on campus, attending selective schools, or the racial climate within a school (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Kuh et. al., 2008; Cabrera et. al, 1999).

The school-defined indicators and definitions reflect value judgments and assumptions that can profoundly shape students' well-being, college choice process, and likelihood of persisting and graduating, yet are not taken into account in the school’s current approach. While using accountability systems may seem like a common sense approach to increasing college outcomes, this approach requires that system leaders make
judgments about who should go where to college, and what factors are most important for making choices about college. As Mahoney and Hextall (2001) assert, "The struggles that take place over standards are then conflicts over definitions of the nature of the world and society, and what is important within them" (p. 185). This study’s examination of one organization's set of standards and definitions raises questions about the use and parameters of accountability systems, and the assumptions and values that undergird them.

Performance management criteria render important aspects of social environments invisible (Ball, 2001), thereby privileging endeavors that can be measured over those that cannot. Strathern (2000) writes about the inability of accountability measures to capture the complex work in institutions of higher education. In her study, the "effectiveness" of these institutions and the departments within is measured by several indicators, including research output, frequency of publication and the quality of the journals in which faculty are published, the number of graduate students in the department, and the ability to attract research funding, among other explicit targets. While shaping the institution's work, the metrics do not capture other invisible but critical processes of the organization, the effects of which may take generations to be seen. The instruments do not capture the relationships within the institution, investments in researchers and researchers in training, creativity of the research, and transmission of knowledge over time, all of which are essential to the quality of the organization (Strathern, 2000). Although not directly captured by metrics, other factors may also contribute to achieving measurable outcomes in complex ways.
Similarly, at Performance High, college “success” was measured by administrative steps, and outcomes like college acceptance and enrollment. But, other potentially important predictors of college success were not captured by these metrics. For example, this study documents the strong relationships between the students and their teachers and counselors at the school. Almost all of the focal students identified one or more staff member that they were close to, and several students said that they felt they could contact these adults after they graduated if they needed help. In the follow-up interviews in the winter following high school graduation, more than a third of the 35 students had contacted adults at Performance High and/or had visited their high school during their winter break from college. Research reflects that relationships with adults are important for students' college-related outcomes (e.g. Museus, 2012) but the performance management approach does not capture this aspect of the Performance High context. In fact, this study demonstrated that in some ways, the uniform approach to college choice actually undermined the trust and relationships between some students and their teachers and counselors, as many students' negative perceptions of the built-in metrics, expectations, and uniform advising fostered students' distrust of the counselors and the system.

**Implications for transmitting cultural capital through institutions**

This study also highlights the challenges associated with transmitting cultural capital through institutions. Bourdieu (1977) conceptualizes cultural capital as being transmitted primarily in the home, from parents who possess cultural capital and invest in ensuring their children inherit it. But, to be of value, children must absorb cultural capital,
and draw on it to convert it into educational capital. Drawing on Bourdieu, Jaeger (2009) proposes a framework that distinguishes three effects of cultural capital on children’s educational choices. He argues that the parental socialization effect is important, whereby parents’ “stock” of cultural capital increases their children's cultural capital. Further, he contends that cultural capital is transmitted by the parental investment effect as parents take deliberate action to transfer resources. Finally, he argues that the child investment effect reflects how children draw on their stores of cultural capital to make educational choices. He argues that, though much attention is paid to how cultural capital influences inequality in education, these three channels by which it influences educational outcomes are largely unexplored. Similarly, in the school setting, researchers, policymakers and practitioners tend to focus on the stock of cultural capital and other resources (e.g., Perna & Titus, 2005) rather than the means by which students absorb and convert it.

Scholars have long conceptualized information and resources as an important kind of cultural capital in the college choice process, but little attention has been paid to how high schools influence students' disposition and worldviews in relation to college. Lareau (2011) argues that students from privileged families demonstrate a "sense of entitlement" in pursuing their desires, while lower classes behave with a "sense of constraint." Lareau (2011) conceptualizes this sense of entitlement as an important kind of cultural capital. This study found that, although the school dedicated an incredible amount of resources to college choice, the school was still limited in its ability to change the worldview of students who were hesitant and doubtful about college (though it did move closer to this goal in a few cases, e.g., Damien and Leo).
About a third of the students in this study reported that they and their parents or families had longstanding college aspirations and expectations. These students reported that the pervasive college message at Performance High reinforced and nurtured their college expectations, reflecting a similar interplay between home and school habituses seen for middle- and upper-class students (Weis, 2004; McDonough, 1998). However, even focal students who very much believed in the benefits of college and had strong college aspirations did not feel entitled to a college education. Though the role of Performance High in supporting students who described longstanding positive dispositions toward college should not be minimized, the findings suggest greater challenge for schools seeking to transmit cultural capital in the absence of such resources in the home – a goal that is the central to the institutional logic of No Excuses schools.

Students without longstanding college aspirations and expectations applied to and enrolled in college, but were uncertain about whether college was "for them," would help them achieve their goals, was the next best step, or would produce benefits greater than the costs, or whether they had the academic skills and ability to be successful. For many students, even the strong students, their decisions were characterized by a sense of uncertainty about their abilities and a lack of confidence about whether college would afford them the benefits that they hoped.

Though the majority of the focal students at Performance High decided to go to college, their decisions did not reflect the sense of entitlement portrayed in the college choice processes of middle- and upper class students (Weis, 2014; McDonough, 1998). Rather than draw on the rich resources in their school context to pursue their own purposes and desires, many students deferred to authority, complied with policies, and
perceived that they were dependent on their counselors to facilitate and restrict particular choices. Available literature suggests that No Excuses schools promote student achievement and college going, but focuses on the costs of this approach to students’ emotional well being, sense of agency, and democratic participation (Ben-Porath, 2013; Goodman, 2013). This study reinforces the need to better understand how regulated and performative school practices influence students’ acquisition of the cultural resources, skills, and knowledge that are important for social mobility but are difficult to capture and measure because of their amorphous quality. Bernhardt describes cultural capital as:

Cultural capital is everywhere; it has no clearly defined boundaries, its central characteristics are dependent on context, and it cannot be measured, counted, or tightly packaged to be consistently recognizable or identifiable. Hence, what constitutes cultural capital or describing one’s access to its various forms is socially constructed, influenced by context, affected by power, and shaped by the continuously shifting meanings which underlie social discourse. (2013, p. 210)

Though cultural capital is a critical component in understanding how the college choice process is a site where inequality is reproduced, the performance management strategy in the school studied for this dissertation is ill equipped to understand or measure it.

Reconceptualizing college-going cultures

The findings in this study suggest a need to reconceptualize college-going cultures to include attention to how students absorb cultural capital rather than focusing only on the types and volume of resources available in the school context. Current definitions of college-going cultures include attention to academic resources like curriculum and available courses, a college mission, and comprehensive college services and support (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Jarsky et al., 2009). Jarsky et al. (2009) suggest that the overarching goal for implementing college-going cultures is for all students to
see college as an option and have the necessary information to make informed decisions about their futures.

Scholars understand college-going cultures as influencing students to see college as "for them" and having the information and know-how to navigate the application process, as more privileged students do. In college-going cultures of elite and privileged schools, the college-going culture is implicit (Cipollone, 2012; Khan, 2010). In elite high school settings, it is not necessary for counselors to operationalize their college missions, or set goals and metrics towards achieving high levels of college enrollment. In fact, the most elite high schools in the country, like Andover and Lawrenceville, make no mention of college in their mission statements. Andover's mission states: "Andover is a high school that stands ready to meet, match, and expand the minds and passions of some of the brightest students in the nation and the world" ("Andover at Philips Academy," n.d.). The Lawrenceville School's purpose statement reads: “Through House and Harkness, Lawrenceville challenges a diverse community of promising young people to lead lives of learning, integrity, and high purpose. Our mission is to inspire the best in each to seek the best for all" ("Lawrenceville School," n.d.). In elite high school settings, college going is so taken for granted that it needs not be explicitly acknowledged. In contrast, at Performance High, students expected that college would be the next step, but students and staff problematized the process in their interviews, and in the school setting.

In his ethnography of one elite prep school, Khan (2010) argues that, in the past, cognitive knowledge (like which fork to use) was a more prominent means by which status was signaled and privilege preserved. However, as information is more readily accessible to the masses, high-status signaling is preserved more through subtle taken for
granted understandings and attitudes, demonstrated by what he calls "corporeal ease."
This characteristic is the antithesis of performative cultures, in that its value is in its
inability to easily be defined, measured, and transmitted. Though it remains unclear if and
how schools can provide cultural capital independent of families, notions of college-
going cultures should be expanded to include attention to how well students absorb
cultural capital in order to understand how to design schools that help students to not only
enroll in college, but also persist, graduate, and access the benefits of college going.

Limitations and further study
In performative environments, resources are diverted to activities that can be
measured and that "count" toward meeting metrics and targets. At Performance High, a
tremendous amount of resources was dedicated to ensuring that students submit college
applications and subsequently enroll in two and four-year schools. Yet, even with this
approach, college persistence rates for school alumni remain low. Future research should
build on this study’s findings to explore how a school’s performative environment
influences students’ college persistence and graduation outcomes. While Performance
High consistently achieved high rates of college applications, acceptances, and
enrollment, other indicators may also be important for whether enrolled students persist
in college. Some scholars show that students' expectations about college and their levels
of motivation and commitment influence college persistence (Allen, 1999; Allen & Nora,
1995; Braxton et al., 1995). These studies raise questions about college persistence of
students who are tentative and doubtful about college and whether it is the best way to
achieve their goals.
This study was limited in its inability to identify students' class backgrounds or parental education. The study findings suggest that students' race and the racial composition of their high school have implications for the college choice process and the transmission of cultural capital in school settings. For example, for some students, their perceptions that their White teachers and counselors could not fully understand their perceptions and preferences in relation to college fostered distrust and resentment. As a result, some students were suspicious of their advising, which influenced their decision-making process. Oakes et al. (2004) suggest that building "multi-cultural college identities" is important for students who are underrepresented in higher education and argue, "Adults must work to shape a school culture that does not force students to choose between culture, language, and values of their home community and the majority culture and values that are broadly, if unnecessarily, associated with high academic achievement" (p. 12). Though researchers argue that the cultural divide between their community and college settings can be a challenge for first-generation, low-income and minority students, particularly with regard to their college persistence and success, little is known about how these identities are supported and developed. Further research would be helpful in understanding how college-going cultures and performance management approaches influence students from different racial/ethnic groups and class, and how these cultures and approaches can support the development of multi-cultural college-going identities.
APPENDIX I: Protocol for Students

1. How would you describe your high school? What do you like and dislike about it and why?

2. As of now, what are your plans for after graduating high school? What options are you considering and why?

3. If college is an option, when did you first start considering going to college? What influenced you to consider college as an option?

4. Why do you want to go to college? What purpose do you think it will serve for you?

5. How long have you been preparing for college? What school experiences have prepared you for applying to and attending college?

6. What types of things have you done to make yourself an attractive candidate for college, if any?

7. Do you have a list of schools to which you will be applying? How was the list developed? Did anyone help you create the list? How did they help?

8. Can you talk me through your list of colleges? How did each end up on this list? Which schools did you delete from your list and why? Do you have an application strategy? If so, how did you develop the strategy?

9. How influential have your high school experiences been in shaping your college search?

10. Which schools have you visited and under what circumstance? What did you think of them?

11. What about this school makes it an ideal option for you?
APPENDIX II: Protocol for Counselors

1. Can you describe what it's like to work at this school, in general?

2. What is the school's philosophy on college, as you understand it? Who determines this philosophy? What role do guidance counselors play in developing and executing the school philosophy?

3. What policies do your school have around college-going (college seminar, application requirement number/type, SAT, financial aid) and how are they enforced? Who develops the policies and procedures?

4. How does the college process work from your perspective? Please tell me about the steps that your office takes in this process, from beginning to end.

5. What kinds of college-related events occur on campus? How are the institutions chosen for college fairs, trips, etc.? What other supports are in place to help students with the college application process? What about for students who don't see college as an option?

6. What are your school's strengths in terms of supporting students in the college application process? What are the school's greatest challenges in relation to college-going?

7. What relationships or partnerships do you have with various colleges? Is cultivating relationships an important part of your role? What kind of contact might you have with these schools/reps? How are these institutions selected for partnership?

8. How do you advise students on college-related decisions? In what areas do you think students need the most advising?

9. What does it mean to prepare students for college? What role does your school play in preparing students for college?

10. When students put together a list of schools to apply to, what is your role in this process? What role does the student play? What role does the parent(s) play? In your opinion, what is the strongest set of influences as students put together their list?

11. To what extent do students come to this school with college aspirations already in place? What role does the school play in shaping their aspirations?

12. To what extent do students come to this school with ideas about where they want to go to college? What role does the school play in shaping their final choices?

13. What school related factors do you think are the most influential in determining if and where students go to college?
APPENDIX III: Protocol for Teachers

1. Can you describe what it's like teaching at this school, in general?

2. What is the school's philosophy about college, as you understand it? Who determines this philosophy? What role do teachers play in this?

3. What are your school's strengths in terms of supporting students in relation to college? What are the school's greatest challenges in relation to college going?

4. How are students supported who don't see college as an option?

5. Do you advise students about their post-secondary options? In what areas do you think students need the most advising? How do you advise students?

6. What does it mean to prepare students for college? What role does your school play in preparing students for college?

7. In your opinion, what factors influence students' decisions about if and where to go to college?

8. To what extent do students come to this school with college aspirations already in place? What role does the school play in shaping their aspirations?

9. To what extent do students come to this school with ideas about where they want to go to college? What role does the school play in shaping their final choices?

10. What school related factors do you think are the most influential in determining if and where students go to college?

11. What factors do you think are important in terms of students persisting and graduating college?
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