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*Guiding the way to higher education*

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# Professional College Knowledge: Re-envisioning How We Prepare Our College Readiness Workforce



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### Introduction

Preparing secondary school graduates for entry to and success in higher education has become a national priority in the United States. The need for an educated workforce, coupled with the individual benefits of earning a college degree, has prompted changes to federal and state policies, as well as new professional and programmatic practices to increase postsecondary outcomes for all students (Baum & Ma, 2007; Gándara, 2002). As a result, education stakeholders have made much progress in raising academic standards and attending to an array of financial and student support needs that have improved the postsecondary chances of many previously underserved students. However, despite this progress, students' access to success in higher education remains uneven at best, in part due to the inconsistent services provided by those charged with college admission counseling across the K-12, higher education, and non-profit sectors. Although a great deal of focus has been placed on the kinds of programs and practices that are essential to high quality college admission and readiness counseling, this knowledge base has not been codified or disseminated consistently throughout this workforce of college access professionals.

At present, the college admission/access field includes school counselors, professionals from community-based organizations, independent counselors, and college and university staff. Their involvement in this field varies by type of involvement (i.e., instrumental, emotional or family support), degree of involvement

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(primary vs. secondary or other level of responsibility), and level of accountability for their work. A consequence of having a professionally diverse group of individuals all working in a single field is the variation of training experienced by the different groups. There is no single path by which all professionals arrive at their positions, no single "pre-service" requirement for obtaining a degree, and no certification or other established "in-service" requirement for college admission counseling professionals. As such, there is not currently a widely accepted 'curriculum' from which to draw pre- or in-service training for college admission counseling professionals. However, there has been an increasing recognition of the need for such a unifying curriculum.

Identifying a set of topics and/or competencies to guide college admission and readiness professionals requires a strong theoretical foundation that includes aspects of adolescent development, motivation and choices, the influence of contexts and relationships, decision-making behaviors, and policy contexts, to name a few relevant areas. Further, it calls for clear recognition of the professional nature of this work and the best practices in the field that are informed by theoretical frameworks and literature. Such an endeavor has the potential to call attention to the need for evolution in pre-professional programs for educators; to clarify the role of college readiness for school counselors; and to strengthen professional development for all college access professionals. Doing so will not only support the holistic development of programs, practices, and policies, but more importantly, will strengthen the capacity of key sources of social capital for students.

This paper is intended to start the academic and policy conversation necessary to create a common set of professional competencies to define, coordinate and improve the work of college counseling and admission professionals across multiple contexts. The paper first identifies the landscape of current professional development in the field, both in pre-service and in-service settings. Next, it groups the key knowledge in the field into topical areas that are essential to successful practice. Finally, based on this existing professional development and topical framework, it suggests a set of competencies and policy recommendations for starting the consideration and adoption of such a set of professional benchmarks to guide the preparation, development and support of professionals in this field.

### Working Definitions

This paper uses the term "college readiness counseling" rather than the more commonly used phrases, college admission counseling, college counseling or college planning. While each of these terms accurately captures the developmental processes that are engaged in as a part of the planning for postsecondary education, this paper utilizes the term college readiness counseling due to its suggestion that "readiness" includes preparation for success upon matriculation. Although the focus of the services is on helping students aspire to and enroll in college, there is ample evidence that getting





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students into college is insufficient. Additionally, there is growing support for the pre-college activities that simultaneously promote college access and set students up for success once enrolled.

This choice of terms is also used in an attempt to expand the pool of practitioners engaged in the work of helping students prepare for college. While schools act as the central providers of college readiness counseling, there are a host of other organizations and professionals engaged in this work, including college counselors from independent and charter schools, staff from college preparation programs, independent educational counselors, and college and university staff. Unlike school counselors, youth development and afterschool program staff are relatively new players in the effort to nurture and support young peoples' future planning. While these organizations have existed for a long time, many have recently expanded their missions to include programs and activities that support preparation and planning for college. In light of the diversity of professionals all working towards a common postsecondary goal, this paper utilizes an inclusive but focused description of the professionals involved in college readiness counseling. This paper uses the term "college access professionals," in addition to "school counselors," to include a range of people. A common definition enables us to think about the necessary training and competencies, and begins to build a community of practitioners committed to promoting access to and success in higher education.

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### The Need for High Quality Training

The importance of college admission counseling to achieving our national goal of broadening access to postsecondary attainment is perhaps unquestioned, but it bears reviewing the literature that confirms its key role. Without question, college counseling and support is critical to supporting students' postsecondary planning (Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Despite the fact that all students require support for their postsecondary planning, there are differences between who uses what types of support. For example, first-generation college students' postsecondary resources differ from middle and upper class students, who gather information from family members and peers, independent college counselors, and less overburdened school counselors (McDonough, 2004,1997). On the contrary, research has suggested that urban students rely heavily on their school counselors for postsecondary counseling and support (Choy, Horn, Nuñez & Chen, 2000; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). This is due in part to the fact these students often lack



college knowledge, possess low postsecondary aspirations due to perceived academic or financial barriers, and may not have access to social networks to assist with their planning (Engle, Bermeo & O'Brien, 2006; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson & Li, 2008). Therefore, changing the outcomes for this student population relies on the effectiveness of the counselors serving their schools and communities.

There is no question that current gaps in college access and success call for professionals who bring a unique set of skills and training to promote equity and opportunity through college enrollment and degree attainment. However, emerging research has called into question the degree to which those primarily responsible for college readiness counseling receive specialized training for this role. Because college counseling is seen as a form of social capital that is transmitted through the relationships that exist between students and those who support their college planning process, the preparedness of the people who provide the counseling is critical (McDonough, 2005a). Yet, studies show that many school counselors feel underprepared for the college counseling aspect of their work (Bridgeland and Bruce, 2011; Savitz-Romer, 2012). In fact, specific misalignment between college readiness counselors' influence and their college readiness counseling was highlighted in a recent report by the College Board's Policy and Advocacy Center (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). Without pre-service training, urban school counselors find themselves in an influential role without information or the tools they need to act on that influence (Savitz-Romer, 2012). This dilemma highlights the need for school counselors to receive specialized training in college counseling to





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enhance their professional efficacy (Bridgeland and Bruce, 2011; McDonough, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy, Lee, Bryan & Young, 2011). When combining these gaps in training with the fact that the field of college readiness counseling is comprised of a range of individuals with different varying training backgrounds, it raises questions about the efficacy and professionalism of the field and its related work. And while many fields would turn to a set of professional competencies to guide training programs across professions, college admission and readiness lacks a unified body of knowledge that might otherwise shape the process by which individuals are trained to bring specialized knowledge and skills to their work with students. This does not mean that the field lacks pre-service and in-service pathways. However, it does seem to lack a guiding force behind how pre-service and in-service pathways prepare individuals to engage in college readiness counseling.

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### Nature and Scope of Pre-Service and In-Service Training

#### Pre-Service Pathways

Primarily charged with the task of providing college counseling at the secondary level, school counselors rarely receive training for the college counseling component of their jobs in their pre-service graduate programs (Bridgeland and Bruce, 2011; McDonough, 2005a; Savitz-Romer, 2012). The traditional pathway to become a school counselor includes earning a master's degree in the field of

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counseling or school counseling and earning licensure in guidance counseling by the state in which they were trained. Although graduate coursework varies by state, graduate programs typically offer courses in clinical counseling topics and theories (individual, group, cross cultural), psychological testing, legal and ethical issues, and career development. However, specific coursework in higher education or college counseling is rarely required, if even offered (McDonough, 2005a; National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2004). In her research on urban school counselors' specific experiences with college counseling and their perceived

preparation for this dimension of practice, Savitz-Romer found that counselors wished for more academic coursework related to college readiness counseling (2012). Similarly, in a report entitled *Counseling at the Crossroads*, only 16 percent of school counselors rated their graduate training as highly effective (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). This misalignment between pre-service training and work experiences was also noted in a NACAC report that showed only 23 colleges offering college admission counseling coursework at the graduate level and only four of these colleges required the counselors to take these courses (NACAC, 2004). In response to this omission, many researchers and advocates have urged counselor education programs and in-service training to be tailored to prepare counselors in their specializations above and beyond the generic counseling coursework (Paisley & Hayes, 2003).

This absence in graduate coursework is partially attributable to the state licensing boards that do not require such coursework (Dounay, 2008). Furthermore, although the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) recommends that counselor education programs include college counseling in the curricula, this is not a requirement. Without requirements that specifically call for targeted college readiness counseling to be integrated into pre-service training models, counselor educators may not be in a position to include it in graduate curricula. The implications of this are worthy of close attention.

In addition to school counselors, higher education administrators play a part in college readiness counseling through admission/enrollment offices, outreach and partnership offices and federal

TRIO programs. Administrators and staff at postsecondary institutions vary in their background and training, which often depends on the specific area of institutional management in which they choose to specialize. Although it is not uncommon for people to fall into this field with a range of backgrounds, many higher education professionals obtain a graduate degree in either Higher Education Administration or College Student Personnel or Student Affairs Administration. There are often stark differences between the two programs. For example, college student personnel programs focus on counseling





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college-age students and train people for roles in student affairs by offering courses on college student development and issues in higher education (NASPA, 2011). Professionals who are trained in these programs are focused on working directly with students in student affairs areas including advising, residence life, student activities, Greek affairs, orientation, multicultural services, student development, career exploration, and leadership development. On the other hand, other Higher Education programs have more of an administrative focus with courses in administration, law, economics, history, finance and organizational behavior (NASPA, 2011). Professionals trained in these programs typically enter positions in higher education policy, budget and finance, and curricular development. Considering the differences between these programs, it is also important to note any differences in how people who enter the field are oriented around issues of college admission. It should be acknowledged that most student affairs oriented programs rarely offer courses that focus on college admissions, but they do prepare students for issues of retention as it relates to student development. With some variation, these practitioners are not licensed and their graduate coursework is largely focused on college-aged students and their needs.

Based in schools and sometimes in the community, college counselors and advisors play a central role in the field of college readiness counseling. Unlike school counselors and higher education staff, college counselors, including independent college counselors and those who work for non-profit organizations and in charter schools, do not follow one particular academic pathway. The same is true for youth development and after-school providers, as well. In fact, the professional literature in these fields calls for more specific credentialing for these practitioners (Garza, Borden & Astroth, 2005). Some of these professionals hold specialized certificates related to college admission counseling, which is discussed below. Unfortunately, little research has examined the specific pre-service pathways of these groups, or the efficacy of professionals from different training models.

The absence of coursework addressing college counseling has left school counselors, admission personnel, and independent and non-profit college access workers without the theoretical foundations, best practices, and data that would otherwise inform their practice. Some of the implications of inadequate training are mistrust among practitioners due to belief that some are more educated than others, inequity of services, inefficiency and potential for burnout. Perhaps more troubling is that such misalignment between professional training and workforce needs can result in an inability to meet students' needs.

The absence of coursework on college readiness counseling in school counseling programs can be partially attributed to historical debates within the counseling profession as to the professional nature of college counseling; calling into question whether the field should advocate for this responsibility. However, it is more likely the case that this omission remains due to a lack of information about what future counselors need specific to developmental theories and frameworks beyond the traditional nuts and bolts of instrumental support. Regardless of the reason, the evidence is clear—training in college readiness counseling needs to be included in pre-service training programs. Doing so holds great promise for helping more youth enroll in and succeed in college.



### In-Service

Although there is much variation among the pre-service pathways of school counselors, higher education staff, and college counselors, both independent and community-based, the in-service landscape reflects much more overlap. Although each of these groups has professional affiliations, participation in professional development does occur across professions. This is partially attributed to the fact that many professional organizations, such as NACAC and The College Board, are topically focused, rather than on any individual profession. Although there is very little research illustrating specific professional development participation related to college readiness counseling, this research draws on existing opportunities and presents those in the context of what is known about in-service activities.

School counselors attend (or may attend) professional development offered by their school, their district, or professional organizations. Research on school counselor professional development provided by individual schools and districts is virtually non-existent, which may be due, in part, to the very limited focus of in-district counselor-focused in-service. In a qualitative study of urban school





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counselors, they reported that school-based in-service focuses almost exclusively on instructional topics, providing little relevance to school counselors (Savitz-Romer, 2012). As a result, most school counselors rely on outside professional development opportunities, or worse, they do not attend at all.

Professional school counselor organizations, such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the American Counseling Association (ACA) and their regional affiliates, have historically provided the majority of school counselor-focused professional development, covering an array of topics that includes college preparation and counseling, but is not limited to them. In addition, many centers and programs offer professional development to school counselors around specific topics. For example, the Center for School Counseling on Research (CSCORE) offers trainings in leadership development and data usage. Likewise, the National Center for Transforming School Counseling Initiative (NCTSCI), sponsored by the Education Trust, provides broader professional development on topics related to leadership, advocacy and data-driven practices.

There are many other providers of in-service targeting college readiness counseling. Participation in professional development at these organizations includes school counselors, as well as the other college access professionals described in this paper. Four primary provider-types include federal programs, national professional organizations, regional and statewide initiatives, and privately sponsored professional development. Federally sponsored in-service programs are typically routed through Federal Student Aid programs, or more

Because these organizations all have slightly different membership groups, there is some variation of training topics. A review of these types of in-service opportunities reveals the following topics as primarily covered: career planning and college requirements, planning and policies, national issues related to admission and testing, secondary counseling topics and best practices for working with stakeholders (parents, school staff, and peers), supporting specific populations, and specific topics for particular professionals (independent counselors, community colleges, transfers, overseas counselors, and community-based organizations). Like these topical areas, these organizations vary in terms of the format in which professional development is offered, including state conferences, site-based training, online webinar series, Web-based forums, one day workshops and training materials such as guidebooks and related materials.

While there appears to be a proliferation of offerings, research suggests that there are barriers preventing school counselors from participating in this professional development. These barriers include, but are not limited to, irrelevant topics, lack of perceived relevance to school counselors' actual work, work environments that do not value professional memberships or attendance at non-school sponsored in-service, financial constraints, and little benefit in terms of professional status or credit (Bauman, 2008; Savitz-Romer, 2012). The salience of these barriers is reflected in counselors' participation in professional development. Despite the fact that developing 'college knowledge' is an essential ingredient for promoting college access and success for underserved students, only 25 percent of secondary schools require professional development for those professionals responsible

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recently, the National College Access Grant, both of which are attended by school counselors at schools, financial aid administrators, and college admission counselors. Perhaps the largest providers of in-service training opportunities are the national professional organizations. With varying target populations, these include such organizations as American School Counselor Association (ASCA), The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), National College Access Network (NCAN), The College Board and its NOSCA (National Office of School Counselor Advocacy), COE (Council for Opportunity in Education), Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and the Education Trust.

for college counseling (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011). This rate of attendance varies by secondary school type. Secondary college counselors working in private schools were required to attend professional development at a rate of 44 percent, whereas only 20 percent of public school counselors are held to that same requirement (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011). Similarly troubling patterns emerge in relation to costs covered for participation in professional development. According to NACAC's 2010 *State of College Admission* report, 28 percent of public high schools covered the full costs of obtaining professional development in college admission counseling, whereas 67 percent of private schools did so (Clinedinst & Hawkins,





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2010). Outside of financial barriers to participation, licensing renewal requirements rarely specify a need for practitioners to learn about topics germane to school counseling or college counseling, which influences professional development participation. Therefore, barriers to participation, and too few messages about its importance, make it highly unlikely that some counselors will elect to participate in in-service.



On the contrary, college counselors who work for non-profit organizations often receive in-service training through their organization, as well as through attendance at the national or professional organizations offerings mentioned above. Outside of internal professional development opportunities, which are often not advertised publicly and thus difficult to document, many higher education professionals and college admission professionals (i.e. independent counselors, nonprofits, federal TRIO programs, etc.) rely predominately on attending the conferences for key professional associations as the primary means of in-service professional development. Although there are a number of other professional development opportunities, conference attendance is common for most major professional associations or their regional/state affiliates. For college admission counseling professionals, some of the most common professional associations include NACAC, The College Board, NCAN, Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA), and the Higher Education Consultants Association (HECA). Other higher education administrators involved in college readiness counseling attend professional development provided by such organizations as National Association of Student Financial Assistance (NASFAA), American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA). In addition, it should be noted that federal TRIO programs also have regular internal trainings in

five key areas relating to program regulations and sustainability. One of these training areas focuses on postsecondary access and other issues relating to admission counseling.

The majority of regional organizations providing professional development are affiliates of national organizations, such as the NACAC's state and regional affiliates. One freestanding example, however, is SREB (Southern Regional Educational Board), which offers in-service training for school counselors and other college access professionals. Similarly, state-based organizations provide in-service through their national affiliates. However, a much more common type of state-based in-service is delivered through statewide initiatives focused on college access and readiness. For example, South Carolina's *Can Go to College* offers interactive online courses and a compilation of online resources regarding college access and best practices. Their interactive online course, which provides three credit hours toward license recertification, provides strategies for advising low income and first-generation students. Finally, there are a host of private companies who offer in-service training specific to college access and readiness counseling. These typically address similar topics to those described above. In addition to statewide initiatives, there are many statewide financial serving organizations that provide professional development. As one example, FAME (Finance Authority of Maine) provides training for school counselors and college access professional regarding college access and financial education.

Falling somewhere between pre-service and in-service training, preparation also comes from recently developed college counseling certificate programs. Sometimes offered by institutions of higher education or not-for-profit agencies, certification programs are yet another route to college readiness counseling. Institutions of higher education, such as the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), the University of California San Diego (UCSD), Eastern Michigan University and Suffolk University market certification programs to practicing school counselors, college admission counselors and other professionals who wish to improve upon their practice. These certificate programs typically include the completion of credit-bearing courses on topics that include some of the following: advising special populations; working with athletes; using technology to support college counseling; developing counseling skills; writing letters of recommendations; understanding admission assessments and tests; and using technology in college and career planning. In addition, certification programs also typically require a field-based practicum. Some professional organizations offer a certification for college counseling. For example, the National Institute of Certified College Planners (NICCP) offers The Certified College Planning Specialist Certification (CCPS) Program. This certification program





is designed for experienced financial planners and advisors who provide financial support and counseling to families. Similarly, the American Institute for Certified Educational Planners provides certification as an Educational Planner for individuals who already hold a master's degree and seek credentialing as an educational planner.

Unfortunately, there is little research that assesses the impact of these types of professional development on students' postsecondary outcomes. Additionally, there is no existing research that analyzes the types of offerings to assess areas of overlap or topics missing. In lieu of such research, casual review suggests that there is an emphasis on instrumental topics that describe best practices in working with particular groups, or in particular settings. For example, topics focusing on parental engagement typically describe best practices for reaching parents or strategies to fill the gap of weak family capital. Yet, they rarely integrate theoretical models or frameworks born from the literature on family engagement and parenting practices. When best practices and skills training are introduced in tandem

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with foundational or theoretical knowledge, practitioners are better positioned to apply them and make modifications for their contexts. Without research linking these kinds of training to specific competencies, the intentions behind topics lacks theoretical grounding.

An additional area of concern emerging from the literature is that although there is a proliferation of in-service professional development available to college access professionals, questions remain about whether school counselors participate equally. Approximately 68 percent of counselors report being trained in college and career readiness post graduate training (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). In fact, according to that same report, college readiness and counseling support is one of the most desired in-service topics among school counselors (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). However, questions remain about whether counselors and practitioners working with a large percentage of first-generation students attend such offerings at similar rates of their peers in well-resourced schools and districts.

## An Interdisciplinary Field

A primary objective of this discussion paper is to begin a conversation that will inform a unifying set of competencies from which pre- and in-service programs can draw as they strive to prepare college readiness professionals for their work. In order to propose a set of competencies that may be used to inform new training models, this paper outlines the key academic and professional topic areas from which these competencies must draw in order to be based on theory and research. By drawing on existing bodies of literature that have implications for college readiness counseling, this paper proposes categories of core competencies that can inform work in the field and further professional development.

Typically, professionals who make up the field of college readiness counseling follow standards and competencies guided by their own disciplinary field or the specialty with which they are most comfortable. As such, the proposed competencies are

not intended to replace those provided by any one professional discipline. Rather, because college access and success is an interdisciplinary field, and in particular, a field that benefits from several disciplines, it is hoped that the cross-section of academic and professional areas outlined here might enhance existing competencies currently, or fill a gap for those whose professional affiliation might be missing attention to one or more topical areas and their aligned competencies.

An understanding of research from numerous fields, including psychology, sociology, economics, and specific areas of education, is necessary to create competencies that reflect the full array of skills necessary to guide students' college planning experiences. An interdisciplinary orientation towards the field will best provide a lens through which practitioners can understand the practices and programming necessary to ensure their students' success. And, as stated previously, narrowly focusing on best practices





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without laying the foundation in theory is a limited approach. The following section provides a brief overview of each topical area, its relatedness to college readiness counseling, and references to key research in the area.

### Psychology

The field of psychology offers a wide and deep literature base from which to understand and engage in college readiness counseling. In fact, career development theory, which utilizes many principles of psychology, is perhaps the closest theoretical base that informs college readiness counseling today. However, while postsecondary development can be conceptualized as a set of developmental tasks within the broader career development process, much of the career development literature has not been explicitly linked to college-going behavior and the practices that support it. Moreover, outside of career development theories, there are a number of developmental processes covered in field of psychology that also describe students' needs and offer valuable insights about how to meet them.

Psychology is a field that attempts to understand the mental processes, emotions, and behavior of individuals and groups. Some relevant subfields include cognitive, developmental, ecological, positive, and social psychology. Each of the sub-fields includes theories and bodies of research that can be used in training programs for college access professionals; however, the links between these concepts and college going may not yet have been established or fully researched. For example, several psychological theories describe specific internal processes such as problem solving, goal setting, motivational patterns, emotional regulation and decision making. Yet, the body of research on college readiness and these processes is very small. This section describes a few prominent psychological theories, followed by existing research that does connect these developmental processes to college readiness counseling. However, we begin first with a description of how career development theories are currently being utilized within college readiness counseling.

### Career Development

College going aspirations, expectations, planning, and related behaviors can be understood using theoretical frameworks developed through psychological research on career development. Career development is the study of how people understand and make decisions about careers across the lifespan. While the term "career" often connotes vocations, it can also be defined more broadly to include postsecondary choices, goals and intentions. Furthermore, because pursuing higher education is an important step towards a satisfying



career, it can be argued that college counseling is part of career development. Within the career development research, there are numerous theories that bear specific relevance to college readiness counseling (Savickas & Lent, 1994). Some of these include social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1999; Bandura, 1986), trait and factor theories (Lapan, 2004) career typologies (Holland, 1996; 1985), self concept theories (Super, 1988) and student engagement frameworks (Kenny, Blustein, Haase & Perry, 2006; National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004). As one example, Social Cognitive Career Theory describes the link between choices, action and interest; the influence of self efficacy and outcome expectations; person- and environment-related contexts and learning situations; and a feedback loop that shapes an individual's future actions (Lent et.al, 1999; Lapan, 2004). In this case, and many other career development theories, the term "career" refers to both vocational and academic choices. Some researchers have recently begun to apply SCCT and self efficacy to studies of college going aspirations and choices (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). For example, Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) applied SCCT to how school counselors can work with first-generation, college-bound students and noted the importance of helping students build self efficacy towards their college going goals. However, while this theory offers clear relevance to college going processes, it is rarely introduced in the context of college readiness counseling practices or programs. Additionally best practices in college readiness counseling typically do not support the development of self efficacy or other constructs. Like other theories that describe career development, awareness of the applicability of them to college readiness counseling practices would greatly benefit practitioners.





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### Developmental Psychology

In addition to career development and its related theories, there are numerous other psychological theories that have yet to be strongly linked to college readiness through research (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). First, theories of positive psychology, an area of psychology that examines human strength and virtue (Sheldon & King, 2001), also relate to college readiness counseling. Instead of taking a problem-focused approach, positive psychology views human functioning, potential, motives, and capabilities through an open and appreciative frame of reference (Sheldon & King, 2001). A relevant outgrowth of positive psychology is Positive Youth Development (PYD), an approach that focuses on helping youth transition to adulthood successfully by increasing access to community resources and assets that promote positive choices and experiences (Lerner, 2004; Jones, 2005). While many programs that focus solely on prevention have reported only short-term effects, PYD-infused programs have resulted in longer-lasting impact by promoting youth asset building, developing affirming relationships between youth and positive adults, and developing a diverse set of protective factors (Lerner, 1995; Jones, 2005). With a focus on nurturing, guiding, and challenging youth, the PYD approach attempts to help youth build a sense of agency in order for them to take a more active, autonomous role in their development (Jones, 2005).

Many of the developmental outcomes researched in PYD are associated with college aspirations and enrollment, and recent research has begun to draw links between this field and college readiness

*Adolescents' personal, social and emotional development is represented through a wide body of research on adolescent development, which exists within the sub-field of developmental psychology.*

counseling. For example, in 2008, Child Trends published a report that compared the fields of college readiness, workplace readiness, and positive youth development in an effort to find areas of overlap and influence (Lippman, Atienza, Rivers & Keith, 2008). The authors contend that while there are notable differences across these three areas, there is mutual overlap in the importance of positive developmental assets for success in college and the workforce. Furthermore, the emphasis on PYD practices, such as mentoring and positive role models, are important in helping youth set and reach college and career goals. Similarly, Hooker and Brand (2009) documented how youth-oriented programs are engaged in college

readiness counseling. Specifically, these researchers identified significant aspects of youth development practices deemed promotive towards college readiness.

Other research that connects positive psychology and college readiness includes the work of C.S. Snyder. Snyder (1995) introduced the concept of hope theory, which describes how pathways thinking acts as a catalyst that turns goals and agency thinking into action. Because this theory provides a framework for how individuals set and stay on track to achieve their goals, it has been used to understand academic and future oriented goals. For example, Snyder has applied his hope theory to college students and found that high hope students were more academically successful in college (Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams & Wiklund, 2002).

Adolescent development theory is another key theoretical area that has implications for college readiness counseling. Adolescents' personal, social and emotional development is represented through a wide body of research on adolescent development, which exists within the sub-field of developmental psychology. Early contributions in this field began with research by Erik Erikson (1968) and later through the identity statuses presented by James Marcia (1980), as well as other theories and scholarly work that emphasize the defining of self. Current work includes targeted literature that focuses on individual aspects of identity, such as racial identity development (Phinney, 1990; Cross, 1995). Because college aspirations and planning begins with an adolescents' sense of self (identity, ability, competence), these developmental theories provide useful insight into how college going attitudes and choices may

be shaped by general identity development processes. For example, Schneider (2009) examined the how adolescent development in general shapes college going decisions and choices such as early decision admission offers. Likewise, Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) have written extensively on how future goals related to identity are shaped by students' meaning making, and the role of educators in supporting adolescent's construction of identity.

Although college readiness counseling often targets adolescents who are fully immersed in making choices about their identity, developmental research that links this to college going choices





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and goals is notably absent. Rather, research typically examines relationships between specific demographics and postsecondary outcomes, with little attention to the actual developmental processes associated with understanding identity. Ironically, a working knowledge of how identity is formed and with what influences (peers, family members, societal messages), provides valuable insight into where interventions need to be targeted.

The field of psychology offers a range of theoretical frameworks that act as a roadmap to understanding students' goals, and their ability to persist towards realizing them. These theories span a range of subfields, but share a focus on developmental processes. These processes include such things as self concept, motivation and self regulation. For example, research on possible selves has been used to understand how youth understand and develop future oriented visions of themselves (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Research has found that possible selves affect expectations, goals, decisions, and behaviors, including academic and college-going behaviors (Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006). Another applicable theory from developmental psychology comes from the work of Angela Duckworth, who has developed a scale to measure an individual's grit (perseverance) and tested its predictability for academic success (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

Research conducted by developmental psychologists describes how students' perceptions of self influence specific academic and college readiness behaviors. Constructs and theoretical frameworks in this realm include attribution theory (describes how individuals make causal understandings of their actions and behaviors) (Gordon & Graham, 2006), expectancy-value theory (describes the developmental processes that are involved in attitude development) (Wigfield, 1994), goal theory (describes factors that impact motivation to learn) (Dweck, 2000;1986), self-determination theory (illustrates how a person's behavior is self-motivated without outside influence) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), self-efficacy theory (how a person's belief about his/her capabilities impacts thoughts, behaviors and emotions) (Bandura, 1986), and self concept theory (the role of sense of self-worth in achievement oriented outcomes) (Harter, 1992). For example, it is widely recognized that self concept influences adolescents' behaviors, but understanding how it shapes participation in college access programs and postsecondary goals and behaviors would be quite valuable to school counselors and other college access professionals. Likewise, self-regulatory skills such as planning and formation and maintenance of strong peer and adult relationships also play a key role in college readiness activities.

One final theoretical framework worthy of inclusion in training for college readiness counseling is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. This theory describes individuals as embedded within a series of systems or levels of influence and the transactions between individuals and the unique contexts in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). These ecological models have been increasingly applied to development in educational contexts, in which the school setting is viewed as a unique system comprising characteristics of teachers, administrators and school staff, students, and the dynamic relationships among them. Such systems have become both a focus of intense study (e.g., LaRusso, Jones, Brown & Aber, 2009) and a target of intervention and prevention efforts. Indeed, college going is an interconnected process, shaped by many people, practices, experiences, and programs, and is also intimately connected to the other developmental processes occurring within a student's life. Some research on college going behaviors utilizes this theory, looking at how specific elements of one's context shapes aspirations, goals and choices. For example, Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) used ecological theory to understand the college aspirations of rural students, finding that for male students, family and peer contexts were predictive of college aspirations, whereas individual academic preparation and external barriers to college attendance were most salient for females. This theory is also widely used in research on college student development.



The scope of research that has been conducted in the field of psychology is vast, much of which is not acknowledged here. However, the literature included here reflects a sampling of how knowledge from within the field of psychology can benefit practitioners involved in college readiness counseling. While it is helpful for professionals who work with youth to have a broad understanding of development over time, it is essential to have





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a clear understanding of their students' current developmental stage and of those immediately preceding and following it. This is necessary to ensure that strategies and practices are focused and effective. Understanding research from the field of psychology and how to apply this information can inform college planning and preparation, especially with regard to how students develop and realize postsecondary aspirations and opportunities.

### Sociology

There are several key theories within the field of sociology that offer additional insights into the practice of college readiness counseling. It is widely understood that individuals' future aspirations, decisions and choices are shaped by relationships and other forces in their social environments. For example, these social environments include schools, home, neighborhood, or community. Contributions to the field of college readiness counseling by sociologists largely draw on human capital theory, and to some extent social reproduction theory. Both of these conceptual frameworks allow for an understanding of the contextual influences shaping opportunity, and have already been utilized significantly within research specifically related to college access and success. While social reproduction theories illuminate the stratification of opportunities available across groups, human capital theory holds the most relevance to college readiness counseling.

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Human capital theory describes how the possession of certain kinds of capital (or resources) leads to certain outcomes because of the information, knowledge, or skills that are associated with that capital. In the context of college readiness counseling and related research, this theory is often drawn upon to illustrate how some individuals are more likely to enroll in higher education than others. According to the human capital theory, one of the primary roles of higher education is to serve as a screening device, primarily for employers, by sorting out individuals and bestowing credentials of status that signify individual achievement (Bills, 2003; Weber, 2000). Yet, some students are disadvantaged in education because their *habitus*, or socioeconomic environment that shapes their cultural capital, that often does not transfer the types of cultural knowledge necessary for postsecondary opportunities. Therefore,

research from the field of sociology that is especially relevant to college readiness counseling includes attention to contexts and relationships that are particularly conducive to transmitting such capital to students.

Numerous sociologists have applied these sociological theories to their research on college access and readiness. The most relevant research here provides a perspective on college admission that focuses on students' predisposition to pursue higher education as being shaped by other individuals in their environment, and by the behaviors of individual institutions. Specifically, sociologists have articulated relevant forms of capital consisting of cultural signals, dispositions, attitudes, skills, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals, and competencies that are rewarded depending on the social context in which they are used (Terenzini et al., 2005; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

One context that has been examined carefully due to its ability to transfer human, social and cultural capital is schools (McDonough, 1997; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Hill, 2011; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). For example, McDonough's research has focused on how students' college choices are shaped by a schools' organizational culture. According to McDonough (1997), schools are a "habitus" in which the organizational structure and culture informs students of expectations and information (or not) for the future. Based on

her research on the processes of forming a college-going culture, McDonough has argued that PreK-16 settings send students messages about opportunities through the availability of postsecondary planning resources (available counselors, advanced placement classes, teacher quality, exploratory activities, and time and space dedicated to the planning and supports for postsecondary education (McClafferty, McDonough & Nunez, 2002). This research has been widely applied in schools that seek to build college-going cultures that support college enrollment and success.

Using a different focus, Rosenbaum (2001) examined how schools undermine students' future oriented goals through 'college for all' practices and policies that set students up for failure beyond high school. In these studies, and others like them, researchers have





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explored how decisions and beliefs about college going are directly shaped by these contexts and the institutional attributes they possess. Both Rosenbaum and McDonough represent the benefits of sociological research in illuminating how school contexts influence students' future oriented identities.



Other sociologists utilize human capital theory to illustrate the significance of individual resources, specifically in the transmission of social capital. The literature often uses social network theory and social capital theories to illustrate the benefits of students' access to college knowledge and related capital (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). While the term "social capital" is widely used and applied, this paper uses it to refer to the benefits, support and knowledge that is gained through relationships with others. The social capital concept builds on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and James Coleman (1988), among others, with capital taking the form of expectations, information, and access to people and opportunities that bring about other types of capital. Scholarly work in this field includes a focus on peer groups (Kao, 2000; Sokatch, 2006; Tierney & Colyar, 2005;), access to school counselors and other influential adults (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 1997), and basic research on the importance of relationships for college readiness (Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Gonzalez, Stoner & Joven, 2003).

For example, Stanton-Salazar (1997) examined the relationship between the educational and occupational goals of Mexican-origin students and their reported social ties to institutional agents, such as, teachers, counselors and college-going peers.

Practitioners and the contexts in which they work are important sources of social and cultural capital. While there is a great deal more sociological research that has been done in the field of college access that is not acknowledged here, the works cited above provide a good introduction to the contributions of this field that are relevant to the development of professional competencies. While many college preparatory programs claim to operate on social capital models, it is unclear to what extent school counselors and college access professionals are knowledgeable about these theories. Having a foundational understanding of these concepts will increase the likelihood that practitioners, organizations and schools will be physically and socially organized to facilitate the transmission of social capital, or that the necessary attributes of a relationship will be in place.

### Economics

The field of economics has long been a platform for research regarding individuals' access to higher education. In fact, early college choice models constructed by economists were designed to inform the marketing and admission practices of institutions to generate greater enrollments. To date, many economists have contributed to the field of college readiness, largely relying on microeconomics, or the study of individual decision-making behaviors. By controlling for specific factors or events, economists can assess the relative impact that any one activity or variable has on individual decisions, such as college-going choices and outcomes.

Many economists use human capital theory models to understand college enrollment decisions (Long, 2007). Because education is believed to be a form of capital that when invested in, provides a certain type of return, this model largely guides what is commonly referred to as "cost-benefit analysis." In other words, when students are weighing the costs of going to college (whether financial, social or personal), they do so in the context of benefits (or capital) gained. These concepts often drive practices in which college access professionals encourage students to consider the increased earnings associated with going to college, along with the other benefits to be gained (health, civic, social) from degree attainment.

Research on college transitions from the field of economics has focused on college preparation, access, affordability, and persistence. Specific topics attended to by economists include: how





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families make financial decisions about college, which college in particular to attend, how to compare colleges, which type of college to attend (two–four year), how admission policies shape student behaviors and how financial supports and aid influence student enrollment, selection, and other outcomes (Dynarski, 2003; Long, 2007; Perna, 2000; St. John, 2001). On a smaller scale, Avery and Kane (2004) used evidence from intervention programs in the Boston Public School system to learn more about student perceptions of the economic value of college and the financial aid and college application process.

One area of college readiness counseling that has been widely covered by economists is the benefit of merit scholarship programs and other financial support incentives. According to Heller and Rasmussen (2002), this line of research is often referred to as “student price responsiveness” or “student demand” studies. This area of study examines how students make decisions about whether to attend, or invest, in higher education. There is a deep body of research on the impact of price and financial aid on enrollment, looking at a range of outcomes including how college choice, selection, and persistence behaviors are shaped by financial aid and other forms of financial support. For example, Dynarski (2000) examined how incentive programs such as Georgia’s HOPE (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally) scholarship influences enrollment choices and decisions. In a similar vein, Heller and Rasmussen (2002) evaluated the college attendance patterns of recipients of the Florida Bright Futures and Michigan Merit scholarship programs. These economists were further interested in the effects of these merit-based scholarships on eligibility of aid for need-based scholarships.

*The decisions that students make about courses, how to spend their time, and goals they set are influenced by their perceptions of costs, financial and otherwise. This body of research on how financial aid shapes students’ willingness to invest in higher education is especially applicable to students from low-income families.*

Literature from the field of economics provides useful insight into how students make decisions about whether to attend college. The decisions that students make about courses, how to spend their time, and goals they set are influenced by their perceptions of costs, financial and otherwise. This body of research on how financial aid shapes students’ willingness to invest in higher education is especially applicable to students from low-income families. In addition to the individual studies described above, there are several comprehensive reviews of the contributions of economics to college access, choice and enrollment (Long, 2007;

Heller, 1997). These reviews offer a deeper understanding of microeconomics and how it influences students’ college going intentions and decisions.

### Education

Psychology, sociology and economics are each disciplines that provide frameworks that can be used in pre and in-service training models. The final related discipline, which has roots in all three of the previously introduced disciplines, is education. More specifically, this paper presents three subfields of education that offer important knowledge that is critical for effective college readiness counseling. This section explores the bodies of research and literature from the fields of education policy, higher education, and family engagement.

### Education Reform and Policy

It has been argued that school counselors and other college access professionals have been excluded from conversations regarding education reform and policy, despite the fact that their role puts them in a unique position to be a part of school and district-based reform strategies. This is true of instructional policies (data driven practices), as well as those that are directly related to college readiness counseling (K16 curricular alignment). Whether the exclusion is due to perceptions that counselors are ill-equipped to engage in policy-related initiatives or their role in reform efforts is unclear, the reality is that there are a host of educational policy initiatives that are directly related to college readiness, especially at a time when college access and success has become a national imperative.

However, understanding the intentions behind and goals related to these policies is rarely a topic of in-service or pre-service training. While it could be argued that all policies designed to improved academic achievement are applicable to college readiness counseling, there are a few topics that are even more directly pertinent to college readiness counselors. Some of these topics include: common college readiness standards, PreK–16 alignment policies; charter school models and expansion; and financial aid policies. This paper uses a select number of these to showcase the research associated with them and the links to college readiness counseling.





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One of the most current and directly relevant federal policies is the use of “benchmarked standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace” (US Department of Education, 2010a). These efforts have been most notably evident in the development of Common Core Standards (US Department of Education, 2010b). The development of these standards has been influenced by research claiming that high school graduates must possess key content knowledge, and academic behaviors such as study skills and time management, as well as a range of cognitive and metacognitive capabilities including analysis, problem solving, and reasoning, in order to be successful in higher education (Conley, 2005, 2007; ACT, 2005).

Similar to common standards, national interest in aligning the educational experience across PreK–16 systems has prompted a range of federal and state initiatives to close the leaks in the educational pipeline. Many of these changes have been spurred on by a body of research noting the lack of alignment (Adelman, 2006; Conley, 2005; Haycock, 2006; Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia & Miller, 2007). For example, Kirst and Venezia (2004) have argued that while many students have high expectations for college, state and individual school policies and practices inhibit these goals from realization because of the lack of academic alignment between secondary and higher education. Here, specific reform efforts and policies influencing college readiness counseling include dual enrollment policies and early college high schools (Hoffman, Vargas & Santos, 2008; Le and Frankfort, 2011), data and accountability systems (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Muldoon, 2010), college readiness standards (Conley, 2005), multiple pathway models (Oakes & Saunders, 2008; Symonds, Schwartz & Ferguson, 2011), student learning plans (Rennie Center, 2011), admission and transfer requirements (Bailey & Karp, 2003) and secondary school use of university entrance examinations (Howell, Kurlaender & Grodsky, 2010). Research on these topics has been conducted by those in academia, as well as from those in policy organizations with an interest in college and career readiness, such as Boston-based Jobs For the Future, the Education Trust, and the Southern Regional Educational Board, among others.

Literature on educational policy has also shaped the expansion of charter schools, of which there are more than 5,000 throughout the country serving 1.5 million students since 2009 (Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010). Although most research concerning charter school effectiveness in raising test scores is mixed (Gleason et al., 2010), the role of charters, such as the “No Excuses” school models, have consistently reported high



student acceptance and matriculation rates to colleges and universities (Wilson, 2008). Unlike most traditional public schools, many high achieving charters have included college attendance as integral to their mission (Wilson, 2008) and many of their practices relate to preparation for college enrollment. This may include frequent mock practice exams for the SAT; mandatory PSAT participation; SAT test preparation incorporated in lesson plans and instruction; and college-prep days multiple days a year (Merseth, 2009). This set of strategies pioneered by these schools is a topic within the policy arena for which there is great relevance to college readiness counseling.

Finally, another example of policy literature that bears direct relevance to school counselors and college admission counselors is that of financial aid policy.<sup>1</sup> Research has been conducted on federal, state and institutional financial aid policies. At a time when tight budgets and differing levels of governmental support for need-based aid determine whether and how federal policies will support financial assistance for college, knowledge about this topic is crucial. The task of helping students understand the dimensions of these policies and the effectiveness of them would aid in college readiness counseling. Understanding policies about Pell grants, undocumented students’ access to financial aid, and the political origins behind need/merit-based aid would contribute to a foundational understanding of financial aid policies.

<sup>1</sup> The topic of federal financial aid policy could certainly be introduced in the higher education section as well.





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The field of educational policy is vast and certainly includes topics unrelated to college readiness counseling. The topics discussed above are meant to provide a window into the applicability of this line of research on college readiness counseling. While the literature in educational policy does not necessarily offer the theoretical frameworks discussed in previous sections, the conceptual frameworks driving these policies are indeed relevant and will aid in the service delivery that school counselors and college access professionals need.

### Higher Education

Like K-12 education reform policy, the field of higher education has many influences on college readiness counseling. As the context of interest, literature from the field of higher education research provides important insight into the social, academic and overall experience that awaits students. Like other subfields of education, research in higher education is interdisciplinary, covering a range of topics including historical perspectives (Thelin, 2004; Rudolph, 1990; Trow, 1989), international comparisons (Altbach, Gumport & Berdahl, 2011), philosophical purpose (Gumport, 2007; Gutman, 1999; Brubacher, 1982), financing (Paulsen & St. John, 2002), institutional type and mission (Bok, 2003; Gumport, 1997), organizational systems and structures (Birnbaum, 1988; Kerr, 2001), the professoriate (O'Meara, 2011; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006), and college student development (Astin, 1984; Baxter Magolda, 2003; Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; King, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While a general working knowledge of higher education would certainly

largely pointing to a lack of information or college knowledge (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon & Perna, 2009; Vargas, 2004); inadequate college counseling support for college applications (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; McDonough, 2005a; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Public Agenda, 2010); concerns about cost (Long, 2007, 2008; Toutkoushian, 2008); and academic preparation and college readiness (Adelman, 2006; Conley, 2005). This body of scholarly work also calls attention to the important supports necessary for college access and success through outreach programs and related supports (Gándara, 2002; Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005). The research on these topics utilizes many of the theoretical frameworks previously discussed in this paper, particularly human capital models.

Higher education scholars have contributed to the field through their development of college choice theories used to provide a framework for student decision making. For example, the most widely cited college choice theory, Hossler and Gallagher's three-stage model of college choice, focuses on individual students' beliefs and behaviors, positing that students pass through three decision-making phases, including predisposition (the phase most often targeted by college preparation programs), search, and choice (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). These models serve multiple purposes, but have recently been used to understand the college planning experiences of prospective students, and to articulate how traditional-age students pursue their postsecondary goals. In addition to this seminal theory, subsequent research has criticized these normative college choice models and offered alternative models. For example, Free-

*Higher education scholars have contributed to the field through their development of college choice theories used to provide a framework for student decision making.*

enhance all aspects of college readiness counseling, there are a few topics that relate specifically to the pre-college process. Some of the subtopics of interest include college access and enrollment issues, college choice theories, persistence and retention, and standardized admission assessments.

The most applicable body of research growing from higher education is that which examines the gaps in college enrollment and related college choice models (Bial & Rodriguez, 2007; Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005). The most directly applicable area of the research born from the field of higher education is that which seeks to understand gaps in enrollment and degree attainment,

man developed a model of predetermination for African American students (Freeman, 2005) and Cabrera and LaNasa designed a three task process that describes the experience for low-income students (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). These population specific models critique traditional models and highlight the importance of differentiation in choice models. Each of these models is important in understanding the impact of factors that uniquely shape the decision making of students from specific racial, ethnic or income backgrounds. By understanding the stages experienced by students as they pass through this developmental process, school counselors and college access professionals can design their pre-college supports accordingly.





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In addition to research on the barriers to enrolling in higher education, there is also a vast body of literature on the barriers to persistence and degree completion. Much of this research speaks to the academic, social and financial experiences in higher education (Astin, 1984; Braxton, 2000; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Nora, 2002; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Persistence in college has been attributed to how a student becomes integrated, both socially and academically into the institution. One theory that drives this line of research is Tinto's (1993) theory of academic and social integration, which cites the importance of student-student and student-faculty relationships in positively affecting persistence. However, higher education has benefitted from a cascade of research on this topic. Research has identified several engagement measures, including faculty interaction (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004), group study, and participating in co-curricular activities (Astin, 1984; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson & Terenzini, 2003). In addition to specific engagement measures, other barriers to degree completion include delayed enrollment (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005), non-academic variables (ACT, 2005), remediation (Bettinger & Long, 2009), and working while in school (Perna, 2010). This body of scholarly work has advanced our knowledge about the challenges facing students as they progress towards degree completion.

Another relevant topic within the field of higher education is the use of standardized admission testing. Most educators are familiar with standardized tests, such as the SAT and ACT, and the role they play in college admission. However, like other topics, there is a broad body of knowledge that is central to college readiness counseling (Epstein, 2009; Noeth, 2009). This body of knowledge includes assessment objectives, ethics and standards, content and topics covered, interpretation of tests, using test scores to predict college success, student preparation for tests, and group disparities in scores (Noeth, 2009). The role of assessments in standardized testing was covered extensively in the NACAC publication, *Foundations of Standardized Admission Testing* (Noeth, 2009). In this book, Noeth argues that all practitioners engaged in college readiness counseling should be trained in the fundamental issues associated with standardized admission tests as this reflects yet one more area for which a formal body of knowledge exists (2009).

While the point of reference for much of this research is higher education, it simultaneously provides important insight into how school counselors and other college access professionals can individualize their support for students' school college planning,

while also preparing them for success upon enrollment. Indeed, exposure to broader topics from within the field of higher education would enhance college readiness counseling by providing a deeper understanding and context for postsecondary goals; however, the examples described above speak to some of the most directly applicable topics.



### Family Engagement

Family engagement, the final area discussed in this section of the paper, offers valuable insight into how to effectively marshal the resources of parents and familial supports in college readiness counseling. There is ample evidence that families play a central role in students' college going aspirations and plans (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). However, the focus of this line of research typically links socioeconomic status and parents' education level with limited postsecondary outcomes and the lack of financial and educational capital. As a consequence, school counselors and college preparatory programs have long focused on efforts to involve families in programming. These practices often include helping families build college-going aspirations and giving families information that they can use to help their children realize those aspirations by helping with the procedural aspects of college preparation. Research suggests that these areas of emphasis are indeed critical, especially in light of the fact that postsecondary expectations strongly influence their children's achievement and college aspirations (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).





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However, the research from the field of family engagement offers a broader perspective on how to engage families in college readiness counseling and support.

As an area of interest, family engagement focuses on identifying ways to increase families' ongoing participation, communication, and collaboration with schools and communities. The literature looks at different age groups and the ways in which engagement occurs in schools, at home and in the community. The field of family engagement emphasizes the integral role that parents and other familial supports play in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of their children (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, & Gordon, 2009). The literature describes developing policies and practices that utilize the wisdom, support and strengths of families to positively affect student achievement and improve learning (Belway, Durán & Spielberg, 2009). While family engagement researchers and experts often include the role of supportive parenting in promoting educational success (effective parenting styles, building strong communication, developing healthy attachment, etc.), these forms of engagement are usually not the focus of schools' efforts. Instead, schools typically focus on aspects of family engagement such as parents' expectations, knowledge about education, home-school communication, etc.

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Research has consistently shown that various forms of family involvement at school and home help to meet the needs of students and narrow the achievement gap (Henderson & Mapp, 2005). Through linking in and out-of-school learning, mutually reinforcing and supportive pathways for learning are created (Weiss et. al, 2009). Moreover, the literature suggests that family engagement occurs differently across different grade levels, suggesting a need for differentiating outreach efforts (Weiss et. al, 2009). Understanding the field of family engagement enables practitioners to focus on and utilize effective forms of involvement.

Researchers have categorized family involvement strategies in many different ways. The Harvard Family Research Project categorizes effective family involvement processes in the following categories: supportive parenting, responsibility for learning, and home-school relationships. Here, responsibility for learning includes practices that may be invisible to school-based practitioners, but support educational expectations and encouragement for college (Weiss et. al, 2009). This categorization has been used to assess effective practices and policies designed to enhance family engagement. In their book, *Beyond the Bakesale*, Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies offer a framework for engaging families through welcoming, honoring, and connecting with them (2006). These authors write extensively about the ways practitioners can build meaningful relationships with families to support student achievement by a range of indicators.

Other categorizations delineate between home-based and school-based engagement. This distinction has emerged in recent years following research that supports home-based engagement that is often invisible to school personnel. School-based family engagement includes traditional and innovative approaches to parent involvement in schools, such as volunteering, parent-teacher conferences, and implementing communication between the

home and school. However, examples of innovative, meaningful approaches to parent engagement include providing parent liaisons/advocacy, conducting home visits, developing student-run parent-teacher conferences, and increasing communication through the use of student data systems (Wilson, 2009). On the other hand, home-based family engagement includes various strategies used by parents and familial supports to encourage their child's developmental success. These approaches include parenting style utilized, supervision provided, home learning activities offered, homework help, and the overall home context,





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which impacts academic socialization (Hill & Tyson, 2009). For example, the academic socialization that takes place in the home has been found to greatly affect student achievement.

In addition to offering specific frameworks for family engagement, the literature also describes the relationship between positive outcomes associated with effective family involvement and engagement. Studies suggest that there is a link between family engagement and student achievement outcomes, including higher grade point averages, better attendance, improved social skills, reduced dropout rates, enrollment in more rigorous coursework, and improved behavior (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2005). Moreover, a meta-analysis of more than 50 studies on middle school students found that the type of family involvement mostly strongly linked to achievement and postsecondary success was academic socialization, a category that includes discussing learning strategies, making preparations for the future, communicating about the value of education, and linking schoolwork to current events and students' futures (Hill & Tyson, 2009). These outcomes are important predictors of college enrollment and success, yet the parenting practices that support them are rarely conceived of as college readiness supports. Having an awareness of the family engagement processes that promote college readiness allows practitioners to target specific mechanisms for services and provide rationale for a particular approach.

Several researchers have applied research from the field of family engagement to college access and readiness (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, & Gordon, 2009; Jun & Colyar, 2002; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). This research has called attention to the critical role familial supports play in college readiness, finding that families are often underutilized in college preparatory activities. For example, research has found that when parents express high educational expectations and engage in conversations about school and college, their students' likelihood for enrolling in college is increased (Perna & Titus, 2005).

Similarly, research has shown the benefits of parents and other family members sending messages about the intrinsic value of higher education, not only through direct conversations, but by the actions they take. For example, a report by the Bridgespan Group showed that combined parent-student college visits increased the odds that a student would enroll in college (Bedsworth, Colby & Doctor (2006). Likewise, Jun and Colyar (2002) have used social and cultural capital theories to describe the critical role parents play in college planning. These authors argue, "success cannot be achieved without a clear and cogent theoretical understanding of family involvement" (p. 210).



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Drawing from family engagement literature and other research argues that schools, colleges and college preparation programs need to reach out to parents in meaningful and culturally appropriate ways (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). In fact, much of the research connecting family engagement principles to college readiness counseling has highlighted the unique relevance that culture plays in parenting practices. A sampling of literature on this topic with attention to specific ethnic groups includes research on Latino families (Auerbach, 2004), Mexican American families, (Marquez Kiyama, 2010), and low SES African American students, (Smith & Fleming, 2006). For example, Auerbach's research of Latino families participating in a school-based college access program in Los Angeles, found that families' moral support, including their *consejos*, were the primary way that parents shaped students' college goals, postsecondary planning, and other developmental processes (2005). Similarly, Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), who examined the processes that families and their students engage in when making college-going decisions, argue that students from low-income families are heavily influenced by familial supports and expectations.





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Outside of directly using family engagement literature to understand how to leverage family members to support college access and success, there are many program evaluations and documentation of specific college readiness efforts that have worked to engage families (Fann, McClafferty Jarskey & McDonough, 2009; Langenkamp, Walker, Shifrer & Fulton, 2009). With some variation, these studies typically document engagement efforts, as well as specific parenting practices related to students' aspirations, choices, and enrollment.

As previously stated, there is significant overlap between the disciplines and topical areas covered in this paper. This is true for family engagement as well, where many of these models have been shaped by ecological theories and theories of social and cultural capital. As such, while specific research does not exist linking psychological constructs that shape college going with family engagement, there is literature that demonstrates the role parents and familial supports play in other developmental processes (motivation, self efficacy, self concept). Taken together, the literature suggests that family engagement research bears relevance to college readiness counseling through aspirations formation, as well as motivation and other aspects of the college going process.

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A review of selected topical areas described in this paper suggests that there is a robust body of research with clear implications for college readiness counseling. The theoretical frameworks and empirical research shaping college access and success calls for practitioners to be well educated in these disciplines. Therefore, this discussion paper proposes that the academic subfields described here serve as the foundation for pre- and in-service education and training for college admission counseling professionals. Ensuring that college access professionals are well versed in core knowledge, and related concepts behind students' postsecondary aspirations, intentions and supporting behaviors is critical to improving their efficacy.

## Professional Competencies

Professional competencies describe fundamental knowledge and skills believed to be essential for effective practice and can be used to inform both pre-service and in-service training. Core competencies imply that there is a core body of knowledge or skills, upon which advanced knowledge and skills can be developed. In a context with professionals who span several positions and professions, yet who share a common interest in college access and readiness, competencies offer many benefits. First, professional competencies provide a framework or baseline from which practitioners can assess readiness programs to which they can be held accountable. Second, competencies help practitioners gain the respect and credibility they need to influence policy and programmatic decisions. Finally, competencies provide counselor educators, and other interested groups with guidelines for training and course requirements.

To date, there is not one common set of competencies that unite the work of college access and readiness professionals across different professional lines. Existing competencies include Federal TRIO Competencies, NACAC Statement of Principles of Good Practice, and American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) school counselor

standards. For example, the ASCA established a set of competencies to ensure school counselors are adequately trained, prepared for, and able to focus on students' development in academic, personal/social, and career development pursuits (American School Counselor Association, 2011). These competencies create a unified vision for the school counseling profession. In addition, the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education established a set of program standards and guidelines for Federal TRIO programs, which are designed to motivate and support first-generation, college-bound students to aspire to, enroll and succeed in college (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2008). Like the ASCA competencies or standards, the CAS standards focus on knowledge





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areas and program management. The National Career Development Association also provides a set of competencies for career counselors, or those who help professionals identify career paths. In the field of higher education, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), two of the largest professional organizations for student affairs professionals, created standards for student affairs professionals. These competencies include the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are expected of those working in the field of student affairs (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). For the youth development and after-school providers, there are also clear knowledge and skill competencies that are necessary for effective practice; however, these do not necessarily include college readiness counseling. Providers of after school and youth development programs are similarly guided by knowledge and skill competencies established for the frontline staff across professions; such competencies play an important part in ensuring quality programming that meets the needs of constituents. These community-based practitioners are among those increasingly involved in college readiness support and counseling.

There are several limitations to the current set of competencies. Within each, there is varied attention to theoretical knowledge and research, and they are largely driven by the individual professional roles, rather than the work itself. However, as previously noted, professionals involved with college readiness counseling span multiple professions and contexts. In contrast to the existing standards, a unified set of knowledge competencies has the potential to foster trust across professions and academic fields. In doing so, such competencies could be used to complement those that already exist within each individual profession, especially as they emphasize knowledge rather than skills.

For young people to develop and reach their postsecondary goals, the professionals who work with them and their families must know and understand aspects of college readiness counseling from a range of disciplines. This knowledge can and should be drawn from the topical areas described in this paper, as well as best practices within the field. The knowledge competencies proposed here are intended to serve as a beginning point from which additional knowledge must be gained throughout their careers. They do not yet provide the level of detail necessary to be used widely. Instead, they reflect the topical areas from which level-specific competencies can be developed. As is stated in the policy recommendations that conclude this paper, it is suggested that a group of practitioners and researchers spanning these fields be convened to identify more specifically what might be expected for entry-level readiness professionals at the conclusion of their pre-service training, and what should be identified as advanced levels of practice and therefore developed through in-service training opportunities. Just as others have done, a collaborative task force or interprofessional team can ensure that the knowledge and skills described in each competency can be easily identifiable among practitioners.



### Proposed Competencies

College access and readiness professionals should be able to:

1. **Demonstrate basic knowledge of and sensitivity to the scientific, theoretical, and contextual issues surrounding the psychological processes that support college going.**
  - **Example:** Understand how adolescent development influences college-going aspirations, beliefs, and behaviors.
  - **Example:** Understand the theoretical basis for goal setting and motivational processes.
  - **Example:** Be aware of how to set the context for students to build self efficacy relative to college expectations.
2. **Demonstrate basic knowledge of how sociological concepts about context and relationships influence college going intentions, behaviors and readiness.**
  - **Example:** Understand how certain organizational contexts shape college aspirations and goals.
  - **Example:** Be able to recognize the various sources of messaging regarding postsecondary opportunities.
  - **Example:** Be aware of how future aspirations, decisions and choices are shaped by encouragement and relationships in students' social environment.
  - **Example:** Understand basic tenants of social capital theory as it relates to college readiness counseling.





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### 3. Demonstrate beginning knowledge of **microeconomics**, especially related to human capital models

- **Example:** Understand how specific variables, such as perceptions of cost, influence individual decision-making processes relative to college going.
- **Example:** Possess a working knowledge of how specific financial aid incentives affect college choices and decisions.

### 4. Demonstrate knowledge of **educational reform policies** designed to support college readiness.

- **Example:** Understand the intention behind common standards and how to support students' development of these standards, including helping students see relevance between standards and future goals.
- **Example:** Be able to identify the benefits of various alignment strategies.

### 5. Articulate knowledge regarding **higher education** and related research.

- **Example:** Posses a working knowledge of the general landscape of higher education.
- **Example:** Be able to identify the academic, financial and social factors that interrupt a smooth transition to and success in higher education.
- **Example:** Have a working knowledge of how students from different ethnic, racial, income, and family backgrounds experience the college choice process.
- **Example:** Understand the purposes of and limitations to standardized admission assessments.

### 6. Demonstrate knowledge and application of **family engagement** models.

- **Example:** Know how to recognize and support home-based family support for college readiness.
- **Example:** Understand why some parent and family support looks different than others.
- **Example:** Be able to build meaningful, respectful and culturally sensitive relationships with families.



## Policy Recommendations

An important question that guided this research was whether a formal body of knowledge was available from a broad range of topical areas that could inform college readiness counseling. The research conducted for this discussion paper, casting a wide net on a selected set of disciplines, has revealed a number of specific academic areas relevant to college readiness counseling. Further, literature from each of these topical areas has implications for the practice engaged in by school counselors, community-based counselors, university outreach and admission staff, and others in the college readiness community. However, integrating this knowledge into current training models will require specific policy support at multiple levels. The following section offers eight policy recommendations worthy of consideration:

1. *Encourage individual states to add college readiness counseling coursework to the required coursework for licensure in school counseling.* According to ECS, states do not require state endorsed programs to offer coursework in college readiness counseling. Based on the research conducted here, and the wide array of academic disciplines that shape the college readiness experience of students, coursework in this area should be required for those counselors working in secondary schools.
2. *Target licensing renewal requirements to support college readiness counseling.* To date, most school counseling licensure renewal programs require a specific number of continuing education credits but with little direction to guide their content. Individual state licensing departments should consider requiring school counselors from all school types to complete in-service on topics directly related to college





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readiness counseling. With the emergence of college counseling certificate programs and a wide array of college access professional development providers, there are resources that can be utilized or developed to accommodate this need.

3. *Convene a group of stakeholders from different professional roles and organizations to completely develop the professional competencies proposed here.* (The competencies proposed in this paper are intended to begin the articulation of competencies). We can learn much from other professional groups that have been convened to create competencies and frameworks in other fields. For example, the state of Ohio created Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool Professionals by leveraging the expertise and knowledge of a group of practitioners representing many roles and settings (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1999). Convening such a group to create a set of knowledge competencies will go a long way toward informing professional development, job description development, and professional evaluation and accountability.
4. *Designate block grants and College Access Challenge Grants that bring together practitioners from multiple roles and settings.* Grant support for in-service trainings should require recipients to partner with like-organizations and include school-based staff. As the borders between school, community and university-based college readiness counseling become blurred, support for shared professional development will be an important move in the direction towards a shared body of knowledge.

and career plans, schools and districts should be provided support to direct in-service opportunities for their staff in this area. Likewise, individual districts should be asked to include plans for professional development for school counselors in their yearly progress planning reports.

6. *Encourage school districts and community based programming to draft position descriptions that utilize competencies described in this report.* Framing the professional roles and duties to reflect the topical areas presented here will go a long way towards professionalizing the work and improving the quality of services provided to students. However, revised job descriptions must also be accompanied by supporting professional development and evaluations/assessment tools that measure practitioners' progress in similar areas.
7. *Develop individual assessments that can be used by professional development providers.* Asking practitioners to self-assess the extent to which they are knowledgeable in the areas covered by the competencies will reveal important training gaps and potentially encourage participation in specific types of targeted in-service. This form of assessment can also be used as a survey instrument to assess counselors' "college knowledge."
8. *Create incentives for future research that documents the training models and formats being used today.* Despite the diversity of roles represented by the college readiness counseling field, very little has been documented about their training pathways or their relative effectiveness. Only recently has the field benefitted from a survey of school counselors'

*Convene a group of stakeholders from different professional roles and organizations to completely develop the professional competencies proposed here. The competencies proposed in this paper are intended to begin the articulation of competencies... A similar convening should be facilitated to create a set of knowledge competencies that can be used for professional development, job description development, and professional evaluation and accountability.*

5. *Require and provide financial support for school districts to host college readiness-oriented trainings for their staff.* As teachers and other school staff roles are expanded to include advisories and other activities that support students' college

perceptions of their readiness; however, more information about of the different pathways leading to careers in college readiness counseling, and evaluations of these different pathways would give rise to effective training models.



## Conclusion

In the United States we are experiencing a rapid increase in the programs and services intended to open the doors to a college degree. However, the lack of uniformity of professional pathways that prepare the profession to provide these services raises questions about the value and quality of such programs. This begs the question, what is the formal body of knowledge required for effective college readiness counseling?



Based on the research conducted for this paper, knowledge from the fields of psychology, sociology, economics, and education suggest a set of competencies from which a formal body of knowledge can be established. The literature presented in this paper speaks to the individual and contextual experiences and behaviors that shape the college aspirations, expectations and behaviors of students. Based on this research, pre-service and in-service providers can glean concepts to be used to train practitioners to engage in college readiness counseling in school, non-profit and university contexts.

Effective college readiness counseling requires a strong foundation in counseling, developed through graduate course and field-based training. Using formal research and theory will be in sharp contrast to what is believed to be the reality today, relying on personal and professional experience, or rather what has worked in the past. Going forward, we need to enable practitioners to leave their personal experiences at the door, and focus on what decades of research have taught us. Doing so will move our country in the right direction towards effectively preparing the practitioners who set the context in which young people can realize their goals of attaining a college degree.

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