

College for All or College for Some: Charter High Schools and Students' Futures in New Orleans

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Overview

Prior ERA-New Orleans research provides evidence that the Post-Katrina New Orleans school reforms [significantly improved college outcomes](#). However, we know little about what New Orleans high schools do to support students' transition to college. High schools can play a critical role in college attendance and persistence among first-generation college students by helping them to navigate the college-going process. Teachers and counselors may be the only sources of college support for students who do not have family members or friends with college degrees.

Corresponding Technical Paper: Danica Brown. "[Organizational Context Matters: A Multiple Case Study of College-Going Culture and Counselors in Charter and Traditional Public High Schools](#)." Dissertation, Tulane University, 2022.

This study aims to explain how and why the reforms have improved college outcomes for students in New Orleans by examining four schools in depth. It offers insight into how high schools create a culture of support for college attendance for all students—a College-Going Culture—which includes the critical roles of leaders, counselors, and teachers in providing such support. In addition, this research provides a unique perspective into the way the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) college readiness policies are fulfilled at the school level.

Key Findings

1. *Technical support alone is not enough.* Resources like standardized test preparation and FAFSA completion, while necessary, are not sufficient to foster an environment that supports students navigating the college application process.
2. *Organizational structures matter.* High schools that prioritize accessible and cohesive college resources create stronger environments for college preparation.
3. *Collaboration strengthens outcomes.* Schools that foster collaboration and shared responsibility among staff have a more robust culture of support for college-bound students.
4. *Charter schools in this study outperformed traditional public schools (TPS).* Charter schools demonstrated stronger environments for college preparation, likely contributing to their higher college attendance rates compared to TPS.

These findings have important implications for the policies that state and district leaders develop and how school leaders and staff enact those policies to support students, especially first-generation college students. This study offers insights into effective college planning strategies for other urban cities serving similar student populations by illuminating the organizational conditions impacting school-based college support for students who really need it.

What is College-Going Culture and Why Does it Matter?

Prior research has found that a strong College-Going Culture is associated with students taking the necessary steps to prepare for, apply to, and enroll in college. College-Going Culture is a school-wide approach that centers college attendance as a goal and provides students with the necessary information, support, and resources to achieve this goal. It is often defined by the practices and strategies that schools use to promote college-going and aid students in navigating the college search and application process. However, college planning requires more than just doing well on college entrance exams, completing FAFSA applications, submitting college applications, and navigating multiple deadlines. It requires organizational structures that enable leaders, teachers, and staff to collaborate to offer college-going support—cohesion in college practices, availability and accessibility of college supports, and communal care or a shared sense of responsibility for college. Having strong norms around college-going and embedding these norms into students’ day-to-day experiences is an essential element as well. In sum, a College-Going Culture highlights the importance of making college accessible to *all* students rather than supporting a group of students viewed as “college material.”

Guiding Questions

This study is relevant to school, district, and state policy leaders. At the school level, it examines schools’ college-going norms, school resources, and department structures. At the district/network level, the study examines school type (charter vs. TPS) and district expectations. At the state level, this study investigates how college readiness policies and initiatives shape College-Going Culture.

To understand how organizational contexts shape College-Going Culture, this study examines the following research questions:

1. What is the culture around college attendance among four Greater New Orleans charter and traditional public high schools, and in what ways do these schools exhibit variation in College-Going Culture?
2. How do school, district, and state policies, resources, and structures shape College-Going Culture?

My analysis compares two charter schools and two TPS in the Greater New Orleans area. Charter schools are known for emphasizing college as the goal for their students, so this comparison yielded important insights into College-Going Culture across different school types. Moreover, research suggests that charter schools have greater autonomy than TPSs in school-level decision-making, including an opportunity for more innovative educational practices. Considering prior findings, I examined similarities and differences in the College-Going Cultures of these schools.

State Context of Case Study Schools

Louisiana provided an informative context for studying College-Going Culture, as several state policies during the analysis period were aimed at encouraging more students to attend college. Until recently these LDOE college readiness policies aimed to address the low levels of postsecondary education and improve access to future jobs requiring some postsecondary education or training.

During the study period, LDOE college readiness policies included:

- Requiring juniors to take the ACT beginning with the 2013 graduating class.
- Making FAFSA completion or a Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) application—Louisiana’s college scholarship program—a graduation requirement.
- Implementing two diploma pathways or tracks in the 2014-2015 school year: a “college diploma” track, which positions students to meet the requirements for attending four-year Louisiana colleges and universities, and a “career diploma” track, which emphasizes career readiness and prepares students to enter a two-year degree program or the workforce by obtaining additional career certifications or industry-based credentials.

The accountability system also prioritized college preparation. Beginning in 2017-2018, the school performance score (SPS) formula for high schools evaluated four components equally: on-time high school graduation rate, ACT/WorkKeys (an assessment of workplace skills), state assessments, and strength of diploma (a measure of college and career readiness).

It is important to note that policy changes enacted during the 2024 Legislative session removed many of the college readiness policies. Students in Louisiana are no longer required to take the ACT or to fill out the FAFSA, and a new accountability system deemphasizes college preparation for all. Though the policies limited where some schools put their attention in ways discussed in this brief, they also provided students guaranteed support with two critical steps in the college-going process—ACT and FAFSA. We discuss implications of these policy changes at the end of this brief.

What Is the Culture Around College Attendance Among Four Greater New Orleans High Schools?

I took an in-depth look at College-Going Culture through case studies of four Louisiana high schools during the 2019-2020 school year. Pseudonyms are used to protect schools' identities. I compared two NOLA Public Schools, Garden Charter High, a standalone charter school, and Forest Charter High, part of a larger charter management network, with two TPSs from a comparison district, Orchard High and Woodlot High. All schools served a predominantly Black, Latinx, and low-income student population, and did not have admissions requirements. They also had college readiness written in their mission statements or mentioned by school leaders in their interviews. Charter schools in this study had significantly higher college enrollment rates than the TPSs.

Table 1 compares dimensions of College-Going Culture across schools. TPSs in this study, Orchard and Woodlot, had limited College-Going Cultures while charter schools, Forest Charter and Garden Charter, had a greater focus on college and stronger College-Going Cultures. Overall, charters focused more than TPSs on making college resources accessible and had greater collaboration and relationship-building among students and staff in providing college support, despite facing similar resource and time constraints as TPSs.

Table 1: College-Going Culture varied from limited to strong with TPS having weaker support structures for college.

	Garden Charter	Forest Charter	Orchard TPS	Woodlot TPS
Schoolwide College Norms	Yes	Yes	No	No
Availability of College Practices/Resources	Extensive	Extensive	Extensive	Extensive
Accessibility of College Practices/Resources	High	High	Low	Low
Cohesion in College Practices	Cohesive	Cohesive/ Incohesive	Incohesive	Incohesive
Communal Care and Shared Responsibility for College Support	High	Moderate	Low	Low
College-Going Culture (Overall)	Strong	Moderate	Limited	Limited

I identified schools as having stronger College-Going Cultures when leaders, teachers, and counselors normalized college by expressing an expectation for students to attend and succeed in college and when schools had numerous college-going resources that were made accessible school wide. Moreover, I identified strong College-Going Culture by *cohesive practices* that were intentionally aligned and by *communal care* in the college process as expressed through staff collaboration and shared responsibility for providing college support.

Next, I describe each aspect of College-Going Culture in depth and provide evidence of how it was enacted within each school context.

Schoolwide College Norms

A strong College-Going Culture requires schoolwide college-going norms including high expectations for college attendance and various ways of communicating this. Garden Charter’s leaders and staff normalized college attendance through their high academic expectations and belief in students’ ability to succeed in college. A teacher explained, “You’re expected to [go to college] when you come here. The kids know that.” This was not the case at all schools. Orchard staff did not normalize college attendance for all students, and thus, there was no mechanism for schoolwide support with the college application process. Instead, staff often spoke of top-performing students as college bound and their practices tended to provide concrete supports to “bubble kids” as described by a school counselor and assistant principal. This perspective was echoed by a teacher who said, “I really don’t think all teachers think that every kid will be successful in college. And I think that they don’t believe that they all will go.” Orchard’s staff identified several reasons why many of their students would not or could not go to college. They cited the demographics of the school population, low college aspirations among students, lack of academic and non-academic preparation, and adults at their school having low expectations for students based on their academic performance.

This discussion of low college aspirations specifically applies to Latinx and low-income students among many Woodlot staff members. Like Orchard, Woodlot’s teachers had higher expectations for top-performing, English-speaking students, and lower expectations for immigrant and non-English speaking students. A teacher discussed the lack of college aspirations among their students who were identified as low-income and English Language Learners stating:

“A lot of those students are undocumented. The likelihood of them going to college is small. And even if they do go to college, there’s a million hoops they have to jump through to really get to college. A large portion of our students came from low-income backgrounds, where academics wasn’t as important as getting a job and putting food on the table.”

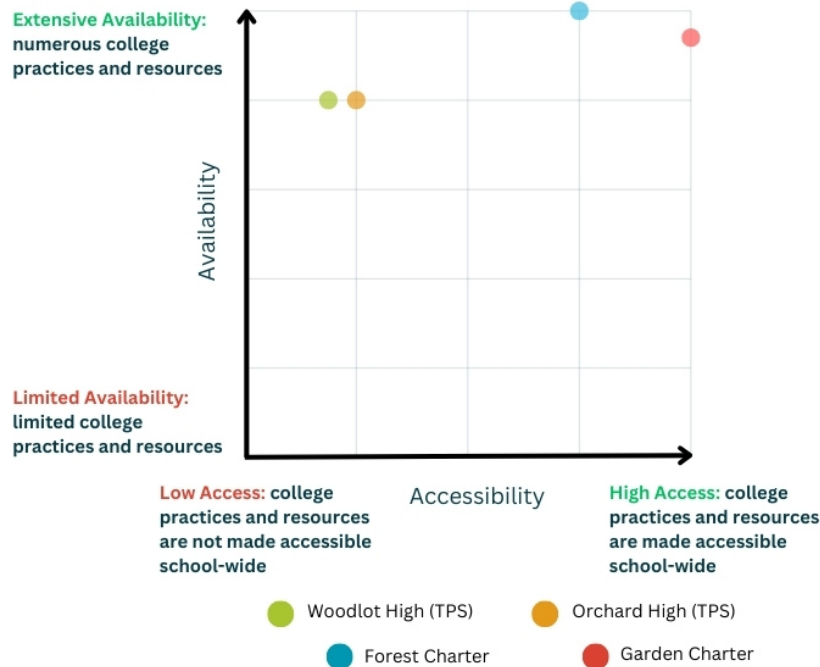
Forest Charter’s mission at the school and charter network levels explicitly highlighted college preparation, and staff generally agreed that Forest Charter focused on preparing students for college. A teacher explained:

“Forest has always been a school that was college prep, ...even before the state did the two [diploma] options...So they’ve always preached college, Dual Enrollment, AP courses. That has always been a part of Forest culture.”

While college attendance was the mission of Forest Charter and its charter network, interview and observational data complicate whether college attendance was a network goal that could be enacted at the school level. For instance, a counselor explained that there was pressure on counselors from “leaders in our network, they want to see the counselors push” college. However, network leaders removed resources from the counseling department—eliminated counselors’ secretary position—leaving counselors with a greater workload that included more paperwork and less time to devote to college support.

Availability and Accessibility of College Practices/Resources

Figure 1: Extensive availability and high accessibility of college-going practices and resources are two critical components of a strong College-Going Culture.



A strong College-Going Culture requires both extensive availability and schoolwide accessibility of resources, especially more than just those that are mandated. Availability refers to the presence of resources at a school, which exist if students are aware of and able to find them. Accessibility, on the other hand, means that these resources are not only present but are also easily accessible to all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, ensuring equitable access. For instance, all students took the ACT in their junior year and could receive waivers to take the test again and FAFSA applications were a graduation requirement, so students received support with completing them. Other than these two mandated resources, Orchard and Woodlots’ college practices and resources were not widely offered to students, and instead, staff focused on students who were close to meeting thresholds or students they perceived as college material. Participants in these schools felt pressure from district leaders to provide support to their top students in reaching the college benchmarks that add extra points to schools’ SPS scores.

In contrast, I observed Forest Charter and Garden Charter’s practices going beyond the availability and accessibility of state mandates, providing additional opportunities to all students with Garden Charter providing the greatest access. For instance, Garden Charter offered all students after-school tutoring for ACT testing. This was announced during the school day and there were fliers around the school advertising it. Teachers described how helpful this was for students. Similarly, Forest Charter’s schoolwide college access program started in ninth grade and supported students with every facet of the college-going process. While Forest Charter had more availability of college resources than Garden Charter, due in part to Garden’s limited AP course offerings, Garden Charter exhibited higher levels of accessibility to practices like ACT preparation and individualized support with college applications, doing more than piecemeal preparation based on state mandates.

Cohesion in College Practices

A strong College-Going Culture requires cohesion—intentional alignment of practices, resources, and people—rather than isolated activities carried out by individuals. Cohesion was most prevalent at Garden Charter. Teachers, leaders, and counselors described the various activities such as ACT preparation courses and tutoring, scholarship opportunities, and individualized support from counselors with college applications. Staff were aware of what their school had to offer students, and teachers promoted these activities in their classrooms. Alignment of their college-going mission, resources, practices, and people to assist students navigating the college-going process was described by an assistant principal in this way:

“We did a college door decorating contest...And that was before the college fair. So the kids seeing colleges on doors and then now this is college fair and after the college fair was the college application day that the counselors did in collaboration with the...English IV teachers and the English IV teachers doing one of their major culminating tasks for the quarter was your college application essay. So, it’s just programmatically aligning so many things where it’s like, ‘Whoa, this is just culture. So it’s in our classes. It’s in our counseling sessions. It’s in our assemblies.’”

Forest Charter had some alignment in their practices, the resources they offered, and the ways in which staff worked together to promote and support college-going. Their college access program worked to align their practices, providing students the opportunity to develop a full picture of the college-going process. During a program event, I observed a panel of current college students answering questions about college admissions and their everyday experiences. Students were engaged, but attendance was moderate. Teachers were aware of the program but had limited details to share. Outside of this program and individual teacher efforts, staff discussed concrete college supports less often than Garden Charter as organizational conditions constrained the counseling department. For instance, network leaders eliminated their secretary position and restructured their counseling department requiring each counselor to focus on one grade level. This led to less time and opportunities for individualized college counseling.

Orchard and Woodlot exhibited more isolation in their efforts. Participants in these schools described college practices separately and as serving a select group. Counselors in these schools worked in silos, focusing on activities related to the grades they supported, leaving the senior counselors to handle college planning. As a result, many staff members at both schools stated that their students did not fully understand the steps to apply to college.

Communal Care and Shared Responsibility

A strong College-Going Culture requires communal, schoolwide care rather than isolated acts of support to navigate the application process. At the heart of communal care is shared responsibility for college support characterized by relationships and collaboration among teachers, counselors, students, and leaders. Communal care provides the foundation for a strong College-Going Culture and requires time and intention to build. This was best reflected in Garden Charter and to a lesser extent in Forest Charter. Staff in these schools had relationships with each other and with students as they described communicating and collaborating regularly. All Garden Charter interview participants described their school as “close knit” and “like a family.”

A Garden Charter assistant principal explained,

“...you have to have relationships. That’s really the backbone and skeleton of our students being college ready and persistent is because we build relationships...”

Another Garden Charter assistant principal illustrated their shared sense of responsibility in that they “all take the success of the students...personally...One band. One sound.” She described Garden Charter staff as “vested” and “invested” in students’ success and in the vision of the school.

Relatedly, Garden Charter’s staff prioritized collaboration and they generally expressed that college support was the responsibility of all staff. Forest Charter’s staff also highlighted the value of collaboration. Garden Charters’ teachers planned together, and leaders developed teacher learning communities and empowered them to lead their peers. Forest Charter and Garden Charter’s counselors discussed how they worked together to provide college-going support with each

counselor having a role. Staff in these schools devoted time to meeting, sharing, working together to support their student’s college goals. They also had more knowledge of schoolwide college activities than what was expressed at Orchard and Woodlot. Multiple teachers at Garden Charter and Forest Charter described speaking with students about their college plans and providing support with things like applications, essays, and letters of recommendation.

At Woodlot and Orchard, there was less collaboration across teachers and counselors in supporting college-going. Teachers and counselors would describe what they did individually to support a student with college without connecting this work to the broader school goals or the work of others in their schools. When asked, they were often unaware of what others were doing to assist with college. For example, an Orchard teacher had a college corner in her classroom with information and a senior exit interview to help students with postsecondary planning. When asked whether other teachers in the school did the same, she said, “I don’t know what they do, ... but this happens in my room every year.” An Orchard counselor said that teachers did not feel responsible for college planning because they did not know how to be helpful or “some of them think my job is to teach this and get them passing this class. And that is me helping them [with college].” Caring teachers, counselors, and leaders were present at all four schools, but this did not add up to the intentional communal care that is needed to build a culture of college attendance.

How Do School, District, and State Policies, Resources, and Structures Shape College-Going Culture?

During the course of this study, schools were required to track and report student progress on college readiness measures, which were built into the state accountability system to help increase the number of students going to college. While all college-going practices are crucial to college attendance, I found that the state policies present during the scope of the study put pressure on case study schools leaders and staff to engage in some college practices, but these were limited to a few easily measured elements like FAFSA completion and did not extend to other crucial dimensions of college attendance like individualized college counseling. Most interviews that discussed college practices and counselor support discussed FAFSA completion as a primary focus of their college practices. As a result, schools did not regularly engage in other practices like assisting students with TOPS applications, which could be done in lieu of completing FAFSA according to state policy. Across all four schools, most students did not make the ACT score to qualify for TOPS, so the lower hanging fruit was FAFSA applications. School counselors also focused less on individualized college counseling due to resource and time constraints, often citing the difficulty of navigating expectations from school and district leaders and paperwork tied to test-based accountability as the reasons.

School counselors had the most negative perceptions of accountability systems compared to teachers and leaders and felt that their work was constrained by the reporting requirements of test-based and college accountability systems. As the principal of Forest described, state pressure on these measured practices narrowed school practices to those giving the “biggest bang for their buck” for SPS points, rather than building a holistic culture of support. School-based autonomy from district and/or network oversight also played a key role in College-Going Culture. My research found that greater autonomy at Garden Charter, a non-network charter school, enabled a stronger College-Going Culture, while network oversight at Forest Charter and the district’s oversight of TPSs, Orchard and Woodlot, dictated many of the college practices these schools focused on. Consequently, these schools gave more attention to mandated practices and less attention to relational practices like mentoring students through the full application process.

Discussion

Up through the mid 2010s, there was an increased emphasis on going to college nationally, but some states, including Louisiana, have begun to scale this back. I found that state college readiness policies focusing on the technical aspects of college-going were not sufficient to create or sustain a College-Going Culture at the four Greater New Orleans schools included in this study. Certainly, state policy can impact College-Going Culture through mandates and resources to promote and provide access to college. However, state policies rarely account for school and district contexts where the policies are enacted and they especially do not account for the people on the front lines charged with carrying out these policies, mainly counselors.

Since this research was conducted, the state has revised a variety of the policies mentioned earlier which could likely decrease access to college support for all students and likely erode College-Going Culture. For instance, Louisiana no longer requires high school students to complete FAFSA or take the ACT as graduation requirements. Similarly, Louisiana policymakers recently approved a new accountability system that focuses more on student test performance than measures of college and

college readiness. To an extent, though in a piecemeal approach, state college readiness policies intended to ensure that students from historically marginalized groups could access the information and support needed to pursue a college education. However, the removal of these imperfect policies may also result in stunted College-Going Culture across the state and fewer students pursuing college with a shifting focus from prioritizing college as an option for all students to labeling it as available only to some. For schools that already have a deeply embedded College-Going Culture, state policies might get in the way. But for other schools, such policies may be just the push they need to at least make some resources widely available.

For these reasons policymakers should consider the following:

- *State funding for school-based staff focused on providing college and postsecondary planning assistance.* A College-Going Culture does not come cheap. Counselors have a significant role in college support, but they cannot do it all on their own. An increase in the number of counselors and other staff who can provide administrative and clerical capacity related to college and postsecondary planning is needed. Building a community of support around students that includes all school leaders and staff working in collaboration with community members will enhance access to support with the college-going process.
- *Funding for school-wide staff training and evidenced-based professional development for postsecondary counseling by role.* It is not enough to increase the number of staff and counselors who can give individualized assistance. School leaders and staff need training on how to offer such support. I found that shared responsibility among all school staff is critical to building and sustaining a College-Going Culture. Teachers, coaches, leaders, and other staff need training tailored to their unique roles and that addresses how they can collaborate with counselors to build strong College-Going Culture. For example, the New Orleans College and Career Attainment Network provides a community of support for counselors with professional development and opportunities for collaboration with other counselors across the city. This type of training and support is also needed for leaders, teachers, and other staff.
- *Policies and initiatives to enhance school-community partnerships and collaboration.* Schools typically operate in isolation from the surrounding community especially in contexts without a strong presence of neighborhood schools. Increasing collaboration with local non-profits focused on college access like the Louisiana Center for College Access, College Track, and College Beyond can provide schools, networks, and districts with added capacity to provide college advising and other vital student support sharing the responsibility of college-going support.

Supporting students with college requires a strong College-Going Culture and that can only be created with policies, practices, and resources to support multiple stakeholders to share the responsibility of providing college-going assistance.

How Was the Analysis Conducted?

My primary data source was interviews with 40 school leaders, counselors, teachers, and teacher leaders across the four selected high schools. Interviews with participants across different roles allowed more nuanced perspectives on the norms and practices at each school. To supplement and triangulate interviews, I conducted observations at Forest Charter and Garden Charter schools. I could not conduct observations at Woodlot and Orchard (TPSs) due to school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiated a more extensive line of questions focused on what I would have observed if a visit could happen.

In addition to interviews and observations, I collected and analyzed documents and data from websites and social media across all four schools. This included an analysis of 50 documents from school, district, network, and state-level websites such as the LDOE and the Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance. I also analyzed social media posts related to college and career readiness practices from 2019 to 2020. Additional data allowed me to contextualize the interview data to provide comprehensive descriptions of cases for categorizing schools' College-Going Culture. Data were analyzed in multiple stages and included transcribing and coding interviews, developing detailed case profiles for each school, and analyzing across cases.

About the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans

The Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) is a research center at Tulane University that collaborates with local education stakeholders to produce objective, rigorous, and useful research to inform the community's understanding of how to improve students' experiences in schools and beyond.

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