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Working together to beat the odds : factors that influence the college readiness of low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail High School : a case study

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ABSTRACT

WORKING TOGETHER TO BEAT THE ODDS: FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE COLLEGE READINESS OF LOW-INCOME, HISPANIC STUDENTS AT ADDISON TRAIL HIGH SCHOOL-- A CASE STUDY

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Northern Illinois University, 2017

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This case study investigated the factors that influenced the college readiness of low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail High School. The purpose of the qualitative study was to determine, through the eyes of the participants, four low-income, Hispanic students who graduated Addison Trail High School, what factors assisted them in becoming college ready. Through detailed interviews and analysis, themes emerged from the data as to how the participants became college ready. The data supported the finding that the participants became college ready because they challenged themselves, the school provided resources that did not exist at home and the participants felt a sense of belonging to their school, which allowed them to feel comfortable enough to access the resources available within the school (both practical and social-emotional) to become college ready.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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WORKING TOGETHER TO BEAT THE ODDS: FACTORS THAT
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LOW-INCOME, HISPANIC STUDENTS AT
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A CASE STUDY

BY

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my family.

To my mother, Robin; father, Paul; brother, Ryan; and sister, Ashley. Thank you for always coming to my games and rooting me on. You were always there for me, no matter what, and I love you all.

To my in-laws, Jane, Ralph, Emily, Randy and Maggie. Thank you for always being positive and a constant source of laughter and fun.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

According to national statistics, low-income, Hispanic students are not enrolling in college-level courses like Advanced Placement (Zarate & Burciago, 2010) and are underrepresented at two- and four-year colleges and universities in comparison to their White peers (Fry & Lopez, 2012). However, at Addison Trail High School – a public high school of approximately 2,000 students, serving students in grades 9-12, located in the suburbs about 30 miles to the west of Chicago, Illinois – low-income, Hispanic students *were* being accepted to college and enrolling in Advanced Placement courses like their White peers. Additionally, some low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail *were* scoring well enough on the ACT college entrance exam to be considered by ACT as “college ready.” Since some low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail were college ready, this study will seek to examine how low-income, Hispanic students from this high school, Addison Trail, became college ready despite the national data showing that very few low-income and Hispanic students are ready for college in comparison to their White classmates (ACT, 2013a; ACT, 2013b). To date, however, there is no qualitative study that has detailed how low-income, Hispanic students in a public, suburban high school, from their own perspectives, become college ready.

Problem Statement

Since there is already a gap in the college readiness of Hispanic and low-income students in comparison to their White peers (ACT, 2013a; ACT, 2013b), and there is an increasing number of Hispanic students in U.S. public schools (Kena et al., 2015) and an increasing number

of Hispanic students living in poverty in suburban public schools (Kena et al., 2015), this study will attempt to understand what impacts a low-income, Hispanic student in becoming college ready. By studying the perspectives of college ready low-income, Hispanic students from a public high school like Addison Trail (that has had a significant increase in the number of low-income, Hispanic students enrolled), one can seek to replicate conditions, programs and systems to assist more low-income, Hispanic students in defying the national statistics and becoming college ready.

Defining Low Income

For the purpose of defining low income for this study, low-income students will be identified as those students who qualify for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). These students are children from families that are at or below 185% of the poverty level (Illinois State Board of Education, 2014).

Defining Hispanic

The term “Hispanic” will be used to identify the participants; however, the term “Latino” will also be used interchangeably. The 2010 United States Census Bureau defined Hispanic or Latino as “a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011).

Defining College Readiness

The research on factors that influence the college readiness of low-income students and factors that influence the college readiness of Hispanic students explores college readiness in a variety of ways. For example, college readiness may be defined as the ability to read complex texts (Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory at Edvance Research, Inc., 2012) or participation in college-preparatory courses (Mayer, 2008).

For the purpose of this study, college readiness will be defined by the ACT college entrance exam. The ACT is a curriculum-based achievement test that measures the skills and knowledge taught in high schools that are deemed essential for college and career readiness. ACT has defined college readiness as the “acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing first-year courses at a postsecondary institution” (ACT, 2013a, p. 3).

Furthermore, ACT has defined college ready as meeting all college readiness benchmarks on the ACT exam. In 2012, the benchmark scores on each one of the ACT subject exams to be college ready were as follows: Composite = 21, English = 18, Mathematics = 22, Reading = 21 and Science = 24. By achieving each one of the subject benchmarks, ACT studies have shown “that a student has a 50 percent chance of earning a grade of B or higher or about a 75 percent chance of earning a C or higher in a typical credit-bearing first-year college course in that subject area (English composition, college algebra, introductory social science and biology)” (ACT, 2010, p. 1).

CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

My Experiential Knowledge

In July of 2012, I was named principal of Addison Trail High School and my personal goal was to prepare all students for college and career. Addison Trail is a public high school that served 1,969 students in 2012, grades 9 to 12. At the time I began this study, in 2012, Addison Trail High School was 52% Hispanic, 38% White and 49% low income. The graduation rate for low-income students at Addison Trail in 2012 was 85% and 86% for Hispanic students. In 2012, 19% of the overall student population was considered college ready in all four ACT subject area tests, as per the ACT college readiness benchmarks (Illinois State Board of Education, 2012b). According to internal data collection at Addison Trail, 88% of the graduating class of 2012 was accepted to a two- or four-year college or university. Fifty-nine percent of those graduating seniors were accepted to a four-year college/university and 29% were accepted to a two-year college/university.

Prior to 2012, Addison Trail had undergone a significant shift in the demographic make-up of its student body. By the time I had become principal, Addison Trail had shifted from a predominantly White, non-low-income student body to a predominantly Hispanic, low-income student body. Table 1 details the major student demographic percentages and total student enrollment figures for Addison Trail High School from 2003 to 2012 according to the Illinois School Report Card provided by the Illinois State Board of Education.

Table 1

Major Student Demographic Percentages and Total Student Enrollment Figures, 2003-2012

	2003	2012
White	60.6%	37.7%
Black	1.0%	2.8%
Hispanic	31%	52.4%
Asian	6.9%	5.1%
Low income	19.1%	48.9%
Total Student Enrollment	1,780	1,969

Setting Context

In 2012, three non-selective suburban Chicago public high schools in Illinois were identified as “peer” benchmark schools for the college readiness of Addison Trail students. These three high schools had greater than 1,400 students, at least 30% of their population listed as White and approximately at least 50% of the student body listed as Hispanic. The schools, including Addison Trail, their demographics and percent of students who were college ready are listed in Table 2. In 2015, according to the Illinois School Report Card, the four schools listed in Table 2 remain as the only non-selective, public high schools in Illinois with 1,400 students or greater and at least 30% of their population as White and at least 50% of their population identified as Hispanic.

Table 2

Non-Selective Suburban Chicago Public High Schools

School	Number of Students	% White	% Hispanic	% Low Income	% of Students College Ready According to ACT	Graduation Rate (%)
Addison Trail High School	1,969	37.7	52.4	48.9	19	89.6
Community High School 94	2,153	42.9	48.4	26.3	21	94.2
Fenton High School	1,579	39.3	48.5	49.5	22	82.8
Wheeling High School	1,887	38.4	51.3	38.1	27	85.8

The data shows that of the schools with similar demographics to Addison Trail, the school with the greatest percentage of students who were college ready in 2012 was Wheeling High School. Wheeling had 27% of its overall student population college ready, as per the 2012 Illinois State Report Card.

The data implies that the low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail would have to beat the so-called “odds,” for historically, Hispanic students are underrepresented at the college level, specifically, two- and four-year colleges/universities (Fry & Lopez, 2012). In addition, according to the ACT, low-income and Hispanic students are less likely to meet the ACT college readiness benchmarks than their White and Asian peers (ACT, 2013a).

However, while studies show that Hispanic students and low-income students are not as college ready as their White peers (ACT, 2013a; ACT, 2013b), in an attempt to increase the college readiness of its low-income, Hispanic students, Addison Trail began to implement

practices to increase the college readiness of its low-income, Hispanic students. Starting in approximately 2001, Addison Trail began removing barriers for students entering Advanced Placement programs. Additionally, in an effort to increase the number of students accepted to colleges and universities, Addison Trail began to translate materials into Spanish and hold college planning and financial aid night for parents in both English and Spanish. To connect students and parents to colleges, regular college visits were scheduled and college fairs were held on campus.

The results of such efforts were that in my first year as principal of Addison Trail, 92% of the graduating class of 2013 was accepted to a two- or four-year college or university, many of those students being low income and Hispanic. Additionally, Addison Trail had a growing number and percentage of Hispanic and low-income students accessing college-level Advanced Placement (AP) courses. The AP enrollment had increased from 23 Hispanic students (13%) and 12 low-income students (7%) in the fall of 2005 (total of 172 students enrolled in AP courses) to 333 Hispanic students (40%) and 345 low-income students (42%) in the fall of 2013 (total of 825 students enrolled in AP courses).

As more and more Addison Trail low-income, Hispanic students began to be accepted to college and access Advanced Placement courses, as principal I sought to seek an answer to why certain low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail became college ready. What phenomena existed in the lives of the Addison Trail college-ready low-income, Hispanic students? How or can these conditions be replicated for all low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail? Do certain courses or experiences at school better prepare a low-income, Hispanic student at Addison Trail to become college ready? What home, peer and school influences played a role in a low-income, Hispanic student becoming college ready? In short, these questions led me to

formulate the main research question of this study: How do low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail High School become college ready?

While there is extensive research on the achievement levels of low-income and Hispanic high school students as separate groups in grades 9 through 12, and the achievement gap that exists between each demographic and socioeconomic group and their higher income and non-Hispanic counterparts, there is little research that focuses on the factors that influence college readiness of *both* low-income, Hispanic students. Therefore, the literature that will be reviewed will be first of low-income students and then of Hispanic students.

Factors That Prevent the College Readiness of Low-Income Students

Adelman (2006) conducted a quantitative analysis of several variables to what predicted the difference for students in completing a bachelor's degree at a four-year college/university. Adelman found that socioeconomic status (SES) was statistically significant in the study, but that the completion of mathematics courses beyond Algebra 2 and participation in rigorous academic courses in high school were more significant in a student's ability to graduate college (Adelman, 2006).

Additionally, students from low-income families historically have not had the opportunity to access rigorous high school courses and Advanced Placement courses (Martin, Karabel, & Jaquez, 2005). Instead, they tended to have underqualified teachers who were not experienced to deliver the curriculum effectively (Kozol, 1991) or not prepared to teach the college preparatory curriculum (Haycock, 2006). In addition, Kozol (1991) found that many of these children were not prepared for college-preparatory curriculum due to the lack of education needed in their early years of schooling. For example, many low-income students who began high school in non-college-preparatory classes were more likely to remain in non-college-

preparatory classes and not be college ready upon their completion of high school (Bernhardt, 2013).

Further evidence of low-income students not accessing higher levels of rigorous coursework compared to their higher income peers comes from the College Board. According to the College Board (2014), approximately 27.5% of Advanced Placement test takers were low-income. This compares to approximately 48% of students in the United States qualifying as low-income (College Board, 2014).

In his multivariable quantitative study, Crosnoe (2009) found that the low-income minority students in high- to medium-socioeconomic (SES) schools felt isolated because of their low-income status, had progressed less in the level of high school coursework and had a greater feeling of depression. These students also had feelings of depression because they felt left out, both culturally and academically, in the medium- and high-SES schools (Crosnoe, 2009).

Factors That Prevent the College Readiness of Hispanic Students

In their review of the national trends of Latino students attending college, Zarate and Burciaga (2010) found that Hispanic students were less likely than White students to receive the preparation of a program such as Advanced Placement or gifted/talented programs which exposes them to the rigor of a collegiate setting. For example, in a study performed by the Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory on 11th-grade Texas high school students, Hispanic students were nearly 24% less likely than their Asian and White peers to be prepared for the reading level of college texts (Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory at Edvance Research, Inc., 2012). The lack of preparedness of Hispanic students for the reading level of a collegiate text may be attributed to the lack of access to college-preparatory classes like Advanced Placement. There is a gap that exists in the number of Hispanic students who have access to

college-preparation courses like Advanced Placement in comparison to their White classmates (Klopfenstein, 2004). In some cases, high-achieving Hispanic students are underrepresented and do not enroll in selective programs for which they are qualified (Fry, 2004).

Many Hispanic students, according to their results on the ACT, are not college ready. Only 14% of Hispanic students meet all four college readiness benchmarks. Currently, the demographic groups with the highest percentage meeting all four ACT college readiness benchmark scores are Asian and White students at 43% and 33%, respectively (ACT, 2013a).

According to the ACT, more White high school students are college ready than Hispanic high school students (ACT, 2013a). Although more Hispanic students are attending college (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010), White students are twice as likely as Hispanic students to graduate from a four-year college. Additionally, 30% of Whites between the ages of 25 and 28 have a bachelor's degree, whereas only 13% of Hispanics have a bachelor's degree (Trevino & Mayes, 2006).

Factors That Increase the College Readiness of Low-Income Students

The completion of college-preparatory coursework and academic advising for a low-income student into college-preparatory courses increase the college readiness of a low-income student (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011). Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) concluded that students identified as low income were more likely to be college ready when they received academic guidance in selecting rigorous classes. This guidance created a pathway towards college and career and an understanding of the college application process. Additionally, low-income students tended to be more college ready as evidenced by a greater acceptance rate and increased performance on standardized achievement exams that may be used for college admission when their parents were engaged in their child's education (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010).

Resilient low-income students have the ability to “beat the odds” and perform academically. High academic aspirations and exposure to a rigorous curriculum increase the resiliency of a low-income student (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001). Additionally, resilient low-income students possess academic behaviors like being prepared for class, participating in class and completing class assignments (Finn & Rock, 1997).

Factors That Increase the College Readiness of Hispanic Students

The implementation of a high school course selection policy, like open admission in Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs (an international curriculum that allows students to earn college credit in high school), may assist in preparing Hispanic students for college-level material. In her qualitative study, Mayer (2008) found that an open admission policy for IB programs successfully attracted and retained Latino students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Additionally, Mayer attributed the success of the Hispanic students in the college-preparatory IB program to the International Baccalaureate teachers' expectations that the minority students had the ability to meet the rigorous goals of the program. Mayer found that implementing a rigorous academic curriculum was only the first step in the process of raising the academic achievement of Hispanic students. Teacher belief in the students' ability, a rigorous curriculum and a highly scaffolded system of academic and social support must be in place for achievement. These academic and social supports included counseling students on academic progress, college requirements, college financial aid and offering student leadership opportunities and retreats for students to build positive relationships with one another (Mayer, 2008).

Reyes, Scribner and Scribner (1999) discovered that schools that achieved high levels of performance in educating Mexican-American students used a collaborative approach to

leadership and articulated and implemented a clear vision for all stakeholders in the school community. The schools also had collaborative, selfless administrators who were dedicated to the school community and its students.

Liou, Anthrop-Gonzalez, and Cooper (2009) focused on the factors necessary to create change in large urban high schools for Hispanic students. The study found that a school must possess caring adults and a structure that does not prohibit students of color from rigorous high-school curricula to create a feeling of belonging for its students and tap into all social networks within the community. Liou et al. (2009) found that the guidance counselors' and teachers' belief in the students' ability typically led to either student success or failure. If the guidance counselor or teacher believed the student had a limited capacity, the student did not push him or herself to become college or career ready.

Yamamura, Martinez and Saenz (2010) examined the meaning and significance of college readiness among teachers, counselors, parents, students, and superintendents in the region along the southern border of Texas to improve the college readiness of its Hispanic students. They found that stakeholders felt that there was a personal and group responsibility for the college readiness of the students. The teachers, counselors, parents, students and administrators all emphasized a desire to improve the college readiness of their students to reverse the college dropout trends of its Hispanic student population. Additionally, the personal responsibility of stakeholders, early interventions (academic and social) for students not meeting college readiness benchmarks, exposing college-ready students to the diversity of a post-secondary school and educating the families of the students on what it takes to be college ready, all contributed and prepared students to become college ready (Yamamura et al., 2010).

Sheehan (2002) explored what separates high-performing schools with large numbers of Hispanic students. Sheehan found that a combination of expectations for student achievement, a clear structure for instructional leadership, a high percentage of students participating in extracurricular activities and high parental involvement were all linked to better performance for schools serving predominantly Hispanic student populations.

In addition to a rigorous curriculum, resiliency was a factor in a Hispanic student's academic success and path toward college readiness. Morales (2010) focused on key factors that cause resilience in gifted low-income, minority students, including Hispanic students, to push them to succeed. Morales defined resiliency as "the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding" (Morales & Trotman, 2004, p. 8). Morales's research found these key factors that impacted resiliency: a support system at home that caused the student to feel a sense of duty, a mentor or significant adult, a strong work ethic, high self-esteem and a strong mother as a role model. These factors contributed to a Hispanic student's ability to strive to succeed when there were educational or social obstacles that may prevent the student's academic success and ultimately his or her ability to become college ready (Morales, 2010).

Like low-income students, resilient Hispanic students demonstrate behaviors at school that clearly are connected to success in the classroom. Examples of these behaviors are participation in class, prepared for class, being on time to school, completing assignments and/or homework on time and not disrupting class (Finn & Rock, 1997). Additionally, resilient Hispanic students believe in their cognitive abilities, are goal-oriented and have an unwavering belief in their ability to understand and do well on the material covered in school (Gordon,

1996). A supportive academic environment, a sense of belonging to school, and family and peer support all play a role in the resiliency of a Hispanic student (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997).

Resilient Hispanic youth believe in their ability to create meaningful relationships at school but do not view belonging as the only means by which they can become successful (Gordon, 1996).

Altschul, Oyserman and Bybee (2008) explored how the self-perception of a student's own racial identity, regardless of race, positively or negatively impacted the academic achievement of a student. The study found that identifying oneself with a group is extremely important to academic success of the student. Hispanic students who did not identify with a racial/ethnic identity tended to perform poorly and have poor end-of-year grades. Hispanic students who identified with their native culture and that of the new culture did not have an effect on the student's performance as measured by their grade point average. Lastly, Hispanic students that focused on overcoming all obstacles to be a part of mainstream society had higher end-of-year grades than those minority students who did not (Altschul et al., 2008).

In his interviews of first-generation Hispanic students, Borrero (2011) found that students felt there were four predictive factors of how students perceived themselves as being college-bound: college talk, dynamic family roles, school as a support system, and community resources. The students felt the "college talk" was necessary to navigate the college application landscape. Additionally, the students who felt a deep commitment to their families and had support from their families and school staff members felt ready to accept the next phase of their education, going to college. Last, the students who had a strong cultural bond and felt an obligation to overcome cultural stereotypes were proud of their accomplishment in being accepted to college and being college ready (Borrero, 2011).

Goza and Ryabov (2009) studied the role of peers in the context of school and how it predicted academic outcomes. This study used a nationally representative sample to explore how peer networks predicted academic performance. Results showed that Hispanic students benefit academically from well-funded schools but were more likely to perform better in school and have a higher grade point average when there were more Hispanic students in their school and courses (Goza & Ryabov, 2009).

Shiu, Kettler and Johnsen (2009) studied the social effects of Hispanic students enrolled in an Advanced Placement course in middle school. While the study was conducted on middle school students, the results are relevant as the study found similar results with studies conducted in high school; that is, family, friends and a sense of belonging were all key factors in Hispanic students valuing school and seeing the connection between performing well in school and having college and career goals. The authors found that by enrolling in rigorous courses like Advanced Placement, students tended to be surrounded by fellow Hispanic students who were serious about their future and that such peer groups influenced the belief and college goals of one another.

Close and Solberg (2007) investigated if combining Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and Deci and Ryan's (1987) self-determination theory would predict a Latino high school student's achievement, distress and retention. The findings were consistent with social cognitive theory, which states that the higher the student's academic self-efficacy, the more positive the academic outcomes (Bandura, 1986). Self-determination theory states that a student would perform better academically when he or she freely and individually makes choices based on one's own self-interest (Deci & Ryan, 1987). The results of the Close and Solberg study (2007) found that the greater the Latino student's level of intrinsic motivation and the more

connected the Latino student felt to his or her teachers and peers, the higher the students' self-efficacy and academic achievement.

A Hispanic student's success in school, including his or her ability to prepare oneself for college, can be linked to a sense of belonging and friends in school. According to Madrid's (2011) article on the Latino achievement gap, to create a culture for Hispanic students to feel a sense of belonging and provide support for students so they stay in school, the school leaders must clearly set a vision and develop a collaborative environment that fosters a mutual respect among all school stakeholders.

The teachers of students in schools where Hispanic students were successful had students who perceived their relationships with their teachers as meaningful and respectful. Additionally, in schools where Hispanic students were successful in their courses, the students had teachers who felt responsible for the learning of their students and believed that all students could achieve their academic potential and successfully complete college (Madrid, 2011).

Latino students may face complex cultural experiences. At home, many Hispanic students deal with a home language that differs from the language at school. Additionally, many times the student is the first to attend school in the United States, which may lead to a sense of isolation. The student struggle to identify as a member of one's culture and a member of the formal and informal relationships within the school (Borrero, 2011).

Smith, Stern and Shatrova (2008) listed the following as primary factors preventing parents from involving themselves in their child's schooling: the failure of the school to communicate in Spanish to parents about key happenings; the lack of the parents' ability to communicate in English with the school and the unwillingness of the parents to question the

authority of the school officials and advocate for their child. The lack of parental involvement may impact the child's knowledge of the steps necessary to become college ready.

Parents were engaged in their student's education in schools that are highly effective in serving Hispanic students. Parents of Latino students were provided translation services so they may understand any material sent home. School events were organized around the schedules of the parents, not the school calendar. Additionally, teachers actively reached out to parents and developed positive communication lines on the progress of each student (Madrid, 2011).

Summary

The research shows that several factors affect the ability of low-income students and Hispanic students to be ready for college. The literature supports that creating a sense of belonging for students, participating in a rigorous curriculum and engaging parents in their student's education contribute to their college readiness.

Additionally, reaching out to the families of Hispanic students provides a support system for the student. The Hispanic families must feel comfortable accessing the resources of the school and understand their role in shaping their child's future education. The school must accommodate parents by communicating in Spanish in written notices, having translation services available when speaking with parents and minimizing the intimidation that typically is felt by parents because they cannot speak the language.

While the aforementioned factors can impact the college readiness of Hispanic students, a gap between low-income and Hispanic students and their high-income and White peers still is present. While the research speaks of the necessity of exposure to rigorous curricula and a supportive environment for parents and students, it remains silent on the effect educating low-income, Hispanic parents on the college application/financial aid process has on a low-income,

Hispanic student's willingness to become college ready. Questions still remain on what information college-ready, high-income, White students have that Hispanic students do not have access to. While common knowledge would assume that by educating the parents and students on what requirements must be met to get into college, at what point in the education of a White student or high-income student does the college-preparatory conversation take place versus their low-income, Hispanic peers? What steps do White families and high-income families, or just families of college-ready students, take that low-income, Hispanic families do not take to prepare their students for college?

To conclude, the research supports that for low-income and Hispanic students to become college ready they must engage in a college-preparatory, rigorous curriculum; their families must be involved in their child's education; and the student must feel a sense of belonging in the school.

Research Question

My main research question is: How do low-income, Hispanic students from Addison Trail become college ready? As the summary above indicates, currently there is a lack of knowledge in the area of the factors that impact the college readiness of a low-income, Hispanic student and no study that analyzes those factors through the phenomenological lens as told by a low-income, Hispanic student in a suburban setting like Addison Trail.

The interview questions were centered on three topics: (1) the participants describing how and what experiences at Addison Trail they felt contributed to their college readiness; (2) the participants explaining their understanding of the college application process; (3) what skills they would need to acquire from Addison Trail to prepare them for the college of their choice; and (4) the participants sharing what skills they acquired and how they acquired those skills

during their years at Addison Trail to prepare them to meet each of the ACT college readiness benchmarks.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Participant Selection

The participants in the case study were low-income, Hispanic students who graduated from Addison Trail High School in the spring of 2012 and met all four of the ACT college readiness benchmark scores on the English, Math, Reading and Science ACT subtests of the Illinois Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) taken during the students' junior year (grade 11) of high school in the spring of 2011. The decision to use the ACT college readiness benchmark scores as a criterion for participant selection was derived from the Illinois State Board of Education's use of the ACT benchmark scores to define the percentage of students who are college ready in all public high schools in Illinois, one being Addison Trail (Illinois State Board of Education, 2012b).

To identify the qualifying participants, I used the Addison Trail Prairie State Achievement Exam scores provided to Addison Trail High School by the state of Illinois student information database in the spring/summer of 2011. According to the student information database, 463 total grade 11 students took the PSAE during the spring of 2011. Of the 463 students who took the PSAE exam during that year, 148 students were low-income and Hispanic. Of the 148 low-income, Hispanic students who took the PSAE, seven low-income, Hispanic students met all the ACT college readiness benchmark scores. The ACT benchmark scores to be

considered by ACT as college ready in 2011 are as follows: Composite = 21, English = 18, Mathematics = 22, Reading = 21 and Science = 24 (ACT, 2010).

Research Relationship

During the time the participants attended Addison Trail, I served in the role of Assistant Principal of Curriculum and Instruction. I did not instruct the participants in a classroom setting or in an extracurricular setting. My interactions with the participants were limited to social interactions within the school setting, such as student recognition ceremonies, athletic contests, extracurricular activities, etc.

Since each of the qualifying participants knew of me and my professional role in the school, both as an assistant principal and then the principal, I presented myself as not only a researcher but also a practitioner. I explained to the participants that it is my goal as a researcher to listen to their account of how they achieved college readiness so that I can seek to replicate conditions for students of a similar background. This way, more students may be helped to become college ready upon graduating from Addison Trail.

I clarified that as a researcher it is my obligation to present their stories of how college readiness can be achieved. I asked the participants to speak candidly and honestly about their experiences at Addison Trail and not to be self-conscious about how I may feel if there was a negative experience during their time in high school. I reinforced that all experiences, both positive and negative, shaped the participant's college readiness and we sought to gain a better understanding of what phenomena took place during their Addison Trail years that prepared them for college.

Participant Interviews

Once the participants were selected, they were interviewed through a series of prompts. These interviews were conducted in a location chosen by the participant. The interview was an informal conversational interview, with both the interviewee and myself discussing various topics within the interview (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). All interview responses were audio recorded and then transcribed.

The interview questions were designed to answer my research question: how the participants believed they became college ready by the time they graduated Addison Trail High School. The questions were centered on three topics: (1) the participants descriptions of how and what experiences at Addison Trail they felt contributed to their college readiness; (2) the participants' understanding of the college application process and what skills were needed from at Addison Trail to prepare them for the college of their choice; and (3) the participants sharing what skills they acquired and how they acquired those skills during their years at Addison Trail to prepare them to meet each of the ACT college readiness benchmarks.

The first set of interview questions began with the participants describing their high school experience and the types of courses and coursework done during their schooling at Addison Trail. Some examples of the prompts are as follows:

1. Describe your experience at Addison Trail High School.
2. What classes did you take at Addison Trail?
3. Describe the type of assignments and assessments done in those classes.
4. Why did you select the courses you did at Addison Trail?
5. Reflect on your collegiate experience. In your opinion, did the knowledge and skills you acquired at Addison Trail make you feel prepared for your college coursework?

- Why or why not? Did these skills develop in Addison (elementary, middle or high school) or from another school or educational setting?
6. Did you participate in any extracurricular activities at Addison Trail? If so, what skills did you feel you acquired by participating in those activities? Do those skills transfer to the collegiate setting? Why or why not?
 7. Were there any influences or experiences in elementary or middle school that may have assisted in your college readiness? If so, what were they? If not, what helped shape your view of college and the importance of going to college?
 8. At what point in your high school or college career did you feel like you were college ready? Do you feel like you were you able to maintain your values, culture, etc., to achieve college readiness?

The next series of interview questions focused on the participants' understanding of the college application process, the students' desire to attend college and the students' understanding of the steps that needed to be taken in high school to prepare for college. Some sample prompts are as follows:

1. What did you know about college when you entered Addison Trail?
2. Did anyone in your family or peer group go to college? Did they talk about college or college aspirations?
3. Did you want to go to college? Why or why not?
4. How did you learn about the college entry requirements?
5. Looking back to your high school years, what steps did you feel you had to take in high school to qualify to be accepted to a college or university? How did you learn about those steps?

6. Were there any significant individuals, friends, family or adults, either at school or home, who that mentored your understanding of the college application process and steps in high school you should take so you would be accepted to the college of your choice and be ready for that collegiate coursework? If so, who were those individuals and what guidance did they provide you?

The final set of questions centered on the ACT college entrance exam. For this study, the ACT college readiness benchmarks served as the criteria in determining the participants' college readiness. Since each participant met the ACT college readiness benchmarks, participants were asked why they believed they met each of the ACT college readiness benchmarks and what high school experiences may have contributed to their ability to meet the benchmarks. Some sample interview prompts are listed below:

1. What do you remember about the ACT?
2. Why do you think you performed the way you did on the ACT?
3. Why do you think you met all the ACT college readiness benchmark scores?
4. What experiences in high school helped prepare you with the knowledge and skills to perform at the level you did on the ACT?

Data Analysis

After data was collected through audio recording, the data was transcribed. The transcribed interviews were coded in terms of the coding categories assigned. I read the interviews and highlighted sections that appeared to be key topics pertaining to the question about students' college readiness. I labeled these topics as coding categories. Some examples of coding categories are "influences at school," "peer influences," etc.

After the data was coded, I attempted to find the relationships and connections that existed within and between each of the categories to see if any themes developed from the data. Once the connections and relationships within and between the categories were determined, theories about how students became college ready emerged from the data as to the factors that impacted a low-income, Hispanic student from Addison Trail to be college ready (Maxwell, 2005).

Validity

Potential threats to the validity of the study existed. Specifically, serving as an administrator at Addison Trail, I dealt with two potential threats to the validity: bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2005). Bias means that based on the fact that I was an administrator during the years the participants attended Addison Trail, I may have preconceived theories or perceptions as to how the students became college ready (Maxwell, 2005). In addition, because the participants know me as an administrator from Addison Trail, there is the issue that their responses could have been affected and/or altered by my presence as a researcher. This potential threat to the study is called reactivity.

To address both of these threats, the participants reviewed their individual case studies, reviewed the themes drawn from them, provided any clarifications and confirmed their case studies and themes. This allowed the participants to validate the themes and/or theories as those that they intended to communicate to me (Maxwell, 2005). This “member-checking” minimized my bias and their reactivity as they confirmed that the themes and/or theories drawn from their responses were indeed accurate representations of their thoughts and feelings about how they became college ready. Additionally, where necessary, I used the participants’ personal academic data (e.g., ACT scores, student transcripts, etc.) to confirm that their statements of their academic

performance and experiences match their personal accounts of their academic performance and experiences.

While the threats of bias and reactivity were present, there were benefits to being an administrator during the students' time attending Addison Trail. By working at Addison Trail, I was able to ask questions that were directly linked to the participants' experience. I also had a rapport with the participants that made it comfortable for them to respond freely. Last, because I had a working knowledge of Addison Trail, I was able to ask direct and relevant follow-up questions to provide a complete picture of the participants' responses (Maxwell, 2005).

Limitations of the Study

The results of the study are limited to the responses of the participants that met the participant selection criteria. The criteria and definition of college readiness for this study was limited to a low-income, Hispanic student meeting the ACT college readiness benchmark scores. One may argue that this criteria and definition for college readiness was too narrow, even within Addison Trail High School. Additionally, one could say that since there are low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail being accepted to college, regardless of their ability to meet the ACT college readiness benchmarks, those low-income, Hispanic students should be considered college ready because they were accepted to a college.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Critical Analysis

Based on the literature, traditional barriers that have prevented low-income students from becoming college ready include a lack of participation in rigorous coursework, such as Advanced Placement (Martin et al., 2005) or successful completion of Algebra 2 (Adelman, 2006). Low-income students also traditionally attend schools with underqualified teachers (Kozol, 1991) who lack the skills to provide the students with the academic skills necessary to perform college-preparatory coursework (Haycock, 2006). Additionally, low-income students that begin in non-college preparatory classes rarely leave them (Bernhardt, 2013), and the College Board data supports such claims with only just over 27% of Advanced Placement test takers being low income (College Board, 2014). Last, low-income students in high- to medium-SES schools felt a lack of belonging, both academically and culturally, which limited their progress in the level of high school coursework (Crosnoe, 2009).

The barriers to college readiness are not just present for low-income students; they also exist for Hispanic students. Hispanic students are less likely to participate in AP or gifted programs (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010), less likely to have access to AP courses (Klopfenstein, 2004), do not enter rigorous courses that they are qualified for (Fry, 2004) and are not as prepared to read college-level texts (Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory at Edvance

Research, Inc., 2012). According to the ACT, only 14% of Hispanic students are college ready (ACT, 2013a).

So, how did these low-income and Hispanic students from Addison Trail become college ready? First, the students challenged themselves. Second, the school provided resources to support the students challenging themselves because those resources did not exist at home. Third, through the practical and social-emotional support provided by fellow students and staff, combined with the accessibility of resources, the students felt a sense of belonging within the school that gave them the courage to challenge themselves in the most rigorous of courses offered at Addison Trail.

Background of Participants

As was stated in the previous chapter, of the 148 low-income, Hispanic students who took the PSAE, seven low-income, Hispanic students met all of the ACT college readiness benchmark scores in the spring of 2011, thereby qualifying them for this study. Of the seven qualifying candidates, four candidates agreed to participate in this study. The other three candidates either could not be contacted or did not agree to participate in the study. Of the four participants who took part in the study, two are male and two are female. All participants graduated from Addison Trail High School in 2012.

Participant #1 - Jessica

Jessica was born in Mexico and came to the United States with her mother and sister when she was 9 years old. Jessica's mother was the sole provider for the family as Jessica and her sister grew up on the outskirts of Chicago in Berwyn, Illinois. Jessica's mother always stressed the importance of education in the household, but finances were always a concern. Despite earning a bachelor's degree in Mexico, Jessica's mother had to work two or three jobs to

meet all her financial obligations. As Jessica grew older, she recalled always discussing bills and her mother was open about the family's limited income level.

It was not until her junior year of high school that Jessica and her family moved to Addison and attended Addison Trail for her junior and senior years of high school. Based on her family's income level, she qualified for the school's free lunch and fee waiver program. These programs allowed her to eat lunch at no cost, and she did not have to pay for any additional book or course fees. As her peers began to earn their driver's licenses and buy cars to transport themselves to school, Jessica used the school-provided bus transportation. In addition, as her fellow classmates began to get laptops and computers of their own, Jessica relied on the Addison Trail library as a resource to complete coursework because her family's computer was, in her words, "just very, very slow. So, I might as well not have a computer" (Jessica, April 9, 2016).

While the resources at home may have been limited for Jessica, she started to access the staff and students of Addison Trail to help her connect to the resources necessary for her to develop the academic skills to become college ready. Upon her arrival to Addison Trail, she joined to the cross-country team. There she found a group of teammates and staff members who immediately connected her to the school at the start of the school year. Jessica commented that her extracurricular activities allowed her to "start networking," which led to positive peer relationships. It was this group of friends who supported each other in deciding, what classes to take (like the rigorous Advanced Placement courses where she would be exposed to college-level readings and writing assignments), which teachers made class the most interesting and how to complete specific homework assignments.

One specific example of how Jessica's network of friends helped her become college ready was when they convinced her to take the ACT prep course. Jessica stated that despite not

wanting to attend the ACT prep course, it was her friend who said, “You should go with us.” Jessica felt after attending the course, “I think that’s what helped me with my ACT score, to be honest” (Jessica, April 9, 2016). It was in this course that students learned the content of the ACT, took practice ACTs to monitor their own progress on the test and learned specific test-taking strategies to improve one’s ACT score.

Not only did her friends help her become college ready, the staff did as well. Jessica reflected that as a low-income student she did not think college was possible until she arrived at Addison Trail and spoke with her guidance counselor. Jessica stated, “That’s the one thing I will always remember because the counselors here were way more involved in classes and what you actually needed to be college ready” (Jessica, April 9, 2016). An example of this guidance came from the many conversations she had with her counselor about taking Advanced Placement courses or taking courses aligned with her career goals, which at the time was becoming a firefighter. She felt these more rigorous courses helped develop the skills she needed to become college ready, such as the Advanced Placement courses providing the skills of analysis necessary to dissect the meaning of a reading passage. It was the hands-on Fire Science course that required she apply the knowledge she learned in the classroom portion of the course.

Additionally, she found the Addison Trail staff supportive and encouraging, even during times when Jessica found herself questioning whether or not working hard in school would be worth it. A faculty member told Jessica one day when she commented that she did not think she would go to college, “You can still work your way through it. Educate yourself” (Jessica, April 9, 2016).

The combination of staff and students working together to support Jessica in finding the path to developing the academic skills to become college ready by taking rigorous courses and

becoming familiar with the ACT led Jessica to not only meet the ACT college readiness benchmarks, earn a grade point average of 3.2917 (out of 4.0), but also feel a sense of belonging to her school where there was no barrier to her success in the classroom. Jessica said, “I kept seeing everyone [at Addison Trail] thinking and dreaming about their huge goals that it’s contagious” (Jessica, April 9, 2016). She continued that there was a “sense of unity” throughout the school; whether it was at a track meet or homecoming, Jessica felt that “We would all back ourselves up this school” (Jessica, April 9, 2016). Jessica is currently fully employed and working herself through college.

Participant #2 - Beatrice

Beatrice was born in the United States after her parents moved to the United States from Mexico. Beatrice lived in Addison, Illinois, as long as she can recall and attended public school in Addison from kindergarten through grade 12. Her parents were undocumented, and like Jessica, her family (which included a younger brother and sister) had to struggle to find a way to pay daily expenses. Whether it was rent for her home or groceries, Beatrice was always aware that her family’s financial circumstances were much different than some of her classmates. Her mother and father worked long hours, and while Beatrice was a part of the free lunch and fee waiver programs at Addison Trail, it was her responsibility to pay for the additional expenses that came with participating in extracurricular activities. At times, Beatrice did not know how she would eat at her cross-country meet or how she could afford the costumes necessary to participate on the Orchesis dance team.

The lack of financial resources caused a sense of self-consciousness within Beatrice. At times, she did not want to trouble her classmates for a ride to or from school because they had a car and she did not. She did not have sleepovers at her house because she was aware of the

socioeconomic differences that existed between her and her peers. In her words, Beatrice said, “I still felt like I was the poor girl in the group” (Beatrice, May 5, 2016). She also said, “I felt culturally there was some kind of disconnect there. Like I said, it just made me feel way out of place” (Beatrice, May 5, 2016). As she reflected on the difference in educational upbringing, Beatrice continued:

I always felt like I was behind because I didn't know all of the words and I always had to look back and figure out vocabulary. Or even just socializing, figuring out what some statement would mean. I never felt like I could invite anybody really to my house to study, and things like that just made me feel way out of place. (Beatrice, May 5, 2016)

Despite the self-consciousness, Beatrice connected with a group of peers. This peer group assisted each other in selecting courses that they felt would best prepare them for college, helping each other with the difficult homework that came along with taking the challenging honors and Advanced Placement courses and helped connect each other to extracurricular activities that they felt were meaningful and enriching experiences. When Beatrice got to high school, she learned about honors and Advanced Placement courses from her classmates because, as she put it:

My parents don't really know what that means. They don't really know the American school system or what honors means or what AP means or any of that. But for myself, I thought I would be better off in those classes. I was kind of jealous of the other kids who were there too. (Beatrice, May 5, 2016)

She did not seek out the AP courses as a means to get into a specific college but rather to challenge herself. “I wanted the hardest classes I could take for my own benefit, even if I didn’t know what that meant necessarily” (Beatrice, May 5, 2016).

Beatrice’s parents did not know the steps for her to become college ready on the ACT, nor did they know the steps for her to get accepted to a college on their limited means. However, it was her peer group who pushed each other to think about future aspirations. Beatrice and her

friends talked about what colleges they wanted to attend and competed in the classroom. She said:

In senior year when we had to seriously start considering where we are going to go, two of them wanted to go, I think, to medical school and I kind of wanted to go to medical school too. The other one wanted to do aerospace engineering. I was like, 'Wow, what am I going to do?' Nursing. I think even between us it was a little bit competitive. (Beatrice, May 5, 2016)

It was not only her friends who provided guidance on the steps she needed to take to become college ready, it was also the staff of Addison Trail. Beatrice said:

My idea of college was, 'Okay, I am going to go to College of DuPage and do something there and stay at home and save money and do I don't know what.' That was my college idea. It wasn't until my counselors said, 'Let's look at your grades; they are really good. Why don't you think about applying to the other places?' I had never really thought about it. He was like, 'Why don't you think about applying to Harvard or these Ivy League schools?' I was like, 'How dare I?' In my head, I always thought really smart people go there and I wasn't number one in my class, so I didn't think I would make it. I needed to have a lot of money to go to those schools. I didn't realize until after I applied that the financial aid is really good at the Ivy League schools. That saved me from going to COD. (Beatrice, May 5, 2016)

Beatrice said:

I never thought I was qualified. That was my own, like, in my head: I am never going to be as qualified as I need to be. It wasn't until my counselor said you are more overly qualified. You need to change your mindset. (Beatrice, May 5, 2016)

Additionally, key messages from the teachers supported her focus on college. Beatrice said her AP teachers were instrumental in messaging the importance of college.

The teachers in those classes, I think, had a different way of speaking to us than just regular teachers. They would say, 'When you go to college, when you attend college. Like this will be useful at this time.' I think that kind of culture between us helped to really solidify I am going to college after this. (Beatrice, May 5, 2016)

It was this encouragement from staff and students that created a sense of belonging for Beatrice. So much so that upon Beatrice's graduation from Addison Trail she had at a grade point average of 4.5789 (out of 4.0), had a composite ACT score of 25 and took 11 Advanced

Placement courses. The academic success came as a result of not only Beatrice's willingness to challenge herself but also her peers and the staff at Addison Trail providing her the knowledge of the steps she needed to take in high school to be college ready and the confidence that, regardless of her family's limited income and her Hispanic background, there would be no barrier for her at Addison Trail that would prevent her from attending the college of her choice. Beatrice has since graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in Nursing.

Participant #3 - Frank

Frank grew up in Addison and attended all Addison schools from kindergarten through grade 12. Frank has five siblings, of which he is the second oldest. Frank's parents immigrated to the United States with approximately an elementary school education from Mexico. Frank's parents got divorced and his mother, a housekeeper, became the provider for the family. Frank said:

Housekeeping doesn't pay that much, so she has to work a lot of hours in order to make money. She always tells us we've got to pay attention in school in order to be successful and do better than her. (Frank, May 6, 2016)

As was the case with the other participants, Frank was part of the school's free lunch and fee waiver program, which provided him meals at school at no cost and waived his course fees. Despite Frank's participation in such programs, he never felt out of place when it came to his peers because he took part in the free lunch and fee waiver programs. Aside from him not having a laptop like some of his fellow classmates, Frank always felt like he had similar material goods similar to his peers. He felt his mother provided them the clothes similar to his classmates and they always, as Frank said, "had a roof over your head" (Frank, December 10, 2016).

One of the reasons Frank never felt self-conscious about any socioeconomic differences that may have existed between him and his classmates (like someone having a car, larger home,

more expensive clothes, etc.) was because of football. Frank grew up playing football with the same group of classmates since the fourth grade. He felt that because he grew up with these classmates and developed positive relationships with these classmates on the football field, they looked beyond what material possessions each other had and they did not compare such things among each other.

Not only did football provide Frank a sense of connectedness at Addison Trail, it provided him with skills that he felt helped him be academically successful. Football taught Frank the value of time management and perseverance, both skills that he felt helped him acquire the academic skills in the classroom necessary to be deemed college ready on the ACT. “It really helped me out, just focusing there. My job was to get my homework done right away” (Frank, May 6, 2016). He also felt the time management skills he learned in football taught him how to pace himself on the ACT, which allowed him to complete the exam. He said that his key to meeting the college readiness benchmark scores for the ACT was:

just managing my time. Especially on those tests, you know how the time is limited on each section of the test. Just managing time on each question and seeing how long I can spend on each question and then if I didn't know the answer, just to move on. (Frank, December 10, 2016)

His greatest lesson of perseverance in football came when Frank, a player on the Freshman B team (there are two teams at the high school freshman level, the A and B teams), became a starter on the varsity team and eventually a college football player. This perseverance transferred to the classroom, as he was able to stick with the difficult material he was learning in his courses. “The one thing with myself, I don't like to give up. It's really hard to give up on something” (Frank, December 10, 2016).

The relationships on the football field were not the only peer relationships that supported Frank during his years at Addison Trail. His peers supported each other in their understanding of their coursework. They worked together in groups in the Addison Trail library to complete homework assignments. According to Frank, you could always approach a classmate if you needed assistance in one of your classes. In fact, Frank was often the support system for other students.

In math classes, yeah. People would always ask me for help. I would show them how I figured it out, but it'll be a slow pace, at their pace so they understand and then once they got it, they would understand. (Frank, December 10, 2016)

Another example of this peer assistance also came in the form of college visits, where the students visited a college campus and learned what ACT score, grades, courses and activities needed to be done in high school to attend a particular college. Frank cited the example of a teammate taking him on a college visit to Carthage College because he did not have a parent who could attend the visit. “When I did the college visits, when we went to Carthage, I went with [a fellow football teammate]. We both went out there. We went with his parents because my parents couldn't go. Then we checked out the school” (Frank, May 6, 2016). While Frank did not end up attending Carthage College, it was his relationship with a teammate that allowed him the opportunity to see the college campus and learn the steps he would need to take in high school to be admitted to the school.

Frank also relied on positive relationships with the staff at Addison Trail to access the courses that would provide him the foundation to be successful on the ACT and in his classes. “[M]y guidance counselor would help me out with that and then just the requirements that I needed and they would tell me what I should take” (Frank, December 10, 2016). Without his guidance counselor meeting with him and telling him he had the ability to take an Advanced

Placement Spanish course, Frank would have never taken one. In these rigorous courses, Frank learned how to grapple with difficult texts and improve his writing. “Underlining and highlighting important stuff in the story when we read, that helped, and then writing” (Frank, December 10, 2016). The AP Spanish courses even helped Frank improve his speaking and writing in his native language, Spanish. “My writing, I got better at that and then just talking with it, just using it more and more often” (Frank, December 10, 2016).

The Addison Trail staff also provided Frank with resources to complete his homework assignments. The Addison Trail library staff was available before school, during lunch and after school so students could access computers. Since Frank did not have access to a computer at home, Frank would have not been able to complete the writing assignments necessary for his courses without the availability of the library computers.

[I]f I needed to get something done on a computer I would either ask one of my friends that has a laptop or computer and I would go use it there or just going a bit early during school and using the library's computers. (Frank, December 10, 2016)

Additionally, Frank could always go to a teacher if he needed extra practice on something in a class. He felt the teachers were always “approachable” and never felt like he could not get a good grade in whatever class he took (Frank, December 10, 2016).

The combination of the belonging Frank felt to Addison Trail through football and his peers, the support his peers provided him and the recommendations of the staff to take courses that would prepare him for college, these made college a reality for Frank. While he and his mother did not always know if Frank would be able to attend college because of her limited income, through Frank’s hard work in football and earning a grade point average of 3.9804 (out of 4.0), having a composite ACT score of 22 and taking three Advanced Placement courses,

Frank was provided an opportunity to attend, play football, and eventually graduate from Elmhurst College.

Participant #4 - Ronald

Ronald's parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico. His parents came from small villages in Mexico, where Ronald estimated there were only 300 to 400 people. His father came to the United States with no more than a seventh-grade education. Ronald's mother, graduated high school in the city of Chicago. Neither parent had parents who graduated from college, and among Ronald's extended family, only his aunt, graduated from college.

Despite the limited education of his parents, Ronald's mother and father worked hard to provide for their family. Ronald was well aware of his family's financial situation.

I was doing my parents taxes on Turbo Tax basically since freshman year of high school, so I don't know if you can get any closer than that. [M]oney was always a decision that it went into purchases or going out to eat. (Ronald, December 15, 2016)

Additionally, Ronald was a part of the school's free lunch and fee waiver program, where he did not have to pay additional fees for his course materials.

However, Ronald never felt that he and his sister ever lacked any material items in comparison to his high school peers.

I can think of a few friends who just their parents owned businesses, so they had nicer homes or more homes, so places we could hang out at. It was honestly never a thing that bothered me or came between us or anyone really. I guess the way my parents raised me, material things didn't really interfere. As long as we were happy at a social level, the material things weren't something that really stuck with me. (Ronald, December 15, 2016)

Ronald did feel accepted by his peers and worked side by side with his peers on strategizing the best pathway to college readiness.

I think my friend groups, specifically, I think they were very supportive. I think almost all my close friends are in college and on paths to graduate from pretty good schools. I think

that that peer group and in which everyone was asking what college you were applying to, what AP class are you going to take, what AP are you thinking about taking, you know, want to come over and study or you want to go research this thing. I think creating that friend group in which we rely on each other to go through these classes together, I think was very important because it provided social motivation to do it, which, I think probably had a role in why I kept on doing it. (Ronald, April 28, 2016)

Along with his peers, Ronald credits his guidance counselor for always discussing the best courses for him not only to take to challenge himself academically and develop the skills necessary to be successful in the course and on the ACT but also to look positively in the eyes of a college admissions officer.

I think that early on it [discussions with the guidance counselor] was mostly about taking the most challenging and engaging classes more than anything, and I think once I got into junior year and I was doing well in class ranking and stuff, I think that's when I started having a little bit more say in what classes I wanted to take in regards to getting into college and what classes would be the best ones to get me ready for that. (Ronald, April 28, 2016)

Ronald credited these rigorous courses, along with his ACT prep course, with developing his foundational skills to meet and exceed the ACT college readiness benchmark scores.

I think the honors-level and AP-level English and math courses were very useful content-wise obviously, but also knowing how to deal with that level of material. It was just heightened difficulty, in my opinion, from an average English or math course. It forced you to really learn and make sure that what you did learn you were able to retain and apply in an exam. I remember [an English teacher], I remember him talking about, I think an AP exam, but it applied to ACT or all timed exams, basically when you get that time crunch, there's five minutes left or ten minutes left and you have X amount of questions to do, he told me stop, take a deep breath, and understand that you have time to finish everything or most of it if you let yourself have time, basically saying most people hype themselves up and get anxiety. Instead of completing most of the questions, they don't complete any because they're just consumed with the fact that they have very little time versus actually focus their energy on what they do have. (Ronald, December 15, 2016)

The combination of guidance and support from staff members and peers, combined with the comfort level Addison Trail provided to where Ronald was confident in his ability to challenge himself and ultimately succeed in those challenges, led to tremendous success. Not

only did Ronald earn a composite score of 31 on the ACT, he graduated Addison Trail with a grade point average of 4.7547 (out of 4.0), was accepted and now has graduated from Harvard.

Emergent Themes from the Case Studies

There are three emergent themes that helped the participants become college ready. All these items must be present simultaneously so as to complement each other so that the participants could become college ready. The themes are as follows:

1. The students challenged themselves.
2. The school provided resources to support students challenging themselves because those same resources do not exist at home.
3. Practical and social-emotional support, which came in the form of support from peers, support from staff members and availability of resources, helped the participants form a sense of belonging.

A specific example of these three themes working in synchrony emerged from the participants' interviews. In each one of these personal stories, the participants had the support of the staff, fellow students and a sense of belonging to their school, which ultimately allowed them to feel comfortable enough to risk failure and access the resources (both physical and human) necessary to develop the academic skills to become college ready on the ACT. In addition, the encouragement of staff and students created a space where the participants felt that not only could they challenge themselves, but they could also receive the extra help they needed if they were to struggle with such a challenge. Last, this sense of belonging created a space for the participants where they felt ultimately they would succeed in becoming college ready because, while they may not have had the financial resources or knowledge of the American school system at home with their families, at Addison Trail they knew that they had their friends and

staff members who would give them access to the resources they needed to achieve their post-high-school goals.

Emergent Theme #1: Students Must Challenge Themselves

Each participant within the study spoke of the desire to challenge him or herself in the most rigorous courses provided at Addison Trail. Jessica commented that it was the counselors at Addison Trail who pushed her to challenge herself to become college ready. She said, “That’s the one thing I will always remember because the counselors here were way more involved in classes and what you actually needed to be college ready” (Jessica, April 9, 2016). Beatrice said in her first interview:

I just wanted the hardest classes I could take for my own benefit...It was also a little bit of a competitive factor because being placed in these honors classes and advanced classes you have other people like you who want to succeed as well and you are seeing what they are doing and you want to try it out as well so you just keep piling on those AP and honors classes. (Beatrice, May 5, 2016)

Ronald took Advanced Placement courses because he wanted to take the most difficult courses in the school.

I chose AP courses because they were the hardest classes I could take, to be honest. I saw them as a challenge and saw them as something that at the worst case I would take a class that was preparing you for college level versus other classes, which at worst I would have at least had some experience at doing the work and at best I could get some college readiness in course material and at the same time get college credit. (Ronald, April 28, 2016)

Last, in Frank’s case, it was his counselor who convinced him he had the skills and ability to take an Advanced Placement course. When asked whether he would have taken Advanced Placement courses without the advice of his counselor, Frank simply stated, “No” (Frank, December 10, 2016).

Taking these challenging courses helped provide the participants with the academic skills necessary to meet the ACT college readiness benchmark scores. Jessica felt Advanced Placement courses helped her develop the analytical skills necessary to earn a college readiness benchmark score on the ACT.

[T]hey really helped with that section. As annoying as it seemed at the time when we were taking the class being like, ‘Well we have to dissect this one paragraph. How do we know they’re really meaning to say all of this?’ That actually helped out. (Jessica, December 11, 2016)

Beatrice felt the pacing and types of testing done in the AP courses prepared her for the ACT.

[A] very general example would be timed tests we would take in writing our essays or reading passages quickly, which I know I struggled a lot and I felt I had enough practice at school to be okay with just the general formatting of all of our exams which were some multiple-choice-style questions, which are the ones we see on the ACT as well. (Beatrice, December 12, 2016)

Ronald said the honors and AP courses taught him the content necessary for the ACT exam and gave him the skills to tackle difficult academic material.

I think the honors-level and AP-level English and math courses were very useful content-wise obviously, but also knowing how to deal with that level of material. It was just heightened difficulty in my opinion, from an average English or math course. It forced you to really learn and make sure that what you did learn, you were able to retain and apply in an exam. I think those courses and that level of materials both really helped me. (Ronald, December 15, 2016)

Finally, Frank spoke of how these rigorous courses taught him how to analyze difficult texts and improve his writing: “Underlining and highlighting important stuff in the story when we read, that helped, and then writing.” His Advanced Placement Spanish courses even helped Frank improve his speaking and writing in his native language, Spanish. “My writing, I got better at that and then just talking with it, just using it more and more often” (Frank, December 10, 2016).

Emergent Theme #2: The School Must Provide Resources That Do Not Exist at Home

The participants commented on the school providing resources to assist them in developing the skills necessary to meet the ACT college readiness benchmarks. These resources took the form of physical resources, access to rigorous courses and access to staff members. The aforementioned resources did not exist at home for the participants, as the participants' parents did not have the knowledge of how to best provide their children the academic skills to become college ready nor did they have the financial resources to provide additional schooling outside of that provided by Addison Trail.

Frank spoke of the computers available to students in the Addison Trail library. He did not have the technology at home that would allow him to complete the writing.

[I]f I needed to get something done on a computer I would either ask one of my friends that has a laptop or computer and I would go use it there or just going a bit early during school and using the library's computers. (Frank, December 10, 2016)

Jessica also mentioned the value of the computers:

[T]here it was really public and known to the students that there were computers there, like the laptops and stuff like that. Everybody was like pretty reliant on those things, on the computers. We would want to do homework before we got home so we would either go to the library during lunch and do homework or after school we would go if we didn't have practice. Especially me because like I said my computer wasn't the best. It was really slow, so I might as well not even have had a computer. (Jessica, December 11, 2016)

These resources also came in the form of scholarships for courses like ACT prep, Advanced Placement exams and receiving fee waivers for course and textbook fees. Ronald said:

I think Addison Trail did a good job in providing opportunities for me. I think I got a lot of help financially from Addison Trail through different government programs that helped, that I was able to get, reduced lunch and what-not. I was able to get ACT waivers and I was able to, I believe, waive my college application fees and my AP exam

fees. So right there, that's almost like a thousand dollars that I was able to waive, which I saw probably as one of the barriers to applying to college. (Ronald, April 28, 2016)

Jessica commented about the value of the scholarship for the ACT prep class when she stated, “I think the ACT prep was one of the biggest ones. I thought it was a waste of time and it actually ended up helping me. I think that's what helped me with my ACT score, to be honest (Jessica, April 9, 2016).

Additionally, access to rigorous courses was available to the participants. Advanced Placement and career pathway courses provided daily rigor for the participants on practicing academic skills necessary to meet the ACT college readiness benchmark scores. Access to these courses was encouraged by the participants’ guidance counselor. In Jessica’s case, her counselor encouraged her to pursue courses aligned with her interest in becoming a firefighter. Jessica stated, “That's one of the other things that got me college ready, because I got some type of credit through that and I was able to go and have hands-on experience with firefighters” (Jessica, April 9, 2016). For Frank, it was his counselor that recommended he take an Advanced Placement course. He said, “I didn't know what electives to take. I already finished my two years of Spanish. Then I just continued it [taking AP Spanish]” (Frank, May 6, 2016). Beatrice credited her counselor in “pressuring” her to sign up for AP courses. She said:

I was definitely influenced by our counselors at the school and just the general promotion of the AP courses starting freshman year and the fact that I was taking, as expected almost, I was advanced from the Honors program into the AP courses. It only felt natural to sign up for them, with a little pressure from counselors. (Beatrice, December 12, 2016)

Last, Ronald spoke about the many conversations he had with his guidance counselor about taking Advanced Placement courses and the value of AP courses. He said, “[M]y guidance counselor, who helped out in being able to find all the information about classes, because I didn't

know anything about AP classes, I didn't know how to graduate from high school or how to apply for college” (Ronald, April 28, 2016).

The advice from counselors was not the only support the participants received from the Addison Trail staff. The participants received academic support. They always felt that a staff member was there to help them understand their coursework. Frank felt the teachers were always “approachable” and never felt like he could not get a good grade in whatever class he took (Frank, May 6, 2016). Jessica said, “We would all back ourselves up with each other with school. It's just a huge sense of unity in this whole school” (Jessica, April 9, 2016). Beatrice said:

For the most part they [the teachers] were all great and almost all of them would offer time for you to come during lunchtime or after school or even before school to talk about material that you didn't understand. Being able to go to them when I was not understanding material was great. (Beatrice, December 12, 2016)

Ronald received extra help on classwork from his AP teachers. He mentioned, “AP teachers, who seem to be more involved in college readiness, helping me along the way, be it through actual classwork to review sessions and everything, or through more a little bit of a separate, personal support” (Ronald, April 28, 2016).

Emergent Theme #3: Sense of Belonging

The support of peers, access to staff and the availability of resources at Addison Trail provided a sense of belonging for the participants. This sense of belonging provided a comfort level for the participants to challenge themselves without fear of failing.

Peers provided academic and social-emotional support to the participants through the relationships they formed in school or during extracurricular activities. Ronald discussed

potential college opportunities, Advanced Placement courses to take and times where he and his friends could study together:

I think that that peer group and in which everyone was asking what college you were applying to, what AP class are you going to take, what AP are you thinking about taking, you know, want to come over and study or you want to go research this thing. I think creating that friend group in which we rely on each other to go through these classes together, I think was very important. Because it provided social motivation to do it, which I think probably had a role in why I kept on doing it. (Ronald, April 28, 2016)

Frank was often the support system for his peers, specifically in his math classes. Frank felt he was very good at math and would help his classmates understand the material.

In math classes, yeah. People would always ask me for help. I would show them how I figured it out, but it'll be a slow pace, at their pace so they understand and then once they got it, they would understand. (Frank, December 10, 2016)

Beatrice looked to her classmates for extra help in working through the challenging coursework in her Advanced Placement classes. She stated, “We would work together on things and work to understand the content that we were studying” (Beatrice, December 12, 2016). Last, Jessica said:

We [her friends and her] were all basically in the same class, similar classes; whether we were in the same period or not we were all taking the same ones, so that was actually a good time to ask questions or give each other tips on how to work through and specific tasks we had at the moment. (Jessica, December 11, 2016)

This peer support, coupled with the academic counseling by staff into rigorous courses, the extra time spent by staff in helping each participant understand the classroom content and the school providing access to resources, created a sense of belonging, where the participants felt that they, as low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail High School, could challenge themselves and succeed in becoming college ready. Frank credited his football coaches in keeping him on track to not fail his classes when he said, “They never wanted me to get bad grades” (Frank, May 6, 2016). Ronald talked about the support of his teachers by stating:

I think a lot of teachers, more so the AP teachers, who seem to be more involved in college readiness, helping me along the way, be it through actual classwork to review sessions and everything or through more a little bit of a separate, personal support. (Ronald, April 28, 2016)

Beatrice felt that based on her family's income level, she was going to attend community college. It was her guidance counselor who told her she had the grades to apply to an Ivy League school.

My idea of college was, 'Okay I am going to go to College of DuPage and do something there and stay at home and save money and do I don't know what.' That was my college idea. It wasn't until my counselors said, 'Let's look at your grades, they are really good. Why don't you think about applying to the other places?' I had never really thought about it. He was like, 'Why don't you think about applying to Harvard or these Ivy League schools?' (Beatrice, May 5, 2016)

Jessica found a sense of unity throughout Addison Trail.

Just that whole sense of unity. You can just feel it everywhere, no matter where you went. Even in our track meets. I always think back to my track meets because when I was in track it was just such a sense of unity with all of us. We would all back ourselves up with each other with school...It's just a huge sense of unity in this whole school. (Jessica, April 9, 2016)

The participants challenged themselves by taking rigorous coursework. They took rigorous courses because they had classmates and teachers who they knew would spend extra time to help them if they were to struggle in the challenging courses. This sense of belonging allowed the participants to take the advice of their guidance counselor or classmates, take the most rigorous courses offered at Addison Trail High School and thereby develop the critical academic skills to meet the ACT college benchmark scores.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Factors That Increase the College Readiness of Low-Income Students

This study expands the work of Cates and Schaeffe (2011) and Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) through the participants confirming that, indeed, they did receive advice to participate in rigorous college prep courses (Cates & Schaeffe, 2011) like Advanced Placement courses, but that advice came from both staff and students. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) found that low-income students were more likely to be college ready when they received academic guidance in selecting rigorous classes, created a pathway towards college and career and understood the college application process.

As was found in this study, the counseling to a college and career pathway came, specifically, from a fellow peer or Addison Trail staff member. The participants discussed with their classmates what courses to take, which teachers were the most interesting and supported each other with extra help on class assignments. The staff members supported the participants with their focus on rigorous content in the classroom, encouragement in taking Advanced Placement courses, attending college after high school and their willingness to always help the participants with their coursework.

Along with academic advising, the participants in this study demonstrated resiliency. Cappella and Weinstein (2001) found that high academic aspirations and exposure to a rigorous curriculum increased the resiliency of a low-income student. The resiliency in this study came in

the form of the participants' ability to identify the resources necessary to develop the skills they needed to meet the college readiness benchmarks on the ACT.

For example, while the participants' family members in this study lacked the background knowledge of the education system as to what courses would help their child develop the reading, writing and math skills to earn a high score on the ACT, the participants took it upon themselves to find out which courses were the most challenging (Advanced Placement) from their guidance counselor or peers. Not only did the participants find out which courses would best prepare them for college, they took it upon themselves to become successful in those classes by accessing resources like the computers in the media center, extra help offered by teachers or working in groups with classmates to become successful in their classes. Finn and Rock (1997) supported these same academic behaviors in their work, as they discovered that resilient low-income students are those who completed class assignments, were prepared for class and participated in class.

Factors That Increase the College Readiness of Hispanic Students

The participants in this study stated that the work done in Advanced Placement courses prepared them with the reading and writing skills necessary for them to be college ready. They enrolled in these courses based on the recommendations of their counselor and/or peers. The participants did not feel that there was a barrier for them to be successful in these Advanced Placement courses or any course at Addison Trail. The participants all stated they could access the staff for additional help when they did not understand certain material in their courses. Additionally, the participants spoke of Addison Trail's free lunch and fee waiver program, whereby they could receive their course materials at no cost and attend the ACT preparation course at no cost.

The “open enrollment” policy at Addison Trail described by the participants is defined as the opportunity for all Addison Trail students to choose rigorous courses like Advanced Placement and thereby increasing the chance for low-income, Hispanic students to become college ready. This open enrollment policy at Addison Trail means a student who requests to take an Advanced Placement course may enroll in the AP course. In a small number of cases, students may need to take a prerequisite course to take an Advanced Placement course. For example, a student would not take AP Calculus AB, without taking Precalculus. In such cases where a student may not have the prerequisite coursework, the Addison Trail guidance counselors and administration will attempt to find a path for the student to get the required coursework so they can access the AP course during the student’s junior or senior year. These findings align with the work of Mayer (2008), which found that access to rigorous curriculum could increase the college readiness of low-income, Hispanic students, as well as the value of academic counseling in getting students the courses they need to best prepare them for college.

While the participants in this study did not speak directly to the administration being responsible for their college readiness, through the work of the guidance counselor and their peers, the participants spoke about a focus on college at Addison Trail. Reyes et al. (1999) found that schools with high performance levels for Mexican-American students had a clear vision for the students and the community. In this study, it was the staff and students sharing information on how best to become college ready. This information included communicating the challenging courses that not only would provide the skills necessary to meet the ACT college readiness benchmarks but also the college application process and ways to pay for college.

In addition to the information sharing between staff and students, this study also supported the work of Liou et al. (2009), which found that schools must have adults who care

about their students and not prohibit students of color from access to rigorous high school curricula. Similarly, the results of this study also support the work of Yamamura et al. (2010), where all stakeholders (teachers, counselors, parents, students and administrators) provided support for the participants, either through direct advice or academic support (provided by peers and teachers), encouragement (by Addison Trail staff members and parents) and providing resources and opportunities to prepare for college through academic courses (Addison Trail administration and guidance counselors). Additionally, Mayer (2008) found that systems that support counseling students on college requirements, college financial aid and monitoring academic progress can contribute to student preparation for college. This work was supported through the responses of the participants in this study, which found a belief of the staff that all students, including low-income, Hispanic students, can achieve success in these college preparatory courses.

As mentioned in the previous studies and supported in the results of this study, the belief that all students can be successful in college preparatory courses created a sense of belonging for this study's participants. This study found that the participants' sense of belonging created a belief system whereby they felt that if they challenged themselves to take the most rigorous courses in the school, they would ultimately be college ready. This finding supports the work of Vygotsky (1978), where the participants were surrounded by peers and staff members who challenged them at the highest possible level at Addison Trail, which in turn pushed their skills and abilities to a level where they could be college ready, based on the ACT benchmarks. The expectations for student achievement came in the form of school staff members working with the participants of the study to be successful in their courses and recommending the participants take challenging courses like Advanced Placement.

Furthermore, this study found that the sense of belonging that existed at Addison Trail for the participants, coupled with the availability of resources and support from peers and Addison Trail staff, created a self-confidence that made it okay for them to challenge themselves and want to challenge themselves (Deci and Ryan, 1987) in rigorous courses and know they would be successful. The participants had developed a strong sense of self-efficacy. In affirming the findings of Bandura (1977), this sense of self-efficacy allowed the participants to persist in what is a potentially threatening experience for many low-income and Hispanic students (challenging oneself in rigorous courses like Advanced Placement) on a national scale and actually thrive because the participants had already participated and succeeded in these rigorous courses, the same rigorous courses that Hispanic students regularly qualify for but do not participate in (Fry, 2004).

While this study did not find that parental involvement directly led to the participants' college readiness, each participant commented on their parents' encouragement and seeing education as a means to an improved socioeconomic status. Beatrice discussed that her parents would regularly state they wanted her to focus on her education so she could earn a higher income.

Ever since I was little my parents would say, 'You don't want to be like us.' My mom works at McDonald's and she is a waitress and my dad is a construction worker and he's a cook and they would say, 'You don't want to be like us working all the time and making so little money and not being able to enjoy having any free time really. The way to get ahead, we don't have money, but you have education and you can really take advantage of that and go wherever you want to go; just always focus on your studies and you will do well.' (Beatrice, May 5, 2016)

Frank stressed his mother's focus on education as a way out of poverty as well: "She always tells us we've got to pay attention in school in order to be successful and do better than her" (Frank, May 6, 2016). Jessica echoed similar thoughts when she said:

The closer I got to graduation day it was more of a, ‘Well, we can't really afford that. I don't know if you're going to be able to go to college.’ Regardless my mom still kept me with that goal in mind to go to college to keep trying in school because you could always get scholarships. (Jessica, April 9, 2016)

Ronald’s father stressed his desire for his son to improve his financial situation:

[M]y dad always instilled in me that, you know, look at how far I have come and I can only get here but I'm sending you off for something better and I want you to always work for something better than what you have. (Ronald, April 28, 2016)

From each of these examples, the parents played a role in stressing the importance of education in improving one’s financial situation; however, it was not conclusive from the participants’ statements that the parental involvement directly led to them acquiring the academics skills to meet the ACT college readiness benchmarks.

The literature supports that parent involved does matter in shaping the academic success of a Hispanic student. Morales (2010) found that a Hispanic student’s ability to succeed in her or his education came as a result of a support system at home that caused the student to feel a sense of duty, there was a mentor or significant adult, a strong work ethic, high self-esteem and a strong mother as a role model. Additionally, as was the case with low-income students, resilient Hispanic students demonstrate behaviors such as class participation, preparedness for class, punctuality, completing assignments and/or homework on time and not disrupting class (Finn & Rock, 1997). Gordon (1996) found that resilient Hispanic students who believe in their cognitive abilities are goal oriented and believe they can be successful in school. Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) found that the resiliency of a Hispanic student depended on a supportive academic environment, a sense of belonging to school and family and peer support.

Related, Borrero (2011) found that students felt there were four predictive factors of how students perceived themselves as being college-bound: college talk, dynamic family roles, school

as a support system, and community resources. The students felt the “college talk” was necessary to understand the college application process. Additionally, the students who were committed to their families and supported by their families and school staff members were ready to go to college. Borrero also found that the students who had a strong connection to their cultural heritage and felt a sense of duty to overcome cultural stereotypes were proud of their accomplishment in being accepted to college and being college ready.

This case study confirms the studies above as each participant shared, as previously mentioned, that the support of their families and significant staff members who encouraged them to take challenging courses and/or helped them if they struggled with the course material played a role in this study’s participants becoming college ready. The participants also shared how their peers supported each other, both with course recommendations and on homework and/or assignments.

This sense of belonging created an environment for the participants to feel comfortable to ask for help from staff or students and take challenging courses that traditionally low-income and Hispanic students do not enroll in across the country. Without the combination of support from peers, staff and that sense of belonging, the participants in this study would not have taken the steps necessary to participate in the courses essential to developing the academic skills to meet the ACT college readiness benchmark scores.

The results of this study connect to the work of Close and Solberg (2007). The results of the Close and Solberg study found that the greater the Latino student’s level of intrinsic motivation and the more connected the Latino student felt to his or her teachers and peers, the higher the students’ self-efficacy and academic achievement. Furthermore, Goza and Ryabov (2009) found that Hispanic students benefited academically from well-funded schools but were

more likely to perform better in school and had a higher grade point average when there were more Hispanic students in their school and courses. Shiu et al. (2009) found that by enrolling in rigorous courses like Advanced Placement, students tended to be surrounded by fellow Hispanic students who were serious about their future and that such a peer group influenced the belief and college goals of one another.

A theme that did not emerge from this study was the sense of belonging of the participants in the case study to their racial identity. Altschul et al. (2008) explored how the self-perception of a student's own racial identity impacted the academic achievement of a student. The researchers found that Hispanic students who did not identify with a racial/ethnic identity tended to not perform as well academically and have poor end-of-year grades. The study also found dual identification with one's native Hispanic culture and that of the new culture did not have an effect on the student's performance as measured by grade point average. Last, Hispanic students who focused on overcoming all obstacles to be a part of the mainstream group had higher end-of-year grades than those minority students who did not (Altschul et al., 2008).

In this study the participants did feel a sense of belonging to their school and peers. However, while they recognized differences in the income levels of their family versus that of some of their peers, the lack of family financial resources never prohibited the participants from participating in a school extracurricular or academic course. Nor did the participants feel that their Hispanic heritage prevented them from accessing challenging courses that would best make them college ready.

Future Considerations

Future studies may look to investigate the depth and role that the parents of low-income, Hispanic students play in teaching the skills needed to be college ready. Holcomb-McCoy

(2010) found that low-income students tended to be more college ready as evidenced by a greater acceptance rate and increased performance on college admission standardized achievement exams when the student's parents were engaged in their child's education. While this study did not find a theme of parent engagement leading directly to the participants' college readiness, it should be noted that all participants discussed the importance of their parents in their education. The participants shared that while their parents may not have had the financial resources or the background knowledge of the United States education system, their parents always stressed to them the *value* of an education. Each parent wanted their child to have a better life than they had and stressed the value of hard work to reach goals.

So, while there was no direct evidence in this study for this parental encouragement in teaching participants the academic skills they needed to meet the ACT college readiness benchmarks, all participants commented on the tremendous support they received from their parents, which provided motivation for them to perform their best in the classroom.

A second future consideration for study surrounds the definition of college readiness. While in this study the college readiness definition was narrowly confined to the various ACT college readiness benchmark scores, one could broaden that definition and change the context of the study to see if the factors that impacted the college readiness of low-income, Hispanic students at Addison Trail also are consistent in different settings as well as with a different definition of college readiness.

Additionally, future research may attempt to analyze the factors that impact the college readiness within the various cultures inside the Hispanic community. For example, the cultural background of students from Puerto Rico differs from students from Guatemala, which differs from students from Mexico. The definition of Hispanic used in this study is a broad one, and one

could compare the findings from this study to the factors that influence the college readiness of a specific culture within the Hispanic population.

Last, future studies may want to analyze the academic skills taught during the kindergarten through grade 8 years that best prepare low-income, Hispanic students for meeting the ACT college readiness benchmark scores. The ACT falls short of specifically outlining the specific skills low-income, Hispanic students need prior to their high school experience.

Implications for Educators and School Administrators

This study provides some practical implications for educators and school administrators of low-income, Hispanic students. Specifically, to assist low-income, Hispanic students to become college ready, school administrators, school boards and teachers must create a culture in which students are self-motivated to pursue goals that lead them to being college ready. This environment must meet the following three conditions:

1. Students have the opportunity to *challenge themselves* and there be no barriers for students to challenge themselves.
2. Schools provide *resources* to support students challenging themselves because those same resources do not exist at home.
3. The administration, school board and staff ensure that the school is an *inclusive environment* and fosters *a sense of belonging* for all students.

Because I was an administrator at Addison Trail, it would be appropriate at this point to use my experiential knowledge (Maxwell, 2005) to provide the context in which these factors had been implemented at Addison Trail. Although the student informants were not aware of such institutional process, I believe that changes set forth by the administrative policies and

decisions I describe below helped create these three factors, which in turn were reported by student informants as factors that aided them to become college ready.

From the time I arrived at Addison Trail as a teacher in the fall of 2004, to my transition as a principal in 2012, to the current day, I witnessed an institutional and cultural shift initiated by the DuPage High School District 88 Board of Education and Addison Trail. Initially, only the highest performing students participated in Advanced Placement courses, remedial courses existed for struggling learners, and students rarely changed tracks -- either low, middle or honors. Additionally, these students were not being given opportunities to move from one track to another.

The initiatives by the DuPage High School District 88 Board of Education and Addison Trail, however, created an environment that encouraged rigor for *all*, specifically through the targeted goal of increasing the number of students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses and the elimination of remedial courses. Then Addison Trail devoted resources, such as providing technology for students, extending hours for students to work in the school's library/media center, equipping teachers with research-based instructional strategies, paying for Advanced Placement courses and ACT prep classes. The combination of the promotion of participation in rigorous coursework, allocation of resources and the social emotional support and academic counseling of students created a laser-like focus on increasing the college readiness of all students, including those who are low-income and Hispanic.

First, this cultural shift began at Addison Trail, with the administration's focus on ensuring that no obstacles existed for students to challenge themselves. As we have seen in the literature nationally, barriers that have kept low-income students from becoming college ready include a lack of participation in rigorous coursework, such as Advanced Placement (Martin et

al., 2005) and successful completion of Algebra 2 (Adelman, 2006). These students are, in many cases, attending schools with underqualified teachers (Kozol, 1991) who do not have the teaching skills to provide the students with the academic skills necessary to perform college-preparatory coursework (Haycock, 2006).

We have also seen in the literature that Hispanic students are less likely to participate in AP or gifted programs (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010), have access to Advanced Placement courses (Klopfenstein, 2004), are not as ready to read college-level texts (Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory at Edvance Research, Inc., 2012) and do not enter rigorous courses, even when they are qualified to do so (Fry, 2004).

The Addison Trail administration removed such barriers from the low-income and Hispanic students. The students were not prohibited from taking Advanced Placement courses because they may not have taken an AP course in a previous school year. Neither were they prohibited from taking an AP course because they did not have a specific ACT or standardized test score. Students were not prohibited from taking an AP class because they did not complete required summer assignments. Rather, the opposite was true and confirmed by the participants in this study.

Due to the Addison Trail administration and the DuPage High School District 88 Board of Education's focus on opening access to Advanced Placement for all students, guidance counselors, teachers and even fellow students encouraged each other to take rigorous courses like Advanced Placement. Rigor was expected for all students, not only for the select few students who historically perform best academically.

Second, the Addison Trail administration, which again was supported by the Board of Education, provided resources for students challenging themselves. One important example was

making available courses like AP or career pathway courses to provide built-in rigor for students. Also, because there were limited financial resources at home, the school needed to provide resources, like computers and access to Internet, so students could complete the required assignments of courses like AP. Addison Trail also provided scholarships for Advanced Placement exams and standardized test prep courses, so low-income and Hispanic students did not see a financial barrier to taking an AP class or getting extra help on the ACT.

Another resource that supported the low-income, Hispanic students in becoming college ready was the school staff, which included administrators, teachers, guidance counselors and support staff (teacher aides and clerical). They were available both during the day and on specific evenings and weekends to advise students and families to what courses best prepare students for college and how college can be made affordable. For example, the administration, teachers and support staff translated the materials and communications pertaining to college readiness into Spanish for families so that language was not a barrier for them. Guidance counselors took college visits with students and parents on weekends so that students were better informed about college entrance requirements. Moreover, the administration and school board supported financing a college visit to the University of Wisconsin-Madison for all freshmen students each year because they knew that for many students (several low-income and Hispanic) this would be the first time they stepped foot on a college campus. All these efforts demonstrated to the students and families that the school would take all possible avenues toward maximizing students' readiness for college.

Last, the administration, school board and staff must ensure an inclusive environment that fosters a sense of belonging for all students. This sense of belonging may manifest itself in a variety of settings. It may come from providing opportunities for students to belong to an

extracurricular activity like a club or sport. The sense of belonging may come from offering translation services for students and families so they may understand the communications from the school. It may also come from the availability of staff members willing to spend extra time with students who may initially struggle with completing difficult assignments like those within AP courses.

All the previous conditions were present at Addison Trail. While the strategy to create this sense of belonging may be different from school to school functionally, it must create in students a sense of self-efficacy – as communicated to them by the faculty and peers -- that they *can* become college ready regardless of their family income level, ethnicity or race.

In conclusion, despite all the odds and research being stacked against them, these participants did become college ready. They became college ready because they challenged themselves. They became college ready because Addison Trail provided resources for its students to become college ready when the resources to become college ready did not exist at home. They became college ready because through the support from peers and Addison Trail staff members, they felt a sense of belonging to their school. This sense of belonging allowed the participants to feel comfortable taking challenging courses because they knew there were resources available that would help them to achieve their goals. On the other hand, with any of one of these factors missing, the participants would not have been helped to become college ready as much. It was necessary for all three factors mentioned at the beginning to work in unison and in synergy. Together, they created a *culture* and a *system* of practices and resources in which low-income, Hispanic students could succeed.

In order to replicate those conditions, the school must thus identify and remove barriers that prevent low-income, Hispanic students from challenging themselves to achieve their highest

potential. When all three conditions work in synchrony, the school can create a working *culture* in which low-income, Hispanic students can “beat the odds” and develop the skills necessary to be college ready.

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