Boston College
Lynch School of Education and Human Development

Department of
Educational Leadership & Higher Education

Higher Education

A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: THE (UN)INTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF NO-EXCUSES CHARTER SCHOOLS ON COLLEGE SUCCESS

Dissertation
by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

May 2023

A Double-Edged Sword: The (Un)intended Consequences of No-Excuses Charter Schools on College Success

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ABSTRACT

No-excuses charter schools are arguably the most successful and controversial school-choice model of the last quarter century (Cheng et al., 2017). Typically following a college-for-all ethos, they demonstrate sizable gains in test scores and college acceptance rates for marginalized student populations (Davis & Heller, 2019). However, concerns regarding *how* these schools achieve these short-term outcomes using strict practices warrants further qualitative investigation (Golann, 2015). A paucity of research explores the influence of no-excuses practices on long-term college success outcomes extending beyond graduation and persistence rates to include well-being, career preparation, academic growth, and satisfaction (Mehta, 2020).

This three-article dissertation investigates the perceived influence of a no-excuses charter high school on four-year college success from multiple perspectives. Following a qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 1998) grounded in a conceptual model of college success (Perna & Thomas, 2006), the study utilizes observations, document review, and semi-structured interviews—some including photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002). Article One explores the four-year college experiences of no-excuses charter high school alumni. Article Two examines institutional agents' roles in implementing college-for-all practices within a no-excuses charter high school. Article Three draws on this case study to propose a process for merging qualitative research and

program theory development for school improvement (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Joyce & Cartwright, 2021).

These articles identify and expound upon certain no-excuses components that positively and negatively contribute to students' college success. Aspirational college talk, comprehensive college and financial aid application support, and a caring environment contributed to four-year college matriculation. However, pressure institutional agents experienced to meet short-term outcomes associated with normative definitions of college success resulted in one-size-fits-all approaches to teaching, behavior management, and college preparation that minimized opportunities for students' identity formation, noncognitive skill development, social-emotional learning, and discovery of intrinsic college-going motivation. This study offers recommendations for (re)envisioning college-for-all policies and school-based practices to be more flexible, student-centered, and culturally responsive in ways that honor a student's personhood while helping them go to college, thrive, and graduate.

GRATITUDE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It takes a village. Many people have shaped my experience as a doctoral student. Words cannot adequately express my gratitude for the community of friends, family, and colleagues who have supported me emotionally, academically, financially, and intellectually throughout this educational journey.

First and foremost, my advisor, mentor, and dissertation chair, Dr. Karen D. Arnold, has been a guiding light and steadfast rock throughout my studies. She has pushed my thinking, provided me with numerous professional growth opportunities, and given me invaluable feedback on the many iterations of this dissertation topic over the years. More than that, she has exemplified the qualities in a mentor that I hope all doctoral students are lucky enough to have and that I hope to embody. I would also like to thank my dissertation committee. Dr. Heather Rowan-Kenyon has helped me hone my research interests since my first year in the doctoral program. Dr. Emily Gates has introduced me to new ways of thinking about educational equity and evaluation. I could not be more grateful to have such an encouraging and forward-thinking committee of strong women who seek to change education for the better.

I also wish to thank my participants for their vulnerability and willingness to engage in a study during the height of multiple pandemics. Your openness, honesty, reflection, and commitment to equity and school improvement are why I continue to work in the field of postsecondary access and success. Additionally, I would like to thank my doctoral cohort and broader Lynch School community for their endless support, encouragement, collaboration, and motivation. Some of my fondest doctoral memories have been exchanging feedback and ideas with colleagues and friends who are so knowledgeable.

Last, but certainly not least, thank you to my given and chosen family. Specifically, thank you to my husband and partner, Kevin, for encouraging me to pursue doctoral studies. You took walks in the woods with me when I needed to disconnect with work and reconnect with myself. You believed in me when I did not believe in myself. I do not think I could have done this without you. And finally, thank you to my sisters. You are my number one supporters in everything and anything I do. When I said that finishing this dissertation was impossible, you reminded me that Chau sisters always get it done. And I did.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE THREE ARTICLES

Introduction

In the United States, inequitable access to a quality K-12 and postsecondary education is an imperative social justice issue. There are sizable returns on a college degree such as lower unemployment rates, greater career choice, and increased economic stability (Carnevale et al., 2013). However, bachelor's degree enrollment and completion are stratified by race and socioeconomic status (Cahalan et al., 2019). Historically underrepresented students are less prepared for college compared to their White and wealthier peers (Conley, 2007; National ACT, 2019). As extensively studied, where students grow up and what high school they attend affects college readiness, preparation, experiences, persistence, graduation, and future work earnings (Chetty & Hendren, 2018; McDonough, 1997; Perez-Felkner, 2015; Perna, 2006). On average, 12th grade Black and Hispanic students and students attending high-poverty schools perform lower in both the reading and math sections of the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) when compared to White students and students attending low-poverty schools, respectively (McFarland et al., 2019). Moreover, underserved learners, described as those who are "members of minority groups from low-income families whose parents did not attend college," report lower ACT scores and meet fewer college readiness benchmarks (National ACT, 2019, p. 3). In response to these issues related to inequitable college preparation and access, K-12 neoliberal market-based school choice options including "no-excuses" charter schools have emerged (Lakes, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

Incentivized by federal policies such as *No Child Left Behind* and initiatives such as *Race to the Top*, public charter schools have proliferated rapidly since their creation in the 1990s

(Cohodes, 2018; Dynarski et al., 2010; Golann & Torres, 2018). Public charter schools are free, publicly funded, privately run school-choice options that benefit from greater flexibility and autonomy compared to traditional public schools (Curto et al., 2011; Gleason et al., 2010; Zimmer et al., 2012). Issues related to their expansion, reduction, accountability, performance, governance, and funding mechanisms have been pervasive in education reform debate (Cohodes, 2018; Dynarski et al., 2010). In particular, the "no-excuses" charter school model is quite controversial. Its academic successes and authoritarian practices draw both positive and negative attention from ardent supporters and vehement critics in academic, media, and policy debate.

The term "no-excuses" was coined in 2000 to describe a group of mostly urban charter schools sharing similar educational practices and exhibiting unusually high test scores for students from low-income backgrounds and racially minoritized students (Carter, 2000; Cheng et al., 2017). Charter schools in the United States make up roughly 8% of all public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Although there is no comprehensive list of no-excuses charter schools, they represent a highly visible and influential subset of charter schools commonly located in urban areas.

Features of no-excuses charter schools include college-going cultures, strict disciplinary practices, extended instructional time, and high behavioral and academic expectations (Angrist et al., 2016; Carter, 2000; Cheng et al., 2017; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Whitman, 2008). Established to close the academic "achievement gap," no-excuses charter schools typically subscribe to a "college-for-all" ideology—the belief that all students can and should obtain a college degree, and thus, schools should prepare them for this pursuit (Quartz et al., 2019). As such, whether implicitly understood or explicitly stated, they attempt to transmit the human, social, and cultural capital that low-income students need to achieve social mobility (Davis &

Heller, 2019; Hammack, 2016; Whitman, 2008). Many policymakers and foundations have expressed support for these school missions. In fact, increased federal grant and philanthropic funding have contributed to the expansion of no-excuses charter schools in the last twenty years (Cohodes, 2018; Ferrare & Setari, 2018; Golann & Torres, 2018). Quantitative studies of prominent charter management organizations (CMO)—nonprofit organizations that centrally manage groups of charter schools—indicate that no-excuses charter school students are more college-ready, as measured by standardized test scores and college enrollment rates, when compared to their demographic peers (Angrist et al., 2016; Davis & Heller, 2019).

However, studies have produced mixed results regarding the effects of no-excuses charter school attendance on long-term outcomes. Although many of their practices have contributed to academic feats for marginalized students, many of these practices may not necessarily translate to preparing students for college success and beyond (Mehta, 2020). College access is not the goal. College success, defined as not only persistence and graduation rates, but subjective well-being is the goal (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). It is critical to understand *how* no-excuses charter school practices achieve these outcomes and identify which components contribute positively or negatively to long-term success before replicating and scaling them.

There is an extensive body of literature about no-excuses schools, but a paucity of qualitative research that investigates whether, how, which and for whom commonly held no-excuses charter school beliefs and related practices influence college success (Curto et al., 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2019). Recently, the National Academy of Sciences, Medicine, and Engineering (2022) published a report calling for increased investment into qualitative research studies that "focus on why, how, and for whom interventions work" and an expansion "of student outcome measures" (p. 4). Quantitative studies articulate *what* interventions work for a given population,

but neither describe *how* they work in other contexts nor capture the complexity of practice implementation (Brown & Flood, 2018; Joyce & Cartwright, 2020). Further, Cohodes and Parham (2021) concluded, "while we know much about charter schools, more research, in more contexts, is needed to further understand where, for whom, and why charters are most effective" (para. 1). No-excuses charter schools are at an inflection point. At this pivotal moment—when charter schools have been established long enough to have alumni in college and when the United States is embroiled in discussion and action regarding racial justice and equity—qualitative research on no-excuses charter schools must elicit the experiences of various stakeholders to examine *how* practices influence long-term outcomes for educational equity.

Purpose of Three Interrelated Studies

This qualitative case study dissertation (Merriam, 1998) addresses the gaps in the literature by exploring the perceived influence of no-excuses charter high schools on college preparation, experience, and success from multiple stakeholder perspectives through three related articles. The first two articles are empirical in nature and draw on qualitative data collected from a single no-excuses charter school. The third article offers a process for merging qualitative case study research processes with program theory development for school improvement based on findings articulated in Articles One and Two.

1. **Article One:** A Double-edged Sword: The Influence of "No-excuses" Charter Schools on College Alumni's Preparation, Experience, and Success
2. **Article Two:** Translating the "30,000 Foot Goal" to the "Day-to-Day": Exploring How No-excuses Institutional Agents Carry Out an Evolving College-for-All Mission

3. **Article Three**: It's About the Process: A Proposed Approach for Merging Qualitative Case Study Research and Program Theory Development for Intentional School Improvement

These three linked studies provide valuable insight into *how* no-excuses charter schools do and do not contribute to their ultimate outcomes of college success. By eliciting the voices of institutional agents and alumni, this dissertation centers participant voices to provide important recommendations for policy, theory, research, and practice. Article One explores the positive and negative influences of no-excuses charter high school attendance on students' college experiences and success from the perspectives of college-attending alumni themselves. Article Two investigates how institutional agents perceive the level of college preparation alumni received from their no-excuses charter high school and make sense of their role in fulfilling college-for-all expectations. Article Three draws on data collected from Articles One and Two to propose a process for merging qualitative case study research and program theory development to help drive intentional research-based decision making for school improvement (Brown & Flood, 2018; Joyce & Cartwright, 2021).

Together, these three articles highlight the "double-edged sword" of no-excuses charter school practices on college success-related outcomes. There are benefits, negative consequences, trade-offs, as well as immense opportunity for paving a more collaborative and equitable path forward in education evaluation (Wilkinson et al., 2021). This study builds on growing literature calling for more student-centered policies and incentives that equally emphasize academic preparation, nonacademic preparation, extracurricular involvement, and cultural relevance to help students get to college, thrive, and graduate (Noll, 2021). The dissertation concludes with further implications derived from the findings from these three linked studies.

Literature Review

No-excuses charter schools are situated in a broader education reform landscape in the United States that shapes their practices, cultures, and missions. No-excuses charter schools share common characteristics in order to meet specific goals related to academic achievement and college preparation. Much quantitative scholarship has investigated the effects of these no-excuses charter school practices on short and medium-term outcomes. There is substantially less empirical research that investigates no-excuses charter school attendance on long-term outcomes. Initial qualitative explorations have focused on student experiences in middle and high school and have suggested the unintended negative effects of no-excuses charter school attendance on student experience, overall well-being, and college success, defined more broadly than persistence and graduation rates. The literature reviewed in this section grounds all three studies of this dissertation and articulates what gaps this study seeks to fill. Literature relevant to each particular sub-study will be reviewed in those specific standalone articles.

Background on Charter Schools

Charter schools are a school-choice educational reform strategy. Since the creation of charter schools in 1992, they have grown considerably in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education defines charter schools as

> public schools that operate under a contract (or "charter"). The expectation is that these schools meet the terms of their charter or face closure by their authorizing bodies. As public schools, charter schools must also meet the accountability requirements of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). (Finnigan et al., 2004, para. 1)

Authorizing bodies can be public school districts, state education agencies, or other entities who have the power to close or renew charters based on their performance (Gleason et al., 2010; McFarland et al., 2019). Charter school leaders are held accountable by their board, authorizing body, and state and federal bodies to deliver specific outcomes such as state test results (Hoxby & Murarka, 2009). They also face unique challenges, such as accessing physical space, acquiring funding for facilities, and dealing with varying levels of authorizer quality (Dynarski et al., 2010). By law, charter schools are required to hold a random lottery for admission if enrollment interest is higher than their capacity (Baker, 2016; Hoxby & Murarka, 2009). As a trade-off for these stipulations, charter schools maintain greater autonomy and self-governance than traditional public schools, allowing leaders to make decisions with fewer bureaucratic impediments on curriculum design, hiring practices, and day-to-day operations (Gleason et al., 2010).

In the United States, there are approximately 7,800 charter schools spread across 44 states and Washington D.C., serving roughly 7.5% of all public school students. Almost 60% of charter schools are in urban areas, 30% are in suburban areas, and more than 10% are in rural areas (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, n.d.). They serve over 3 million students and a greater share of Black and Hispanic students than traditional public schools (NCES Public Charter School Enrollment, 2020). Further, charter schools serve more students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) than traditional public schools (de Brey et al., 2019). Created to provide public schools with the ability to experiment and innovate (Carnoy et al., 2006), their purpose and quality can vary widely.

National studies have produced mixed results on overall charter school effectiveness measured by academic achievement (Braun et al., 2006; CREDO, 2009, 2013; Gleason et al. 2010; Maas & Lake, 2015). There are discrepancies in academic achievement results based on location, student demographics, and charter school characteristics (Braun et al., 2006). Gleason et al. (2010) did not find significant effects of charter school attendance on test scores overall but identified significant positive effects for urban charter schools, which make up approximately 60% of charter schools in the United States. Although no-excuses charter schools comprise a fraction of charter schools overall, they are typically located in urban areas. No-excuses charter schools are prominent in policy debates due to their exceptional academic outcomes for marginalized students (Cohodes, 2018) and controversial practices (Golann & Torres, 2018). Thus, they are the focal school type of this dissertation.

Overview of No-excuses Charter Schools

The "no-excuses" charter school model began in the 1990s with a school called the Knowledge is Power Program, commonly known as KIPP and now extended into a national network of 280 schools nation-wide (KIPP, 2022). Following, more schools and school networks have replicated and added to the no-excuses model. The phrase "no excuses" refers to the belief that there are "no excuses" for schools failing their students, particularly those located in low-income areas (Pondiscio, 2019). Extensive research describes the common practices of "no-excuses" charter schools, but there is no official list of them and there can be variation between schools. Broadly, however, they are characterized by the belief that all students should have access to a high-quality public school and should be prepared for college regardless of zip code, race, or socioeconomic status (Noll, 2021). They employ college-going culture, strict disciplinary practices, college preparatory curriculum, data-driven instruction, extended

instructional time, character education, and high expectations (Angrist et al., 2016; Carter, 2000; Cheng et al., 2017; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Whitman, 2008). The following section reviews literature related to no-excuses school disciplinary and character education practices, pedagogical and instructional methods, and their effects on student, teacher, and counselor experiences.

No-excuses Disciplinary and Character Education Practices

To minimize chaotic environments that detract from coveted instructional time, no-excuses charter schools set explicit social norms and employ a strict disciplinary model. Golann and Torres (2018) described no-excuses charter schools' approaches to discipline and character education through the 4Cs: comprehensiveness, clarity, consistency, and consequences. First, comprehensiveness refers to no-excuses charter schools' "sweat the small stuff" approach to school-wide discipline, grounded in political scientist James Q. Wilson's "broken windows" theory (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Whitman, 2008). This theory asserted that disorder begets crime. If a criminal sees a broken window at a factory, they are more apt to break more; if the window is fixed, criminals are deterred from undesirable behavior. Following this philosophy, no-excuses charter schools administer punitive consequences for small infractions including untucked uniform shirts, ignoring trash on the floor, slouching, or not "tracking" (looking at) a speaker. Addressing minor issues, this philosophy assumes, prevents larger behavioral problems that could negatively affect learning (Marsh, 2018; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Whitman, 2008). No-excuses charter school teachers and staff strive toward gaining 100% compliance for all student tasks or else students have to "Do it Again" until all meet expectations (Lemov, 2010; Golann & Torres, 2018; Whitman, 2008).

Second, no-excuses charter school teachers and staff provide clear and exacting expectations for student behavior, effectively eliminating any room for interpretation (Whitman, 2008). In practice, teachers give consistent and explicit directions for how students should enter classrooms, walk through hallways, and complete assignments (Golann, 2015). Third, consistency refers to how teachers and staff administer these clear expectations and "sweat the small stuff" through a culture of high accountability and feedback. They follow a highly prescribed behavior management system so that students are treated the same way from classroom to classroom (Golann & Torres, 2018). Both teachers and students receive extensive feedback on their practices.

Fourth, no-excuses charter schools use positive and negative consequences to hold students accountable to high expectations. In many no-excuses charter schools, scholars earn points for "good" behavior and lose points for "bad" behavior, amounting to rewards such as trips or punishments such as detention. These "bad" behaviors can range from interrupting a speaker to cursing at a teacher (Marsh, 2018; Golann & Torres 2018). Students are told exactly how to behave (Whitman, 2008). By controlling these elements, no-excuses charter schools intend to set the conditions for more rigorous college preparatory learning. Overall, maintaining order is paramount (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

No-excuses charter schools also expressly focus on building character, which translates to helping students develop noncognitive skills like persistence, self-discipline, and leadership (Whitman, 2008). They emphasize parental involvement and expect students and families to commit to excellence (Marsh, 2018). Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) describe how no-excuses charter schools balance these strict practices with warmth through laughter, joy, celebration, and acknowledgement of growth. Teachers and leaders greet their students each day

with a handshake, eye contact, and a smile. Other researchers question these schools' efficacy and authenticity in these actions (Athanases, 2018). Although there is differentiation in these disciplinary practices by grade and age-level, their underlying beliefs and behaviors remain consistent across studies. Recently, no-excuses charter schools have begun disassociating themselves with many of these behavioral practices. However, research investigating these changes is still nascent (Cohodes & Parham, 2021; Golann & Debs, 2019; Strauss, 2019)

No-excuses Instructional and Pedagogical Practices

The prescriptive practices described above are a through line in no-excuses school instructional approaches as well. Consistent planning and coherent school culture maximize the time teachers spend on instruction (Merseth, 2009). With more autonomy from bureaucratic constraints and unions, no-excuses charter schools can allocate funds, determine hiring practices, and control curriculum in ways that traditional public schools cannot (Whitman, 2008). No-excuses pedagogical approaches include emphasis on teaching reading and math skills, disciplined work habits, and extensive tutoring. They increase instructional time through extended school days and years and use data to drive their instruction (Angrist et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 2017; Dobbie & Fryer, 2013; Merseth, 2009; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Whitman, 2008). Moreover, no-excuses charter schools strictly align their college-preparatory curriculum to state standards and provide targeted preparation for state-administered assessments and college entrance exams like the SATs, resulting in a test-based accountability structure (Hammack, 2016; Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Merseth, 2009).

Of these practices, Dobbie and Fryer (2013) identified five that together made up 45% of the variation in a no-excuses charter school's effectiveness. These practices include extensive teacher feedback, data-driven instruction, intensive tutoring, increased instructional time, and

high expectations. Without formal tracking or a belief in social promotion, no-excuses charter schools place all students on a college preparatory track (Whitman, 2008) and rely on school culture as a mechanism for academic achievement.

In an in-depth look at five no-excuses charter schools in Massachusetts, Merseth (2009) provided a glimpse into the instructional practices that contribute to students' high standardized test scores. Derived from Lemov's (2010) *Teach like a Champion*, teachers relied heavily on the "right is right" concept in which they ensured all students had the correct answer before moving on. Nearly every classroom in each school had a similar blackboard configuration that included a Do Now, AIM, agenda, and homework for the day. They focused on utilizing every minute of class time for instruction (Merseth, 2009). Not only do no-excuses charter schools hold high expectations for students, but they also uphold the same expectations for teachers. No-excuses charter schools provide intensive teacher feedback and coaching (Angrist et al., 2016; Dobbie & Fryer, 2013; Lake et al., 2012; Whitman, 2008).

No-excuses Charter School Outcomes

Quantitative empirical studies have explored the effects of no-excuses charter school attendance on short and medium-term student outcomes including academic achievement, college preparation, college enrollment, and to a lesser degree, long-term outcomes like college success. The majority of no-excuses charter school studies utilize human capital metrics such as standardized test scores to determine their effectiveness.

Studying charter school effectiveness on academic outcomes is empirically challenging. Since students' families choose to apply to charter schools, students may possess some unobservable characteristics that make them inherently different from other students, making it difficult for researchers to control for bias in quantitative analyses. To address these concerns,

the most common methods employed to measure the effects of no-excuses charter school attendance on academic outcomes have been quantitative experimental lottery-based studies and observational studies (Cheng et al., 2017; Cohodes, 2018).

As mentioned previously, if more students apply for a charter school seat than they have capacity for, the school must hold a random lottery for admittance. In lottery-based studies, researchers utilize oversubscribed lottery data to create a randomized control trial. Students who were not selected in the lottery are placed in a control group and students who were selected in the lottery are placed in a treatment group. Then, researchers could attribute any observed differences in students' academic outcomes to charter school attendance, eliminating bias associated with charter school self-selection. Lottery studies are favored for their empirical rigor, but require that charter schools be oversubscribed and keep adequate lottery records. Oversubscribed schools may be more high performing in themselves, rendering results not generalizable to all charter schools (Cohodes, 2018). Conversely, observational studies attempt to create groups of students who differ only based on charter school versus non charter school attendance as a means of comparison (Booker et al., 2011; Sass et al., 2016). The main limitation to observational studies is that they do not take into consideration the potential differences between students who applied for the lottery and those who did not. Therefore, there are limitations to either quantitative approach, but lottery studies are preferred (Dynarski et al., 2010). The literature describing the effects of no-excuses charter schools should be read with these methodological considerations and limitations in mind.

The Effect of No-excuses Charter School Attendance on Academic Achievement

Many no-excuses charter school studies have been conducted in urban locations such as New York City (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013, 2015), Boston (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2011; Angrist et

al., 2010; Angrist et al., 2016), and Chicago (Davis & Heller, 2019). In a meta-analysis of lottery-based studies, Cheng et al. (2017) found that for each year of attending a no-excuses charter school, students' math and literacy achievement increased by .25 and .17 standard deviations, respectively. According to a quasi-experimental study, Angrist et al. (2010) found that lottery winners who attended KIPP Lynn middle school in Boston demonstrated larger gains on statewide test scores than their non-lottery winning peers. Those who began as academically weaker saw greater improvements. Others have found similar results. No-excuses charter school lottery winners at five middle schools and three high schools in Boston achieved statistically significant academic gains on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2011) in comparison with non-winners. Importantly, these schools also served predominantly Black and Hispanic students. Dobbie and Fryer (2015) found that students offered admission to a charter middle school in New York scored .279 standard deviations higher on academic achievement outcomes than the control group. Together, these lottery-based studies suggest that attending a no-excuses charter school has a significantly positive effect on standardized test scores.

Observational studies demonstrate similar results. CREDO (2015) created a matched student database utilizing charter records from 41 urban locations across the country and found that urban charter schools demonstrated statistically significantly higher math and reading results in comparison to traditional public-school peers. Furthermore, Black, Hispanic, low-income, and special education students demonstrated larger academic gains. In a report by the *Mathematica Institute*, Tuttle et al. (2015), evaluated the impact of KIPP elementary, middle, and high school attendance on a variety of student outcomes up to four years after students began at a KIPP school. Using a combination of lottery-based and matched student quasi-experimental designs,

they found that KIPP high schools had a statistically significantly positive impact on newly admitted students. Overall, based on observational and lottery-based studies of no-excuses charter schools and their effects on academic achievement test scores, it is evident that no-excuses charter schools have demonstrated relative success in this domain. However, these studies adhere to a limited definition of academic achievement and college readiness as measured by test scores.

The Effects of No-excuses Charter Schools on College Enrollment, Persistence, and Success

Literature is still emerging regarding the impact of no-excuses charter school attendance on college student enrollment, persistence, and success. Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) including Uncommon, YES Prep, KIPP and Achievement First report that their alumni graduate from college at rates between 32- 50% (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017). Notably, these rates are much higher than the national average for minoritized student populations; however, they remain lower than national averages overall (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Results from observational and lottery-based studies produce mixed results on the long-term effects of charter school and specifically no-excuses charter school attendance (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019).

In an observational study, Booker et al. (2011) found that middle school charter school students in Florida and Chicago who subsequently attended a charter high school were 8-10 percentage points more likely to go to college than those students who transferred to a traditional high school. Although the schools sampled in this study were not solely no-excuses schools, Booker et al. (2011) found that educational attainment was higher for charter schools in urban locations, where no-excuses charter schools are predominantly situated. Building from this study, Sass et al. (2016) examined the impact of attending a charter school on college persistence and

post-graduation income earnings. Researchers define college persistence as students enrolling in college for two consecutive years or four consecutive semesters following high school (Davis & Heller, 2019; Sass et al., 2016). Using a merged dataset from the Florida Department of Education's K-20 Education Data Warehouse and the Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program, Sass and colleagues (2016) found similar results to Booker et al. (2011) and additionally reported that students who attended a charter high school were more likely to persist in college. Notably, Sass et al. (2016) found that students who attended a charter high school earned more in annual earnings from ages 23-25 than their peers who did not attend a charter school.

Because previous studies had not investigated the effects of charter school attendance on long-term outcomes, this finding is particularly notable. A primary limitation of these two observational studies is that they do not differentiate between no-excuses charter schools and other types of charter schools. Conversely, using matching and regression analysis to analyze education data from Texas, Dobbie and Fryer (2019) found that while attending a no-excuses charter school did increase enrollment at two and four-year colleges, it did not statistically significantly impact post-graduation earnings.

In addition to observational studies, lottery-based studies contribute meaningfully to this area of inquiry. Angrist et al. (2016) examined the effects of no-excuses charter school attendance on student outcomes including state exit examination scores, grade progression, high school graduation, SAT taking, SAT scores, AP taking, AP scores, college enrollment, and college choice. From a sample of six high schools in Boston, they found that urban no-excuses charter school attendance increased AP test-taking and SAT scores, which are gatekeepers for college. Additionally, although they did not find a statistically significant effect of charter school

attendance on college enrollment overall, there was a positive effect on students enrolling in four-year instead of two-year institutions. These findings could reflect no-excuses charter schools' definition of "college-for-all" as being explicitly associated with four-year institutions. Davis and Heller (2019) conducted a recent study investigating the effect of no-excuses charter school attendance on college outcomes. Utilizing data from Chicago Public Schools and Noble Street Charter School's oversubscribed lottery, Davis and Heller (2019) found that Noble Street lottery winners were 10 percentage points more likely to attend college and 9.5 percentage points more likely to persist in college, indicating that no-excuses charter school attendance can impact more than just standardized test scores.

Lottery-based and observational studies overwhelmingly indicate that attending a no-excuses charter school is correlated with greater human capital gains including academic achievement and college attendance. However, no-excuses graduates have still not reached parity with non-minoritized students in degree attainment. Acquiring human capital measured by test scores and college attendance are not the only components that contribute to a student's college persistence, upward mobility, and lifelong success (Hammack, 2016). The discrepancies between post-graduation earning outcomes highlights an ongoing tension between no-excuses charter schools' focus on teaching to high stakes tests and effectively developing essential noncognitive skills that contribute to students' long-term success (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019).

No-excuses Charter Schools: The Other Side of Success

Researchers have conducted rigorous studies to identify the effects of attending no-excuses charter schools on primarily academic short-term outcomes and found that charter schools are largely successful by these metrics. These findings are valuable; however, they do not capture the holistic experiences of students, teachers, families, counselors, and leaders. This

investigation of how no-excuses charter schools influence students' success and transmit social and cultural capital is largely missing from literature primarily dominated by the economic human capital theory driven inquiries. This section reviews qualitative studies that attempt to isolate the disciplinary and academic factors that contribute to or undermine no-excuses charter schools' espoused college-for-all and social mobility missions.

The Unintended Consequences of a College-for-all Approach

Despite substantial strides in increasing college attendance rates for minoritized students, no-excuses charter schools' college graduation rates are still lower than expected (Athanases et al., 2016). Farmer-Hinton (2011) uncovered challenges that no-excuses charter schools faced in conceptualizing what college preparation and college-going cultures look like in practice. As newer schools, their growing pains and "trial and error" practices influence student college preparation and success (Farmer-Hinton, 2011, p. 579). Counselors, can inadvertently offer "low-volume" or "counterfeit" social capital, defined as when students may perceive being supported by staff, when in reality, "staff are pressured to complete job tasks at the expense of students' academic growth" because they are overworked, lack sufficient training, or often operate in reactive "triage" modes (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008, p. 79).

Additionally, counselors and teachers at no-excuses charter schools highlight tension between overly coddling students and allowing them to fail and learn from their mistakes. For example, if a no-excuses charter school goal is college-for-all, students cannot miss any college application deadlines. Counselors then follow-up with students incessantly. However, if students do not learn how to hold themselves accountable without this constant support, then they may not develop the necessary skills to be successful in college and life (Farmer-Hinton, 2011; Lamboy & Lu, 2017).

Lamboy and Lu (2017) raised multiple concerns with the "one size fits all" nature of the college-for-all construct. First, students may feel pressure to attend a four-year college when they are not psychologically, academically, or financially prepared, which could have negative unintended consequences. Second, researchers take issue with defining success as attending elite, predominantly White, four-year institutions of higher education as it implies that BIPOC students need to adopt White and middle-class values to be successful. Underlying these two criticisms is concern regarding the lack of empirical research that expands the definition of college success beyond simply college acceptance.

Teaching Methods and Instructional Practices

Researchers have begun to explore the consequences of no-excuses charter school instructional methods on students' college success. Athanases (2018) conducted a case study at a small charter high school in California and found that although they espoused a college-for-all mission, only 47% persisted in college. Through classroom observations, Athanases (2018) found that despite fostering safe and caring spaces, teachers provided more academic support than academic challenge in their instruction. Athanases (2018) suggested that overly structured, formulaic, and standards-based teaching practices stifled critical thinking, imagination, deeper learning, and idea generation, highlighting the potential detrimental consequences of no-excuses charter schools' instructional approaches on students' long-term learning.

Other researchers investigated different unintended consequences of no-excuses charter schools' instructional practices. Despite the flexibility leaders have, Sondel (2015) argued that teachers do not have the autonomy to implement justice-oriented and culturally relevant pedagogical practices. Researchers find that teachers have little discretion over their classrooms (Golann, 2018) and burn out quickly due to unreasonable expectations, long hours, and pressure

to conform (Golann, 2018; Torres, 2016). Drawing on ethnographic data collected at a KIPP elementary school, Sondel (2015) found that no-excuses charter school leaders justified culturally-deficit belief systems and curriculum implementation by saying they were doing "whatever it took" for students to go to college. Sondel (2015) argued that defining success in these stringent terms ignores the structural issues facing education reform and erroneously presumes that preparing students for assessments, individualism, and compliance equates to preparing students for democracy. Mirroring these concerns, Dobbie and Fryer (2019) questioned whether or not no-excuses charter schools intentionally or unintentionally sacrifice teaching essential labor-market skills such as creativity in order to achieve short-term outcomes such as good scores on standardized tests. These qualitative studies highlight the negative effects of no-excuses charter schools' historic commitment to conformity and narrowly defined expectations.

Character Education and Disciplinary Practices

Multiple researchers articulate that no-excuses disciplinary practices reinforce the expectation that Black and Latina/o/x students adopt White, middle-class behaviors, which contributes to the very inequities that such schools are meant to combat (Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Sondel et al., 2019). Drawing from qualitative observations and teacher interviews at two charter middle schools, Sondel et al. (2019) utilized a critical race theory framework to explore how teacher hiring practices, meritocratic assessment-based academic approaches, and oppressive behavior management practices at schools that serve predominantly BIPOC students perpetuates systems of oppression and colorblind racism. They described no-excuses charter schools as a neoliberal market-based reform strategy built on White supremacist, anti-Black, and White saviorism ideologies. The unintended consequences of authoritarian disciplinary practices and

constant emphasis on attending college can confer stress, low-motivation, shame, low levels of self- respect, and the development of "worker-learners" who monitor themselves instead of sharing their opinions (Golann, 2015; Lamboy & Lu, 2017). Considering America's history of police brutality and the school to prison pipeline for Black and Latina/o/x populations, employing 100% compliance techniques and constant monitoring, in combination with high rates of expulsion for this population is particularly problematic (Casey, 2015; Lamboy & Lu, 2017).

These consequences are also particularly concerning for Black and Latina/o/x students with disabilities. In a year-long qualitative study, Waitoller et al. (2019) conducted interviews with parents of K-12 students with disabilities attending no-excuses charter schools and discovered that although parents were drawn to these schools because of their college preparatory curriculum, they were dismayed by the consequences of these practices on their children. These consequences included deteriorating mental health, depression, and anxiety. Moreover, in an ethnographic study incorporating semi-structured interviews with students, classroom observations, and photovoice methods, Marsh (2018) explored how middle school students resisted the oppressive definitions of success enacted by a no-excuses charter school. Students expressed that being loud, outgoing, or opinionated equated to being seen as oppositional to their school's definition of an ideal student. Many learned to "play the game" and follow teachers' directions without question to avoid the label in order to not be labeled "at risk." Marsh (2018) compared no-excuses charter schools' classroom policies to those employed in prisons. Through an extensive literature review, Golann and Torres (2018) found little empirical evidence to support strict no-excuses disciplinary practices as foundational to increasing academic scores. Although qualitative researchers have begun to unearth the detrimental effects

of no-excuses charter schools' disciplinary and teaching practices, it is challenging for them to isolate the components that contribute positively or negatively to students' academic outcomes.

Effects on Noncognitive Skill Development

Researchers have also investigated the effects of charter school attendance on the development of noncognitive skills including self-control, grit, conscientiousness, and decision making (Dobbie & Fryer, 2015; Golann, 2015; West et al., 2016). From cross-sectional data collected from eighth grade traditional public and charter school students in Boston, West et al. (2016) found that students attending over-subscribed high-performing charter schools achieved greater test score gains than their public school peers, but rated themselves as lower on noncognitive skills. Similarly, Dobbie and Fryer (2015) found that no-excuses school students in Harlem reported having lower noncognitive skills despite having increased test scores. West et al. (2016) posed two hypotheses for this paradox. Students attending these schools could be more critical of themselves and therefore, there is a level of reference bias. Or, despite raising test scores, no-excuses charter schools could negatively influence students' development of grit, self-control, and conscientiousness despite their intentions. Recent evidence points to the potentially perverse effects of disciplinary practices on non-cognitive skill development including a negative influence on confidence and decision-making abilities (Golann, 2015).

The "Paradox" of No-excuses Practices

Evidence from these studies highlights concerns regarding the effects of no-excuses charter schools' practices on the marginalized groups they intend to serve. Some quantitative studies and in-depth qualitative studies highlight critical concerns about whether these practices have unintended consequences on students' long-term outcomes and experiences (Hammack, 2016). Highly prescriptive models do not allow room for failure, opinion, and developing

independence. Kerstetter (2016) suggested that no-excuses charter schools could implement a relational discipline structure instead of a punitive one and still achieve academic results. Thus, Golann (2015) describes this "paradox": no-excuses charter schools teach students of color and low-income students to be more like middle class, White students through paternalistic mechanisms that emphasize conformity and short-term achievements. In contrast, ironically, middle class students are being taught to think creatively, to negotiate, and to assert their needs. In this sense, academic attainment alone might not necessarily translate to long-term success.

Gaps in No-excuses Charter Schools College Success Literature

Black students, Latina/o/x students, and low-income students continue to graduate from college at lower rates than their peers, articulate more racialized experiences on campuses, and face a number of barriers to surviving and thriving in college (Museus, 2014; NCES, 2020; Schreiner, 2010). Considering the college-for-all ethos of many no-excuses charter schools, examining their definition of college success and their approach to preparing students for this pursuit is paramount. No-excuses charter schools are often lauded publicly by the media and education reformers as a promising and replicable fix to urban education issues (Golann & Torres, 2018). As indicated in this literature review, there is empirical substance for this praise. However, quantitative studies do not uncover how elements of no-excuses charter school practices contribute to these results nor expand their definitions of success beyond test scores and educational attainment.

Qualitative research studies have captured the textured nuances of student experiences and painted vivid descriptions of school culture and instruction, while raising essential questions about the other unintended effects that no-excuses charter schools have on students' holistic and long-term college success. However, these qualitative studies focus primarily on elementary,

middle, and high school student experience. Few, if any, focus on the college experience. Golann (2015) reported that no-excuses charter high school students questioned whether the strict disciplinary practices in high school would actually prepare them for college. Until now, research attempting to investigate this question by studying students in college has rarely been pursued.

It is important to note that no-excuses charter schools vary and that they change over time. Notably, since their founding, no-excuses charter schools have gone through transformations and iterations that are critical to highlight. In this dissertation, I use the term "no-excuses charter schools" as a proxy for a set of high-performing, urban, college preparatory charter schools that share similar college-for-all missions, disciplinary practices, and pedagogical approaches. No-excuses schools can be elementary, middle, or high schools. Although not all no-excuses schools self-identify with this label, and some actively reject it (Pondiscio, 2019), it is commonly invoked to describe this distinctive group of charter schools (Cheng et al., 2017). According to popular media sources, many schools have begun changing their no-excuses charter school methods in response to widespread criticism (Cohodes & Parham, 2021; Disare, 2016; Golann & Debs, 2019; Strauss, 2019; Wilson, 2019). Thus, the no-excuses label may refer to schools who no longer identify with it and with some practices that could be outdated. However, since researchers have yet to examine these changes systematically and many no-excuses practices were used with students who currently attend college, this term and its associations remain applicable for this study. Even with the variability and changes in this sector, it remains hugely important to study student experience during the college years as their success remains the espoused end goal of no-excuses charter schools.

Overview of Three Articles

This three-article dissertation examines the perceived influence of a no-excuses charter high school on student college preparation, experience, and success utilizing a qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 1998) grounded in Perna and Thomas' (2006) conceptual model of college success. Each article acts as a standalone journal article. In this section, I describe how these three articles are related to one another. First, I provide an overview of my methodological approach. Second, I describe the conceptual framework grounding all three articles. Third, I outline the four no-excuses charter school distinguishers that undergird data collection and analysis frameworks. Fourth, I describe the case study site selection process and provide a detailed description of the focal school. Last, I describe my positionality and how I approached this research topic with care and reflexivity.

Methodological Approach

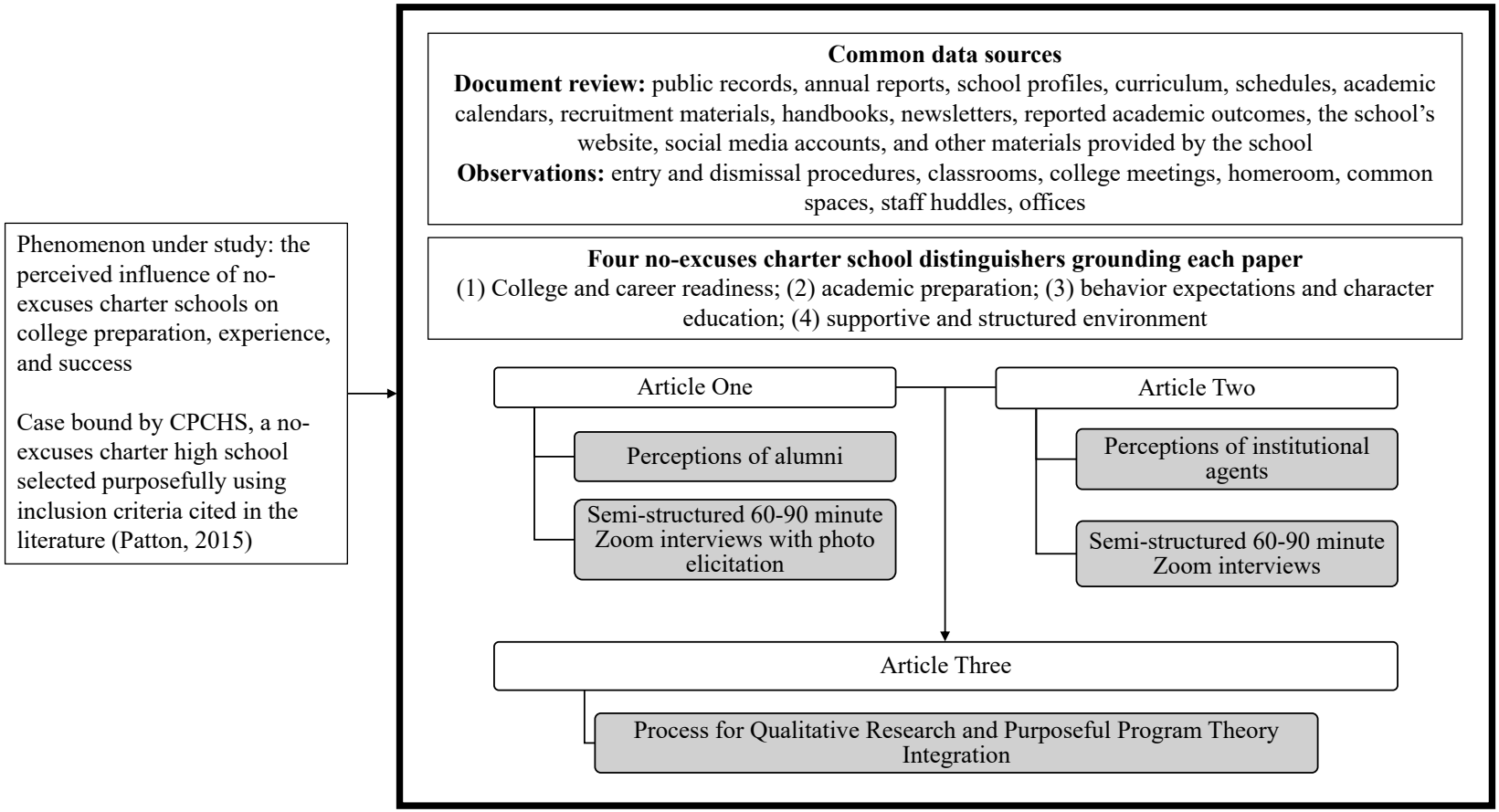
Case studies are an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). They draw on multiple sources of evidence to generate important information that can inform policy and practice (Simmons, 2009; Schwandt & Gates, 2018). A case study is not necessarily a method, rather a choice of what to study within a bounded context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). More specifically, particularistic case studies "concentrate on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation" (Shaw, 1978, p. 2) to help reveal what the phenomenon may represent for understanding practical issues (Merriam, 1998). In order to produce research that informs practice, a particularistic case study is an applicable approach for these three interrelated studies.

Figure 1 is a visual of the phenomenon, the bounded context, and the data sources that contribute to each individual article. The first two articles have different units of analysis but are

situated within the same single no-excuses charter school and investigate the same phenomenon: the perceived influence of no-excuses charter schools on college preparation, experience, and success (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). In the first article, I examine the perceptions of alumni on this phenomenon. In the second article, I examine the perceptions of high school institutional agents (counselors, teachers, leaders, instructional coaches, and staff) on this phenomenon. Then, based on the findings from the first two papers, the third paper proposes a framework and stepwise process for combining participant-centered qualitative research approaches with purposeful program theory development to contribute to greater research utilization in complex school systems such as no-excuses charter schools.

Figure 1.

Article Overview and Connections Among the Three Articles



From an interpretive orientation, experience is subjective, socially constructed, and contextual (Lather, 2006) and "school is a lived experience" (Merriam, 1998, p. 4). Following this worldview, I investigate and interpret the multiple perspectives and realities of alumni and institutional agents situated within the context of one no-excuses charter school. To take a generic interpretive qualitative approach to a case study that focuses on containing rich descriptions, illustrations, and interpretations of a phenomenon within this bounded system (Merriam, 1998), I collected multiple forms of data including observations, document review, and semi-structured interviews with photo elicitation protocols that are discussed in detail within each individual article (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

This study draws upon Perna and Thomas' (2006) multi-level conceptual model of college student success. High school context influences students' college aspirations, belief systems, academic preparation, and acquisition of necessary skills for college and beyond (Cheng et al., 2017; McDonough, 1997). According to the literature, no-excuses charter schools implicitly and explicitly ground their disciplinary and academic approaches in the belief that developing students' human, social, and cultural capital will contribute to their social mobility and college success (Hammack, 2016). Capital is defined as "object, knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and values that can be expressed and transmitted as a means of social or educational advancement" (McDonough & Abrica, 2021, p. 4).

Human Capital

Human capital refers to the acquisition of skills, education, and training that will lead to an individual's economic gain (Becker, 1994). No-excuses charter schools prepare minoritized students for high-stakes tests to help them go to college and achieve upward social mobility

through attaining a degree that will be recognized and rewarded financially in the labor force (Davis & Heller, 2019; McDermott & Nygreen, 2013). As such, many studies investigate the effects of no-excuses charter school attendance on increased academic achievement outcomes and college enrollment (Dobbie & Fryer, 2015). The acquisition of human capital on its own, however, does not necessarily convert to social mobility, especially if students attend college but do not attain a degree. Students must also acquire social and cultural capital that they are able to utilize and convert (McDermott & Nygreen, 2013).

Social Capital

Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the summation of resources that one obtains through social networks in daily life. Social capital is reproduced and reinforced by group membership and can be obtained through various avenues and structures, including school (Bryan et al., 2017; Perna, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). For example, in a school context, these resources include extensive advising, hands-on support in college and financial aid applications, connecting students to social networks, and providing opportunities for programs or activity participation (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; McDonough, 1997). School-based institutional agents, teachers, counselors, and leaders at no-excuses charter schools aim to transmit to students the social capital the educational field deems essential for college success. An undergirding assumption is that marginalized students do not receive this exchange of social capital at home or through other networks. To compensate for this, no-excuses charter schools take students on college visits, attend cultural events, network with professionals, and help them acquire white-collar internships (Whitman, 2008).

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital refers to what can be attained and transmitted through language skills, cultural knowledge, and mannerisms associated with class status that can be transformed into resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). A student's actions related to college choice are influenced by their individual habitus and their school context. An individual's habitus is their "internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions that are acquired from the immediate environment" (Perna, 2006, p. 113). These internal beliefs influence a student's understanding of what "reasonable" actions are in relation to the college process. Moreover, an individual's college process is also shaped by their schools' habitus, which include their structures, organization, resources, programs, and expectations (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). No-excuses charter schools disseminate extensive college information, name their classrooms after colleges, utilize college vernacular, take students to college recruitment events, provide extensive college application support, and maintain four-year college-going expectations. All these elements contribute to a school context that influences students' college choice and enrollment (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McDermott & Nygreen, 2013; Merseth, 2009; Robinson & Roksa, 2016).

Human, Social, Cultural Capital and College Success

According to Perna and Thomas (2006), college success is a longitudinal process shaped by four transition stages that span K-12 and higher education (college preparation, college enrollment, college achievement, and post-college attainment) and by multiple layers of context (internal, family, school, and social, economic, and policy). Across the stages, there are 10 indicators of success which include educational aspiration, academic preparation, college access, college choice, academic performance, transfer, persistence, post-bachelor's degree enrollment, income, and educational attainment (Perna & Thomas, 2006, p. 5). Psychologists, sociologists,

and economists ascribe varying levels of influence to each of these indicators on college success. Underpinning many college success conceptual frameworks are social, cultural, and human capital frameworks described previously. Perna and Thomas' (2006) conceptual model combines multiple approaches, highlighting that academic achievement is not the sole predictor of college success (Bethea, 2016; McDermott & Nygreen, 2013). Non-academic metrics including student experience, satisfaction, engagement, involvement, confidence, and self-efficacy are also important factors (Kuh et al., 2006).

Shaped by social and political neoliberal reform contexts (Lipman, 2015), no-excuses charter schools believe that increasing these forms of capital through rigorous academic and behavioral expectations at the school-level is crucial to students' college success. Therefore, these three papers will be grounded in layer 3, the school context, which is where students and institutional agents are situated. The context of the school is essential for marginalized student populations in preparing for and enrolling in college (Bell et al., 2009). High school quality (Perna & Thomas, 2006), habitus (Bourdieu, 1986; McDonough, 1997), college-going culture (Farmer-Hinton, 2011), intensity of 12th grade college talk (Bryan et al., 2017), role of institutional agents (Kolluri et al., 2020; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011), and dissemination of college knowledge (Bell et al., 2009) have all been found to affect students' college access and success. Institutional agents are critical to the college preparation process and are defined as those who occupy a position of relative authority and "directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued resources (e.g. high school course requirements for admission to 4-year universities)" to students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1067).

The linked studies in this dissertation will simultaneously problematize current college success frameworks for their emphasis on forms of human, social, and cultural capital that do not

factor in the capital that marginalized students bring to college (Yosso, 2005) and acknowledge that these forms of capital are valued and systematically upheld by institutions of higher education. These studies will argue that providing access to dominant forms of capital must happen in conjunction with frameworks that foreground the cultural values and affirmation of students with marginalized identities (McDonough & Abrica, 2021).

No-excuses Charter School Distinguishers

In attempt to uncover the influence of particular no-excuses components on college preparation, experience, and success, data collection and analysis processes for each article center around four no-excuses charter school distinguishers. I developed the list of key distinguishers from the research on typical no-excuses charter school practices and from document review of the focal school site. These distinguishers are described in Table 1 and are foundational to no-excuses charter school approaches.

Table 1

No-excuses Charter School Distinguishers

Distinguisher	Description
College and Career Readiness	No-excuses charter schools aim to prepare students for the college and career of their choice by cultivating a college-going culture, transmitting social and cultural capital, and disseminating college and career knowledge. They encourage four-year college enrollment and four-year college graduation.
Academic Preparation	No-excuses charter schools focus on "closing the achievement gap" by preparing students to meet and exceed academic metrics (e.g. test scores). This approach entails increased instructional time, extended school days, prioritization on test-preparation, tutoring, high academic expectations, extensive teacher feedback, and data-driven instruction.
Behavioral Expectations and Character Education	No-excuses charter schools have historically utilized systems of rewards and consequences to reinforce positive behaviors and punish undesirable behaviors. No-excuses charter schools employ comprehensive school-wide behavior management systems in order to minimize problematic behaviors and maximize instructional time. Simultaneously, they focus on building students' character and noncognitive skills such as self-discipline, leadership, and persistence. These practices appear to be changing at some no-excuses charter schools. However, they were in place when many students currently in college attended these schools and remain relevant to this study.
Supportive and Structured Environment	No-excuses charter schools follow highly structured daily procedures to maximize instructional time and minimize distraction. Simultaneously, they focus on providing supportive school communities where students feel celebrated and joyful.

Case Study Site: Selection and Description

As discussed previously, all three articles report findings related to data collected from the same case study school site. I used purposeful criterion sampling to select City Prep Charter High School (CPCHS, pseudonym), a "no-excuses" affiliated charter high school that met a list of predetermined inclusion criteria I developed based on common characteristics of no-excuses charter schools discussed in the literature review (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Charter high school in an urban location
- Demonstrates the characteristics of a no-excuses charter school outlined in the literature
- Serves predominantly low-income students and students of color
- Extends school days or year
- Focuses on English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics preparation
- Implements college preparatory curriculum
- Employs designated college counselors
- Has former students currently attending college

CPCHS has not participated in any prior research studies and is not part of a charter management organization and therefore, satisfies researchers' call to investigate NECS in contexts yet to be studied (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). As a former no-excuses charter school practitioner, I used my "insider" status to gain access to and build a relationship with CPCHS. In May 2021, we signed a memorandum of understanding outlining our joint project expectations, which was approved by the Boston College Institutional Review Board.

City Prep Charter High School Description

Located in an urban city on the East Coast, City Prep Charter High School (CPCHS, pseudonym) is part of a K-12 network that opened its doors in 2013. Beginning as a middle school, City Prep expanded to include an elementary school and a high school (CPCHS), all located in different buildings. Consistent with no-excuses charter school literature, CPCHS uses a random lottery for students to gain admittance with preference given to those who live in the district and for siblings of students already enrolled at any of the three City Prep schools.

Student and Staff Demographics

Based on demographic data from the 2020-2021 school year in which the study was conducted, CPCHS enrolled 340 students across grades 9-12. The student body was 44% Black, 31% Hispanic/Latino, 15% White, 9% Asian, and 0.8% Pacific Islander. From this population, 84% of students were eligible for free and reduced-priced lunch and 22% of students received special education services. Compared to their district, CPCHS served a higher percentage of Black students and Hispanic/Latino students, a higher percentage of students with disabilities, and a higher number of students who are economically disadvantaged. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (2021), "low-income schools" enroll at least 50% of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and high minority schools are those with at least 40% of students who are Black and Hispanic. Based on these metrics, CPCHS is both a high minority and low-income school. In total, there are 66 people on the CPCHS staff. During the study year, approximately 60% of staff were BIPOC (33% Black, 9% Asian American and Pacific Islander, 14% Latina/o/x, 6% Multiracial) and the remaining were White or undeclared. The staff was 63% female and 37% male. These data are representative of current staff members, which might not be identical to the staff profile in 2017-2019 when alumni participants graduated from CPCHS.

Outcomes: Academic Achievement and College Enrollment and Matriculation

CPCHS students are required to take statewide standardized tests in core subjects. According to the city's Department of Education [redacted for confidentiality], CPCHS' average exam completion rate was higher than that of its city. Additionally, exam score data reveal that CPCHS performed higher in the majority of subject areas than the city. Since CPCHS's first graduating high school class in 2017, 100% of CPCHS students have been accepted into college. Eighty-nine percent have matriculated to college directly following graduation, which is notably

higher than 49%, the national average of students from low-income and high minority public schools reported by the National Student Clearinghouse (2021). On average, 70% of CPCHS' matriculated students enrolled immediately in four-year colleges. However, when disaggregating the data, four-year college matriculation rates have decreased over the last five years. Although CPCHS cannot yet report on their six-year graduation rate, 56% of their graduated students are either persisting in college or have graduated college within 4 years. This rate is higher than 28%, the six-year college completion rate for graduates of high-minority and low-income public high schools (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). Based on these metrics, CPCHS is making strides in closing the college attainment gap.

School Description

To build a rich description of the school, I conducted document review of school profiles, publicly available data from the Department of Education, social media, classroom worksheets, school schedules, school calendars, and other materials online. Further, I conducted in-person observations for four days in October 2021 until I reached saturation of the four no-excuses charter school distinguishers described in Table 1 and below.

Supportive and Structured Environment

CPCHS' school day and school year were longer than the average public school. Their average school day stretched from 8:00am to about 4:00pm, except for one day per week when they dismissed early so that staff could participate in professional development sessions. Each morning, staff met for "huddle," a brief meeting to discuss any announcements for the day.

Throughout my observations, I was struck by the structured yet familial nature of the school. The building itself felt quite small and intimate. The schedule was precise, accounting for every minute of the day. From 8:10am - 8:30am, students trickled into the building, personally

greeted by staff members who stood at various thresholds of the building with smiles, laughter, and school-provided breakfast. Hallways felt lively and loud as students used their lockers and sauntered into their morning homerooms where they used their phones, socialized, ate breakfast, and received morning announcements from their advisors. At 8:30, the bell rang, and students were dismissed to a three-minute transition period to get to their first class. Throughout each transition period, students freely entered office spaces to greet administrators and joked with staff members in the hallways. Simultaneously, staff stood in the hallways, ushering students into their classrooms, jovially shouting reminders to students to keep their uniforms tucked in, and encouraging them to get to class on time. Each day appeared to be a well-oiled machine; students knew where to go and when, except for days when a new tutoring schedule began. During that confusion, staff were armed with lists and schedules to help students figure out where to go.

During classes, staff of all ranks were assigned various responsibilities. Bathroom duty, for example, required a staff member to sit at a desk in the hallway to track students who went to the restroom, to encourage them to get to class as quickly as possible, or to handle any issues if they were to arise. Staff often covered these duties by engaging in casual relationship-building banter with students and other staff. As an example, the principal covered bathroom duty when the school was short-staffed.

College flags and pennants representing staff members' alma mater decorated almost every classroom and office. Posters with Malcom X, Rosa Parks, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, James Baldwin, and Constance Wu filled the space above whiteboards. Multiple flyers with phrases such as "stop AAPI Hate" or "BLM" or "LGBTQ+" hung around classrooms. In the hallways, posters advertising SAT sign-up were interspersed with flyers for club meetings for Asian Culture Club Alianza (Lideres de Latinos), spring sports tryouts, and coding. All CPCHS

students also participated in advisory, a consistent group of peers led by an adult that meets daily for homeroom to receive school-wide announcements and weekly for more in-depth peer bonding and discussions of current events and social justice issues. The constraints of the building itself, made for elementary school students, were readily apparent during the passing periods when students were shoulder-to-shoulder getting to and from their classes. Teachers, staff, and visitors found any place they could to work; in the gym, in empty stairwells, in empty classrooms, or in the back of their own rooms while another teacher was teaching.

Academic Preparation

Students were referred to as "scholars" by teachers and staff, indicating that above all, academics and learning are priorities at this school. Each student followed a jam-packed schedule of either eight 47-minute periods a day, or four double-blocked 80-minute periods. On double-block days, students received two blocks of English Language Arts and Math Courses. CPCHS offers a college preparatory curriculum. For example, they offered AP Art, Calculus AB, Biology, English Language and Composition, English Literature and Composition, Government and Policy, and US History. They also provided the opportunity to take Dual Enrollment courses at the local community college. CPCHS provided multiple diploma pathways, as articulated by state diploma requirements. However, students were heavily encouraged to earn the most advanced high school diploma offered by the state's department of education. This advanced diploma option required advanced scores on state tests as well as a rigorous course sequence requiring four years of English and Social Studies, three years of Math, Science, and Languages other than English. Therefore, students were broadly encouraged to, at a minimum, meet these requirements.

Additionally, within the schedule, CPCHS included mandatory "academic advisory" sessions three days per week, which included 50-minute structured tutoring or study hall sessions. Depending on a students' academic standing, they either met in small groups with teachers for targeted content-specific tutoring or had the opportunity to complete homework or outstanding assignments. CPCHS provided each student with their own laptop, a recent adjustment made to accommodate virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In classes, they often switched between typing and writing in packets or notebooks. Through classroom observations, it was clear that teachers applied more academic structure for 9th and 10th grade students and less academic structure for 11th and 12th grade students. For example, in 11th and 12th grade classrooms, I observed more discussion-based lessons and independent writing. In 9th and 10th grade classrooms, I observed more structured lessons following "I do, we do, you do" approaches.

College and Career Readiness

Highly invested in supporting students to and through college, CPCHS' college-going culture was palpable. Posters with SAT sign-up information, FAFSA reminders, and college banners scattered the walls. CPCHS students in the 11th and 12th grades attended a mandatory college and career readiness class two times a week. In this class, students received guidance on how to research colleges, met with college counselors, prepared for the SAT, and completed college application and matriculation tasks beginning in their junior year. In this class, for example, I observed students registering for the PSATs and SATs in class with a packet of clear instructions from their college and career readiness teachers and counselors. In another class, students received a lesson on the components of a college application. CPCHS began providing students with a "last dollar" financial scholarship funded by an anonymous donor in order to help

students matriculate to a college of "best-fit." Alumni were eligible to receive this grant for each year they are enrolled in a four-year college to help fill the gap between grant and aid offered by colleges and universities. CPCHS has an alumni team of two full time staff members that maintains relationships with alumni once they have graduated.

Behavioral Expectations and Character Education

Scholars wear variations of a school uniform. According to the school handbooks and in discussions with staff members, CPCHS has a demerit and merit system through which students receive demerits for certain behaviors (e.g. dress code violations, being late to school or class) and merits for positive behaviors (e.g. showing professionalism). Notably, demerits did not equate to consequences, which is a departure from CPCHS' previous "no-excuses" practices and what is reported in the literature. The accumulation of merits results in rewards such as off campus lunch, sitting in a cell phone use zone at lunch, and dress down days. It was clear, however, that the demerits and merits system was not ubiquitously or consistently utilized throughout the school. Through observations of interactions between students and staff and interviews and casual conversations with staff, it became increasingly evident that CPCHS is in the process of (re)evaluating their behavior management system. Inside classrooms, some teachers did not, for example, enforce dress code. Students wore non-CPCHS sanctioned jackets and hoodies, but when they stepped into the hallway, other staff would ask them to take their hoodies off. Students walked into class late but did not receive demerits. I witnessed only a handful of merits and demerits given over the course of four days.

The behavior and discipline systems have evolved over the years, from adhering to more "traditional" strict and punitive no-excuses charter school approaches to more relational and restorative justice-based models. For example, when students were referred to the Dean's Office,

the priority was discussing how the student could repair the relationship with the staff member who asked them to leave their room. CPCHS emphasizes "character education" and uses an acronym to reference specific traits such as professionalism and respect that they believe students should possess for lifelong success.

Changes at City Prep Charter High School

When CPCHS opened, they more strictly adhered to the traditional "no-excuses" model and replicated practices from other reputable charter management organizations (CMOs) including the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), Achievement First, Uncommon Schools, Excel Academy, and others. Over the course of the last eight years, however, they have adjusted practices to intentionally move away from more traditional no-excuses discipline and behavior management approaches. Catalyzed in part by virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, staff discussed a shift away from punitive approaches that used to include high rates of dean referrals and detentions. Instead, they have adopted restorative justice practices. However, from 2013 - 2019, when the students in this study attended high school, CPCHS maintained the typical practices associated with the no-excuses model. Through in-person observations in the fall of 2021, it was evident that there are still vestiges of no-excuses practices that remain intact, specifically regarding school structure, college-going culture, and academic preparation, which are the primary areas of focus for this dissertation.

Positionality - A Loving Critic

Conducting qualitative research is a personal, reflexive, and emotional endeavor (Clarke et al., 2014). My personal and professional experiences and identities contribute to my interest in investigating this dissertation topic. Growing up in the United States as a second-generation Vietnamese-American woman, I learned that getting good grades, graduating from college, and

working hard were critical to achieving the "American Dream." I had the privilege and opportunity to attend highly selective private universities where I gained access to forms of social, cultural, and human capital valued by our society.

My professional work was related to no-excuses charter schools for about a decade. While working at a racially and ethnically diverse, urban charter high school on the east coast, I held several positions from teacher to Dean of College. In the latter role, through my presence and actions, I became a physical embodiment of the "college-for-all" ethos that our school espoused. Although 100% of my students were accepted into college, they encountered numerous barriers that would not cease in college or afterwards. Through informal conversations with school graduates, I found that being admitted into college did not equate to inclusion or success once enrolled.

I believe in the power of higher education, the opportunity it provides, and the potential for education reform efforts to support students who have been historically marginalized to achieve their goals. However, college access and success are more nuanced and complex than I once understood. As a practitioner, I did not have the time, capacity, access, or knowledge to ground program implementation or practices in theoretical frameworks, current research, or student experience. I had the best of intentions, but as my supervisor used to say, I was often "building the plane as I flew it," trying new things, implementing other schools' "best practices," and focusing on immediate tasks without a critical perspective or understanding of what it would take to prepare students for more than college acceptance. I did not foresee unintended impacts that our practices could have on students and institutional agents in the long term. As an educator and researcher who works with predominantly students of color from low-income backgrounds, I grapple with the ways in which my experiences as a BIPOC woman, my background as a child

of immigrants, and my socioeconomic privilege and former notions of meritocracy have contributed to my approaches to college access and success-related research.

I embarked on this research study because I left my work at a no-excuses charter high school feeling deeply conflicted. On one hand, I was proud of the work that I did and the positive effects I had on students' college pathways. On the other hand, I felt that I did a disservice to many students. As both an insider and an outsider to the no-excuses charter school realm, I aim to conduct research that can help institutional agents to reflect on their practices and examine the ways in which they contribute, intentionally or unintentionally, negatively or positively, to students' college experiences and success. In many ways, I consider myself a "loving critic" who approaches this research with the intention of helping no-excuses schools improve for the betterment of their students, staff, and communities. Further, as a former art teacher, I approach research with the understanding that physical spaces, visual artifacts, and imagery can represent beliefs, conjure emotions, and communicate ideas. Thus, utilizing visual qualitative research approaches and providing opportunities for those who operate within these highly structured no-excuses charter school environments to reflect on their experiences and practices in different modes can reveal insights that traditional qualitative or quantitative approaches cannot uncover.

Preview of Subsequent Dissertation Sections

Articles One, Two, and Three are individual articles derived from the data collected from this case study investigation and can be read as standalone articles. Although there is overlap in language used in The Introduction and The Conclusion and the three articles themselves, this dissertation ensures no overlap in language between the publishable standalone articles. The Conclusion section provides a summary of each of the article's findings, how they contribute to

further understanding the phenomenon under study, the limitations of each study, and what implications these study findings have for future research.

ARTICLE ONE: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: THE INFLUENCE OF "NO-EXCUSES" CHARTER SCHOOLS ON ALUMNI'S COLLEGE PREPARATION, EXPERIENCE, AND SUCCESS

Introduction

College success is a longitudinal process that begins before students enter college—where students grow up and what high school they attend affects college preparation, experience, persistence, success, and future work earnings (McDonough, 1997; Perna & Thomas, 2006). Sizable returns on a college degree include lower unemployment rates, greater career choice, and increased economic stability (Carnevale et al., 2013). However, Black students, Latino/a/x students, and students from low-income backgrounds remain less college-ready and graduate from college at lower rates than their peers (Cahalan et al., 2019; National ACT, 2019). To remedy these inequities and close the "opportunity gap," no-excuses charter schools emerged in the 1990s as a market-based school-choice model. Although no-excuses charter schools comprise a fraction of charter schools overall, the combination of their demonstrated student academic achievement success and controversy over their educational practices positions them at the forefront of policy debate (Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Noll, 2021).

No-excuses charter schools serve predominantly students from urban and low-income areas and share similar educational practices that work toward college preparation (Cheng et al., 2017). Quantitative studies of prominent no-excuses charter management organizations (e.g. KIPP, Uncommon, Achievement First) demonstrate their students are more college-ready, as measured by standardized test scores and college enrollment rates, when compared to their demographic peers (Angrist et al., 2016; Davis & Heller, 2019). As such, they are lauded publicly by the media and education reformers as a promising fix to urban education issues, garnering substantive private and public funding for replication and expansion (Golann &

Torres, 2018). However, researchers suggest unintended long-term consequences associated with the strict disciplinary practices, formulaic instructional methods, and college-for-all ethos employed to achieve these gains (Golann, 2021; Mehta, 2020). Recently, no-excuses charter schools have begun moving away from these criticized practices.

Given these mixed reports, researchers have called for qualitative studies investigating the long-term effects of no-excuses charter schools in more school contexts (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). This case study addresses these gaps by investigating the perceived influence of a single no-excuses charter high school on their alumni's college preparation, definitions of success, and four-year college experience utilizing Perna and Thomas' (2006) conceptual model of college success. Drawing on multiple forms of qualitative data including document review, observations, and semi-structured interviews with a photo elicitation protocol with 16 "successful" college-persisting alumni, this study's findings provide important implications for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

Literature Review

No-excuses charter schools are characterized by their college-going culture, strict disciplinary practices, college preparatory curriculum, data-driven instruction, character education, extended instructional time, and high expectations (Cheng et al., 2017). They typically subscribe to a "college-for-all" ideology—the belief that all students, regardless of zip code, socioeconomic status, race, or ethnicity, can obtain a college degree, and thus, high schools should prepare them for this pursuit (Lamboy & Lu, 2017). As such, whether implicitly understood or explicitly stated, they attempt to transmit the social and cultural capital that marginalized students need to go to college and achieve social mobility (Davis & Heller, 2019;

Hammack, 2016). Empirical studies highlight the impact of no-excuses charter schools utilizing qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Impact of No-excuses Charter Schools

Lottery-based and observational studies indicate that attending a no-excuses charter school has a significantly positive effect on short-term outcomes such as standardized test scores (Cheng et al., 2017). No-excuses charter high school attendance has yielded a positive effect on four-year institution enrollment, reflecting no-excuses charter schools' definition of "college-for-all" as associated with four-year colleges (Angrist et al., 2016). Davis and Heller (2019) found that no-excuses charter school graduates were 10 percentage points more likely to attend college and 9.5 percentage points more likely to persist in college than students who failed to gain entry in admission lotteries.

Despite immense strides in increasing test scores and college attendance rates for marginalized students, college graduation rates reported by no-excuses charter schools remain lower than national averages overall (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Charter management organization alumni graduate from college at rates between 32-50%—higher than the national average for similar student populations, but lower than school networks expect (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017). Coen et al. (2019) found no statistically significant difference in four-year college persistence for middle school students who were offered a lottery seat at KIPP from those who were not. Mixed results require further research into which school-level components of the no-excuses model confer or unintentionally hinder success.

Unintended Consequences of No-excuses Charter Schools on College Outcomes

Researchers highlight concerns regarding the lack of empirical research expanding the definition of college success beyond academic achievement and college acceptance. Academic growth and human capital attainment do not necessarily translate to long-term success. Despite no-excuses charter schools fostering safe and caring spaces, Athanases (2018) found that overly structured, formulaic, and standards-based teaching practices stifled students' critical thinking, imagination, and deeper learning—all essential skills for college-level academics. Authoritarian disciplinary practices and overemphasis on college attendance could impede the development of non-cognitive skills, some scholars contend, and confer stress, low motivation, shame, low levels of self-respect, and the development of "worker-learners" who monitor themselves instead of sharing their opinions (Golann, 2015; Lamboy & Lu, 2017).

Moreover, researchers highlight concern regarding the "one-size-fits-all" nature of the college-for-all construct. Noll (2021) found that students who attended no-excuses schools received the resources and cultural capital necessary to navigate the college application process but did not necessarily develop internal motivation to go to college. Doing whatever it takes to get students to college could result in the justification of culturally-deficit thinking (Sondel, 2015) that pressures psychologically, academically, or financially unprepared marginalized students to attend four-year predominantly White institutions of higher education (Lamboy & Lu, 2017). Thus, Golann (2015) describes this "paradox": no-excuses charter schools teach students of color and low-income students to be more like middle class, White students through paternalistic mechanisms that emphasize conformity, whereas, middle class students are taught to think creatively and assert their needs. These concerns lead to questions regarding whether no-excuses charter schools unintentionally sacrifice teaching essential labor-market skills in order to achieve short-term outcomes like high standardized test scores (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019).

Despite the concerns raised within the literature, existing empirical studies have yet to examine what happens once no-excuses charter school students are actually in college. Quantitative studies do not uncover how these college-going alumni experience college, making it difficult to isolate components of the no-excuses model that contribute positively or negatively to students' academic outcomes (Golann & Torres, 2018). Therefore, further qualitative research that investigates student experiences beyond high school can help uncover the longer-term influences of attending these controversial charter schools. This study fills this gap by eliciting the voices of alumni using creative qualitative approaches.

Conceptual Framework

This study draws on Perna and Thomas' (2006) multi-level conceptual model of college success. College success is a longitudinal process shaped by multiple layers of context (internal, family, school, and social, economic, and policy) and four transition stages that span K-12 and higher education (college preparation, college enrollment, college achievement, and post-college attainment). Combining multiple approaches from psychology, sociology, and economics, this model is grounded in social, cultural, and human capital frameworks (Perna & Thomas, 2006) and is appropriate for this study because no-excuses charter schools believe that increasing these forms of dominant capital through rigorous academic and behavioral expectations at the school-level is essential to students' college success, commonly defined as persistence and graduation (Hammack, 2016). Specifically, this paper is grounded in layer 3, the high school context, which can influence students' college aspirations, college knowledge, belief systems, academic preparation, nonacademic skills, and acquisition of social and cultural capital (Cheng et al., 2017; McDonough, 1997).

Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as the summation of resources that one obtains through social networks that lead to advantage with a particular field. Reproduced and reinforced by group membership, social capital can be obtained through school environments (Perna, 2006). Examples of school-based resources associated with social capital include extensive college advising, connecting students to social and career networks, and providing opportunities for programs or activity participation (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; McDonough, 1997).

Cultural capital refers to what can be attained and transmitted through language skills, knowledge, and mannerisms associated with class status (Bourdieu, 1986). A student's actions related to college choice are influenced by their individual *habitus*, an "internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions that are acquired from the immediate environment" (Perna, 2006, p. 113). These internal beliefs influence a student's understanding of what "reasonable" actions are in relation to the college process. Moreover, an individual's college process is also shaped by their school's *habitus*, which describes their structures, organization, resources, programs, opportunities, and expectations (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). An underlying assumption is that marginalized students do not receive the forms of social and cultural capital valued by school environments at home or through other networks. To compensate for this, no-excuses charter schools cultivate college-going environments by disseminating extensive college information, utilizing college vernacular, providing college application support, taking students on college visits and to cultural events, and teaching networking skills (Whitman, 2008).

Although access to these forms of capital is important to college preparation and success, scholars also suggest that simply exposing students to college is insufficient because this relies on a deficit model that does not foreground marginalized students' strengths and assets (Cipollone & Sitch, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Instead, college success frameworks could integrate Bourdieuan frameworks with those that culturally affirm marginalized student identities, reject

assimilationist approaches, and expand definitions of college success beyond college persistence and graduation (McDonough & Abrica, 2021; Noll, 2021). Therefore, this study simultaneously problematizes current college success frameworks for their emphasis on forms of "dominant" capital that do not foreground the cultural wealth that marginalized students bring to college and acknowledges that students need to possess forms of capital that are valued and systematically upheld by education systems in the United States (Cipollone & Sitch, 2017; Yosso, 2005).

Positionality

As a former no-excuses charter school teacher and administrator, my interests in exploring the experiences of no-excuses charter high school alumni are personal and professional. I am a Vietnamese-American daughter of immigrants. My racial presentation, college counseling experience, college-level work experience, as well as knowledge of no-excuses charter school culture, all contributed to my level of relative comfort in interviewing alumni. Moreover, my "insider" status and relationships with no-excuses charter school leaders provided me with access to a school site with relative ease. It is worth noting that a researcher's stance shapes interview protocols and study direction. Throughout this process, I reflected greatly on how my socioeconomic privileges, educational background, and work experience would inevitably influence the data collection and analysis process.

Research Method

This qualitative case study examined the perceived influence of no-excuses charter schools on alumni's college preparation, experience, and success within the context of City Prep Charter High School (CPCHS, pseudonym), a single no-excuses charter high school. Case study is an appropriate approach as it draws on multiple sources of evidence to holistically understand

a situation that can reveal practical issues to inform policy and practice (Merriam, 1998). The research questions are as follows:

1. How do alumni perceive the influence of their no-excuses charter high school on their college preparation?
2. How are alumni perceptions of college success influenced by their no-excuses charter high school experience?
3. How do alumni perceive the influence of their no-excuses charter high school on their college experiences at four-year institutions of higher education?

The School Context

I used purposeful criterion sampling to select CPCHS, a standalone charter high school that reflected a no-excuses approach and met inclusion criteria developed based on no-excuses charter school characteristics (e.g., extended school day, college preparatory curriculum, school-wide behavior management system, emphasis on English and Math instruction). CPCHS was selected as a typical case that would provide insight into the research questions (Patton, 2015) and satisfy researchers' call to investigate previously unstudied no-excuses charter school contexts (Cohodes & Parham, 2021).

Founded in 2013 as part of a K-12 network, CPCHS is located in an urban school district on the East Coast. Demographic and academic data reported are from the 2020-2021 academic year. CPCHS enrolled 340 students across grades 9-12. The student body was 44% Black, 31% Hispanic/Latino, 15% White, 10% Asian and Pacific Islander. From this population, 84% of students were eligible for free and reduced priced lunch and 22% of students received special education services. Compared to their district, CPCHS served a higher percentage of Black students and Hispanic/Latino/a/x students, students with disabilities, and students from

economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Based on National Student Clearinghouse (2021) criteria, CPCHS is classified as both a high-minority and low-income school.

Beginning with the first graduating high school class in 2017, 100% of CPCHS students have been accepted into college. Eighty-nine percent have matriculated to college directly following graduation, notably higher than 49%, the national average of students from low-income and high minority public schools reported by the National Student Clearinghouse (2021). On average, 70% of CPCHS' matriculated students enrolled immediately in four-year colleges. Notably, however, four-year college enrollment has decreased over the last five years. Although CPCHS could not yet report on their six-year graduation rate, 56% of their graduated students are persisting or have graduated college. This rate is higher than 28%, the six-year college completion rate for graduates of high-minority and low-income public high schools (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). Based on these metrics, CPCHS is making strides in closing the college attainment gap.

Interview Population and Sample

I utilized a purposeful criterion sampling strategy (Patton, 2015) to identify alumni who graduated from CPCHS, were enrolled in a four-year private or public not-for-profit institution of higher education, and had completed at least two years of college (to account for the effects of COVID-19 on first year experiences). Participants were deemed "successful" due to their four-year college enrollment and persistence. From this population, I conducted maximum variation sampling to select 16 college-going alumni who attended a four-year college and were on track for college graduation in at least six years (Patton, 2015), shown in Table 2. The four-year colleges students attended represent a range of selectivity levels. Participants were in their second, third, or fourth years of college and reported varied levels of preparation for the "non-

academic" components of college (e.g. socialization, time management) on a brief screening survey (Appendix A).

Table 2
Alumni Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Race	Gender Identification	College Type	College Selectivity Level
Lindsay	Asian	F	Public	More selective
Aaliyah	Asian	F	Private	More selective
Ben	Black	M	Public	Selective
Makayla	Black	F	Private	Selective
David	Asian	M	Public	More selective
Lance	Asian	M	Private	More selective
Cory	Black	M	Public	Selective
Olivia	White	F	Public	Selective
Brenden	White	M	Public	Less selective
Andrew	Asian	M	Public	More selective
Sebastien	White	M	Public	More selective
Julie	Asian	F	Private	Selective
Elliot	Black	M	Public	More selective
Lyanna	Latinx	F	Public	Selective
Gracie	Black/White	F	Public	Selective
Jayden	Black	M	Public	Selective

Note. Alumni self-reported their racial and gender identities in an open-ended survey question

Informed by an interpretive approach (Merriam, 1998), I aimed to understand the diverse experiences successful alumni had with no-excuses charter school distinguishers in relation to their holistic college success—defined as persistence and graduation as well as subjective well-being, academic and intellectual growth, social engagement, career preparation, sense of belonging, and overall satisfaction (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Strayhorn, 2018). The number of interview participants depended on achieving *a priori* saturation, when the four predetermined

no-excuses charter school distinguishers became “adequately represented in the data” (Saunders et al., 2018, p. 1898).

Data Collection

Three data sources included semi-structured interviews with alumni using a photo-elicitation protocol, document review, and in-person school observations. Conducting observations at CPCHS over four days and reviewing public records, annual reports, curriculum, schedules, calendars, handbooks, newsletters, reported academic outcomes, school profiles, CPCHS’ website, social media accounts, and other materials contributed to building a thick description of the case (Merriam, 1998). Further, observations and document review revealed the presence of four typical distinguishers of no-excuses charter schools that corresponded to the literature descriptions. These distinguishers include: (1) college and career readiness, (2) academic preparation, (3) behavioral expectations and character education, and (4) supportive and structured environment. They provide the foundation for the interview protocol and analysis processes used in this study (Appendix B). To ensure trustworthiness and dependability, I triangulated data using these multiple data sources and sought disconfirming evidence (Merriam, 1998).

The semi-structured interview protocol with a photo-elicitation protocol was organized by the four no-excuses charter school distinguishers articulated above. I conducted interviews over Zoom for 60-90 minutes (Patton, 2015). Photo elicitation is a visual method where researchers show photographs during interviews to evoke deeper emotions, reflections, and responses than would occur using verbal techniques (Harper, 2002). Although participants in this study attended different colleges, using photographs from their “collective” high school experiences helped sharpen memories from their shared no-excuses school experience (Clark-

Ibáñes, 2004, p. 1511). Using photo elicitation also allowed students to direct the conversation topics and flow, which increased trust between participant and researcher. For each distinguisher, I showed 2-3 CPCHS-associated photographs (e.g. college trips, students taking tests, the dean's office, advisory) compiled from social media, former staff's photographs, and the school's website. Then, I asked questions about students' experiences with what was represented (Harper, 2002) in addition to questions about how alumni perceived the influence of CPCHS' associated practices on their college preparation, experience, and success (Appendix B). Throughout data collection, I wrote analytic memos, interrogated my positionality, and practiced reflexivity (Miles et al., 2014)

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative process that occurred throughout data collection (Miles et al., 2014). I audio and video recorded Zoom interviews, transcribed them with assistance from Rev.com, and analyzed them using a computer-assisted qualitative software program, NVivo. I approached data analysis inductively and deductively (Merriam, 1998) and followed a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). First, I familiarized myself with the data by reviewing interview transcripts, documents, and field notes while jotting questions and observations (Merriam, 1998). Then, I conducted the first cycle of coding in which I deductively chunked text into smaller units using a provisional list of codes developed from the literature and the conceptual framework. I also inductively coded using *in vivo*, values, versus, descriptive, and process codes, which helped refine the codebook (Saldaña, 2016).

Following, I conducted a second cycle of axial coding where I sorted and relabeled first-cycle codes into the four predetermined no-excuses charter school distinguishers and new categories derived from the inductive codes. I iteratively coded until achieving *a priori* saturation

(Saunders, 2018). Throughout this process, I displayed data alongside the photo-elicitation photographs in visual diagrams to contextualize analysis, identify patterns, reflect on data in relation to the conceptual framework and predetermined distinguishers, and draw relationships among them (Saldaña, 2016). Last, I examined how categories worked together or revealed insights into the theoretical framework (Merriam, 1998). I maintained audit trails, conducted member checks with participants during the interview process, and provided participants with opportunities to review the article's findings and their associated quotes (Miles et al., 2014).

Findings

CPCHS is a high-minority and low-income charter high school that boasts 100% college acceptance rates and high four-year college matriculation rates for their students. Three themes emerged in relation to the research questions: (1) CPCHS helped students enroll in and matriculate to four-year colleges; (2) a normative definition of college success shaped expectations and behaviors during college; (3) practices associated with the no-excuses model positively and negatively influenced students' college experiences. Together, these themes describe a "double-edged sword" of the no-excuses charter school model: some components helped students get into and persist at four-year colleges while also conferring unintended consequences on students' definitions and experiences of college success. These consequences complicated and sometimes hindered students' overall identity development, career exploration, engagement, sense of belonging, and well-being (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Strayhorn, 2018). Findings highlight shortcomings of no-excuses charter school models grounded in dominant social, cultural, and human capital frameworks that measure college success strictly by persistence and graduation rates (Perna & Thomas, 2006; Yosso, 2005).

CPCHS Helped Students Enroll in and Matriculate to Four-year Colleges

College Preparation: College-going Culture Coupled with Care and Concrete Support

For participants, a college-for-all mission was clear during high school. Ben said, "there [was] going to be no slacking and all that because they have a real, straightforward mission. We want students to go to college," and more specifically, a four-year college. CPCHS' college-going culture helped alumni who were predominantly first-generation students, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students, and students from low-income backgrounds, believe that college was not only possible, but as Sebastien said, "a given."

In terms of college preparation and overall support, Elliot shared, "[CPCHS teachers and staff] were going to go the extra mile to help you." Jayden reflected, "[counselors] definitely had our backs. You know with colleges, [they] wanted to push ourselves to go to the school we wanted, but be realistic at the same time." Inside and outside of the classroom, students discussed feeling genuinely cared about and known by teachers and staff. Makayla emphasized that "teachers [she] didn't even know" checked up on her if she looked upset. Ben added, "we really have to give thanks to [counselors] because they made [college] possible…I am pretty sure they had countless meetings on how to better assist us." Figure 2 depicts "Signing Day," a community-wide celebration where students shared their college plans. Upon seeing this photograph, most students recalled feeling "happy" and "emotional." Aaliyah articulated that CPCHS publicly celebrating students' college decisions was "a very good way to feel proud of the accomplishment of college."

Figure 2

Photo-elicitation Photograph Showing College Signing Day

Note. This photograph was shown as part of the "College and Career Readiness" distinguisher. College Signing Day is a celebration where students publicly announce their college plans to the school community.

Additionally, according to alumni, the comprehensiveness of the college counseling program was critical to completing immediate, concrete tasks associated with the college process such as applying for financial aid, filling out college applications, preparing for the SATs, and matriculating to college. Upon reflection, alumni referred to the benefits of their 11th and 12th grade College and Career Readiness class, a required elective that provided them direct access to college readiness teachers and college counselors and designated time to work on application and matriculation tasks. According to Andrew, completing college applications "would've been really hard on his own, but having someone there to guide you, that was really helpful."

Building Capital Through Course-taking and Pre-college Opportunities

In high school, students understood that getting good grades, passing standardized tests, taking Advanced Placement (AP) classes, and achieving high SAT scores were proxies for being prepared for college. Despite CPCHS' small school size, students noted their attempts to provide enough AP courses. Elliot said, "we would make the joke that [CPCHS] would give us AP lunch if they could give us all AP classes." For some, taking these classes translated to feeling

academically prepared for college-level work, specifically in terms of reading and writing. Lyanna shared, “I felt very academically prepared [for college] actually. Nothing was really difficult for me. I understood my assignments quite clearly. Also when it came to, I would say essays or anything with writing…[high]school prepared us well.”

Additionally, college-related family events helped students navigate through complex financial aid applications. When discussing the influence of the “college and career readiness distinguisher” and seeing Figure 3, a FAFSA reminder that CPCHS posted on social media, many students, including Sebastien noted, “the regular nights of, hey, we're going to do the FAFSA…or stuff like that. Like show up and get a major part of the college application process, just done. That was really helpful.”

Figure 3

Photo-elicitation Photograph Showing a FAFSA Reminder Sent to Students

Note. This photograph was shown as part of the “College and Career Readiness” distinguisher.

Alumni also discussed the benefits of attending a fully funded and supported summer program, which CPCHS required for rising juniors and seniors. Students with high academic standing applied to study abroad or pre-college programs while the remainder participated in

less-selective activities of interest. Andrew's pre-college program gave him an "early head start of what's ahead" in relation to his STEM-related career aspirations. Lyanna's study abroad experience did not relate to her major, but allowed her to explore diverse settings and cultures that would not have been accessible otherwise,

> it really helped me picture [a] more clear path of what I want to do…because every college is different and it was nice to experience each type of college that we went to and say, oh, if I wanted to go to this college, this is what it would be like this is the kind of culture of the community.

From alumni's perspective, CPCHS offered essential college counseling support in addition to discrete academic, financial, and experiential opportunities that helped them access four-year college.

A Normative Definition of College Success Shaped Expectations and Behaviors During College

The Influence of CPCHS' Definition of College Success

At CPCHS, employing consistent behavioral rules, upholding high and strict expectations, and fostering a caring and supportive environment were mechanisms to bolster academic achievement and college access. Students internalized the idea that meeting academic benchmarks, getting into college, and graduating within four years equated to success. For participants who wanted to go to a four-year college, CPCHS' approaches were not a "problem." They expressed appreciation for CPCHS' efforts that helped them get there. However, some felt "suffocated" by the ubiquity of four-year college talk without sufficient recognition of their individual goals and aspirations. Some observed that their peers felt ashamed if they did not fit into this college box. Ben reflected,

> because of how disciplined [CPCHS was] to the students, they expected things their way. And because we never got any input, we were kind of stuck…We weren't really given any opportunities to voice ourselves or to say what we really wanted.

This point is further underscored by the fact that CPCHS addressed student classes by the year they would graduate college, communicating that graduation from a four-year college in four years was expected. For example, Gracie, who graduated high school in 2017, was called "the class of 2021." When Gracie transferred colleges, she extended her time to graduation, realized she would no longer be part of the "class of 2021," and reflected,

> Why was [2021 graduation] the focus for so long when realistically not every single person is going to graduate in four years?…It was beat into my head. You're the class of 2021. And when it didn't happen, I was so disappointed.

Ultimately, the one-size-fits-all approaches to college, character education, and discipline unintentionally made some students feel shame and confusion for not meeting what Jayden described as the "gold standard" of CPCHS. In college, after not getting into his major of choice, Elliot felt like a "failure." He associated this disappointment with pressure he felt to live up to expectations imparted by CPCHS. Elliot described himself as being one of the "golden few" top-performing students who was treated by CPCHS:

> As one of the smart kids, one of the kids who would have an easy time would just cake walk through college. [in college] I would sit and just stare and just cry because I didn't know what to do. And I didn't know how to tell the people who believed that I was supposed to be some paragon of academia, that the one you had such high hopes for is literally on the brink of failing out of college and never coming back.

Alumni (Re)examining and (Re)defining College Success

Once in college, alumni began reexamining and recrafting their definitions of college success, which they described as a mixture of nonacademic and academic components such as graduating from college with a career-relevant degree and little or no debt, getting decent grades, learning, discovering passions, building peer and professional connections, prioritizing mental health, and enjoying college life. When defining college success, Sebastien said, "the obvious metric is like your grades, right? Or perhaps this slightly sloppier metric is whether or not you had fun, but I'd say like, there's a bit of a combination of both." Gracie added that college requires, "finding something that you are passionate about and you find a way to integrate that into your life." Lindsay elaborated further:

> It's learning or improving yourself and how you experience or see the world…of course it would be great to graduate with a 4.0 and have a career set for you right after, like that's the goal, but I wouldn't feel fulfilled if that's all I had to prove for myself.

To summarize, after experiencing almost four years of college, Makayla described college success as not being, "all about the books," rather, finding a personal balance between social and academic life—a departure from what she internalized at CPCHS.

Practices Associated with the No-excuses Model Positively and Negatively Influenced Students' College Experiences

Impact on Alumni's Transition from a One-size-fits-all Model to the College Context

At CPCHS, alumni felt supported by individual staff and by the community broadly, but experienced a tension between their care and the pressure to meet academic and behavioral standards. Consequently, alumni discussed the negative influence of CPCHS' concentration on academic rigor and structure over the cultivation of other lifelong skills such as collaboration and time management that would have been helpful within and outside their college classrooms.

In high school, Ben described feeling frequently stressed about meeting academic standards because “it was always [CPCHS] disciplined me to make sure I have this test…it was only school, which was a great thing, but I just never really had fun.” Entering college with this mindset, Ben struggled initially. After years of focusing primarily on academics, once in college, he “wasn't able to balance that schoolwork and chose the fun over the schoolwork…on the first day I missed class and that was because I didn't really understand my schedule too much, and that was my fault.” Unlike his high school experience, where teachers checked in with him frequently, he realized, “I needed to be independent…this is a new environment, nobody's going to hold your hand.” Ben ultimately found success after seeking help and building a support system. Unfortunately, the challenges of his first year negatively affected his grades early on, slightly delaying his graduation date and pursuit of graduate school. Differently, Aaliyah was able to stay organized in college because she had developed “regimented” habits from CPCHS. Simultaneously, emphasis on academics in high school resulted in heightened anxiety that persisted in college. She characterized CPCHS as “a double-edged sword right? Like, okay, I definitely got the skills, but sometimes I feel like [CPCHS] ma[de] me anxious about academics and performance.”

Experiencing the transition from a structured high school context to a freer college setting highlighted interpersonal and learning skills alumni wished they began developing before college. David said that at CPCHS, “[the nonacademic parts of college] were not talked about as much as the academic parts, because I came into college expecting the academic rigor of college, but not expecting the social parts.” Gracie described college success skills as those you need as “an adult in the world”

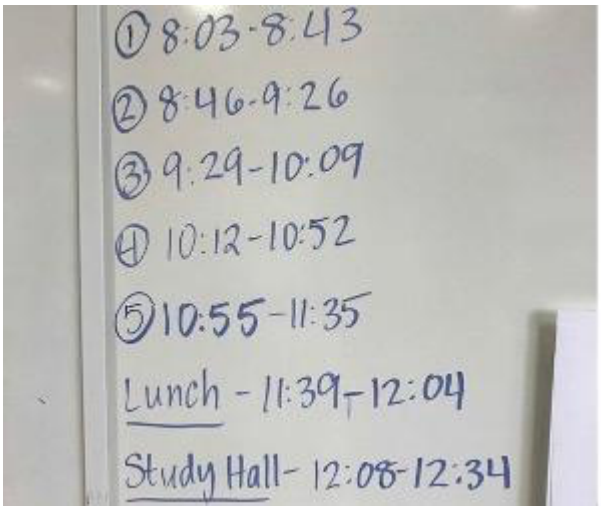
> You need to have time management, you need to be able to be responsible for yourself and your space, you need to have boundaries, and you need to be able to have a better gauge of deciding and balancing between things that you do day to day.

Seeing Figure 4 and reflecting on the supportive and structured environment distinguisher, alumni discussed having little room during high school to build peer communities or experience freedom outside of short transition periods and lunches during the 8am-4pm school day. As Lindsay described, this background affected their college experience:

> The social experience was very heavily structured and I dunno if forced is the right word, but like coerced, pushed…I was so used to having a routine given to me that when I had to create my own routine, it was just different and new and I wasn't able to understand them, but it was just something about time management skills that I struggled with.

Figure 4

Photo-elicitation Photograph Showing a Sample Wednesday Schedule



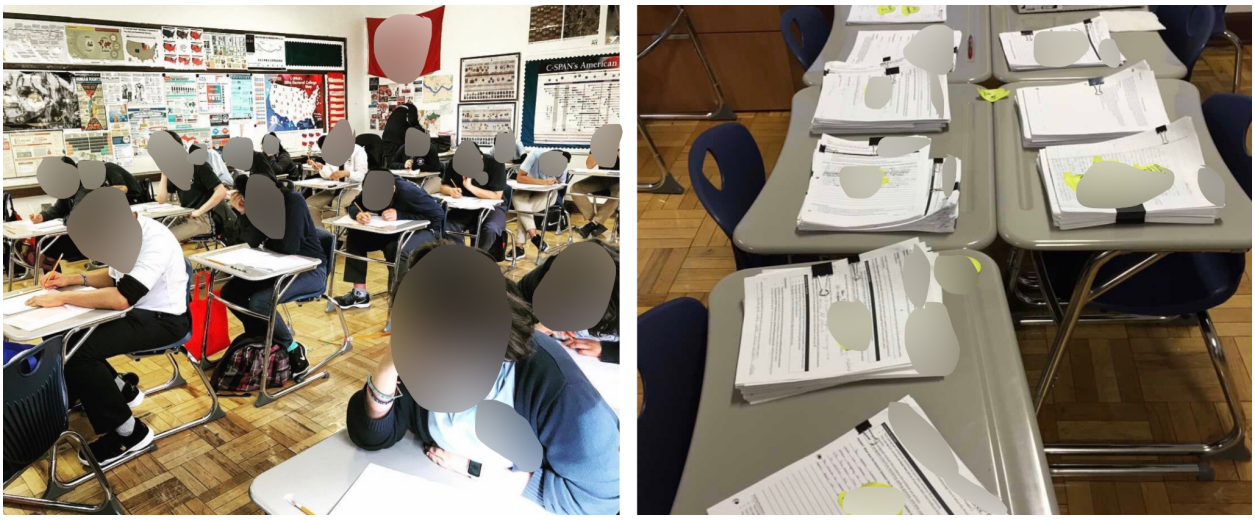
Note. This photograph was shown as part of the "Supportive and Structured Environment" distinguisher.

Additionally, CPCHS' one-size-fits-all approach to behavior management and character education, which included demerits for "bad" behavior and merits for "good" behavior, was "too much" for many and felt akin to the "policing" of Black and Brown students. Students acknowledged the positive intention behind CPCHS' attempts to teach character values such as professionalism and curiosity. However, students referred to these values as "buzzwords" they showed in order to "reap rewards" and garner positive affirmation from staff without necessarily changing their core beliefs. Teaching character through a structured rewards and consequence system inadvertently posed barriers to students like Aaliyah when trying to "develop" and find her "personality" in college because she was accustomed "to following [the rules]" and not sharing her opinion in high school.

Although students said their high school's course offerings helped get them into college, they attributed under-preparation for some elements of college-level academics, such as group work, to some of their high school's inflexible teaching approaches. Independently and in response to seeing photographs associated with the academic preparation distinguisher (Figure 5), Makayla described high school classes as mostly individual, "a lot of times we couldn't talk. Sometimes they allow[ed] for group work, but then most times it was like, no" which was in stark contrast to her college experience where group work was "a given." Lance agreed, recalling how "messy" his first college group project was, partially due to his inexperience with collaborative work in academic settings.

Figure 5

Photo-elicitation Photographs from Academic Preparation Distinguisher



Note. Left panel: 11th grade students taking a test. Right panel: Daily English work packets.

At CPCHS, many students took advanced courses, but reported feeling academically unchallenged because of overly scaffolded approaches within them. Upon seeing a picture of English work packets, Lindsay said that was "CPCHS babying us…I think students should be able to listen to directions and write it down…that could be one way for [CPCHS] to help us prepare for college because professors will not put the directions on the paper." Many students had trouble with college courses specifically in the STEM fields. Andrew, a student pursuing a career in medicine, said, "[in high school] I didn't really need to study, but for college it was like a whole different experience where I couldn't do that…that wasn't even an option for me to get a passing score."

Impact on Alumni's Identity Development and Understanding of Cultural Wealth

According to participants, the high school schedule and discipline system limited opportunities for them to develop identities beyond being a "scholar," highlighting pressure students felt to fit a mold communicated as "the norm." Cory appreciated all the "good" that CPCHS did for him and his college trajectory but articulated negative consequences of CPCHS'

approaches to identity and cultural development that were steeped in White institutional culture and values.

> That's where we move from the theoretical mission to what actually happened day to day [at CPCHS]…what was envisioned and what was sold to a lot of students' parents was that this is a place where my student will be able to actually grow and develop, be successful because we want ways out of our communities…so this was the golden opportunity to a lot of families. Going there as a student, it didn't feel the same because yes, we were pushed academically. But I think at the same time, the culture and the identities weren't acknowledged and represented and that caused a lot of problems.

Cory continued, describing CPCHS as

> An institution [that] came into this community and was on a White savior complex, in a sense it's like we're going to save these kids and help these kids with education, and they're going to call it college and be able to succeed.

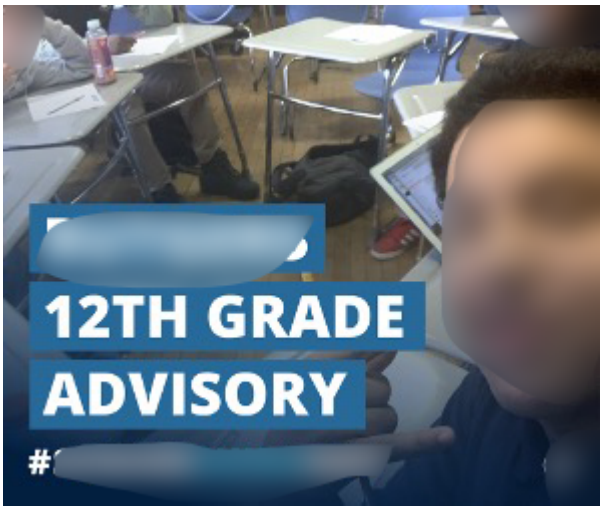
For example, Olivia appreciated CPCHS for providing college-related opportunities, however, felt that CPCHS was "almost taking on the parental role" in the college process, which potentially deterred her parents from becoming involved in her college life once there. She said, "from my parent's point of view, CPCHS was walking you through the process of getting in, but your parents were the wallets."

When presented with Figure 6, a photograph of high school advisory, a weekly small-group meeting, alumni reflected on their appreciation for spaces where they could engage in meaningful conversations about race and identity. Jayden said that advisory "fireside chats" he had with his male peers and male advisor of color helped him understand what it would mean to be a Black man in college. However, these discussions only occurred in some advisories or outside of class based on the closeness of the student and staff relationship. Alumni shared

suggestions for how CPCHS could have further culturally affirmed their identities that would have helped them develop long lasting social and cross-cultural skills.

Figure 6

Photo-elicitation Photograph Showing Weekly Advisory Meeting



Note. This photograph was shown as part of the "Supportive and Structured Environment" distinguisher. Advisory is a weekly small-group meeting of students and one staff member.

For example, in college, Makalya realized how important it was for "schools that have mainly minorities" to have "African-American courses taught in high school." Cory suggested that CPCHS could cultivate different forms of cultural capital by teaching various modes of communication such as storytelling and not just "statistics" which he characterized as representative of "White cultur[al]" values. Inconsistent focus on integrating diverse cultures and identities across academic and nonacademic spheres affected students' ability to understand themselves in relation to their college communities, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds, and BIPOC students who attended predominantly White institutions. Identifying as Asian, Aaliyah articulated,

> Being someone that's not White, but also not Black, like that wasn't a conversation I had and [I] didn't really understand what that would mean for me at a predominantly White

> institution where I knew at CPCHS my place of privilege kind of understood that academically…but then going to an institution like [college name] where all the sudden I was low-income and very visibly brown was definitely something I don't think I was prepared for.

Impact on Alumni's Intrinsic Motivation for Going to College

Without greater focus on developing personal interests and career goals to counterbalance the pervasiveness of the college talk, alumni experienced some unintended repercussions of CPCHS' college preparation approaches once they got into college. As a relatively new school, students felt that CPCHS did not have the capacity to focus on more than the immediate goal of getting them into college. Lindsay articulated a disconnect between possessing the skills to get into college versus those to succeed once there,

> It seems like CPCHS just cares about us getting into college and that's it. And like, [other alumni and I] knew that [CPCHS] would eventually focus on how do you get us to stay in college and to graduate, but then it was like, what else? There's a career afterwards.

The time CPCHS invested into helping students go to college did not necessarily help build all students' intrinsic motivation for pursuing postsecondary education or the skills and mindsets necessary to sustain this choice.

Lance said, "CPCHS had such an emphasis on just getting to college and getting into college, I didn't think that much about what I'm gonna do in college." Meanwhile, Lindsay said her first couple of years of college were "a rollercoaster,"

> The beginning started off fine…I didn't particularly enjoy it or hate it…And then my second and third semester was when things started…it was the downhill part. I was not

> able to balance anything properly…parties, gym, academics, social, working, and I was not able to do one of those things well.

Students like David "contemplate[d] dropping out" because he did not enjoy his college experience. Students wanted career exploration to be more integrated into daily conversations and into their curriculum. Elliot, who began college without a declared major, suggested that CPCHS focus more explicitly on "careers and what you can do with different majors…so [students] cannot feel like they disgraced themselves by switching majors."

Last, alumni received mixed and unrealistic messages from CPCHS about what college life would be like. Julie felt that CPCHS scared her into believing college would be a miserable "hellhole basically" with little support, which was incongruous to her experience. Others felt that CPCHS painted college as an educational utopia. Ben simply wanted to hear a more balanced perspective of the pros and cons of college so that he could have been more internally prepared,

> We just had to jump into college and experience that without ever hearing what the negative parts were…[CPCHS should] try to allow students to understand is that, you know, college is fun…it'll take you to places you never thought I can go to, but you also need to know what you might be getting yourself into.

Despite persisting, participants expressed struggles with mental health, discovering their own reasons for pursuing a degree, and finding support in colleges in different locations and varying levels of selectivity.

Discussion and Implications

Grounded in Perna and Thomas' (2006) model of college success, this study utilized qualitative methods to extend research regarding the influence of no-excuses charter high school contexts on students' college preparation, experience, and success from the perspectives of

college-going alumni themselves. Findings support both sides of the no-excuses charter school debate. CPCHS' college-going culture was palpable. The school helped students achieve critical short-term outcomes related to college success including high academic test scores and college acceptance rates (Angrist et al., 2016; Davis & Heller, 2019). In high school, students passed necessary exams and took the necessary courses to get into four-year colleges. They received extensive support in applying to college, matriculating to college, and acquiring financial aid, known barriers for students from low-income backgrounds (Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Many students believed that college was an option for them because of CPCHS' college-going culture. Participants received opportunities to obtain social and cultural capital through pre-college programs, caring relationships with staff, and college trips.

Findings also reveal certain costs associated with *how* the no-excuses model achieves these goals. The no-excuses charter school model appears to result in unintended consequences because of missing or inconsistent emphasis on culturally sustaining practices, social-emotional learning, identity exploration, career investigation, independent learning and choice, and group work. Additionally, failure to normalize alternative college pathways other than a four-year degree negatively affected some alumni's undergraduate experience and their view of success as broader than college graduation and persistence (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). Alumni took issue not with CPCHS' goal to get them into college, but with *how* they messaged this mission and enacted practices that carried negative consequences. These findings hold important implications for the school context and for the social, economic, and policy context (Perna & Thomas, 2006).

Implications for Practice at the School Context

Participants moved fluidly between discussing how each no-excuses charter school distinguisher (college and career readiness, academic preparation, behavior expectations and

character education, and supportive and structured environment) influenced their college experiences. Their responses highlight the interconnectedness of no-excuses model components and approaches and suggest implications for school practices in each of the distinguishers (Lamboy & Lu, 2017).

College and Career Readiness

College and Career Readiness classes helped students apply for college, get into college, and obtain financial aid. Although there was variation in student experience in college based on their majors and their college's selectivity and contexts, the consensus was that CPCHS did, in fact, help students access college, which is a finding to be acknowledged and underscored. For many participants, however, going to college was something that they were told was the next step, but were not entirely sure of why they wanted to go themselves or how their assets could contribute to a positive college experience (Cipollone & Sitch, 2017). Within college counseling practices and outside of them, no-excuses charter schools can more intentionally integrate discussions of college-going, academic and personal interests, extracurriculars, and major exploration with overall career and lifestyle trajectories to help students develop their own intrinsic motivations for going to college and staying there. Restructuring designated college and career readiness classes to allow for more individualized student support in conjunction with whole-group instruction could combat some of the negative consequences with a one-size-fits-all approach that resulted in students feeling shame for changing college majors or pursuing diverse postsecondary plans (Lamboy & Lu, 2017).

Further, providing more realistic descriptions of the positives and negatives of college life, particularly for BIPOC students at predominantly White institutions, could help calibrate student and family expectations and prepare students mentally and emotionally for their

experience. No-excuses schools should partner with families in the college planning process in more ways than discussing procedural elements of the application and financial aid process (Griffen, 2019). Findings do not necessarily indicate that no-excuses charter schools should abandon their 4-year college preparatory missions. Rather, they should be more intentional in college counseling practices that appropriately match students with quality 4-year colleges of best fit that are most likely to yield maximized benefits (Goodman et al., 2017; Melguizo, 2010).

Behavior Expectations and Character Education

To date, typical behavior management practices enacted at no-excuses charter schools have been the center of criticism (Golann, 2021; Marsh, 2018). Although not the focal point of this study, students experienced the structure and discipline practices at their high school as problematically rigid. According to alumni, such practices stifled their critical and creative thinking, ability to manage their own time, independence, and voice and agency. Notably, these are all intrapersonal, social, and learning skills identified as beneficial for long-term success and development of cultural capital (Cipollone & Stich, 2017; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2017). CPCHS' attempts to teach noncognitive skills within the consequence and reward system failed to cultivate deeper, long-lasting skills that students could use after high school (Marsh, 2018; West et al., 2016). As described by students, implementing rules and expectations does not have to be synonymous with control and conformity. At the time of the study, CPCHS had already begun to make changes to highly criticized behavioral practices. Moving forward, they should further consider what real-world opportunities they provide students to develop "character" skills in freer and less controlled contexts (Cohodes & Parham, 2021; Noll et al., 2021). Alumni suggested their high school prioritize extracurricular activity offerings,

opportunities for leadership, identity exploration, and the development of "adulting skills" like financial and computer literacy.

Academic Preparation

Although students had opportunities to take advanced courses and prepare for tests, which are essential to college-level academic preparation (Robinson & Roksa, 2016), meeting narrow academic achievement outcomes through highly structured and stepwise approaches is insufficient preparation for necessary 21st century skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and analysis, that will support students in their long-term success (Athanases, 2018). No-excuses charter schools must employ less formulaic teaching practices and more culturally relevant and integrous curriculum. Further, they should provide increased opportunities for group work and real-world skill application could better prepare alumni for engaging in college-level classes with diverse communities (Kolluri & Tierney, 2020).

Supportive and Structured Environment

For school types that emphasize consistency, conformity, and clarity (Golann, 2015, 2021), students also expressed that authentic relationships with teachers and staff helped them feel supported. The highly relational aspect of these school models is essential to maintain and not often described in the literature. Participants in this study remained connected to CPCHS and expressed excitement that their feedback would help their former high school improve. Simultaneously, when relational qualities crossed over to paternalism, it caused other tensions specifically for BIPOC students. Sometimes, feeling that staff, who were predominantly White at the time, genuinely cared about them and did whatever it took to get them to college, placed undue pressure on students to conform to a White normative expectation: four-year college (Marsh, 2018; Sondel, 2015). Institutional agents should thoughtfully evaluate their long-term

postsecondary success goals and how personal biases, experiences, and identities affect *how* these goals are carried out. No-excuses charter schools should incorporate training for staff related to cultural competency and diversity, equity, and inclusion in multiple domains: teaching practices, behavior management systems, and postsecondary preparation (Smith, 2022).

Implications for Theory and Policy at the Social, Economic, and Policy Context Layer

No-excuses charter schools were founded with a primary goal of closing the academic "opportunity gap" between students of color and students from low-income backgrounds and White and wealthier peers. As indicated by Perna and Thomas' model (2006), no-excuses charter schools' emphasis on meeting numeric metrics associated with college access is shaped by social, economic, and political contexts that utilize test scores and college enrollment numbers as measures of college readiness (Lamboy & Lu, 2017). By these definitions, no-excuses charter schools are successful. CPCHS provided students historically excluded from higher education with opportunities to build social and cultural capital through intensive academic work, college visits, SAT preparation, pre-college opportunities, college talk, and college knowledge (Whitman, 2008).

However, defining success by these stringent terms has consequences. Closing the academic "opportunity gap" solely is insufficient in contributing to long-term goals of degree attainment and upward social mobility (Golann & Torres, 2018; Hammack, 2016). Overemphasis and prioritization on immediate goals precluded students' development of nonacademic skills, agency, and ability to meaningfully utilize their acquired social and cultural capital in college (Cipollone & Sitch, 2017; Golann & Torres, 2018). In high school, students learned to follow rules and fit into the boxes provided for them, rather than explore their personal assets and identities, highlighting the paradox of no-excuses practices Golann (2015) articulated. While this

approach indeed helped students get into college, it did not necessarily help them once they got there.

Findings from this study provide further justification for college success frameworks that integrate "dominant" capital with the cultural wealth that students themselves possess (Yosso, 2005), expanding definitions of success beyond persistence and graduation (Noll, 2021; Ramos & Sifuentes, 2021). As debate around charter school expansion and accountability remain at the forefront, policymakers and charter school authorizers should continue including more holistic evaluation metrics that appropriately incentivize other forms of college preparation within the school context that contribute to more holistic and equity-minded forms of college success (Golann & Torres, 2018).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

As innovative organizations, some "no-excuses" schools are shifting away from this label and its associated practices (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). CPCHS itself has altered disciplinary practices to focus on restorative justice since participants in this study graduated while other schools may more closely adhere to the no-excuses model. Therefore, studying the effects of no-excuses charter schools on students' long-term success is a moving target and differs by context. Although this study provides in-depth insight into no-excuses charter high school alumni in college, findings are based on a single high school. Variability among no-excuses schools based on their leaders, contexts, networks, and other factors mean that findings cannot be generalized to all no-excuses graduates or schools. Future studies can extend this research by conducting multi-case studies comparing no-excuses charter schools and their influences on college success.

Students provided their perspectives at one time during their college experience during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, experiences could be different at various points. Some students had difficulty recalling details of past experiences. Future studies should consider a longitudinal approach that follows students over time, from the college application process through college graduation and workforce entry. This study focuses on the perceived influence of the high school context on college success from a small sample. Research could expand this study to focus on no-excuses charter school students who attend schools of varying selectivity, dropped out of college, or enrolled in two-year colleges. Studies should consider the role of family, college type, college selectivity, and academic major in relation to college success for no-excuses charter school alumni. Notably, no-excuses charter schools often operate under the assumption that four-year colleges yield greater social and economic returns for students. However, the quality and selectivity of the four-year college matters (Goodman et al., 2017; Melguizo, 2010). Finally, in terms of qualitative methods, utilizing videos, photovoice, or other modes of visual and audio data during interviews can elicit responses that verbal communication and traditional interview structures cannot uncover (Arnold & Rohn, 2020). Future studies incorporating innovative forms of qualitative data collection can shift power dynamics and center students' experiences (Marsh, 2018).

Conclusion

This study is one of the first qualitative explorations to investigate the positive and negative influences of the no-excuses charter school model on students' college experiences from college-going alumni perspectives (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019; Golann & Torres, 2018). Alumni themselves articulated that both the criticism and praise for no-excuses charter schools are well-founded. Findings support previous assertions that many no-excuses practices have

enabled these high minority and low-income schools to accomplish notable success related to measured academic achievement and four-year college acceptance for marginalized students (Davis & Heller, 2019). Students also felt tremendously cared for. However, some of their practices are at odds with what it takes to prepare students to succeed in college and beyond (Mehta, 2020). Achieving social mobility through the transference of social, cultural, and human capital necessary for college access has its pitfalls (Hammack, 2016). Given the reported benefits and consequences reported by alumni themselves, this study suggests that one promising approach may be to maintain, change, and cease certain components of the no-excuses model, but not abandon it entirely.

As a school-choice model with more flexibility and autonomy than traditional public schools (Cohodes & Parham, 2021), no-excuses charter schools are optimally situated to evaluate the unintended consequences associated with their school structure, disciplinary practices, college-for-all ethos, and academic approaches that negatively influence college experience. They can make intentional choices to mitigate these effects. Amid a racial justice reckoning in the United States, policymakers, practitioners, and education reformers continue to seek ways to engage in equity-based practices that close the college attainment gap for marginalized students. Eliciting "successful" college student voices, this study furthers research that advances college success frameworks to integrate forms of dominant capital and cultural wealth (McDonough & Abrica, 2021) and pinpoints the effective and consequential components of the no-excuses model that remains prominent in education reform debate.

ARTICLE TWO: TRANSLATING THE "30,000 FOOT GOAL" TO THE "DAY-TO-DAY": EXPLORING HOW NO-EXCUSES INSTITUTIONAL AGENTS CARRY OUT AN EVOLVING COLLEGE-FOR-ALL MISSION

Introduction

In the United States, obtaining a college degree has become a primary mechanism to address persistent issues of social and economic inequality—making college access and success for all one of the most important issues of our lifetime. The social, psychological, and economic benefits of a college degree have been studied extensively. Bachelor's degree holders have more career opportunities and an increased likelihood of financial stability and social mobility than those with a high school diploma (Carnevale et al., 2013). Unfortunately, however, a wide gap in bachelor's degree attainment between students from low-income backgrounds and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and wealthier and White peers persists (Cahalan et al., 2019).

To remedy this gap, the "college-for-all" movement and its associated practices have gained traction in political and educational arenas (Quartz et al., 2019). A college-for-all framework suggests that in this globalized context, public schools must prepare all students to access and obtain a postsecondary degree, which has resulted in decades of test-based accountability metrics and standardization (Glass & Nygreen, 2011). Of college-for-all adopters, the "no-excuses" charter school model is arguably the most successful and controversial (Golann & Torres, 2018). No-excuses charter schools are market-based college preparatory schools of choice that aim to provide a quality education to all students regardless of zip code, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (Lamboy & Lu, 2017). Located in urban areas, they serve mostly students from low-income backgrounds and BIPOC students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education. No-excuses charter schools follow similar practices and demonstrate positive academic test score outcomes and college enrollment rates for these

populations (Cheng et al., 2017; Davis & Heller, 2019). Simultaneously, researchers have posed serious questions regarding the methods employed to achieve these means (Golann, 2015; Lamboy & Lu, 2017). Therefore, no-excuses charter schools are optimal contexts to investigate how institutional agents—counselors, teachers, leaders, and staff—carry out college-for-all practices for marginalized students (Noll, 2021; Perez-Felkner, 2015).

Institutional agents are essential school actors, chiefly teachers, counselors, instructional coaches, and administrators, who can cultivate college-going cultures, positive school climate, and facilitate college access and success, especially for students who are the first in their families to go to college and students from low-income backgrounds (Knight & Duncheon, 2020; Kolluri et al., 2020; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Although studies have investigated school counselors' influence on students' college-going behaviors (Bryan et al., 2017; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014), few studies have investigated how various institutional agents operationalize a college-for-all belief system within a no-excuses charter school context (Clemens, 2019).

To address these gaps, this qualitative case study investigates how institutional agents perceive the level of college preparation alumni received from their no-excuses charter high school and make sense of their role in fulfilling college-for-all expectations. Grounded in a multi-level model of college success (Perna & Thomas, 2006), this study draws from interviews with 14 institutional agents, document review, and in-person observations from a no-excuses charter high school. Findings highlight the internal and external tensions institutional agents experienced when attempting to implement the academic and nonacademic practices they believed would contribute to students' short and long-term success. The results suggest recommendations for (re)envisioning college-for-all in practice, policy, and theory.

Literature Review

College-for-all

Decades of federal legislation following the "A Nation at Risk" report in 1983 solidified the "college-for-all" ideology as a guiding principle in education reform broadly supported by both ends of the political spectrum over several decades. Namely, the college-for-all discourse articulates that obtaining a college degree is a critical lever to achieve individual economic and social mobility in the United States, which has resulted in increased focus on high-stakes test and college acceptance accountability-based systems (Glass & Nygreen, 2011). As such, K-12 schools have adopted college-going cultures to meet these college for all accountability metrics (Noll, 2021). College-going cultures include college talk, clear expectations, college information and resources, a comprehensive counseling model, college preparatory curriculum, college partnerships, faculty involvement, and family engagement (Quartz et al., 2019).

Increasingly, however, the college-for-all ethos has become debated. While proponents view it as a necessary aspirational goal to remedy educational inequity (Domina et al., 2011), critics identify it as a misguided and unrealistic neoliberal goal that perpetuates inequality, because realistically, not all students will obtain a degree, obtain a degree from institutions of higher education that yield the same economic and social benefits, or even desire to obtain a degree (Glass & Nygreen, 2011; Kolluri & Tierney, 2018). Others suggest the concept of college-for-all is not inherently problematic, but requires more culturally responsive approaches and research investigating how it is translated to practice (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Noll et al., 2021). Therefore, researchers are beginning to explore the benefits and unintended consequences of a college-for-all approach at schools that serve high populations of marginalized students (Lamboy & Lu, 2017)

No-excuses Charter Schools

No-excuses charter schools are a prominent and highly controversial model of public charter school that offer optimal settings to study institutional agents' roles in promoting college-for-all. A neoliberal school-choice model, no-excuses charter schools emerged in the 1990s to serve predominantly students from low-income neighborhoods and BIPOC students and provide them with a quality educational option to prepare them for college (Cohodes, 2018). There is no published list of no-excuses charter schools, but many of are managed by well-known centralized charter management organizations (CMO) such as KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon, to name a few. Others are smaller and more autonomously run schools. They employ extended school days, in-school tutoring, an emphasis on Math and English Language Arts, college-going cultures, intensive test preparation, and strict behavioral expectations (Angrist et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 2017). In recent years, philanthropic organizations and funders have increased their donations to advocacy organizations and CMOs associated with the no-excuses model that demonstrate success on accountability-based metrics such as test scores (Ferrare & Setari, 2017).

No-excuses charter schools have been praised for achieving notable success in terms of short-term outcomes including academic test scores, college acceptance, and college enrollment and matriculation for marginalized students (Cheng et al., 2017; Davis & Heller, 2019). However, research produces mixed results on their effects on students' long-term success including college persistence, graduation, and life earnings (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019). Some researchers posit that emphasis on achieving short-term outcomes through authoritarian and "paternalistic" practices has unintentionally deterred schools from focusing on developing the noncognitive skills students need for long-term success (Golann, 2015). Others identify problematic consequences to the "one-size-fits-all" nature of the college-for-all construct, which can inadvertently pressure unprepared students to attend four-year colleges or imply that

marginalized students need to adopt White middle-class values to attend predominantly White four-year institutions (Lamboy & Lu, 2017). No-excuses charter schools have begun changing their prescriptive approaches; however recent studies find vestiges of the no-excuses model in college counseling practices that remain important to investigate (Noll, 2021).

Institutional Agents

Institutional agents situated at the school level can be teachers, counselors, or administrators who provide students information about college-going (Bryan et al., 2017; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). According to Stanton-Salazar (2011), institutional agents have relative authority and "directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued resources (e.g., high school course requirements for admission to 4-year universities)" (p. 1067). As mediators of college knowledge, institutional agents can be both facilitators and gatekeepers of college success, particularly at urban schools and for underrepresented students (Achinstein et al., 2015). College and school counselors' influence in cultivating college-going culture has been well-studied and documented (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Farmer-Hinton, 2011; McDonough, 1997).

As the college-for-all ethos has gained traction, researchers have posited that other school-based staff could also be influential institutional agents (Kolluri et al., 2020). In addition to teaching content knowledge, teachers are also expected to teach noncognitive skills that have been identified as necessary for college readiness and long-term college success (Conley, 2007). At no-excuses charter schools, however, qualitative studies find teachers experience little discretion over their classrooms, limited autonomy to implement justice-oriented culturally relevant pedagogical practices, and rapid burnout due to difficult expectations, long hours, and pressure to conform (Golann, 2018; Sondel, 2015). Further, it is unclear whether institutional agents have the appropriate knowledge, asset-based perspectives, resources to be these college

knowledge-brokers (Kolluri et al., 2020). School climate (safety and extracurricular offerings) and learning environment can be mediators for college success, suggesting that administrators, teachers, and counselors are all critical to college-going cultures (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Knight & Duncheon, 2020). Therefore, investigating how the institutional agents that no-excuses charter schools rely on to carry out their missions is essential to understanding how their intentions translate to practice and impact on student experiences and success.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in Perna and Thomas' (2006) multi-level conceptual model of college success, which describes college success as a longitudinal process affected by various levels of context. Individual students are situated at the center of interacting family, school, and social, economic, and political contexts. Underpinning this college success framework are social and cultural capital theories. A critical component of cultural capital theory is the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1986), defined in the arena of education as "the internalized set of beliefs an individual acquires from his or her environment to the normative culture or collective consciousness of a school environment and how this interacts with individual decision-making" (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014, p. 224). An essential *habitus* that influences students' college decisions are high schools—where students can internalize beliefs about college opportunity and aspirations. Students can obtain college information, knowledge, guidance, and resources from their environment and school-based institutional agents (McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Therefore, it is critical that researchers not only study college counselor's roles (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McDonough, 1997), but also the beliefs and actions of all institutional agents who contribute to the school's *habitus* and college-going culture. This is especially pertinent for

students who hold one or multiple marginalized statuses and identities, including but not limited to being the first in their families to go to college, coming from a low-income background, and identifying as a Black, Indigenous, and Person of Color (Perez-Felkner, 2015). Historically, no-excuses charter schools have operated with an undergirding assumption that increasing dominant social and cultural capital through rigorous academic expectations, college-going culture, and high behavioral expectations at the school-level supports marginalized students' access to college (Hammack, 2016; Whitman, 2008), making this framework appropriate for this study. Simultaneously, recent literature suggests that providing access to forms of dominant capital must also be accompanied by frameworks that foreground and affirm the cultural values of students with marginalized identities (McDonough & Abrica, 2021).

Methods

This qualitative case study explores the perceived influence of the no-excuses model on alumni's college preparation, experience, and success from the perspectives of institutional agents within one standalone "no-excuses" charter high school. A case study describes an approach to studying a phenomenon within a bounded context using multiple forms of data to reveal insights applicable practice and policy, making it appropriate for this paper (Merriam, 1998). The research questions are as follows:

1. How do institutional agents perceive the influence of no-excuses charter high schools on alumni's four-year college readiness and success?
2. How do institutional agents situated at no-excuses charter high schools make sense of their role in carrying out a college-for-all mission?

This study was approved by the IRB at [institution anonymized for review] and all participants signed an informed consent agreement prior to participation.

The Case Study Site

The case study site, City Prep Charter High School (CPCHS, pseudonym), was selected as a typical case (Patton, 2015) based on a set of inclusion criteria developed from the no-excuses charter school literature (Cheng et al., 2017; Whitman, 2008). CPCHS was founded as a charter school that followed similar practices to no-excuses charter school networks. CPCHS opened in 2013 as an extension of a middle school and elementary school in a city on the East coast and are a standalone charter school. In the year under study (2020-21), CPCHS served 340 students in grades 9-12 who were predominantly students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Specifically, the student body was 44% Black, 31% Hispanic/Latino, 15% White, 10% Asian and Pacific Islander and 84% of students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. Based on these criteria, CPCHS is classified as a "high minority" and "low-income" school (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). There were 66 total employees at CPCHS, approximately 60% of whom were BIPOC (33% Black, 9% Asian American and Pacific Islander, 14% Latina/o/x, 6% Multiracial) and the remaining were White or undeclared. The staff was 63% female and 37% male.

In terms of school culture, in-person observations of CPCHS's classes, staff meetings, advisories, lunch periods, passing periods, and daily systems confirmed the presence of four key distinguishers of no-excuses charter schools: academic preparation; college and career readiness; behavioral expectations and character education; and supportive and structured environment. These distinguishers provided the data collection and analysis framework. CPCHS employed an extended school day and year, incorporated tutoring and double blocks of Math and English Language Arts into the school schedule. Students wore uniforms. CPCHS utilized a school-wide behavior management system in which students received "merits" for specific positive behaviors

and “demerits” for undesirable behaviors. Simultaneously, there was a palpable degree of warmth between students and staff.

College-going culture was central to CPCHS’ school culture and mission. CPCHS students received in-school SAT preparation, took mandatory college and career readiness courses in their 11th and 12th grade years, and attended school-wide events that celebrated college-going. They received extensive support and guidance in the college application, financial aid, college decision, and college matriculation process from college counselors and an alumni support team. On average, 89% of CPCHS students matriculate to college directly following graduation, 70% to four-year colleges, which is higher than the national average for students from similar schools (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021).

Interview Population and Sample

All institutional agents (teachers, counselors, instructional coaches, and administrators) who worked at CPCHS in 2021 were eligible to participate in this study. I recruited participants through a brief screening survey (included demographic and eligibility questions) sent to staff through school-emailed newsletters and in-person announcements (Appendix C). From this population, I utilized a purposeful maximum variation sampling strategy to select a diverse group of 14 institutional agents with varying perspectives of college readiness and success. Given the research questions, I oversampled members from the college and career readiness team (Patton, 2015). Participants represented administrative and non-teaching staff, general and special education teachers of all core subject areas and grade levels, instructional coaches, as well as college team members. Although this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, 11 of the 14 participants interviewed worked at CPCHS prior to the pandemic. The duration of institutional agents’ experiences working at CPCHS ranged from 1-9 years. To protect the

confidentiality of participants in a small school setting, I intentionally omitted individual descriptive information such as role and race when reporting findings.

Approximately 35% of participants identified as BIPOC and 65% identified as White. Because no-excuses charter schools emphasize college-going as essential to their school mission, using this sampling strategy provided a more holistic understanding of how institutional agents occupying different roles carried out a no-excuses charter schools' college-for-all vision at CPCHS. The number of interview participants depended on reaching *a priori* saturation, meaning, the extent to which predetermined categories developed from the literature on no-excuses charter schools (college and career readiness, academic preparation, behavioral expectations and character education, and supportive and structured environment) were sufficiently represented (Saunders et al., 2018).

Data Collection

The data collected for this study derived from in-person school observations, document review, and 14 semi-structured interviews with institutional agents. To build a thick description of the case (Merriam, 1998), I conducted in-person school observations over four days and carried out a thorough document review of materials including public records, annual reports, curriculum, schedules, calendars, recruitment materials, handbooks, school profiles, reported academic outcomes, CPCHS' website, social media accounts, and other materials CPCHS provided. The ~70-minute semi-structured interviews with institutional agents conducted over Zoom constituted the primary source of data. I specifically asked questions about the school mission, what it meant to them, and what they believed their role in preparing students for college was across the four distinguishers (Table 1). Example interview questions included: "What is your definition of college readiness and success? "What do you think students need to

be able to know and do to be successful in college?" (The interview protocol appears in Appendix D).

Data Analysis

I utilized both a deductive and inductive constant comparative method approach to analyze data iteratively (Glaser, 1965; Merriam, 1998). First, I conducted first cycle coding and deductively chunked text into smaller units using a provisional codebook developed from no-excuses charter school literature and the conceptual framework. Simultaneously, I inductively coded using structural, *in vivo*, values, versus, and process codes to refine the codebook (Saldaña, 2016). As I generated inductive codes, I recoded previous interviews using the evolving codebook until I reached *a priori* saturation, when no new codes emerged (Saunders et al., 2018). Then, I conducted a second cycle of axial coding where I sorted initial codes into categories based on the four no-excuses charter school distinguishers. During this process, I created additional categories based on the inductive codes that emerged from the first round of coding. Third, I created visual displays to analyze how these axial categories worked together in relation to the conceptual framework (Merriam, 1998).

Positionality and Trustworthiness

As a former no-excuses charter school teacher, counselor, and leader, I have unique insight into multiple stakeholder perspectives at no-excuses charter high schools. Departing my role as Dean of College from a no-excuses charter high school, I was deeply conflicted about how my approaches to supporting students in pursuing postsecondary pathways affected their personal growth and development. As a researcher, I am deeply invested in disentangling the complexity of no-excuses charter schools, their intentions and impact, and the experiences of those students and stakeholders situated within these spaces. Given my history with no-excuses

charter schools on the East Coast, gaining access to this school site and building rapport with institutional agents relied partially on my own experiences, professional connections, and ability to relate to participants. Attuned to my positionality, it was of utmost importance that I remained reflexive throughout data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1998). To ensure trustworthiness and dependability, I triangulated data between observations, document review, and interviews, sought disconfirming evidence, interrogated my positionality, and kept an audit trail (Merriam, 1998). I practiced reflexivity and reflected on my assumptions, biases, and experiences when collecting and interpreting data by writing analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016). Additionally, I conducted member checking using a modified synthesized analyzed data process in which I provided participants with opportunities to review the themes and their included quotes to ensure their experiences were accurately represented (Birt et al., 2016).

Findings

Findings from this study are grouped into three themes according to the research questions and the conceptual framework: (1) Institutional agents' definitions and measurement of college readiness and success; (2) Meeting evolving and holistic definitions of college readiness and success; and (3) Barriers to meeting these definitions of college readiness and success. According to high school graduation, college matriculation, and college persistence rates, CPCHS is more successful than other public schools serving similar populations. However, findings highlight the complexity and inherent contradictions institutional agents were conscious of when carrying out a college-for-all mission within their social, political, and school contexts. Teachers, administrators, and counselors openly discussed the short-term "results on paper" they needed to deliver: students passing classes, graduating from high school, and getting into college. Interviewees sensed that meeting these goals could occasionally and unintentionally take

precedence over implementing practices and programs that would cultivate long-term intrapersonal, interpersonal, and academic success. Institutional agents articulated the challenges in seeing the "30,000 foot goal" of students' future well-being and upward social mobility through college success when they had to focus on the "day-to-day." They also discussed the ways they attempted to address said challenges within their own roles. Mr. Russell said, "the charter world says 'to and through college,' but in many ways, getting into good colleges feels like a more immediate goal."

Definitions and Measurements of College Readiness and Success

At CPCHS, participants agreed that "college…it's everywhere." Teachers, leaders, and counselors perceived college-for-all messaging as pervasive within and outside of classrooms. For many, the rationale of preparing students for college was ever-present in decision making and casual conversations. CPCHS "push[ed]" a "college-going culture" by requiring participation in a college and career readiness class, displaying college paraphernalia, and incorporating college rituals such as "college dress down" days in which students were allowed to wear college-branded clothing instead of the usual school uniform.

College Readiness

Staff described college readiness as a "two-pronged thing" including a combination of academic and nonacademic preparation. They defined academic readiness as students having the ability to, at a minimum, attend in-state public schools and "be ready for freshman level classes" without remediation. Staff noted the importance of students having a "strong writing basis," highlighting their recent school-wide "college-ready writing" initiative. Alongside these academic metrics, institutional agents emphasized the importance of possessing certain "soft skills" related to self-advocacy, social-emotional skills, independence, critical thinking,

communication, socialization, and cultural competence. Ms. Jordan said that college preparation "is not just academics…college is so much about being able to socialize and problem solve and just be solution-oriented and be a team player…[in college] that's where they meet just such a diverse mix of kids coming from different backgrounds and experiences."

College Success

Closely aligned to definitions of college readiness, staff described successful college students as those attending a college of "best fit" where, as Mr. Emil described,

> [They can] be successful there academically, interpersonally and end up in a career that allows them to live their passions, discover and develop their best self…[and] especially looking at the communities that we serve, have the opportunity to get into a different income bracket, so whatever's gonna allow you to do that and still not lose your soul.

He went on to say that college is not a "silver bullet" for overcoming all challenges in life, but an important part of his and CPCHS' definition of success. Ms. Edwards added that although CPCHS counsels toward a bachelor's degree, "college success is that you have received the degree that will most influence your life trajectory" which could be "an associate's."

Measuring Success

During interviews, staff wrestled with crafting these definitions of college readiness and success, figuring out how to integrate CPCHS' college-for-all-centric mission with the recognition that individual students possess varying academic levels, postsecondary aspirations, and interests. Many acknowledged CPCHS becoming more open-minded about students pursuing various postsecondary pathways. However, institutional agents highlighted how CPCHS' policies and practices still placed academic achievement and four-year college enrollment at, as Mr. Winston described, "the forefront."

Academic support was systematized across the school. Staff spoke extensively about providing a "rigorous" college preparatory curriculum with advanced course offerings, mandatory tutoring built into a long and extended academic school day, double blocks of Math and English, as well as weekly meetings between instructional coaches and teachers to improve instruction. CPCHS tracked data including assessment data, behavioral data (number of demerits, merits, suspensions, expulsion), state-test data, GPAs, and SAT data. However, many institutional agents expressed concern with how CPCHS associated meeting some of these metrics as synonymous with overall college readiness. Mr. Barron wanted "less emphasis on [state test] scores and more of an emphasis on skills" because "if [CPCHS's] mission is centered around student success and students' skills, the [state test] isn't a good benchmark for that." Recognizing state exams and SATs as gatekeepers for college, Mr. Barron did not recommend eliminating test preparation, but wanted CPCHS to incorporate additional "ways to assess students."

Ironically, despite these academic focuses, not all staff believed CPCHS consistently prepared students academically, particularly for students pursuing STEM majors and attending selective colleges. Ms. Edwards shared,

> No [students are not prepared academically], because I hear from our students, 'my first bio class was impossible' or, you know, we often are hearing students fail freshman year, but I have seen students persevere, so maybe we haven't taught them the exact skills in the class, but they've learned academic persistence in a way from us.

Some hypothesized that varying levels of academic preparation was the result of inconsistent "alignment" across teacher expectations, accountability, and quality. Mr. Mitchell believed part of the academic ill-preparation for some students was due to the standards-based and

accountability-focused forms of teaching. After he "hit the standard," he was told to move on by his instructional coach even though he did not feel that students mastering a standard equated to "applying their understandings" and "making connections" between concepts and classes. Balancing expectations to meet essential short-term goals like "average class GPA and a hundred percent" college acceptance rate while preparing students in less quantifiable nonacademic ways was integral to institutional agents making meaning of their role in preparing students for college.

Meeting Evolving and Holistic Definitions of College Readiness and Success

To meet these evolving definitions of college readiness and success, staff discussed how they negotiated meeting CPCHS' one-size-fits-all approach to behavior, college preparation, teaching and learning, and upholding high expectations with supporting individual needs.

Balancing One-size-fits-all vs. Individual Pathways

Specifically, the college-for-all expectation was pervasive. Mx. Davids said,

> [College] is constantly present in a good and in a bad way…a lot of it is, 'what do you want to do in the future? Do you know? And then do you know how to get there?' And if you don't know how to get there, what supports are you curious about? So I feel in that sense, [CPCHS] are really good about…one of my students wants to be a famous mathematician one day or something…what do you need to do to do that? Great, they're very gung-ho about people who have big dreams. What do you want to do? But if they just want to be a construction worker, they're like, that's not good.

Staff members believed providing BIPOC students with authentic exposure to four-year college opportunities and career pathways was essential. As Ms. Gordon shared,

> I'm big on opportunity, what I think we're doing is providing every kid with a springboard into whatever kind of life they want to have. Our job is to give them the open door, not to tell them which door to walk through.

Staff discussed the precarious balancing act between providing broad aspirational college talk, procedural application support, and individualized student support.

Designated college counselors worked intensely on elements of the college process, including college applications, recommendations, SAT preparation, and FAFSA completion, to ensure all students applied to and were accepted into college. CPCHS also provided funding for students to attend colleges of "best fit." Despite efforts counselors made to discuss postsecondary goals and desires with individual students, staff perceived CPCHS' one-size-fits-all policies as unintentionally pressuring students to fit narrow expectations. Mr. Kent reflected,

> We build kids in this particular mold by having these very structured regimented things and they go to college and the idea is that when they grow in that mold, when you take away the mold, they'll just still be the shape, but I think that hasn't really happened. So I feel like there's also been a lot of feedback that when you take away the mold, the thing falls apart. So I don't think that we're doing an effective way of building the shape.

Developing Nonacademic Skills Within and Outside of the Classroom

Reflecting on how to (re)imagine this "mold" of college readiness, staff referred to the importance of teaching nonacademic skills they deemed equally as important as academic skills. These skills included self-advocacy, self-awareness, communication, self-efficacy, critical thinking, confidence, independence, problem solving, exploration of purpose and passion, identity development, and cultural awareness. Staff discussed ways to cultivate these skills

within their spheres of influence, emphasizing the importance of real-world application within and outside the classroom.

In the classroom, figuring out how to develop "independent learners" with effective communication skills became an increasing priority. Mr. Kent said he attempted to prepare students "authentically ready for college or career" by not only focusing on developing strong skills for different types of writing assignments, but creating a "team" classroom culture incorporating opportunities for "time management," "discussion," and "choice time" to help "mitigate" some of the shock of transitioning into a "freer college setting." He and other teachers discussed increasing "project-based learning" in their classrooms to further cultivate socialization and collaboration skills.

Outside of the classroom, staff highlighted how they individually cultivated a culture of feedback and support. Ms. Carlton focused on "treating [students] with respect and hearing them out when they advocate for themselves, helping them when they do advocate for themselves, helping them learn, giving them feedback on how the next time they could better advocate for themselves." By doing so, "students will be okay with criticism and okay with asking for help from college professors because they know that mistakes are a normal part of learning and not something to be ashamed of." CPCHS has made changes to emphasize these skills. For example, they previously had a "silent study hall where no one was allowed to talk" but now they "encourage talking" to help "empower student leaders who can help tutor one another and help each other grow."

Additionally, many hoped CPCHS would place a greater priority on providing space for student-led extracurricular opportunities to facilitate self-efficacy, self-advocacy, self-confidence, and concrete time management and organizational skills. As Mr. Russell explained,

> If we're talking about an end goal, it very much requires student participation in important decision-making…building afterschool opportunities and clubs that directly place students in contact with the different policies and decisions being made by adults and provides them a very specific entrance point that is age appropriate to allow them to begin to build the skills of planning, organizing, conversating, advocating.

Advisory, a weekly small group meeting between students and an advisor, is also a place that most institutional agents saw as a "safe space" with "potential" for cultivating "social emotional learning," "explor[ing] aspects of identity," discussing "current events," and "addressing social justice issues."

Scaffolding to Create Alignment Between High School and College

Across all distinguishers, staff talked about their efforts to appropriately scaffold rules, expectations, teaching methods, and college readiness practices to prepare students for college success. In the college and career readiness domain, students did not take an official college and career readiness class until 11th grade. Yet, the message of "college college college" had been clear since middle school. Multiple institutional agents expressed desire to see college and career talk and knowledge more integrated throughout all four years of high school in a strategic and developmentally appropriate way. Ms. James reflected on the ineffective scaffolding of college preparation, "we can't just wait until 11th grade to be talking about college. If our mission is to be prepping them, we're wasting two years and then we're rushing the last two years."

In the academic realm, staff attempted to ensure students passed classes and met academic benchmarks with appropriate scaffolding that was neither too lenient nor too strict. Mr. Taylor reported that across the school, CPCHS moved toward scaffolding through feedback policies, by "giving more opportunities to revise, to resubmit work, and owning this idea that the

first draft is the first draft and there will be opportunities to kind of improve on the work." Conversely, Mr. Barron observed they "handheld" students for years, then in 12th grade "[took] away all the support that [they] had the first three years" which did not "prepare students for college as well as [CPCHS] hoped."

Simultaneously, many felt that a broader culture characterized by over-reliance on individual student-staff relationships led to providing students with too much leeway and too many second chances when they violated academic integrity, failed to turn in work, or broke school rules. Staff articulated that providing these second chances could be due to the pressure they felt to make sure students "succeed," meaning, passed their classes, tests, and got into college. According to Ms. Carlton, this led to "coddling" and "inconsistently uphold[ing] our expectations," which taught students they could "finesse" themselves out of consequences. Mr. Mitchell said this led to students "throwing their hands up" quickly when they did not understand a concept. Ms. Edwards directly connected this to students' persistence in college,

> People love our kids so much that they are willing to do whatever it takes for them…to the point that it hurts us in that we make excuses for kids…In real life, when you make a mistake in your first year dorm, Mr. [X] isn't coming to give you a talk, you just get kicked out…I am not surprised when I see the second chance provided for in high school…when that kid fails out or takes extra long to graduate college or ghosts us.

Barriers to Meeting Evolving Definitions of College Readiness and Success

CPCHS staff were continuously working through (re)defining and (re)evaluating their definitions of college readiness and success and how they worked toward meeting these "end goal[s]." They acknowledged their school "moving in the right direction," but were in the

process of parsing out which components of the no-excuses model were and were not contributing to students' college success and what barriers they faced in this pursuit.

A "Checklist" Approach to Meeting the "Results on Paper"

One of the primary challenges staff discussed was the pressure to meet specific benchmarks instituted and upheld by those within or outside the school context. Sometimes, these expectations were at odds with what institutional agents felt would be most beneficial for students' college preparation and success. Some felt this pressure came directly from specific counselors, leaders, or teachers at the school level; other staff felt it came more indirectly from external funders, "the board," or political, economic, and social systems. Many understood that meeting particular expectations and "advertising" specific quantitative college-for-all statistics was necessary for garnering financial support. Ms. Gordon said,

> We have to tout certain statistics to benefit, you know, all the kids… the way that I rationalize it is if we have to say this nice statistic and somebody who doesn't work in education, but has a lot of money likes it…they give up all this money so that 58% of our kids can go to college for free, that's a deal I'm willing to take…I think the longer you're in the game, the more realistic you get about some of the things about how this works…that doesn't pull people's heartstrings, but on the backend, I know that allows the things we do that are funded by donors, and I know the donors come and give us money because they're compelled by a narrative about kids going to college, not about kids going to electrician school.

Mr. Russell delivered a similar message. He said CPCHS followed other "model[s] of schools that have seemingly demonstrated [success]," because "people don't give money to CPCHS because it's another version of your local public school." He continued,

> It's impossible to really stake a school on goals being around advocacy, empowerment, social, emotional regulation, connection to school community, because those are not things…that a donor would point to and say, that's something I want to give my money towards. And so in facing that juxtaposition, we often have to rely on GPA, rigor, what colleges are students getting into because if we're producing students who are ready to advocate, to be in relationship with others, but they go to [community college] that is going to perhaps impact our funding and we can't run a school without money.

In day-to-day life, staff experienced this pressure. Ms. Carlton revealed that data are "carefully selected to look a certain way" and that CPCHS "de-publicize[s] students who would choose not to go to college, which are very few, and we take pride in our 100% acceptance rate." Further, there was a palpable "tension in messages that we get from different branches of leadership" even though many said they felt "accepting of a variety of choices that students make." Mr. Taylor reflected on how this pressure made him "accept" that he needed to follow a checklist of items including scripting and rehearsing lessons, making sure kids were "working bell to bell" or else he worried he would be not helping students prepare for college. Noting the effects on students as well, he shared,

> There was one student in particular who was dead set on not going to college and it didn't matter no matter who talked to him and several teachers approached me like please convince the student to apply to college. It didn't matter, this student was convinced that this was not what they wanted to do. They didn't appreciate the fact that we were just trying to do it for show, to keep our numbers up at a hundred percent.

Siloed Efforts for College Readiness and Preparation

Even though college talk was pervasive, school-wide definitions of college readiness and success and clearly defined related roles were often unspoken and unclarified. Mr. Russell said,

> I don't think I've ever really thought of my work as preparing a kid to go to college or career. I'm preparing them to make it through the week, make it through the 10th grade, make it through high school and in many ways the work manifests itself in limitations around the end goal.

College team members primarily focused on the procedural elements of the college application process, specifically for students in 11th and 12th grade. Due to the structure and limitations of the school space and schedule, they often spent more time teaching groups of students than working one-on-one in individualized college counseling sections, which they felt was a disservice to students. They attributed this structural challenge to the lack of "communication between leadership and the college team" and the need for leadership to "understand what our mission and our goals say and how it directly relates to what I'm doing or what we're all doing on a day-to-day basis."

Simultaneously, teachers expressed challenges with the pressure they felt to help "these kids go to college," by getting students to "pass this test…to graduate with a [advanced] diploma," without being consciously integrated into broader college-preparation practices across the school. Mr. Taylor said he felt "a disconnect between what the college and career readiness classes are doing and what they, maybe other classes and content levels could be doing." For most staff, getting "snippets every now and then" about college preparation mainly around "letters of recommendation" and "SATs" was insufficient. Despite a clear college-going culture, Mr. Winston said staff viewed the college team as "in a silo" and wished they would be "more integrated in the conversation with different subjects and different things that all along to support

students so it can help inform their work as well and vice versa for us." Additionally, even though teachers knew they were "one of the last people that [students]" were "going to see until they get to college," a few teachers expressed concern they did not have enough voice in making curriculum changes they believed could support students' long-term success.

A History of White Institutional Culture

The relationship between a history of "White institutional culture" at CPCHS and their attempts to authentically prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion undergirded some of the barriers staff faced in relation to meeting these more holistic college readiness and college success-related visions. Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ+ posters hung in multiple classrooms, signaling that across the school, equity and inclusion were important. Mr. Emil said "at our core, [we are] conceptually different" when describing changes CPCHS had made related to prioritizing trauma-informed professional development sessions, implementing affinity groups, changing hiring practices, and investigating race relations within the staff community. Others discussed important shifts made from compliance-based discipline systems to restorative justice models. However, staff continued to wrestle with the history of no-excuses charter schools and their longstanding practices that remained in day-to-day life. Ms. James described the school-wide "no-excuses" structure and model, which still included a busy schedule with limited time for peer socialization and the use of a demerits and merits system, acted in direct opposition setting conditions for nonacademic skill development students needed. Other staff members echoed this concern and articulated that CPCHS was at "a crossroads," figuring out how to transition away from "sweat[ing] the small things."

Ms. Gordon said that in the "founding years" of CPCHS, school adults were "overwhelmingly White people" from middle-class or upper-class backgrounds "and went to

college, four-year college." Upholding these White middle-class "norms" may have influenced students' experiences and levels of pressure they felt. Mr. Taylor said,

> We asked kids to be urgent and everything is urgent, but really that became kind of a negative stigma of White supremacy where you're really just saying we need you to get this done no matter what, no matter what the toll on your mental health is, no matter what the toll on your anxiety or your feelings and thoughts are…[White staff] were basically saying, this is the character that we want you to have…we want you to essentially act White or at the very least be able to navigate in a very White dominated world.

Mr. Kent added that they wanted to make "sure that they're comfortable moving through diverse spaces, spaces that they may be unfamiliar with, spaces…that are more filled with middle-class rules, and you know, White normative rules," but grappled with how to help students with "code switching" and not asking kids to "change their characters." To address some of these concerns, Mr. Emil said "getting to know the kid, getting to know the families, exposing them to things, and get[ting] to best fit schools" was important. Mr. Emil and Mr. Russell shared that moving forward, increased partnership with families and communities is essential to dismantling the White institutional culture at CPCHS.

In terms of academics, multiple staff members wanted to prioritize the development of "culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy." However, despite CPCHS bringing in a diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant and implementing affinity groups, many felt that there were no substantive changes in the curriculum. While a culturally responsive and relevant curriculum component was added to a teacher observation rubric, Mr. Barron shared, teachers were "not sure if people really knew how to run PDs [professional development] around culturally relevant

teaching," leaving the onus on teachers to "combat White supremacy as individuals." School-wide discipline policies and systems did not "send the right message," he said, and continued,

> [It] goes against some of the work that is being put into DE and I [diversity, equity, and inclusion] work…and it's just frustrating from a teacher standpoint because it almost feels like the lens is just on us and what are we doing wrong? Or what could we be doing differently and not what could we be doing differently as a school in general?

Staff also discussed how changing policies, systems, and curriculum for the betterment of students need to happen in tandem with individual reflection and understanding of one's own biases and experiences. Most believed that advisory played an important part in raising social justice awareness, cultivating students' identity development, and combating White supremacy. However, some questioned whether or not White staff could facilitate those conversations when they did not "fully understand what that looks like in practice within our school." Ms. Jordan summarized the internal conflicts that she and other institutional agents experienced,

> How much more empowered can [our students] be? How much more critical thinkers can they be? How much stronger writers can they be if the curriculum was reflective of who they are and if teachers were more willing to allow their students to just be more freely who they are in the classroom space themselves, because by allowing systems like merits and demerits or allowing systems of read[ing] this particular set of books [by] a bunch of White authors, by doing all of that, we're literally stripping these opportunities away of helping these kids fully be these better successful people in general.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to understand how institutional agents perceived the level of college preparation alumni received from their no-excuses charter high school and how they

made sense of their role in meeting college success-related goals. Study findings indicate that institutional agents cared deeply about their students, mostly believing that helping students obtain a college degree was a primary way to remedy societal inequities. They also understood that not all students were prepared for college upon high school graduation and that not all students wanted to attend four-year colleges. Institutional agents were conscious of the internal and external pressures preventing them from implementing what they deemed to be ideal academic preparation and college counseling practices to meet their more holistic success-related goals. They identified contradictions, trade-offs, and practical constraints of the no-excuses model.

Despite successfully meeting the short-term academic and college-related "results on paper" that policymakers, donors, and institutional agents themselves expected of them, staff sought to prepare students in more comprehensive ways for both four-year college and alternative pathways by emphasizing social-emotional learning, cultivating deeper academic skills, and incorporating more culturally responsive curricula and practices (Noll, 2021). However, findings revealed that institutional agents frequently made these efforts in silos, unaware of other staff members' comparable attempts and associated struggles. Institutional agents' clear articulation of the barriers they faced offers recommendations for (re)envisioning college-for-all and college-going cultures in policy, theory, and practice.

(Re)envisioning and (Re)defining College-for-All in Theory, Policy, and Practice

Undergirding challenges staff experienced when trying to enact change within their schools were spoken and unspoken expectations to prioritize and advertise numeric academic achievement metrics (grades, test scores, graduation rates), behavioral metrics (merits and demerits, dean referrals, suspensions), and college access metrics (college acceptance rates) to

garner financial support. In the current context, reporting success on these short-term college access and academic metrics remain critical for charter schools to remain open and fundraise and realistically, cannot be replaced fully (Ferrare & Setari, 2017; Fullan, 2006). However, as indicated by participants, this checklist of items was not the sole determinant of college or career readiness or success. For many, overemphasis on short-term goals superseded cultivating other equally important, but less quantifiable nonacademic outcomes associated with college readiness such as leadership, self-advocacy, empowerment, and cultural validation (The College Board National Survey of School Counselors and Administrators, 2012). Consistent with the literature, the traditional "no excuses" approach minimized incentives and resources for staff to hone their craft, consider the diverse needs of students, and implement creative and culturally responsive practices (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019; Sondel, 2015).

Implications for Policy, Theory, and Research

In this study, institutional agents desired to prepare students more holistically, but were situated in political, economic, and social contexts that shaped school-level decision-making (Enberg & Gilbert, 2014). The rigidity of the college-for-all ethos, which incentivizes 100% college acceptance rates and high-test scores, influenced staff behaviors. Ironically, although no-excuses charter schools and charter schools have more autonomy than other public schools (Cohodes & Parham, 2021), institutional agents still felt constrained by these external expectations. Staff in various roles attempted to resist these limitations and evolve the college-for-all construct to be less one-size-fits-all and more inclusive of individual student needs and identities. However, they identified certain limits to how much they could achieve. Findings suggest that the college-for-all ethos should not be fully abandoned, rather (re)envisioned to be more flexible, allowing college *opportunity* and *choice* for all. This would allow schools and

associated stakeholders to appropriately uphold high expectations and adapt to the individual needs of students (Hashim et al., 2021). No-excuses charter schools themselves must advocate for this shift publicly, as the American public has become more skeptical regarding the benefits of higher education.

Additionally, this study contributes to the continued development of more culturally relevant college success frameworks. Current college success frameworks grounded primarily in social, cultural, and human capital can unintentionally pressure students to assimilate to White normative expectations, including attending college when socially and emotionally ill-prepared (Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Noll, 2021). Schools should equip students with skills to access college, navigate through and critique predominantly White spaces, while cultivating their strengths and linguistic, navigational, and familial capital (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Yosso, 2005). Ultimately, preparing students for college attendance is not the goal. Providing students with the tools and abilities to flourish in college, obtain their degree, and reap the social and economic benefits of higher education, are the goals.

Therefore, this study builds on growing literature calling for more student-centered policies and incentives that emphasize academic preparation, nonacademic preparation, extracurricular involvement, and cultural relevance to help students get to college, thrive, and graduate (Noll, 2021). Policymakers, foundations, and charter school authorizers determine charter school closures, funding, and performance criteria (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). As such, they must (re)evaluate their accountability metrics and include those outside of academic scores and college acceptance rates. Until these powerful external actors incentivize other performance metrics, institutional agents are caught in the crossfire of meeting one-size-fits-all short-term outcomes while attempting to help students pursue pathways that will ultimately yield the

greatest long-term benefits in their lives. Mirroring these priorities, future research must invest in studying no-excuses charter school alumni in college to understand academic success in addition to well-being, identity, sense of belonging, and ability to navigate cross culturally without obligation to assimilate.

Implications for Practice - Addressing the Barriers

Bridging silos across institutional agents regarding college access and success.

Despite a strong college-going culture, CPCHS leaders, teachers, and college team members often operated in silos, unaware of how their efforts and their colleague's work collectively contributed to college preparation. To build college-going cultures, students need to receive college information from more than one adult (Bryan et al., 2017). This study does not argue that teachers or leaders should assume college counseling responsibilities. Rather, this study's findings suggest that college preparatory schools should consider how their entire school context and climate mediates college access and success (Knight & Duncheon, 2020). Increased collaboration across institutional agents that extends beyond aspirational college talk and meeting immediate goals such as scheduling, course requirements, and recommendation-writing is essential.

As schools that prioritize data-driven decision-making (Golann, 2015), utilizing a systems-thinking approach to collecting data and developing theories of change could contribute to understanding the relationships between the varying school-level activities within and outside of direct college counseling that do or do not contribute to the ultimate goal: college preparation and success (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Knight & Duncheon, 2020; McKillip et al., 2012). Leaders should prioritize data transparency and elicit student, alumni, family, teacher, network, and staff perceptions regarding college preparation to identify misconceptions between

stakeholders and resolve conflicting views about no-excuses school priorities, actions, and intended or unintended impacts. Incorporating in-service professional development opportunities to highlight multiple forms of data could help institutional agents articulate the connection between their day-to-day practices and the long-term goals of college success. Relatedly, throughout the interviews, institutional agents expressed gratitude for the opportunity to slow down, step back, and reflect on their practices in ways not offered by their school. No-excuses charter schools should prioritize and embed opportunities for individual and community-based reflection into existing professional development and coaching meetings.

Additionally, college counselors should engage in routine college and career readiness conversations with teachers and leaders beyond discussions of procedural college application components (Griffin & Birkenstock, 2022; McKillip et al., 2013). Leaders must help to facilitate engagement between counselors and teachers to discuss the relationship between college and career pathways and academic and personal interests. As participants suggested, receiving structural support to create tangible opportunities in advisory or classrooms to connect learning, college choice, student interest, and real-world career skills earlier on in the high school career is essential, especially for students interested in STEM fields. College preparatory schools like CPCHS with designated college readiness classes should consider appropriately balancing the delivery of whole-group college information and resources and providing space for individual meetings with students and families within the school day to combat concerns regarding a one-size-fits-all college approach (Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Noll, 2021). Last, greater attention must be paid to the varied experiences, campus climates, and outcomes reported by four-year colleges. Four-year colleges are not monolithic. School-based institutional agents need to interrogate *how* they counsel students toward four-year colleges and deeply consider the role of college

selectivity and college quality play into student experience and success (Goodman et al., 2017; Melguizo, 2010).

Prioritizing scaffolded academic readiness while integrating "nonacademic" skills.

Historically, no-excuses charter schools have focused on academic preparation and have successfully demonstrated increased academic achievement scores (Angrist et al., 2016; Dobbie & Fryer, 2015). They should continue to prioritize academic readiness by providing challenging academic courses, maintaining high academic expectations, and teaching academic-related skills such as time management (Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2015). Although no-excuses charter schools have more control over their curriculum, institutional agents, specifically those teaching courses tied to state tests, did not feel that they had the agency to approach curriculum more creatively with more focus on deeper learning and higher order critical thinking and problem solving. No-excuses charter schools should provide seasoned teachers with more freedom to vary academic structures and methods, intentionally scaffold lessons to be responsive to students' wide-range of needs, and minimize over-supporting (Athanases, 2018).

No-excuses charter schools also need to place a more intentional focus on career preparation, soft skill development, and culturally sustaining approaches (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Savitz-Romer & Rowan-Kenyon, 2020). In this study, teachers, leaders, and counselors worked individually toward cultivating these skills. However, they worked toward this integration separately from one another, leaving an ambiguous owner for the less "quantifiable," but no less essential, nonacademic components of college readiness. To strengthen college-going cultures, institutional agents must work together to cultivate career-relevant skills within and outside of the classroom. Leaders must prioritize supporting staff in these pursuits through systems and structures. They can allot equal time and resources to developing culturally sustaining pedagogy

in professional development training. Moreover, increasing extracurricular participation positively impacts college enrollment and persistence (Knight & Duncheon, 2020), thus no-excuses schools should invest in further developing after-school and advisory programs.

Addressing institutional Whiteness at no-excuses charter schools.

In terms of broader "no-excuses" school culture, staff addressed underlying issues related to "institutional Whiteness" and latent expectations that BIPOC students and students from low-income backgrounds conform to White middle to upper-class cultures and values (Golann, 2015; Sondel, 2015). In this study, institutional agents cared deeply about students. However, they also expressed concern that care can cross over to assimilationist expectations and paternalistic behaviors. Across college counseling, academic, and behavioral domains, practitioners should continue to interrogate how vestiges of the "sweat the small stuff" approach in addition to individual experiences, biases, belief systems, and assumptions affect practices that contribute to overcoddling, White saviorism, and rigidity that do not serve broader college success goals or result in undermatching and gatekeeping practices (Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2015). Further, prioritizing family communication and relationship building beyond discussions of academic achievement and behavior could bolster collaboration between stakeholders, resist paternalistic undertones of a no-excuses approach, and create a system of support that extends beyond high school (Ishimaru et al., 2019).

Limitations

Although no-excuses charter schools share similar characteristics, they are evolving school models shaped by their individual contexts. First, institutional agents were sampled using purposeful sampling from one case study site, and therefore are neither representative of all institutional agent experiences nor representative of all no-excuses charter high schools (Patton,

2015). However, CPCHS represents a test case that standalone charter schools and charter management organizations can learn from. With more autonomy than traditional public schools and CMOs, findings from this charter school highlight how they are enacting change. Future research should utilize a multi-case study approach to compare institutional agent experiences across no-excuses charter schools. Second, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some institutional agents had limited experience working in the school building. However, 11 of the 14 participants interviewed worked at CPCHS prior to the pandemic. Therefore, their experiences are not based solely on the COVID-19 period. Additionally, typical school events were not held in person, making it impossible to observe school-wide activities.

Third, as indicated, there has been a shift in wider public approval for the college-for-all ethos and some no-excuses charter schools have been changing their practices. I conducted interviews at one point in time, but institutional agent experiences may be different at various points (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). Future research should consider utilizing longitudinal methods to further clarify how institutional agents carry out college-for-all missions over time. Last, this study sought to understand how institutional agents specifically perceived the influence of their school on student experiences. There are many influential stakeholders in a students' college process and further research should investigate family, student, and college personnel perspectives (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017).

Conclusion

This study highlights how the social, political, and economic drivers of the college-for-all ideology pervade the work of institutional agents, affecting their day-to-day practices, beliefs, and experiences in preparing students for college (Perna & Thomas, 2006). Understanding the direct and indirect roles of institutional agents in carrying out college-going culture at no-excuses

charter schools is complex and multifaceted. Institutional agents on the ground are attempting to craft school environments where marginalized students feel safe, heard, supported, and culturally validated while attempting to teach the academic and nonacademic skills that, together, could help students succeed in short-term and long-term college outcomes. However, findings underscore the siloed nature in which these attempts occur and how narrow college-for-all policies can influence institutional agents' perceived autonomy (Golann, 2018). Often, staff experienced tension between upholding high expectations and meeting students' individual needs, deciphering which components of the no-excuses model reinforce or disrupt inequity, and navigating pressures to deliver on short-term goals articulated by external forces—making it difficult for staff to see themselves as important contributors to the larger college success goal on a daily basis.

If the college-for-all ethos continues as a principle of education reform, findings from this study indicate that it must be (re)defined and (re)assessed to be more student-centered and flexible to provide institutional agents with sufficient agency to prepare students socially, emotionally, academically, and culturally for four-year colleges and for legitimate other pathways. The negative consequences of funding no-excuses charter schools based on student achievement data (Ferrare & Setari, 2017) and measuring success solely by accountability metrics grounded in high-stakes tests and college acceptance rates must be examined and addressed. Meanwhile, institutional agents in all roles need to continue to interrogate how they are adapting, changing, and (re)envisioning their practices to meet the growing needs of their communities (Hashim et al., 2021). No-excuses charter schools, particularly standalone schools like CPCHS, can lead the charge in this pursuit by incorporating more student-centered and experiential approaches from innovative small school settings (Arnold & Mihut, 2020) with

effective existing academic and college preparation practices to both foster college-going cultures while meeting students and their individual needs.

ARTICLE THREE: IT'S ABOUT THE PROCESS: A PROPOSED APPROACH FOR MERGING QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY RESEARCH AND PROGRAM THEORY DEVELOPMENT FOR INTENTIONAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Introduction

The persistence of inequities related to college success is a central concern facing education researchers, evaluators, policymakers, and practitioners in the United States. A college degree remains one of the most viable pathways toward social mobility and economic stability. As such, calls for adaptable and scalable P-16 interventions remain at the forefront of the education reform conversation (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2022). Quantitative studies, which have been historically prioritized in educational research, articulate what interventions work for a given population, but do not describe *how* they work in other school contexts (Brown & Flood, 2018; Joyce & Cartwright, 2020).

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recently released a report (2022) arguing for increased investment in qualitative and mixed methods studies that elicit educator experiences to investigate not only *what* practices work, but *how* they contribute to educational equity in local school contexts. However, merely producing more quantitative or qualitative empirical research does not equate to practical intervention implementation (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020). Moving beyond simply uncovering participant experiences to implementing adaptable interventions in school contexts requires tools that can bridge a longstanding divide between research and practice (Weiss, 1995). The *process* of creating program theories (Weiss, 1995; Wilkinson et al., 2021) in tandem with conducting qualitative research, is a promising approach to address this gap (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020).

Program theory—consisting of two parts including a theory of change and theory of action—is a form of theory-based evaluation that draws on research-based and participant-

centered processes to identify a desired goal and understand how an intervention is meant to achieve this goal (Mayne, 2017; Funnell & Rogers, 2011). Program theory uses mental models and diverse forms of deductive and inductive evidence to clarify shared stakeholder purpose and uncover the relationships between assumptions, actions, program components, and ultimate outcomes—all of which can contribute to intentional program development, evaluation, and school improvement (DuBow & Litzler, 2019; Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Joyce & Cartwright, 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2021). Typically represented as a visual diagram and written narrative, program theories can articulate "how and why a program works or fails to work" (Weiss, 1997, p. 77). Despite the popularity of program theory in evaluation, health, and science fields and in international contexts, there is a paucity of peer-reviewed literature that describes the process for creating program theories in school contexts (DuBow & Litzler, 2019; Hargreaves & Podems, 2012).

To fill these gaps, this study draws on a qualitative case study of a "no-excuses" charter high school. In the mid-1990s-2000s, competition, standardization, and accountability characterized the "second way" of education (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 9). During this time, "no-excuses" charter schools emerged as arguably one of the most successful and controversial school-choice models (Cheng et al., 2017). Focused on increasing academic achievement and college preparation through school-wide systems and strict behavioral standards, these schools have demonstrated impressive college acceptance and enrollment rates for students from low-income backgrounds and Black, Indigenous, and Students of Color (BIPOC) (Cheng et al., 2017; Lamboy & Lu, 2017). Simultaneously, college access for this population has not necessarily translated to college success, defined as not only graduation and

persistence, but also subjective well-being and labor market earning outcomes (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019; Kinzie & Kuh, 2017).

Researchers call into question how highly prescriptive behavioral and academic practices associated with no-excuses charter schools achieve short-term academic gains but confer unintended consequences on students' long-term success (Golann, 2021). Examples of these unintended consequences include lower reported noncognitive skills, stifled critical thinking, and pressure to assimilate to White normative behaviors, to name a few (Athaneses, 2016; Lamboy & Lu, 2017; West et al., 2016). Responsive to these critiques within current social and political climates shaped by a racial justice awakening, a global pandemic, and partisan divisiveness, no-excuses charter schools are currently in the throes of change. Many are investigating ways to maintain the parts of their model that have facilitated college access while dismantling the components that unintentionally replicate the inequities they aim to disrupt (Golann & Torres, 2018; Noll, 2021). No-excuses charter schools must transform and navigate the "fourth way" of education reform, characterized by creating shared understandings, purposes, and sustainable change (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008, p. 3). Therefore, they are optimal contexts to utilize program theory as a tool for systematically understanding how schools can improve (Hargreaves, 2010).

Purpose

Developing a purposeful program theory utilizing current research and participant-centered approaches is essential for building consensus, unpacking underlying assumptions that drive behaviors, and creating measurable and collaborative outcomes (Meyer et al., 2021). This study meets researchers' call to identify and describe a practical *process* for integrating

qualitative case study research with program theory development that researchers can adapt for their contexts (Brown & Flood, 2018; Joyce & Cartwright, 2020; Nelson & Campbell, 2017). The following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. What is a process for integrating qualitative case study research with program theory development?
2. What are benefits and challenges of this process for researchers, evaluators, and practitioners?

This paper includes a working visual program theory based on a case study of a no-excuses charter school. The visual product itself is not the focal point of this paper, nor is it meant for exact replication. Rather, reported findings from this study provide guidance for evaluators, researchers, and practitioners interested in how they can use the process of program theory creation in conjunction with rigorous qualitative research studies to increase researcher-practitioner collaboration and contribute to intentional change in school contexts (Brown & Flood, 2018).

Background and Literature Review

Three bodies of intersecting literature formulate the background and context for this paper: research to practice translation, program theory development, and no-excuses charter schools.

Translating Research to Practice in School Settings

The challenges associated with translating research into practice in education has been a relevant topic for decades (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020; Weiss, 1995). Applying "what worked" in research studies of particular settings or populations to other contexts can be challenging, particularly when quantitative randomized control trials do not test theories or describe how or

"which components of interventions are essential to the causal process" (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020, p. 1071). Brown and Flood (2018) argue that determining how to scale interventions requires understanding "why interventions have been successful and how that success might be realised in a new context" (p. 34). In sum, the process of replicating and scaling an intervention requires "adaption, not adoption" in new contexts (Brown & Flood, 2018). However, not all schools have the capacity to develop practitioners' ability to implement evidence-based practices. Moreover, research infrequently centers participant expertise, creating barriers for program and practice adaption in complex school systems (Brown et al., 2017; Koleros et al., 2020). As a potential remedy, schools can develop researcher-practitioner partnerships for equitable and sustainable school improvement (Kirshner et al., 2021; Nelson & Campell, 2017). As Wentworth and colleagues (2016) note,

> If researchers and practitioners work closely together on research that is both aligned to practitioners' goals and of interest the larger field – then practitioners are more apt to use research evidence in their decision-making – has a variety of inputs and outputs that lead to the outcomes (p. 248).

However, research is still emerging regarding how to develop effective research-practice partnerships. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2022) has urged the Institute of Education Sciences and the U.S. Department of Education to support "types of research that will be more responsive to the needs, structures, resources, and constraints found in educational organizations" that address "why, how, and for whom interventions work" (p. 3-4). This recommendation, combined with the proposed benefits of research-practitioner partnerships, presents a timely opportunity for researchers and evaluators to employ theory-based evaluation approaches in school contexts.

Program Theory: Theory of Change and Theory of Action

One promising and underutilized approach to address these calls for research and practice integration in U.S. education systems is program theory (Brown & Flood, 2018; Joyce & Cartwright, 2020). Program theories are a process and product-oriented approach to understand how change occurs (Mayne, 2017). They are "an explicit theory or model of how an intervention, such as a project, a program, an initiative, or a policy, contributes to a chain of intermediate results and finally to the intended observed outcomes" (Funnell & Rogers, 2011, p. xix) and highlight the complexity and nonlinearity of change within schools situated in broader systems (Mayne, 2017). This approach to theorizing change is based on empirical research, theory, and the voices of practitioners.

Program theories are represented in visual and narrative forms and often build on logic models (also referred to as logframes). Logic models are visual representations that typically follow simplistic "if-then" approaches to understanding the relationship between inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. Robust program theories, however, go beyond these linear logic model representations. They articulate the causal mechanisms, relationships between components, and underlying assumptions that affect *how* change occurs (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; van Es et al., 2015; Zazueta et al., 2021). Although evaluators use varied language, the practical components of a program theory include inputs, activities, outcomes, desired change, casual links/mechanisms, and assumptions (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018). Approaches to developing program theories can include mental models, inductive, and deductive methods (Funnell & Rogers, 2010) to uncover causal mechanisms—what occurs in the "black box" or under the surface of programs —that generate outcomes (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010). Deductive approaches refer to what can be understood about a problem based on existing literature and evaluator experience. Inductive approaches derive from interviews and observations with participants.

Mental models refer to the ways in which stakeholders themselves "believe a planned or existing program will achieve what it is designed to do" (Funnell & Rogers, 2011, p. 103). Program theory development may incorporate a combination of all three methods.

Program theories include two components: theory of change (ToC) and theory of action (ToA) (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; van Es et al., 2015). A theory of change (ToC) focuses on the broader organization level and articulates how activities contribute to a series of intermediate outcomes and ultimate impacts or outcomes (Rogers, 2014). A theory of action (ToA) describes how programs or interventions are created to "activate" a systems-based theory of change, focusing on the micro program-level to figure out the black box of program effectiveness (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010). Understanding the relationship between micro-level activities represented in a ToA and macro-level activities represented in a ToC is critical to system-wide change. It is essential to understand what stakeholders' desired change is, how they think their programs should work, what they believe contributes to their goals, and how various components of their programs contribute to (or not) to their collective intermediate and ultimate system-wide outcomes (Meyer et al., 2021).

Multiple purposes for program theory creation can include (1) planning; (2) engaging and communicating with stakeholders; and (3) monitoring, evaluating, and scaling programs. Determining the purpose and reasonable scope of the program theory occurs through conducting a situation analysis of the context and varies based on the situation (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). Although ToC and ToA development is time consuming and resource-laden, it can act as a critical bridge for systematically translating research to practice (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020; Weiss, 1997). Ultimately, developing program theories is a participatory and multi-stakeholder

approach—the *process* of creating the program theory is as important as the resulting program theory itself.

The Benefits of Program Theory Development at No-excuses Charter Schools

No-excuses charter schools are optimal contexts to investigate *how* change occurs in prominent education reform efforts. They represent a small, but highly visible and controversial model of public charter school (Cohodes, 2018). Typically located in urban areas, no-excuses charter schools serve predominantly students from low-income backgrounds and BIPOC students. They are free, publicly funded, privately run, and have more flexibility and autonomy than traditional public schools (Curto et al., 2011; Gleason et al., 2010). Expressing explicit missions related to a college-for-all philosophy, they employ common tenets of educational practice, placing academic achievement at the forefront (Noll et al., 2021). They employ an extended academic calendar and prioritize Math and English Language Arts classes, tutoring, test-preparation, and college-going culture through systems of school-wide behavior management, structured schedules, and strict expectations (Lamboy & Lu, 2017).

Research indicates that no-excuses charter schools are successful at achieving short-term outcomes such as increasing standardized test scores and college acceptance rates for marginalized students in comparison to schools serving similar populations (Davis & Heller, 2019; National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). As such, many policymakers have expressed support for these schools, resulting in increased federal grant and philanthropic funding and their rapid expansion in the last twenty years (Cohodes, 2018; Golann & Torres, 2018). However, researchers have suggested that their strict and authoritarian practices may paradoxically undermine the development of essential noncognitive skills necessary for long-term success in other domains (Golann, 2021). The very practices that have been scaled and replicated may also

hinder students' subjective well-being, college persistence, and college graduation (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019; Mehta, 2020).

No-excuses charter schools typically ground practices in the assumption that developing students' social, cultural, and human capital and their ability to adopt middle-class behaviors beget college success (Hammack, 2016; Golann, 2021). Noll (2021) states that currently, "while many take issue with this theory of change, others argue that no-excuses schools provide students with an education on par or even superior to elite college preparatory schools, and some communities of color and community-based education reformers favor the model" (p. 6). Given the controversies and polarization around no-excuses charter school approaches, many no-excuses charter schools are (re)examining the underlying assumptions that drive their theories of change (Noll, 2021). Therefore, investigating *how* these changes contribute to their outcomes from a systematic and practitioner-oriented perspective is of timely importance (Meyer et al., 2021). Without no-excuses charter schools consciously and intentionally developing new participant-driven and research-based ToCs, it will remain unclear as to "how and why programs work (or fail to work)" (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010, p. 364) in their schools, which could have negative impacts on marginalized students they intend to serve.

The Process: Developing a Program Theory in Tandem with Qualitative Research

Drawing from a case study of a no-excuses charter high school, this section describes a process for aligning qualitative research and program theory development processes. First, I present a brief overview of the case study site. Then, I articulate a process for developing a program theory of college success in tandem with conducting a qualitative case study research. Within this section, I also include an example of a working product—the visual diagram of the theory of change and theory of action—created for the case study site. Last, I describe the

benefits, challenges, and limitations of this approach for researcher and practitioner consideration.

Description of the Case Study Site: City Prep Charter High School (CPCHS)

This paper is based on findings from a single qualitative case study of City Prep Charter High School (pseudonym, CPCHS) conducted in 2021. Data for this case study included in-person observations of CPCHS, document review, and ~70-minute semi-structured interviews with 30 participants. Participants included 16 four-year college-attending alumni and 14 institutional agents (teachers, leaders, counselors). CPCHS was selected as a typical case of a no-excuses charter school that self-identified as being in the process of (re)evaluating their practices in relation to college success outcomes (Cohodes & Parham, 2021; Patton, 2015).

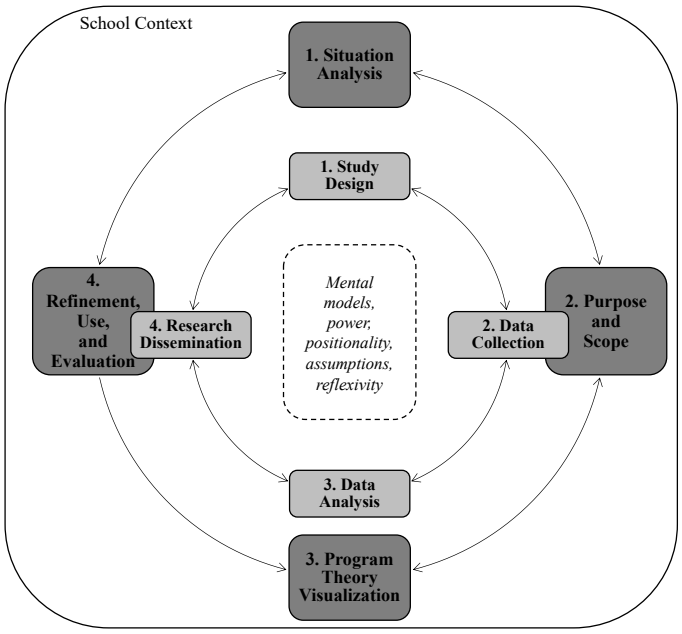
Located in a city on the East Coast, CPCHS enrolled 340 students in grades 9-12 and was classified by the National Student Clearinghouse (2021) as a "high minority" and "low-income" school. Of their student body, 84% of students qualified for free and reduced-price lunch and 85% of students identified as a student of color. On average, 70% of CPCHS' students enrolled immediately in four-year colleges. Although CPCHS cannot yet report on their six-year graduation rate, 56% of their graduated students are either persisting in college or have graduated college within four years. This rate is higher than the 28%, six-year college completion rate for graduates of high-minority and low-income public high schools nationally (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). Based on these metrics and consonant with the literature on no-excuses charter high schools, CPCHS is closing the college attainment gap. Simultaneously, participants' reflections in interviews revealed a belief that not all no-excuses charter school practices contributed positively to these outcomes. Program theory development processes helped uncover which practices should be continued, adapted, or terminated.

Developing a Program Theory of College Success: Layering Qualitative Methods and Program Theory Development Processes

To bridge research and practice in a systematic manner, I embarked on a process to integrate the stages associated with qualitative case study research with those of program theory development. Case studies are an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). Drawing on multiple sources of evidence, case studies "concentrate on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation" (Shaw, 1978, p. 2) to contribute to understanding practical issues in context (Merriam, 1998; Schwandt & Gates, 2018). For these reasons, qualitative case study is a complementary approach to program theory development. In this section, I provide a brief overview of Figure 7, the visual representation of how I layered the steps associated with program theory development and steps of qualitative case study research within a school context (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Merriam, 1998; van Es et al., 2015). Following, I discuss each corresponding step in greater detail.

Figure 7

Qualitative Case Study Research and Program Theory Development Steps



This qualitative case study and associated program theory development process was grounded in a school context, underscoring that change does not occur in a vacuum. It requires examining how contexts influence schools and individual students (Constantinides, 2021). Moving inwards, the outer circle describes four corresponding "steps" for program theory development (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; van Es et al., 2015). The overlapping inner circle describes four iterative "steps" for conducting qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). Although the diagram delineates aligned discrete steps, the circular visual and multi-directional arrows between them highlight both qualitative research and program theory development processes as dynamic and interactive. At any point, a researcher will likely return to steps based on emerging discoveries. In my qualitative study, for example, new insights from the data analysis step informed adjustments I made to the interview protocol and to the program theory visual.

Social identities, relationships, and roles influence how stakeholders identify, understand, discuss, and implement activities. Therefore, depicted at the center of the diagram and undergirding all steps are the mental models, positions, assumptions, beliefs, and power dynamics that exist within and between actors in organizations and researchers (Kirshner et al., 2020; van Es et al., 2015). Through this process, the researcher must remain reflexive and responsive to power dynamics (Kirshner et al., 2021; van Es et al., 2015). As a former no-excuses charter school teacher and administrator, I had unique insight into these school which granted me "insider" status and established initial trust. Additionally, however, I possessed my own beliefs and assumptions based on my experiences and identities. Attuned to my positionality, I triangulated multiple forms of data, sought disconfirming evidence, wrote analytic memos, and conducted member-checks to ensure confidentiality and trustworthiness (Merriam, 1998).

Describing the Steps for Qualitative Research and Program Theory Integration

The following section describes how I approached each step of the qualitative research study and program theory integration process shown in Figure 7. Table 3 describes each step's associated activities, questions for researcher consideration, and suggested researcher outputs.

Table 3

Qualitative Research and Program Theory Steps and Considerations for Researchers and Evaluators

Qualitative Research Phase ⇆ Program Theory Phase	Type of Questions for Researchers and Evaluators to Consider
Study Design / **Situation Analysis** • Literature review • Theoretical framework review • Paradigmatic orientation • Drawing on previous experience • Informal discussions with other researchers, evaluators, and practitioners • Extant program theory review **Outputs** 1. Definition of the problem 2. Theoretical framework selection 3. Research questions development 4. Initial data analysis codebook 5. Case study site selection and sampling approach 6. Memorandum of Understanding and informed consent	• What does the extant literature say about the problem? • What are the gaps in the literature? • What is the state of the problem in local and federal contexts? • What existing programs and solutions address the problem? • What are the outcomes associated with the problem? • How are those programs and outcomes evaluated? • What theoretical frameworks relate to the problem? • What contextual factors influence the problem outcomes? • What is the situation's level of complexity? • What research question(s) address gaps in the literature? • How do I select and gain access to a school site? • Who are the key stakeholders? • How do I facilitate "buy-in" from stakeholders? • What is my philosophical and paradigmatic orientation? • Are participants and researcher on the same page about the purpose of this collaboration?
Data Collection / **Purpose and Scope** • Observations • Document review • Interviews • Member checks • Reflexivity • Mental models • Unpacking stakeholder experiences, assumptions, and beliefs **Outputs** 1. Purpose and scope of the theory 2. Analytic memos 3. Field notes 4. Interview transcripts and preliminary jottings	• What is the problem, solution, and desired change from stakeholders' perspective? • How do stakeholders work toward desired change? • How do stakeholders define and measure outcomes? • What are the school's existing programs and practices? • What are the unintended consequences of stakeholder beliefs and assumptions associated with practices and outcomes? • What barriers do stakeholders face working toward change? • What is the school's public-facing theory of change? • What are stakeholders' internal theories of change? • How do stakeholders' practices, beliefs, and assumptions compare to each other's perspectives and the literature? • What is the purpose and scope of the program theory? • How do power dynamics influence data collection?

5. Research-practitioner relationships	• Whose voices are missing?
Data Analysis • Three cycles of coding (deductive, inductive, thematic) • Data visualization • Validity, reliability, trustworthiness	**Program Theory Visualization** • Logic model • Mapping assumptions, inputs, activities, outcomes, feedback loops, and causal mechanisms • ToC and ToA development • Iterative refinement	• How does first cycle of codes relate to one another? • What themes emerged from code clusters? • How do these themes uncover the hidden causal mechanisms ("black box") of how inputs contribute to outcomes? • What are the (and definitions of) inputs, activities, short-term, intermediate outcomes, ultimate outcomes? • What is the relationship between this school and the broader local, state, and national landscape? • What are the beliefs, assumptions, and biases that undergird the theory of change (ToC) and theory of action (ToA)? • What is the relationship between the ToC and ToA? • Who should provide feedback on the program theory? • How do I solicit feedback in ways that maintains participant confidentiality and centers their voices? • How can a visual diagram capture the relationship between activities, assumptions, outcomes, contexts, and research? • How can the visual diagram be comprehensive and readable? • Does the visual diagram follow a comprehendible logic? • Does the ToC and ToA meet program theory critique criteria?
Outputs 1. Codebook and coded transcripts 2. Short-, medium-, long-term, and ultimate outcome definitions 3. Domains related to achieving these outcomes 4. Relationships between underlying belief systems and outcomes 5. Implicit causal mechanisms (i.e. the "black box") 6. Robust visual of ToC and ToA 7. Menu/list of programs that contribute to outcomes	
Research Dissemination • Publications, conference presentations • Member checking	**Refinement, Use, Evaluation** • Stakeholder review process • Quality assessment, improvement, and refinement • Program evaluation	• Have I member checked with participants to ensure the ToC and ToA accurately represents stakeholder experiences and literature before considering publication? • How and with whom is the visual diagram shared? • How can the ToC and ToA be used? • How can researchers and practitioners collaborate on the use of and refinement of the theory of change and action? • What other voices should be included in future iterations? • How can this program theory help other schools? • What are the next steps for evaluation? • Are the outcomes well-defined and measurable?
Outputs 1. Research publications 2. Conference proposals and presentations 3. Updated program theory 4. Evaluation plan	

Step 1: Study Design ←→ Situation Analysis

Described in Table 3, the first step combines qualitative inquiry design and situation analysis. To develop a qualitative case study and program theory that was relevant and responsive to the needs of the field, I began by conducting a thorough literature review (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Merriam, 1998). Through this process, I assessed the state of the three bodies of literature presented in this paper, identified existing gaps, reviewed relevant program theories, and selected a conceptual model for college success that most appropriately fit with the purpose of the study (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Perna & Thomas, 2006). Further, I identified the common characteristics shared by no-excuses charter schools to deductively inform future data collection, analysis, and the program theory visual itself. These qualitative inquiry activities align with the "situation analysis" stage in program theory development. Conducting a situation analysis requires assessing the complexity of a situation and its interventions, understanding the current issues, identifying what has been done previously, and articulating what needs further investigation or clarification. Through these deductive processes, I produced the outputs necessary for program theory development, as articulated in Table 3.

Step 2: Data Collection ←→ Purpose and Scope

To build a rich description of the case and unpack their complex programs and practices, I conducted in-person observations, extensive document review, and virtual semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (Hargreaves, 2010; Merriam, 1998). Observations of classrooms, common spaces, daily routines, advisory, homeroom, staff meetings, office spaces, and interactions between students, staff, and students over four days provided essential school-based data. Further, reviewing annual reports, school profiles, social media, school calendars, school schedules, National Student Clearinghouse data, and publicly available data from the

department of education supplied essential contextual information. I utilized a maximum variation purposeful sampling strategy to select 16 college-attending alumni who attended a range of public and private four-year institutions of higher education and 14 institutional agents (leaders, teachers, counselors, and administrators) who represented a wide range of disciplines and departments within CPCHS (Patton, 2015). I conducted semi-structured interviews using a combination of open-ended and specified questions to understand how these stakeholders made sense of their experiences, assumptions, and beliefs about programs and practices related to college success outcomes (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Manzano, 2016).

Described in row 2 of Table 3, collecting in-depth qualitative data was essential to determining the purpose and scope of the program theory. Through interviews, I discovered that stakeholders were not yet considering how to monitor and evaluate their programs. Instead, their primary focus was to increase communication and collaboration. Stakeholders discussed the siloed nature of their work, often uncertain of their collective college success vision and how they and their colleagues operationalized this vision. Mr. Morris, (all names pseudonyms) an administrator, reflected,

> I don't think I've ever really thought of my work as preparing a kid to go to college or career. I'm preparing them to make it through the week, make it through the 10th grade, make it through high school and in many ways the work manifests itself in limitations around the end goal.

Despite working at a college preparatory school, Mr. Morris did not connect his actions with outcomes related to his school's ultimate college mission. Other teachers echoed similar sentiments and this underlying belief trickled into student experience. Evan, a college-going alumnus aptly noted,

> There were a lot of really good building blocks set in place to absolutely meet that mission statement and go above and beyond, but it kind of seemed like instead of building like a unified house that was supposed to be that mission statement, they had like a few golden pieces of architecture in there, but they were all just completely disconnected from each other.

As both these quotes suggest, participants identified a disconnect between existing activities and college success outcomes. By taking extensive field notes, remaining attuned to stakeholders' mental models, transcribing interview transcripts, and aligning preliminary findings with current literature, the primary purposes of the program theory emerged. The purposes of the program theory for CPCHS were: (1) to create a shared definition of college success; (2) to uncover *how* siloed stakeholders believed programs were working and *how* they should work toward achieving those goals; and (3) to synthesize these perspectives into a cohesive visual program theory for college success for increased collaboration and future evaluation. Meeting these purposes required unpacking stakeholders' underlying assumptions, beliefs, and hidden the causal mechanisms (the "black box") that could articulate how programs were intended to work (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010).

Step 3: Data Analysis ←→ Program Theory Visualization

The process for analyzing data aligned with the process of creating the program visual (ToC and ToA). To analyze the data, I utilized a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). First, I deductively clustered text into units using a provisional list of codes developed during the first step. Then, I inductively coded interview transcripts using *in vivo*, values, versus, descriptive, and process codes, which codified the codebook drawing from participant experiences in addition to literature (Saldaña, 2016). Following, I conducted axial coding where I

sorted first-cycle codes into deductive and inductive categories until achieving *a priori* saturation (Saunders, 2018). The process of grouping codes and unearthing patterns related to current literature and theory inherently lent itself to articulating program theory components (Miles et al., 2014; Astubury & Leeuw, 2010). As I analyzed data, I visualized the codes and themes in tables, diagrams, and matrices to make sense of their relationships, which informed the visual program theory (Merriam, 1998).

Both the ToC (Figure 8) and ToA (Figure 9) are read roughly from left to right. Although the ToC and ToA follow a relatively linear trajectory, they are more complex than typical logic models. I began with a simplistic intervention theory following a logframe approach, which can be a beneficial starting place to unpack complex systems (Rogers, 2007). One of the key distinctions between logic models and program theories, however, is the latter's movement beyond articulating simple "if-then" relationships to capture the causal mechanisms/assumptions (e.g. the black box of how shown in Figures 8 and 9). Qualitative data analysis processes enabled me to uncover and visualize the causal mechanisms that stakeholders themselves described as essential mediators to achieving college success outcomes that are typically undetectable by quantitative research (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010; Joyce & Cartwright, 2020).

Visualizing a theory of change (ToC) and theory of action (ToA) for CPCHS was an iterative and dynamic process. As I analyzed data, engaged stakeholders, and gathered feedback from other school-based practitioners in the field, I refined the visual diagrams, paying careful attention to capturing their complexity while ensuring readability (Davies, 2018). Table 4 articulates key ToC and ToA components and their associated graphic elements.

Table 4

Theory of Change and Theory of Action Elements and Visual Representation

Joint Theory of Change and Theory of Action Elements	Visual Components
Problem, solution, and assumptions	• Written narrative
Time	• Thick grey arrow representing phases of college success over time (Perna & Thomas, 2006)
Influential contexts	• Grey boxes outlined by black dashed lines
Short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes	• Outcomes outlined by black boxes
How outcomes build on one another	• Outcomes boxes and green arrows of increasing thickness from left to right
Five causal mechanisms associated with achieving outcomes	• Green icons and green outlines to represent each category: (1) academic; (2) resource and data use; (3) individual and holistic development; (4) support and community; (5) cultural relevance and affirmation
Ultimate postsecondary success outcome	• Green box including five causal mechanisms
Feedback loops describing relationships between outcomes and contexts	• Black dashed lines with multi-directional arrows
Theory of Change Specific Elements	**Visual Components**
Unseen causal mechanisms necessary to achieve outcomes	• The "black box of how" outlined by green dashed lines that contribute to outcomes
Relationships between distinguishers in the high school context	• Boxes outlined by black lines and multidirectional arrows
Theory of Action Specific Elements	**Visual Components**
Theory of action purpose and use	• Written narrative
How program-level activities contribute to outcomes articulated in the ToC	• Pathways highlighted in green • Greyed out pathways
Assumptions	• Written narrative
Activities	• Text situated within high school context
Causal mechanisms and associated questions participants should consider when mapping pathways from activities to outcomes	• The "black box of how" highlighted in green

Utilizing boxes, arrows, and text of varying thickness and style emphasize the relationships between inputs, outcomes, and contexts. Further, combining icons, written

narratives, as well as categories enhanced readability. Throughout Step 3, I checked my work against a rubric of robustness to prioritize trustworthiness, validation, and quality assurance (Dillon & Vaca, 2018; Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Patton, 2015; van Es et al., 2015). Further, I conducted a stakeholder review process wherein I provided participants with the opportunity to review the program theory and provide feedback in multiple modes (verbal or written; synchronous or asynchronous). I also sought feedback on this program theory from a community of colleagues at a national conference for educational equity. Figure 8 describes the macro-level ToC. Figure 9 provides one example of how a program-level ToA relates to and activates the ToC. It is important to note that Figures 8 and 9 are two examples of the many ToCs or ToAs that can exist within a complex system.

Figure 8

Example Theory of Change for College Success at a No-excuses Charter High School

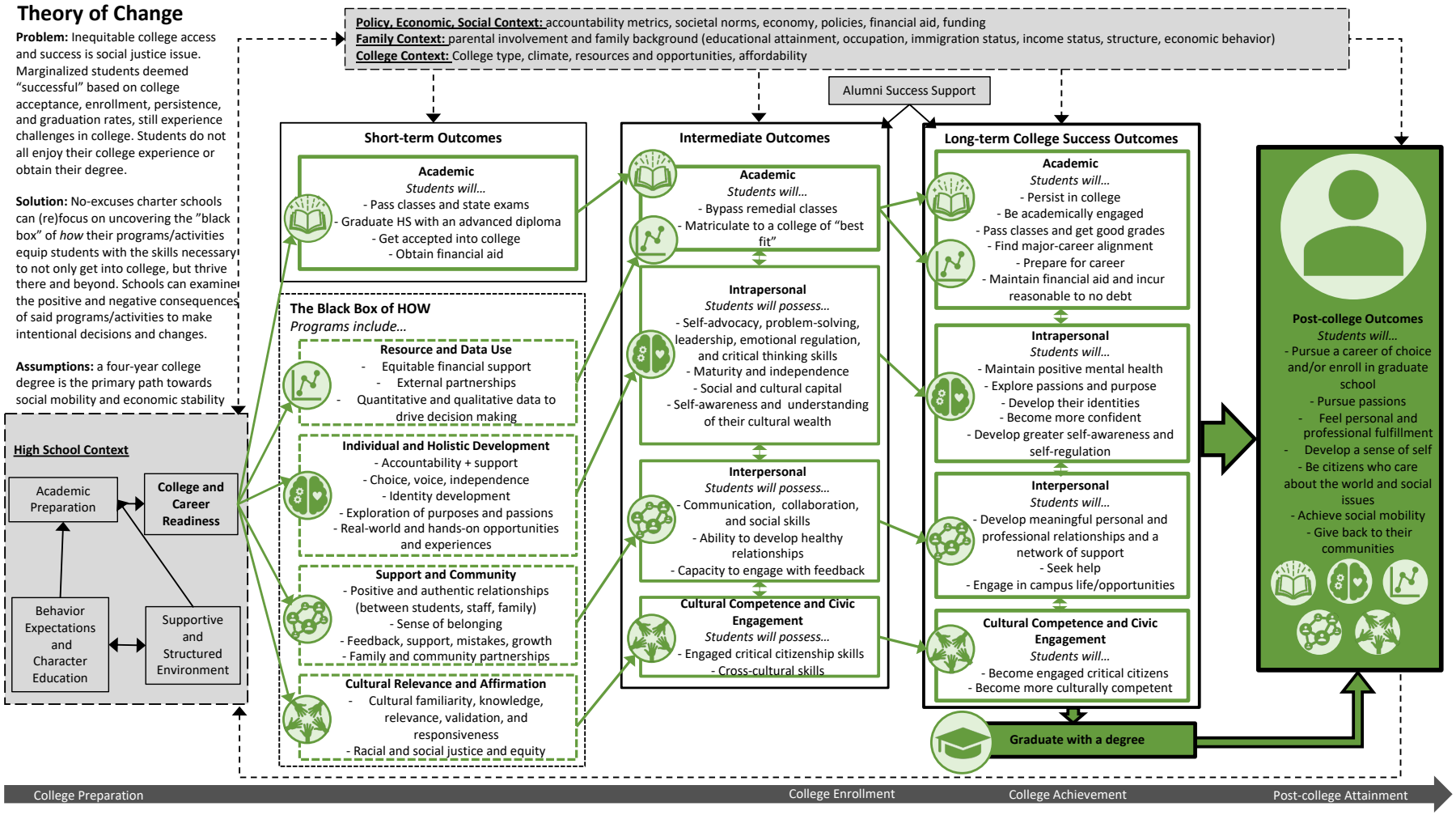
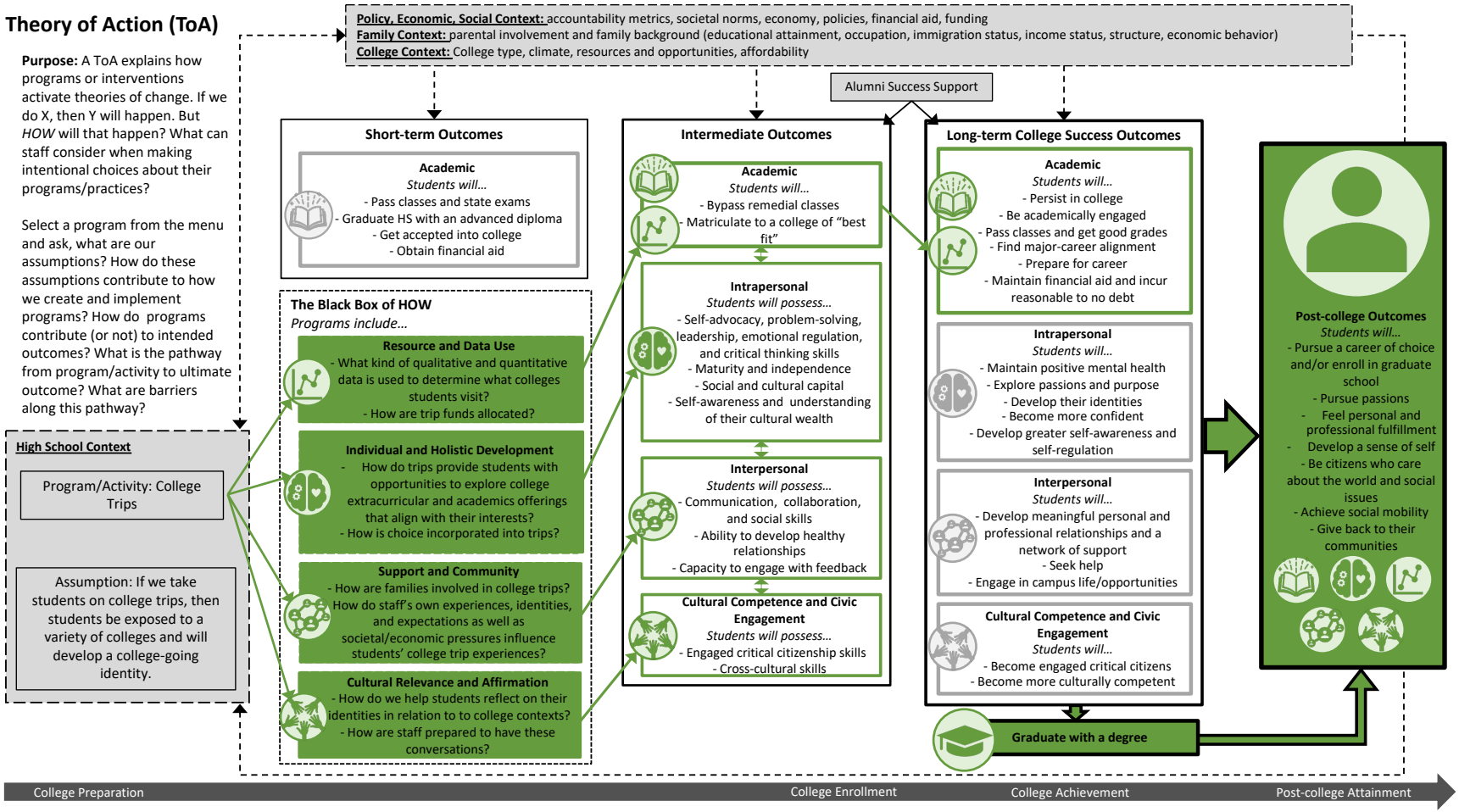


Figure 9

Theory of Action for College Success at a No-excuses Charter High School



Step 4: Research Dissemination ←→ Refinement, Use, Evaluation

Refining a program theory requires incorporating participant feedback and attention to broader research trends. This step is essential for ethical and thorough program theory development and should occur prior to evaluation or research dissemination. One suggested way to refine program theories is to conduct targeted member checks that include presenting the program theory to practitioners and colleagues for feedback. In doing so, I identified further ways to hone the theory to align with participant experience and current research.

Additionally, uncovered by participant interviews, the purpose of developing this program theory was not simply to create a final visual for evaluative purposes. Therefore, the suggested uses of this program theory are precursors to evaluation. CPCHS could use this program theory as a tool to build greater collaboration across departments and with other no-excuses charter schools. Additionally, CPCHS could use this program theory as a starting point to inform future program development grounded in participant experiences and research (Zazueta et al. 2021). In the future, as this program theory is continually tested and refined, it could be used as a basis for evaluation. Additionally, this article in itself aims to disseminate a school-based example of how to combine program theory creation with qualitative case study research for researchers and practitioners to adapt.

Limitations and Areas for Future Consideration

These findings are limited by the fact that a program theory is a dynamic model. As previously stated, this article does not present a tested and refined theory of change and theory of action for exact replication, rather, articulates the *process* for creating a program theory alongside qualitative inquiries using a working example. This program theory was developed from a single case study site and findings are not generalizable to all schools. What is

generalizable, however, is, the process itself. The framework utilized to approach this visual program theory can act as guideposts for educators and evaluators for adaption.

Additionally, the scope of this study was limited and focused on institutional agents and successful college-going alumni perspectives. There are multiple stakeholder voices that are essential in understanding change processes within schools, such as families, community members, current students, and the board, to name a few. Future studies should deeply consider which stakeholder voices are included in the development of program theories. Relatedly, colleges and universities and student experiences within these contexts are not homogeneous. There is variation in experience based on those who attend 4-year colleges of different selectivity, 2-year colleges, or other vocational programs. Therefore, future program development should remain attuned to the assumptions and varying relationships between inputs and outcomes for different student populations and different college contexts. Moreover, collaboration between researchers and practitioners is challenging, particularly if resources are limited. Increased attention to developing long-lasting researcher-practitioner partnerships should be discussed at the outset of a project. Last, an in-depth discussion of evaluation component of program theory was beyond the scope of the study and the needs of the school site. Future studies should plan for not only program theory creation, but its associated evaluation.

Discussion and Implications

Visual theories of change in education are often included in proposals or used to procure grant funding (Rogers, 2007). Although certainly helpful, the product (i.e. the visual representation) is not the sole benefit of developing program theories. Findings from this study suggest that the *process* of creating a program theory in tandem with conducting qualitative research can serve a crucial element to build stakeholder consensus in schools, bridge the gap

between research and practice, and potentially inform future program development and evaluation (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Joyce & Cartwright, 2020; Weiss, 1995). There are challenges that arise from this process, but that should not preclude researchers and practitioners from investing in these practitioner-oriented and research-based program theories. This section highlights benefits and challenges as well as recommendations for evaluators and practitioners.

Benefits

Helping Stakeholders Unpack Biases, Assumptions, and Beliefs

By providing a confidential space in semi-structured interviews for discussion and reflection, institutional agents were able to consider how their own identities, beliefs, and assumptions about college success influenced their daily practices and contributions to college-success outcomes in ways they had not had opportunities to do so before. Alumni were able to reflect on the impact of their school's programs on their college trajectory, revealing alignment and misalignment between their experiences and staff's intentions. Surfacing these underlying components contributed to the development of a shared college success vision that could drive intentional program planning and evaluation (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). Without unpacking how individual and collective beliefs and actions contribute to short and long-term outcomes, schools, and no-excuses charter schools specifically, run the risk of perpetuating the very problems they aim to address (Golann, 2021). Equity-based school improvement requires learning from practitioners on the ground, drawing on expertise of evaluators, and incorporating current research (Meyer et al., 2021).

Building Stakeholder Consensus for Systematic and Intentional Change

Developing, testing, refining, and utilizing program theory is an iterative process that lives with multiple stakeholders (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2021). One of the

primary themes that emerged in this study revealed that students and staff desired similar changes. However, staff were often operating within siloed departments, unaware of how their actions aligned with or conflicted with actions of their peers. I utilized the ToA and ToC as tools to visually show participants how their individual actions within their spheres of influence contributed to CPCHS' broader college success outcomes. Without drawing a clear relationship between the ToA and ToC, program theories run the risk of articulating inaccurate relationships between activities and outcomes or contributing to further program isolation (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Rogers, 2007). Creating a program theory that merged the perspectives of multiple stakeholders helped build consensus across disparate departments and across students and staff.

Integrating Theory, Research, and Participant Experience

Schools are nested within community and social, political, and economic contexts that invariably influence one another (Perna & Thomas, 2006). Programs and interventions are not enacted within a vacuum; they are affected by various contexts. Although CPCHS has begun to shift away from approaches associated with previous education reform efforts grounded in test-taking accountability structures, they described making changes without awareness of the current research or plans for systematic evaluation. Practitioners articulated rarely having the opportunity, bandwidth, or training to do so (Brown & Flood, 2018). Providing stakeholders with a space to develop further consciousness as agents of change is critical to empowering them to enact change from the ground up.

Developing Research-Practitioner Partnerships

One of the primary benefits of developing a program theory in tandem with conducting qualitative case studies is the opportunity for researchers to work in partnership with practitioners. Consonant with extant literature, program theories developed without sufficient

practitioner voice make it difficult for practitioners to utilize program theories in practice (Brown and Flood, 2018). Further, there are ethical considerations when researchers create program theories for marginalized populations without foregrounding the voices of community members themselves. Researchers and practitioners possess different and complementary skillsets and capacities. When program theory creation is conducted without either sufficient researcher or practitioner input, they run the risk of unintentionally doing "physical, psychosocial, economic, cultural, or environmental harm to the populations it was created to serve" (Meyer et al., 2021, p. 3). Therefore, to address these pitfalls, the approach offered in this paper highlights the ways in which program theory development can engage both practitioners and researchers. Conducting a stakeholder review process that invites practitioners to review drafts of the program theory, ask questions, and provide feedback can act as validation checks to ensure accurate representation of varied experiences (Dhillon & Vaca, 2018).

Challenges and Suggestions for Addressing Challenges

Power Dynamics

At the core of many underlying assumptions were the interactions of racial, political, social, and hierarchical power dynamics (van Es et al., 2015). Taking a collaborative approach to program theory attempted to ameliorate the power differential between researcher and practitioner. As a former no-excuses charter school practitioner, I had "insider" status to these schools. Therefore, I was able to develop trusting relationships quickly. However, developing trusting research partnerships in which stakeholders of all rank feel comfortable sharing their experiences is challenging (Kirshner et al., 2021). It requires extensive investment and degree of researcher skill. Many participants highlighted concerns regarding how their words would be shared with other stakeholders or presented in publications. Continuing to actively member

check with participants by asking clarifying questions throughout the interviews, data analysis process, and in research dissemination stages to protect confidentiality is paramount (van Es et al., 2015). I sent participants the quotes and framing narrative used in my publishable articles to give them the opportunity to check the accuracy of their quotes and provide feedback on how I interpreted and used findings to inform the program theory development. This process helped ensure their voices were adequately represented and protected (Birt et al., 2016).

Time, Resource, and Energy Constraints

Although practitioners expressed enthusiastic interest in engaging in the research and program theory creation process, sustaining their engagement was challenging. Busy and overworked staff had a difficult time prioritizing a program theory focused on the "30,000 foot goal" of college success when they had to focus on what was occurring "day-to-day." While I offered a small incentive, asking stakeholders for full collaboration in this process was perhaps unrealistic. At the outset of the research study, evaluators and researchers should allocate larger resources to compensate participants. Further, they should consider how to increase buy-in from the school from the design stage. Additionally, throughout the process, researchers and evaluators should seek convenient methods ways to gather stakeholder input. For example, I recorded a video of myself explaining the theory of change and offered participants multiple ways to provide feedback: email, voice memos, or one-on-one meetings. School leaders invested in amplifying the voices of their staff and students should budget time for their participation in program theory development within work hours.

Balancing Complexity and Oversimplification in Communication and Visual Representation

Articulated in the literature and reinforced through conversations with stakeholders, developing a visual and narrative program theory that was neither oversimplified or overly

detailed presented one of the greatest ongoing challenges. Moving beyond simplified logic models is essential for capturing the nuance and complexity of how change occurs (Davies, 2018). However, practitioners articulated being overwhelmed when the visual diagrams did not follow a linear approach or included too much detail. One of their primary concerns was not being able to translate the benefits of the visual product into practice. Balancing readability and accuracy continued to be an obstacle. Throughout the process, I experimented with multiple program theory visualizations using different software programs and sought feedback from practitioners and colleagues. As a result, I made reasonable concessions regarding visual complexity for the sake of accessibility (Davies, 2018; Dhillon & Vaca, 2018).

Another challenge relates to differences in verbal and written communication. Evaluators and researchers may possess different worldviews and utilize different terminology from education practitioners, often creating communication barriers. As a former teacher familiar with this school setting, I possessed institutional knowledge and understanding of commonly used jargon. Evaluators should familiarize themselves with the specific language of their case study site during the situation analysis. Further, they should be prepared to synthesize these terms with those used by evaluators and practitioners and simplify language usage for increased efficacy and trust (Davies, 2018).

Concluding Thoughts

In recent decades, substantial focus on accountability and standardization measured by numeric academic achievement metrics and quantitative studies within education reform has driven K-12 school goals and activities (Hargreaves, 2008; Hoxby & Murarka, 2009). While quantitative approaches may uncover the overall outcomes of interventions, they typically fail to uncover *how* they work. Considering recent calls for the use of varied methods to understand

how interventions work in schools, evaluators and researchers have a timely opportunity to pave a new path forward in educational research (National Academy of Sciences, Medicine, and Engineering, 2021).

Using an example from a case study of a no-excuses charter school, this study suggests the advantages of developing a robust program theory that incorporates deductive, inductive, and mental model approaches derived from qualitative research. Such an endeavor is not a small feat: the process itself is complicated, messy, and requires both practitioners and researchers' willingness to navigate through complex power dynamics and ambiguity. However, it is in this very process that practitioners and researchers can make necessary connections between empirical research and intentional, research-based actions for contextual school improvement (Nelson & Campbell, 2017). Conducting qualitative research alongside of program theory development is one promising pathway to bridging research and practice within complex school systems.

CONCLUSION

This section will conclude this three-article format dissertation by (1) restating the overarching problem that these studies sought to address; (2) providing a summary of key findings from each individual article; (3) expounding on their joint implications for policy, research, evaluation, theory, and practice; and (4) addressing their collective limitations and suggesting avenues for future research.

Revisiting the Problem and the Case

In the United States, a college degree remains one of the most viable pathways toward achieving upward social mobility and economic stability. However, bachelor's degree attainment for students from low-income backgrounds and Black, Indigenous, and Students of Color (BIPOC) students remain lower than those of their wealthier and White peers (Cahalan et al., 2019). "No-excuses" charter schools, a K-12 school-choice model that follows a college-for-all ethos, emerged in the 1990s to address this "academic opportunity gap" (Cheng et al., 2017; Davis & Heller, 2019; Quartz et al. 2019). According to quantitative metrics, no-excuses charter schools have indeed been successful in this pursuit. They report impressive academic achievement metrics (measured by standardized test scores) and college enrollment rates for marginalized student populations (Cheng et al., 2017; Davis & Heller, 2019; Dobbie & Fryer, 2019). As a result, they have proliferated rapidly in the last thirty years. Proponents posit that they are a potential replicable model to address urban education issues (Cohodes, 2018). However, studies also show that measuring success solely by these quantitative metrics are insufficient at capturing the holistic picture of student experience and success, defined more broadly than college acceptance, persistence, and graduation rates (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019; Hammack, 2016). Recent studies call for more qualitative and mixed methods research that

investigate *how* and *which* no-excuses charter school methods affect students' long-term success (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019; Golann et al., 2015; Mehta, 2020).

This dissertation sought to fill this gap through three interrelated articles that explored the perceived influence of a no-excuses charter high school on students' college preparation, experience, and success in four-year colleges utilizing a qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 1998). Findings from these studies derive from data collected at City Prep Charter High School (CPCHS, pseudonym), a no-excuses charter high school located in a city on the East Coast. CPCHS is a college preparatory high school classified by the National Student Clearinghouse as a "high-minority" and "low-income" school. Over 85% of their students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch and 75% of students identify as a student of color. Based on college enrollment, persistence, and graduation metrics, CPCHS outperforms schools serving similar student bodies and embodies the core features of no-excuses charter schools (Cheng et al., 2017). Thus, this school offered an optimal context to study the tensions articulated in the literature. Shared data sources across the three articles included observations and document review.

Each article sub-section includes a summary of the article's unique data sources, research questions, and findings. In the first article, I explored the perceptions of CPCHS alumni on their college access, experience, and success. In the second article, I examined how CPCHS institutional agents (counselors, teachers, leaders, and staff) perceived the level of college preparation alumni received and made sense of their role in fulfilling college-for-all expectations. Then, based on the findings from the first two articles, the third article articulates an approach for bridging qualitative research and program theory development for intentional

and sustainable educational change within no-excuses charter school contexts (Funnell & Rogers, 2011).

Notably, these studies were conducted at the intersection of multiple pandemics in the United States: COVID-19, a national mental health crisis, and a racial justice awakening. These contexts provide an important background for why this dissertation study is critical for understanding not only *what* no-excuses charter schools are doing to improve but *how*. Systematically and intentionally investigating the decisions, beliefs, and actions that affect students' long-term success is essential for addressing educational inequity.

Article One: A Double-edged Sword: The Perceived Influence of a "No-excuses" Charter High School on Alumni's College Preparation, Experience, and Success

The first article of this dissertation aimed to explore how four-year college-going alumni of a typical no-excuses charter high school perceived the influence of their high school on their college preparation, experience, and success. Few studies have reported on how students themselves make sense no-excuses model components that positively or negatively contribute to their long-term college success (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019; Mehta, 2020). The research questions guiding this inquiry were:

1. How do alumni perceive the influence of their no-excuses charter high school on their college preparation?
2. How are alumni perceptions of college success influenced by their no-excuses charter high school experience?
3. How do alumni perceive the influence of their no-excuses charter high school on their college experiences at four-year institutions of higher education?

In addition to the document review and observational data common to each of the three studies, this article drew from qualitative semi-structured interviews with a photo elicitation protocol

with 16 four-year college-going alumni, deemed "successful" by their college persistence status. Utilizing photo elicitation in interviews helped students recall high school experiences and reflect more deeply on no-excuses charter school distinguishers (Harper, 2002). Data were analyzed deductively and inductively using a constant comparative approach (Glaser, 1965).

Article One: Summary of Findings

Interviews with successful four-year college-going alumni revealed both the benefits and consequences of no-excuses charter schools' approaches on students' college preparation, experience, and success are well-founded. Alumni referred to their experiences at CPCHS as a "double-edged sword" that conferred noteworthy benefits in terms of getting into college, but also resulted in unintended consequences related to normative definitions of college success characterized by grades and test scores, persistence, and graduation as opposed to broader goals of academic and intellectual growth, career preparation, sense of belonging, and overall satisfaction (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017).

Importantly, this article adds to current research by highlighting students' nuanced experiences within no-excuses charter schools (Harrison, 2022). The first theme that emerged was that participants believed that CPCHS helped them enroll in and matriculate to four-year colleges. The immense focus on cultivating a college-going culture, coupled with demonstrated care, aspirational college talk, pre-college opportunities, and concrete college application support, helped students not only believe college was possible, but provided the necessary structure and support for them to take concrete steps toward this goal. Integrating college and career readiness classes into the daily schedule, facilitating family FAFSA events, and providing students with fully funded opportunities to participate in pre-college and study abroad programs provided essential opportunities for students to receive college application and matriculation

support and build social and cultural capital. Moreover, the level of trust developed between students and staff helped them feel cared for, known, and supported both within and outside of the college process.

The second theme that emerged described how a normative definition of college success, defined as college acceptance and graduation, shaped students' expectations of college and subsequent behaviors in college. In high school, alumni internalized the belief that getting into a 4-year college and graduating with a baccalaureate degree in four years were the markers of college success. This helped some students, but made others feel embarrassed if they did not meet these expectations. Many felt that the one-size-fits-all approach commonly associated with no-excuses charter school model components (behavioral expectations, academic preparation, structured environment, and college readiness) pressured students to assimilate and fit a particular mold, often characterized by White, middle-class norms. In college, however, they began (re)defining what college success meant for them as individuals, which was considerably more multifaceted than academic achievement and graduation rates. College-attending alumni cared deeply about career exploration, sense of belonging, social interactions, and finding purpose. These aspects were absent, minimized, or inconsistently focused on throughout their high school experience.

The final theme that emerged described how CPCHS' practices associated with the no-excuses model both positively and negatively influenced graduates' college experience. Again, CPCHS' one-size-fits-all model, highly structured activities, and focus on academic achievement above all else were helpful in terms of getting students into college. However, alumni reported struggling in the transition to a freer college setting. Others felt like they could manage their time but were highly stressed about academic performance, a lingering effect from their high school

experience. Alumni took issue not wholly with CPCHS' desire to get them into college, but how they approached this goal in ways that diminished opportunities for racial and ethnic identity development, noncognitive skill development, career exploration, and discovering their own intrinsic motivations for college, which would have helped them feel more successful once there. Further, despite their high school's demanding workloads, they did not feel as academically prepared because of CPCHS' over-structured and scaffolded systems of support.

Article Two: Translating the "30,000 Foot Goal" to the "Day-to-Day": A Qualitative Case Study Exploring How No-excuses Institutional Agents Carry Out an Evolving College-for-All Mission

This study aimed to understand how the institutional agents who carry out college-for-all missions at no-excuses charter high schools made meaning of their own role in this process and understood their influence on students' college preparation, experience, and success. To date, few studies have sought to understand how institutional agents occupying different school-based roles carry out a college-for-all ethos in a no-excuses charter school. Therefore, the research questions were:

1. How do institutional agents perceive the influence of no-excuses charter high schools on alumni's four-year college readiness and success?
2. How do institutional agents situated at no-excuses charter high schools make sense of their role in carrying out a college-for-all mission?

In addition to the common data sources (document review and observations), I conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 institutional agents who held a range of positions in leadership, teaching, and counseling. In terms of data analysis, I coded deductively and inductively and followed a constant comparative data analysis process that mirrored the process for Article One (Glaser, 1965).

Article Two: Summary of Findings

Institutional agents, (teachers, school counselors, instructional coaches, and administrators) cared immensely about their students and believed that providing the opportunity to go to college, and specifically a four-year college, was critical to success. However, they also sought to prepare students in more comprehensive and holistic ways not yet reported by research. Institutional agents expressed ongoing conflict with internal and external expectations that incentivized meeting goals related to academic achievement and college enrollment over holistic development.

To understand how institutional agents make sense of their roles, it was first important to understand how they themselves defined and measured college readiness and success. The first theme, therefore, described how institutional agents defined college readiness as encompassing both academic and nonacademic preparation. Relatedly, they also described college success as multifaceted, consisting of students not only going to a college of best fit, but discovering passions, pursuing careers of interest, finding community, belonging, and feeling academically successful. When discussing how they measured college readiness and success, however, school staff often defaulted to using numeric metrics such as test scores and college acceptance rates, which was incongruous to their broader definition of personal and social well-being and growth. Additionally, institutional agents utilized college and four-year college as a panacea, without further investigating the nuance in four-year college type, selectivity, or quality.

The second theme that emerged related to how institutional agents attempted to meet these more holistic and evolving definitions of college readiness and success in their daily practices. Institutional agents attempted to scaffold appropriate levels of support and challenge, emphasis on academic, nonacademic, and college counseling practices for greater high school to college alignment. Simultaneously, they described the challenges with negotiating CPCHS' one-

size-fits-all approaches to behavior, college preparation, teaching, and learning with their desires to uphold high expectations and support students' individual needs.

The last theme that emerged described the barriers that institutional agents articulated when attempting to meet these evolving definitions of college readiness and success. Throughout interviews, institutional agents openly and honestly reflected on CPCHS' demonstrated growth and areas for future improvement. First, they described a palpable pressure to tout specific academic and college-related benchmarks to garner financial support. Sometimes the practices associated with meeting these benchmarks could be at odds with what institutional agents believed would facilitate improved college preparation and success. Second, despite the pervasiveness of college talk, participants were unsure of their individual roles in supporting students in their pathway to college. In many ways, their work was occurred in silos; roles were often unspoken and unclarified, causing some misalignment and miscommunication between institutional agents in relation to the school's college-for-all mission. The last barrier described by participants related to a history of White institutional culture and White supremacy at no-excuses charter schools. Again, while staff acknowledge advancements and changes, they also pinpointed the ways that vestiges of older no-excuses models and expectations grounded in Whiteness affected staff practices and underlying belief systems.

Article Three: It's About the Process: A Proposed Approach for Merging Qualitative Case Study Research and Program Theory Development for Intentional School Improvement

Together, data collected for Articles One and Two informed Article Three. One of my primary purposes for pursing this dissertation topic was to produce meaningful and usable research. It essential that researchers and evaluators continue to seek ways to uncover not only *what* works at these schools, but *how* programs work utilizing participant-centered and research-based approaches. As findings from Articles One and Two suggest, both CPCHS alumni and

institutional agents described a level of disconnect between *how* CPCHS implemented programs to achieve their articulated college success outcomes. These findings informed the purposes of creating a program theory of college success for CPCHS, which include: (1) creating a shared definition of college success; (2) uncovering *how* siloed stakeholders believed programs were working and should work toward achieving those goals; and (3) synthesizing these perspectives into a cohesive visual program theory for college success for increased collaboration and future evaluation.

Although qualitative research and program theory development processes share similarities, there are few frameworks and published examples of complex program theories that describe clear steps for integrating these approaches in school settings (Hargreaves & Podems, 2012). In this article, instead of describing the details of the program theory itself, I intended to describe the *process* of how I combined qualitative case study research methods with program theory development processes for evaluators and researchers to adapt for their contexts (Wilkinson et al. 2021). Using this process as a tool could increase researcher-practitioner partnerships and provide guidance for practitioners seeking to make intentional, equitable change.

Researchers call into question *how* highly prescriptive behavioral and academic practices associated with no-excuses charter schools achieve short-term academic gains or confer unintended consequences on students' long-term success (Golann, 2021). Responsive to these critiques within current social and political climates shaped by a racial justice awakening, a global pandemic, and partisan divisiveness, findings from Articles One and Two indicate that no-excuses charter schools are attempting to navigate a "fourth way" of education reform, characterized by creating shared understandings, purposes, and sustainable change (Hargreaves,

2008). Therefore, no-excuses charter schools are optimal contexts to systematically merge program theory development and qualitative case study research to the unpack the assumptions, beliefs, and actions that contribute (or do not contribute) to change in their organizations (Hargreaves, 2010). The following research questions guided Article Three:

1. What is a process for integrating qualitative case study research with program theory development?
2. What are benefits and challenges of this process for researchers, evaluators, and practitioners?

Article Three Summary of Findings

Steps typically associated with qualitative case study inquiries offer a systematic way to approach program theory development processes. First, using a case study at CPCHS, this article proposed a process and example framework for layering qualitative case study research steps (Merriam, 1998) and program theory development steps (Funnell & Rogers, 2011) grounded in a conceptual model of college success (Perna & Thomas, 2006). These steps included: (1) Study Design and Situation Analysis; (2) Data Collection and Purpose and Scope; (3) Data Analysis and Program Theory Visualization; and (4) Research Dissemination and Refinement, Use, and Evaluation.

For each step, this article articulates actions, outputs, and practical questions for researcher consideration. Within this section, I also included figures of the visual theory of change and theory of action I created with CPCHS. Additionally, I explained how I attempted to capture the complexity of the situation while ensuring readability and accessibility for practitioners (Davies, 2018). Second, this article synthesized some of the benefits and challenges of utilizing this proposed approach and provided recommendations for evaluators and

practitioners. Benefits included helping stakeholders unpack their own biases, assumptions, and beliefs that influence how they independently and collectively defined their college success vision and carried out practices related to this larger goal. Further, following this approach contributed to building consensus among stakeholders of different rank and position. Additionally, the program theory process paved a pathway toward integrating theory, research, and participant experience for school improvement grounded in multiple experiences and forms of data. Last, there are key benefits to program theory development processes as a mechanism for increasing researcher-practitioner partnerships that center participant experiences and draw on the expertise of researchers.

Associated with these benefits are also challenges. Challenges include the power dynamics that exist between actors and must remain at the forefront of consideration when pursuing program theory development. Further, creating program theories requires considerable time, resource, and energy investment for both researchers and practitioners. Last, creating a visual program theory that adequately balances the complexity of change within school systems and readability is challenging.

This study aimed to articulate practical approaches to merging practice with research and revealed meaningful insights into the process. First, the product, in the form of visual and narrative components, is not the sole benefit of program theories. Findings from this study highlight how the *process* of creating program theory was essential building stakeholder consensus and bridge the gap between research and practice (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Joyce & Cartwright, 2020). Second, developing a robust program theory that adequately incorporates deductive, inductive, and mental model approaches is challenging, complicated, and messy. It requires a willingness on both practitioners and researchers' ends to navigate through complex

experiences and ambiguity. Further, it requires a certain level of skill and awareness on researchers' end to understand how power, positionality, and relationships affect change. However, this article argues that it is precisely within the messiness of qualitative research methods and program theory development where researchers and practitioners can make necessary connections between empirical research and practice for contextual school improvement (Nelson & Campbell, 2017).

Limitations of Three Articles and Areas for Future Research

There are several limitations of these three interrelated articles that are important to consider when interpreting their findings. The first area is related to my purposive sampling approach and limitations regarding the generalizability of findings. I conducted this study at one no-excuses charter high school over a year-long period. Although charter schools that follow a no-excuses approach broadly share characteristics outlined by the literature, they can vary based on multiple factors including location, context, student body, staff, charter management organization affiliation, and age, to name a few (Cheng et al., 2017; Golann, 2015, 2021). Further, no-excuses charter schools are freer of bureaucratic constraints than typical public schools. They can and do change, making it difficult to fully understand their practices at one snapshot in time (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). In fact, recent research highlights some of the nuances and transformations no-excuses charter schools have made (Harrison, 2022).

Therefore, this case study cannot necessarily be generalized to other contexts. It does, however, provide an example of an in-depth study of college success at one no-excuses charter school that could be adapted for other contexts. It also shows how schools can partner with researchers to conduct evaluation studies that culminate in a program theory that is collaboratively derived, specific to a particular context, and useful in practice. Future research

should use a multiple case study approach with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods to generate greater generalizability between no-excuses charter high schools and can use longitudinal methods to understand how no-excuses charter schools, their alumni, and institutional agents, change over time.

The second area of limitations is related to the scope of this case study. The units of study were institutional agents and "successful" four-year college-going alumni. However, there are other stakeholder voices and experiences that are critical to the college process including parents, families, community-based partners, board members, and college and university personnel (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). Recent findings indicate that co-constructed curriculum and participatory-based research designs with nondominant families can disrupt power imbalances and foster equity in educational spaces (Ishimaru et al., 2019). Relatedly, this dissertation studies alumni who were "success" stories, meaning they were still enrolled in a four-year college and on track for six-year graduation. This study does not include students who have dropped out of college, nor does it include students who followed other postsecondary pathways. Participating alumni represented various institutions of higher education and various majors. Their experiences could have varied by their area of study and their college context, which are important factors in the college success equation. While studying the differences and similarities taking into consideration these factors were outside the scope of this study, future research should consider comparing the experiences of no-excuses alumni at different institutions of higher education and in different majors, as their experiences may vary. Additionally, future studies of no-excuses charter high school student experience should consider including students who are not deemed "successful" by these normative college success standards to provide a fuller understanding of the influence of these controversial schools.

The third area relates to the time in which this study was conducted. I conducted this study at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely affected the experiences of both alumni and institutional agents. Ideally, I would have conducted in-person observations before the interviews so that I could have taken photographs for the photo-elicitation protocol myself, built relationships with participants, and utilized observation data to craft interview questions. However, this was not possible given the city-wide COVID-19 regulations on visitor policies. Despite these limitations, this is the first study that has attempted to understand the experiences of students and staff associated with a no-excuses charter high school and make sense of the matches and mismatches between their experiences.

Last, adequately creating a program theory utilizing qualitative research requires investment and long-term partnerships between researchers and schools (Wentworth et al., 2017). It was a strength of the study that I had a strong connection to the school and was able to collect across multiple constituencies. However, even though the dissertation was conducted over a year, there were limitations to the amount of time that I could allocate to the collaborative program theory creation process with practitioners. To create a mutual and collaborative research-practice partnership with goals of school improvement, evaluators and practitioners should discuss the longevity and shared purpose of their relationship at the outset. This study provides a helpful program theory development roadmap for future researchers, evaluators, and practitioners to adapt for other school contexts.

No-excuses Moving Forward: Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

This dissertation extends research regarding the influence of no-excuses charter high schools on students' college preparation, experience, and success from multiple perspectives. Findings from this three-article dissertation provide insight into the complexity of no-excuses

charter schools and their operationalization of the college-for-all ethos. As a former no-excuses charter school teacher and administrator, I entered this dissertation topic deeply conflicted: both proud of the positive impact of my work on students and their college trajectories and conscious of the potential harm I inflicted upon students, particularly BIPOC students. I conclude this dissertation echoing similar sentiments, but hopeful regarding the possibilities that these schools possess and the potential that theory-based evaluation models have in contributing toward equitable and intentional school improvement.

Implications for Practice

This section summarizes implications for practice derived from all three articles. CPCHS supported marginalized students in getting into college, which, as it stands in our society, remains the way to achieve upward mobility and access to the middle class. This is an accomplishment that should be underscored and acknowledged. Simultaneously, alumni and institutional agents both struggled to contend with some of the practices employed to achieve these goals. Study findings suggest that no-excuses charter schools must continue to invest resources in college counseling, cultivating college-going cultures, providing concrete guidance and support in the college process, and creating an environment of care and trust. Simultaneously, they must do these things in culturally responsive and student-centered ways that both honor students' full personhood and agency while also setting them on the path for college success and social mobility.

Moreover, there must be a greater understanding of *how* various individuals, departments, and siloed practices, together, contribute to long-term college success goals. These are not easy, nor straightforward tasks. I would venture to posit that no school has fully figured out. However, this section provides concrete implications for practice for no-excuses charter high schools to

make strides toward these goals. No-excuses charter schools must continue to reflect on their practices, utilize multiple forms of data to elicit experiences and understandings of their practices, and be unafraid to look in the mirror and change for the better for their students and communities.

College and Career Readiness

Within the college and career readiness context, no-excuses charter schools can and should continue to provide systematic and concrete procedural application and matriculation support to students and their families. Additionally, they should provide more individualized support for students to combat the unintended consequences of one-size-fits-all approaches (Lamboy & Lu, 2017). In practice, this could translate to maintaining college and career readiness classes, while also providing resources and space for counselors to meet with students and families on a one-on-one basis, earlier on in high school. Further, schools can provide more honest pros and cons of college and elicit the voices of students themselves. Schools should work to normalize and support the idea of multiple postsecondary pathways so students who know they don't want to go to college or are unsure about it won't be ashamed and will have help implementing their goals. Relatedly, college counselors must remain attuned to how they counsel students toward four-year colleges, as college contexts, quality, and selectivity influence college success, particularly for marginalized student populations (Melguizo, 2010).

Second, cultivating college-going cultures relies on multiple institutional agents. This study does not argue that teachers or leaders should assume college counseling responsibilities, rather, suggests college preparatory schools should consider how their entire school context and climate mediates college access and success (Knight & Duncheon, 2020). Increased collaboration across institutional agents beyond aspirational college talk and meeting immediate

college application tasks is essential (Griffen & Birkenstock, 2022). Third, further integrating career discussions and career knowledge with academic, personal interests, and college pathways, specifically for students interested in STEM fields, can help provide more opportunities for students to develop intrinsic motivations for college and understand how college majors, degrees, and work experiences relate to career pathways and desired lifestyles. Institutional agents must continue to message to students that college is indeed an opportunity that they deserve to pursue, and that career exploration is not separate from this potential pathway (Bettencourt et al., 2022).

Behavior Expectations and Character Education and Supportive and Structured Environment

What became clear through data collection and analysis was that the school culture (behavior expectations, character education, and overall supportive and structured environment), together, laid the foundation for academic preparation and college and career readiness. At CPCHS, there was considerable focus on creating both a structured and supportive environment for students to learn and know what to expect. There was a palpable sense of care between staff and students. This emphasis on relationship-building and creating physically and emotionally safe environments is critical to maintain. However, it is also essential for staff to continue to engage in their own identity work to understand how their experiences, identities, and biases, could unintentionally contribute to a White saviorism approach (Marsh, 2018). CPCHS has begun addressing the criticisms of their behavior expectations grounded in rigidity and punitive measures by incorporating restorative justice models (Strauss, 2019). They must continue this work by intentionally interrogating the purpose of their merits and demerits system, prioritizing community and family partnership and engagement, and shifting away from approaches grounded in control and conformity (Golann & Torres, 2018).

Relatedly, CPCHS and no-excuses charter schools sharing similar practices can continue to prioritize a culture of feedback, communication, and cultural responsiveness and validation (Kolluri et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Focusing on the development of nonacademic skills through nonacademic and less structured time including extracurricular activities and advisory could help students facilitate the adulting skills, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, and identity development necessary for not only short-term, but long-term success (Savitz-Romer & Rowan-Kenyon, 2020). Last, considering ways to co-construct curriculum, activities, and research designs with family and community members can disrupt power imbalances, foster equity in educational spaces, and resist the paternalistic vestiges of the no-excuses model (Ishimaru et al., 2019).

Academic Preparation

CPCHS is an example of a small no-excuses charter school that provides access to college preparatory courses and course sequences such as Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment that help students develop competitive transcripts for college admittance (Robinson & Roksa, 2016). However, providing the opportunity for students to take these courses is the baseline. Investigating how these courses are taught and what types of skills and thinking processes students develop within these spaces is essential. Second, study findings bolster arguments for more groupwork, culturally validating curriculum, real-world skill application, independent learning and time management, and scaffolding without over supporting that would prepare alumni better for college-level classes with diverse communities (Athanases, 2018; Kolluri & Tierney, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Implications for Research and Evaluation

The purposes of this three-article dissertation were to elicit the experiences of students and institutional agents and draw attention to the ways in which researchers and evaluators can produce research beneficial to practitioners for sustainable and equitable change (Kirshner et al., 2021; Nelson & Campell, 2017). For decades, no-excuses charter schools have been examples of an older wave of education reform characterized by accountability, standardization, and testing. Much of the no-excuses charter school literature captures what no-excuses charter schools were like when they more closely adhered to "typical" practices reported in the literature. Hargreaves & Shirley (2009) described that the United States is in the "fourth wave" of educational change and research—defined by creating shared understandings, purposes, and sustainable change. As indicated by this study and other emerging research, no-excuses charter schools are attempting to evolve within this new era. More qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research methodologies are needed to track how no-excuses charter schools are changing their practices to influence short, intermediate, and long-term outcomes.

Study findings revealed the interrelatedness between programs, actors, and practices at no-excuses charter schools, highlighting the challenges of disentangling which components conferred beneficial or problematic consequences. Moreover, findings also revealed the siloed nature of institutional agents' approaches to developing the necessary academic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cultural skills. Often, institutional agents who were not directly a part of the college counseling program were unclear as to what role they had in preparing a student for college success. Utilizing a systems-thinking approach that incorporates the voices of multiple stakeholders could increase transparency and communication among staff and create systems of collaboration from the ground up and across silos.

One such approach that this dissertation offers is the utilization of theory-based evaluation practices, specifically, program theory (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Weiss, 1995). The process of developing robust program theories—theory of change and theory of action—as collaborative endeavors can not only bridge an ongoing research-practice divide (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020), but ameliorate some of the criticisms that no-excuses charter schools have faced as top-down authoritarian schools (Golann, 2021). Quantitative approaches can uncover what interventions work, but not *how* they work in other contexts. In this current context, evaluators and researchers have an opportunity to pave a new path in educational research (National Academy of Sciences, 2021). Researchers and evaluators have an immense opportunity to invest in research-practice partnerships that culminate in a tailored program theory created with schools, not for schools (Meyer et al., 2021; Wentworth et al., 2017).

Implications for Policy and Theory

This study was conducted at a critical time in United States history, when overdue investigation into how structural racism and Whiteness has historically grounded educational practices was brought to the forefront of discussion. The tension no-excuses charter schools institutional agents described in preparing students to enter a White-dominated postsecondary sector while honoring and developing their students' identities and strengths was palpable in study findings. Alumni and institutional agents continued to grapple with their belief in the benefits of a college degree with the consequences of *how* no-excuses charter schools have worked towards this goal. In terms of theory, these interrelated studies contribute to growing calls for culturally responsive and sustaining college-for-all frameworks (McDonough & Abrica, 2021). Institutional agents in different roles expressed the desire to carry out college-for-all missions with more attention to the needs of individual students with diverse experiences and

identities. However, staff reflected that many college success frameworks grounded primarily in social, cultural, and human capital, unintentionally forced students to assimilate to a White normative expectation (Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Noll, 2021). Findings from this study provide justification for college success frameworks that combine forms of "dominant" capital with the cultural wealth that students themselves possess (Noll, 2021; Ramos & Sifuentes, 2021; Yosso, 2005). As debate around charter school expansion and accountability remain at the forefront, policymakers should expand definitions of success beyond persistence and graduation and include more holistic evaluation metrics that appropriately incentivize other forms of college preparation within the high school context (Golann & Torres, 2018).

In terms of policy, charter schools are beholden to charter authorizers. Charter authorizers can keep charter schools in operation or close charter schools based on their ability to meet specific performance metrics, often tied to academic achievement outcomes (Cohodes & Parham, 2021). This study does not suggest that charter schools should be absolved of academic achievement accountability metrics, especially given their college-going missions. However, solely providing incentives for charter schools related to academic achievement has had unintentional effects on institutional agents and students. Undergirding challenges staff experienced when trying to prioritize developing social, emotional learning skills, career application, and real-world learning opportunities, were unspoken and spoken expectations to prioritize advertise numeric academic achievement metrics to garner financial support from external funders. Philanthropic organizations that frequently donate to no-excuses charter school networks and advocacy organizations should consider expanding the criteria they use to identify funding recipients to include metrics that best serve students' postsecondary success (Ferrare & Setari, 2017). Findings from this study indicate that the college-for-all principle must be

(re)defined and (re)assessed to be more student-centered and flexible. Institutional agents need sufficient agency to prepare students socially, emotionally, academically, and culturally for selective and quality four-year colleges and for legitimate other pathways. Until policymakers incentivize the adoption of college-for-all frameworks that equally emphasize academic preparation, nonacademic preparation, extracurricular involvement, and cultural relevance, institutional agents are caught in the crossfire of meeting short-term outcomes and fostering a vision for long-term success.

Final Thoughts

Ensuring college success for students historically underrepresented in higher education continues to be one of the most pressing social justice issues in the United States. Federal policies such as *No Child Left Behind* and initiatives such as *Race to the Top* have inspired a wave of education reform efforts grounded in standardization, accountability, and test-taking. No-excuses charter schools emerged as one of the most successful market-based school-choice models during this era (Cohodes, 2018; Dynarski et al., 2010; Golann & Torres, 2018). However, they have also been the subject of sizeable criticism.

In this dissertation, I set out to gather in-depth accounts of how both alumni and institutional agents perceived the influence of no-excuses charter schools on college success. Findings from these studies support both the praise and criticism for no-excuses charter schools and highlight the considerable complexity of these school models. I conclude this dissertation by sharing that I do not have a singular answer, as no-excuses charter schools' practices and their effects on college success are more multifaceted than a simple if-then approaches to inputs and outcomes. Conducting this qualitative case study and developing an associated program theory

of college success was messy, time consuming, and oftentimes, unclear. But, as Joyce and Cartwright (2020) wrote,

> if we want research to be useful to practice, there is no way to avoid the heavy work of detailing the theory of change of the intervention…and of generating and vetting general claims and mechanisms well beyond those of the form ‘‘It works.’’ (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020, p. 1059).

Quantitative studies cannot capture the textured nuance of *how* students experience schools or *how* institutional agents enact practices. It is precisely within these non-linear, entangled, participant-centered qualitative methods that we can and must begin to unpack which no-excuses charter school components should be replicated, improved upon, or ceased.

As the title of this dissertation suggests, these three articles highlighted a “double-edged sword” of no-excuses charter schools. There are benefits, problematic impacts, and trade-offs associated with the no-excuses model. There is also opportunity and potential for no-excuses charter schools to pave a more collaborative and equitable path forward. As no-excuses charter schools continue to evolve, they should deeply interrogate the potential benefits and negative consequences of how they are adapting, evaluating, and (re)envisioning practices to intentionally contribute to their students’ holistic college success.

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Appendix A

Alumni Screening Survey

1. What is your full name?
2. What is your preferred email address?
3. What is your date of birth? (Month/Day/Year)
4. What year did you graduate from [insert school name]?
5. Did you ever begin college after high school?
   - Yes (1)
   - No (2)
6. How many years of college have you completed?
   - 0 (1)
   - 1 (2)
   - 2 (3)
   - 3 (4)
   - 4 (5)
   - 5 (6)
7. What college or university are you currently enrolled in?
8. What degree are you currently working towards?
   - Associate's degree (1)
   - Bachelor's degree (2)
   - Certificate (3)
   - Other, please specify (4)

Respond to the following statements. Strongly Disagree (1) Somewhat disagree (2) Neither agree nor disagree (3) Somewhat agree (4) Strongly agree (5)

9. My high school prepared me for the academic components of college.

10. My high school prepared me for the non-academic components of college (e.g. time management, socialization, etc.).

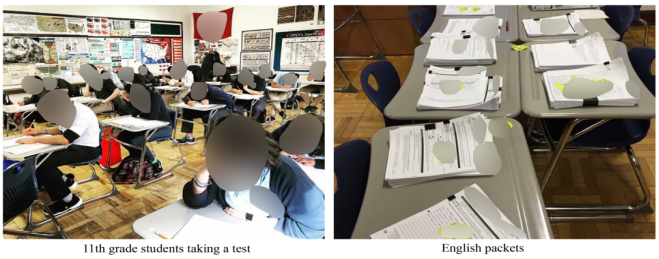
11. What is your race?
12. What is your ethnicity?
13. What is your gender identity?

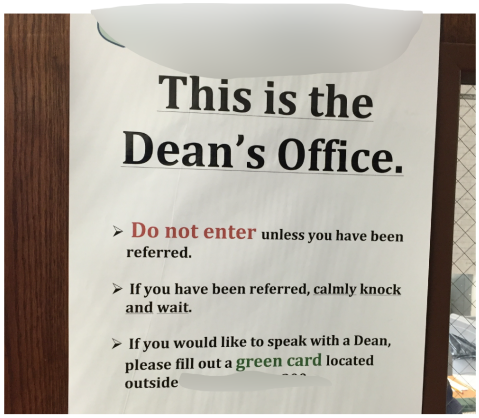
Appendix B

Alumni Interview Protocol with Photo Elicitation by Distinguisher

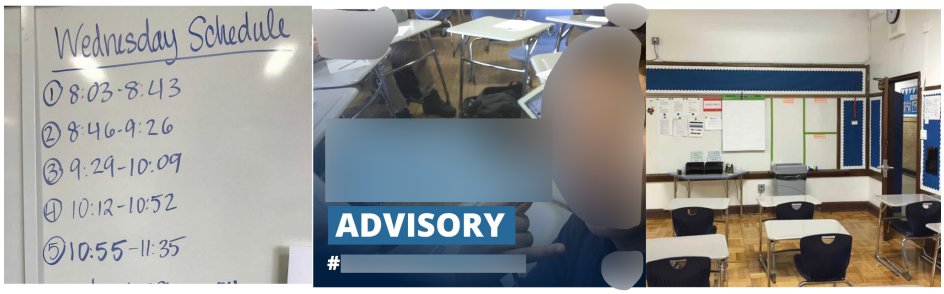
Interview Section	Questions
General introduction and questions	To start off, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? What is your name? Where do you go to college? Is this the college you started at? What are you studying or majoring in? What are your minors? Did you change majors? What types of activities are you involved in in college? Do you live on campus or commute? What has your college experience been like?
Overall Mission	According to the 2020-2021 handbook, the mission of CPCHS is as follows: [mission statement redacted]. What message did this mission communicate to you? How do you think the mission of your school influenced your college goals? What were your goals in high school? What are your goals now?
College and Career Readiness	1. How did you decide to go to [insert college name]? Who were the most influential people in that process? 2. In high school, what did you expect of yourself? What do you expect of yourself now in college? How did you develop those expectations? 3. What did your high school do to prepare you for college? What do you think they could have done better? What kind of opportunities did they provide? Who had access to those opportunities? 4. Tell me about your relationships with teachers and staff in relation to this mission. Were there any people who were particularly influential for you? 5. How is college similar or different from what you thought it would be? 6. You said in your survey that you [insert answer] that CPCHS prepared you for the non-academic components of college (time management, socialization, etc.). Can you tell me more about why you responded with that? 7. What has been most challenging? What has been most enjoyable and rewarding? What do you wish you learned in high school before you attended college? 8. What is your definition of college success? 9. What skills do you think you need in college to be successful? 10. Do you know any peers who have stopped out or dropped out of college? Why do you think that is? 11. If you could change one thing about how your school prepared students for college and career, what would it be? 12. If you tell your school to keep doing one thing to prepare students for college and career, what would it be?

	13. I am going to show you a collage of pictures related to college and career readiness. College and Career Readiness  Signing Day FAFSA completion reminder College Trip 14. What do these photographs capture about your school's approach to college and career readiness? 15. What was your personal experience with…Do these photos bring up any specific memories? What do they not capture?

Academic Preparation	1. How academically prepared did you feel for college? 2. How and when did you come to that realization? How could you have felt more academically prepared? You said you somewhat agreed that CIP prepared you academically, how? Do you have examples? 3. What academic challenges have you faced in college? 4. What academic successes have you felt in college? 5. If you could change one thing about how your school prepared you academically for college, what would it be? 6. If you could tell your school one thing to keep doing to prepare students academically for college, what would it be? 7. Now, I am going to show you a college of photographs related to academic preparation. Academic Preparation  11th grade students taking a test English packets 8. What do these photographs capture about how your school prepared you academically for college? What do they not capture? What was your personal experience with…Do they bring up any memories?

Behavioral Expectations and Character Education	1. Tell me about the behavioral expectations at CPCHS. Tell me about character education at CPCHS. 2. Do you think that CPCHS' behavioral expectations and/or character education influenced your college experience? How? 3. If you could change one thing about your school's behavioral expectations and/or character education to prepare students for college, what would it be? Why? 4. If you could tell your school one thing to keep doing in terms of behavioral expectations and/or character education to prepare students for college, what would it be? Why? 5. Now, I am going to show you a college of photographs related to behavioral expectations and character education. Behavior Expectations and Character Education  Dean's Office Expectations  Community Meeting 6. What do these photographs capture about how your school's behavioral expectations and/or character education prepared you for college? What do they not capture? 7. What was your personal experience with… Do they bring up any memories?

Supportive and Structured Environment	1. Do you think that CPCHS' environment influenced your preparation for college or your college experiences? 2. Tell me about what the similarities and differences are between your high school and college environment. 3. What was the day structured like in high school? What were your classes structured like in high school? 4. How and when did you socialize in high school? 5. What is your day structured like in college? 6. What are your classes structured like in college? 7. How and when do you socialize in college?

	8. What kind of support did you receive in high school? 9. What kind of support do you receive in college? 10. How are your relationships similar or different to those you have with college faculty and staff? 11. Have you faced any challenges in keeping yourself organized in college? 12. If you could change one thing about how your school's environment prepared students for college, what would it be? Why? 13. If you could tell your school one thing to keep one thing about their environment to prepare students for college, what would it be? Why? 14. Now, I am going to show you a college of photographs related to CPCHS' supportive and structured school environment. Supportive and Structured Environment  Daily schedule Advisory Classroom setup 15. What do these photographs capture about how your school's environment prepared you for college? What do they not capture? 16. What was your personal experience with… Do they bring up any memories?

General	Is there anything else that you want to share that I haven't asked about? Is there a pseudonym you'd like to use?

Appendix C

Institutional Agent Screening Survey

1. What is your full name?
2. What is your preferred email address?
3. What is your current primary role at City Prep Charter High School?
4. If you have had any other roles at City Prep Charter High School, please list them below.
5. When did you begin working (in any role) at City Prep Charter High School?
6. What is your race?
7. What is your ethnicity?
8. What is your gender identity?

Appendix D

Full Institutional Agent Interview Protocol by Distinguisher

Section	Questions
Introduction	What is your name? What is your highest level of education? Where did you go to college? What did you study? How long have you worked at (insert school name) and in what capacity(ies)?
Mission	According to the 2020-2021 staff handbook, the mission of CPCHS is as follows: [insert mission] How does this mission manifest in your day-to-day practices? In what ways do you communicate this message to students in your role? Tell me about your relationships with students, families, and other staff in relation to your school's mission. What are your goals as a(n) (insert role) in terms of preparing students for college?
College and career readiness	What do you think your role is in a student's college process? What specific things do you do to support students in their college process? Do you feel like your role in the college process is valued? How and by whom? What is your definition of college readiness and college success? How did you come to these definitions? What is your school's definitions of college readiness and college success? How are these definitions different or similar to your individual ideas? What do students need to be able to know and do in order to be successful in college? How do you cultivate these skills, mindsets, etc.? How do you think you communicate this idea of college success to students? How prepared do you think your students are for college? Do you know any alumni who have stopped out or dropped out of college? Why do you think that is? Since you've been here, have there been any policies or practices related to college readiness or college-going that have changed or been dropped? Why or why not? Are there any policies or practices related to college readiness or college-going that you want to see changed, implemented, or dropped? What are those? How do you think they will help students succeed in college?

Academic preparation	What does academically preparing students for college mean to you? What do you do to prepare students for college? What challenges do you face? What has worked well? How academically prepared do you feel your alumni are and have been for college? Since you've been here, have there been any academic policies or practices that have changed or been dropped? Why or why not? Are there any academic policies or practices that you want to see changed, implemented, or dropped? What are those? How do you think they will help students succeed in college?
Behavioral Expectations and Character Education	Do you think that CPCHS' behavioral expectations and/or character education influences students' college preparation or experiences? Why or why not? How so? Since you've been here, have there been any practices or policies associated with behavioral expectations and/or character education that have changed or been dropped? Why or why not? Are there any behavioral expectations and/or character education that you want to see changed, implemented, or dropped? What are those? How do you think they will help students succeed in college?
Supportive and Structured Environment	How do you think that CPCHS' environment influences students' college preparation or experiences? Why or why not? How so? Describe your school's environment. What was the day structured like? What are classes structured like? How and when do students socialize in high school? What kind of support do students receive? Since you've been here, have there been any practices or policies associated with your school's structure, support, or overall environment changed or been dropped? Why or why not? Are there any practices or policies related to your school's structure, support, or overall environment that you want to see changed, implemented, or dropped? What are those? How do you think they will help students succeed in college?
General	What do you expect of your students? What are you most proud of in preparing students for college? What influences your role in preparing students for college? What would you change about you or your school's approach to college preparation, if anything? Is there anything else that you want to share that I haven't asked about?