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Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All

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Imagining What Could Be:

The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All

by

TARA BAHL

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

2015
Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All
By
Tara Bahl
Advisor: Professor Colette Daiute

In New York City, there exists an uneven landscape of college guidance among high schools, creating a college “guidance gap”. While some schools offer robust counseling that helps students contextualize college admissions information toward making relevant college decisions, other schools have elevated student-to-counselor rates and do not have access to other educational resources necessary to effectively support students. Using ethnographic research and survey data, anchored by dynamic narrative inquiry, this dissertation explores how young people enrolled in under-resourced schools can act as agents of change in the lives of their peers within the context of college planning. Youth Leadership for College Access is a program in New York City that positions students to become paid college access coordinators in their schools (called Youth Leaders), with intensive training and ongoing technical support. Through deep analysis of both their summer training as well as the everyday work that they do with peers during the school year, this dissertation argues that Youth Leaders reimagine college planning as a meaningful, student-centered, relevant experience. They do this by grounding their work by the lives of their peers, and strategically use their unique position inside schools – as both student and college access professional – to help their peers resolve problems they may face when planning for college. This dissertation will show how college access interventions can work effectively when we position young people at the center of school change.
Acknowledgements

It is with endless appreciation and deep love that I thank:

The thoughtful, unwavering, caring guidance of Colette Daiute, with Tony Picciano and Martin Ruck, always keeping me on track and focused.

My very first New York City mentor, the dynamic Deinya Phenix, alongside the inspirational Norm Fruchter.

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The brilliant and dedicated Lori Chajet, with the rest of the College Access: Research & Action (CARA) team, and the 2013-2014 Youth Leaders, who all helped me grow this dissertation.

Vijay and Christine Bahl, my loving and supportive parents, and my musician-scholar-brother, Rishi Bahl.

My incredible partner, John-Paul Quattrone, whose patient love carried me through it all, and our sweet Ginny.

This dissertation is dedicated to Jean Anyon (1941-2013)
bold scholar
fearless activist
good friend
beloved mentor
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Chapter One

Introduction to the Project and the Guidance Gap

During a public speaking tour in the fall of 2014, Michelle Obama visited Booker T. Washington High School in Georgia. Speaking to an auditorium filled entirely with Black high school students, mostly from poor families, Obama emphasized the significance of going to college, saying, “You have to understand that completing high school is not the end but the beginning of your life’s journey”. She went on to pinpoint specific resources that students should make use of when beginning to plan for college, like attending college fairs, studying for the SATs, and visiting college campuses. She explained to the students, “I’m giving you some insights that a lot of rich kids all over the country – they know this stuff, and I want you to know it, too, because you have got to go and get your education. You’ve got to”. Watching this exchange on television at home in New York City, I read between the lines and knew what Obama was identifying. Something that many of us who work inside, or attend, urban public high schools experience everyday: the college guidance gap.

**Minding the Guidance Gap: Observations from the Ground to Introduce the Problem**

A term used by many teachers and college access professionals working with high school students, the guidance gap names an unequal landscape between high- and low-resourced schools, especially among urban schools where differences abound in effectively supporting and preparing students to navigate the complex post-secondary planning process. Many wealthier, high-resourced schools provide students with an ample number of counselors who can provide
them with technical and emotional support. In contrast, low-resourced schools tend to have elevated student-to-counselor rates, lack a college specific counselor altogether, and/or do not have access to other educational resources necessary to support students effectively. These educational resources can include: demonstrated relationships with colleges; connection to alumni networks; a developed and thoughtful college access curricula that addresses how to apply to college, how to apply for and understand financial aid, and other post-secondary options that are not college; a formal protocol to assist all students to navigate the post-secondary planning process; and, making opportunities available for students to visit college campuses, speak with college representatives, or meet college students all in order to cultivate *experiences* and *relationships* that demystify college and college life. These resources work alongside other basic tools students can use during planning for college, like college information guides, digital technologies, and a designated college office or space.

The educational resources enumerated above also reflect a school’s overall ability to strategically support those students who require step-by-step college planning guidance due to circumstances that complicate college access beyond guidance and knowledge of the system. Students who are first-generation-to-college, undocumented, or those with limited English proficiency or IEPs (Individualized Educational Plans) have historically been under-represented in college admissions and completion, and therefore have a different set of needs during post-secondary planning than others (Saenz, et. al, 2007). For example, I have a colleague who has worked in an international high school in Brooklyn for a number of years as a teacher, and for a while she also simultaneously served as the college counselor. This high school serves a high proportion of recent immigrants who are English Language Learners (ELLs). She once explained to me that each year, while wholly capable of completing the coursework demands, a number of
students in the senior class are not initially accepted into four-year City University of New York (CUNY) or State University of New York (SUNY) colleges. This is because of their relatively low state Regents exam scores in English Language Arts, and their academic transcripts that disproportionately list English as a Second Language (ESL) classes because of the international slant of school programming. From the initial perspective of college admissions officers, it does not seem like these students have experienced a rigorous high school program or coursework, and most CUNY and SUNY four-year colleges simply look at course grades, transcripts, and test scores to determine admission. In other words, on paper these students do not look like four-year college candidates, even if, in reality, they are able to complete four-year college coursework successfully. However, there are protocols for high school college counselors to petition this and help students gain access into a four-year college even after an initial rejection, if they believe that the student is capable. While serving as college counselor at her school, my colleague spent a portion of her professional time petitioning for students she knew were four-year candidates, even though a college admissions office did not see this at first.

Students in this kind of special situation need a counselor who can strategically advocate for students. They need a counselor who has developed relationships with colleges and intimately understand college admissions processes and protocols in order to go the extra mile, so to speak, for students with special circumstances; like many ELL students in that international high school. The counselor must have opportunities to cultivate trusting relationships with her students in order to not only get to know their capabilities, but also their lives and goals for the future. It takes a dedicated counselor with time, college relationships, and the overall know-how, alongside a high school that explicitly prioritizes college access and readiness, in order to truly advocate for students during the post-secondary planning process.
All of the school-based college access resources presented above, work toward supporting students’ overall development of complex college admissions information in order to make informed, relevant post-secondary decisions. From one-on-one work with counselors or curricula that addresses all aspects of the post-secondary planning process, to providing students with college-based experiences that demystify college, these resources provide students with a foundation of college admissions knowledge so they can make sound, student-centered post-secondary decisions. This foundation works toward helping students learn about the post-secondary planning process, as well as how to make use of this knowledge within their own personal contexts so that they make meaningful decisions and choices about their futures that are relevant to their lives. Without key resources in place in many high schools across New York City, a pronounced “gap” in college access and readiness work grows between those schools that do provide students with necessary resources and staff, and those that simply cannot.

Casting a Wider Net: Intersection of the Guidance Gap and Public Policy

Of course, the guidance gap is not divorced from larger social or other education policies, and is, instead, very much entwined with them. Here in New York City, the schools that are struggling to fill the guidance gap tend to be those that disproportionately serve first generation-to-college students, students of color, and/or English Language Learners (Fruchter et al., 2012; Villavicencio et al., 2013). Black and Latino/a students make up over 60 percent of those first generation-to-college students, and they tend to come from low-income families (Saenz et al., 2007). These schools in New York City are those that suffer first and most frequently from overcrowding, co-location with new charter schools, or school closings (Campaign for Educational Equity, 2014; NYC Coalition for Educational Justice & NYC Communities for Change, 2012; NYC Independent Budget Office, 2013). Many are schools that are over-policed by metal
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detectors and New York Police Department trained School Safety Agents, disproportionately relying on student suspension to manage discipline (Miller et al., 2011). They are those schools that are found in soon-to-be, or currently, gentrifying neighborhoods, populated by residents who are cut-off from access to adequate employment and housing (Fruchter et al., 2012). The guidance gap is not a silo of a policy problem, but is, instead, one iteration of a slew of policy decisions, and failures, that are made across the urban landscape.

In New York City, public schools are geographically divided into thirty-two districts that represent clusters of neighborhoods. In order to illustrate the relationship between college access and readiness, school resources and student needs during student post-secondary planning, and larger social policy and processes, I hone in on high schools housed in three separate districts: District 2 (high schools located in a number of Manhattan neighborhoods), District 8 (high schools located in the southeast corner of the Bronx), and District 32 (high schools located in the Bushwick neighborhood, as well as parts of Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn).

To provide a basic description of these districts and the neighborhoods that they include,
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I consulted InsideSchools.com, an independent website maintained by journalists, parents, and public school advocates, in partnership with The New School. They conduct school visits, interviews with a diverse mix of local school stakeholders, and classroom observations in order to provide the public with information, data, and descriptions about New York City schools. The site is generally considered a credible source of unbiased descriptions of schools throughout the City. Table 1 documents a summary of Districts 2, 8, and 32, as per InsideSchools.com.

| District 2 | District 2 has some of the highest-performing and most popular schools in the city. The district covers the wealthiest neighborhoods in the city—the East Side south of 97th Street and the West Side south of 59th street (but not the Lower East Side)  
| District 2 has unusually good middle schools and it is the only district in Manhattan that has its own high schools  
| While most New York City high schools are open to children citywide, seven schools limit admission to District 2 children. Since these schools are among the most sought-after in the city, District 2 students have an advantage in the hyper-competitive high school admissions process |
| District 8 | District 8 is a racially mixed district in the southeast corner of the Bronx  
| The western edge of the district includes some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city, such as Hunts Point, while the eastern and northern edge includes more suburban settings, such as Throgs Neck and Soundview, which have a mix of modest single-family homes, low-income housing projects and expensive condominiums  
| A few charters have opened in the district as well, including a k–12 school that emphasizes character building. Some of these charters are co-located with public schools. |
| District 32 | Serving Bushwick and the northern tip of Bedford-Stuyvesant, District 32 has long been one of the lowest-performing districts in the city  
| The neighborhood suffers from a poor reputation as a crime-ridden and neglected area.  
| In recent years, artists priced-out of neighboring Williamsburg have moved into Bushwick pushing real-estate prices up, and longtime residents out  
| The tiny district is home to one of the best and most competitive middle schools in the city |
The site describes District 2 as including some of the wealthiest neighborhoods, and housing many of the highest-performing schools in New York City. A number of District 2 schools have limited admission, meaning that they exclusively enroll students who live in District 2 neighborhoods. District 8 includes several neighborhoods in the Bronx, including “some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city”, with a number of charter schools that have recently opened. I note the opening of charter schools because some of those in District 8 are co-located in traditional public schools, thus taking up school space and other school-based resources from traditional public schools. Some research studies have also found that, oftentimes, when charter schools begin cropping up in poor, urban neighborhoods, it tends to signal larger sociopolitical processes of gentrification and displacement of local residents; particularly in Black and Latina/o communities (Hankins, 2007; Davis & Oakley, 2013; Lipman & Haines, 2007). Finally, District 32 serves the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, one that has a “poor reputation as a crime-ridden and neglected area” and has recently began to gentrify by way of “artists priced-out of neighboring Williamsburg”. This has begun to push-out longtime residents in Bushwick, replacing them with new, wealthier residents. Table 1 documents the district descriptions in more detail.

Alongside these qualitative descriptions of school district neighborhoods, Table 2 illustrates a number of demographic characteristics of students who are enrolled in schools located in each of the three districts. I include students with limited English proficiency, students with disabilities, as well as student poverty indicators, because these factors reflect students who require nuanced and more specific guidance when navigating the post-secondary planning process; they reflect students who have historically been under-represented in college admissions and completion (Saenz, et. al, 2007). They are also among the set of student demographics that
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New York State and New York City make publicly available each year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Selected K-12 student demographics, 2013</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Limited English proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Economically disadvantaged refers to: “students are those who participate in, or whose family participates in, economic assistance programs, such as the free or reduced-price lunch programs, Social Security Insurance (SSI), Food Stamps, Foster Care, Refugee Assistance (cash or medical assistance), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), Safety Net Assistance (SNA), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), or Family Assistance: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). If one student in a family is identified as low income, all students from that household (economic unit) may be identified as low income.”

Table 2 reveals that Districts 8 and 32 serve higher-need students, such as those with disabilities or limited English proficiency. Districts 8 and 32 also serve a high proportion of poor students, particularly compared to District 2. For instance, 20% of students in District 32 have limited English proficiency, compared to 11% of students in District 2, while 20% of students in District 8 are students with disabilities, compared to 14% in District 2. Within the context of the guidance gap, data highlighted in Table 2 underscores the idea that schools in District 8 and 32 serve students who require more nuanced support, particular within the context of post-secondary planning resources and guidance because of complex personal situations and needs, outlined in the previous section.

In order to map school resources onto district descriptions and student demographics, especially within the context of college planning, I look to student-to-counselor ratios. Each year, the New York State Education Department releases teacher and personnel data for each school district in New York City, including number of guidance counselors. One caveat to note is that these numbers do not necessarily tell the whole story, since they only report the total number of counselors in a school. Thus, this data makes no distinction between guidance counselors and college-specific counselors (I will take a deeper look at these inconsistencies in chapter three,
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where I examine college access policy and school-based programming in New York City).

However, the numbers at least provide a window through which to examine high schools and one resource that they can provide in order to support student college planning needs: counselors. Documented in Table 3, the student-to-counselor ratio is roughly 452:1, while in District 8 this ratio increases to 504:1. In District 32 it climbs even higher, to 552:1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Student-to-counselor ratio</th>
<th>Average college and career readiness score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District 2</td>
<td>452:1</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 8</td>
<td>504:1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 32</td>
<td>552:1</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Also included in Table 3, I map “college and career readiness” scores onto student-to-counselor ratios. In 2013, The New York City Department of Education assessed each high school’s college and career readiness success by measuring “how well students are prepared for life after high school” on the basis of: percent of the graduating class that passed advanced courses, percent of the graduating class that met English and math standards, and percent of the graduating class who enrolled in a post-secondary institution (New York City Department of Education, 2013). Each of these three categories are allotted a point value, so that a school can receive an overall college and career readiness score of anywhere between 0 and 10; 10 being the maximum possible score. I aggregated the college and career readiness scores for individual high schools in Districts 2, 8, and 32 (respectively), and proceed to calculate an average college and career readiness score for each of the three districts. This score ranges from 4.2 in District 8, 4.4 in District 32, and 6.3 in District 2, indicating that District 2 is most successful of the three
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districts, according to the rubric enlisted by the New York City Department of Education, in providing school-based resources and support toward student post-secondary planning.

This brief analysis shines a light on how school-based resources (counselors), post-secondary planning and college access, and other educational or social policies and processes can coalesce in order to provide a structural context for the guidance gap among high schools in New York City. It also lifts up how, in many cases, schools that serve higher-need students – like students with disabilities or those with limited English proficiency – can be clustered in particular geographic districts. District 2 houses many of the “wealthiest” neighborhoods in New York City, with many schools limiting admission to only those who live in the district, and provides students with a relatively low student-to-counselor ratio and high college and career readiness score. It also serves a relatively low proportion of high-need students compared to Districts 8 and 32. In contrast, Districts 8 and 32 are situated in more “neglected”, gentrifying neighborhoods, boxing-out longtime residents from affordable housing and employment opportunities, and co-locating charter schools inside traditional public schools. Schools located in Districts 8 and 32 exhibit elevated student-to-counselor ratios in comparison to schools in District 2, while District 8 and 32 schools received a noticeably lower college and career readiness score from the New York City Department of Education than that of District 2. I am not trying to prove causality or a statistical relationship, but rather illustrating connections among and between policies and social processes that provide a structural context for the guidance gap among New York City public high schools.

Banking College Knowledge: How the Guidance Gap Plays out Inside Schools

Just as various policies and social processes come together in order to provide a structural context for the guidance gap, central to how the guidance gap plays out inside many
high schools are the ways that school-based resources described earlier in this chapter do not come together to help students develop situated, in-depth college admissions knowledge and experiences. Traditionally, schools have relied on parents and college counselors to help students make post-secondary choices and act as guides during post-secondary planning (Lindsey & Gable, 2013; Venegas & Hallett, 2008). However, while most parents of first generation-to-college students amply encourage their children to apply to college, they do not always have the firsthand experience of navigating the post-secondary planning process, alongside necessary resources and time (Chajet, 2011; Kirst & Venenzia, 2004). As such, helping students make informed and relevant post-secondary choices – the task of “filling” the guidance gap in many schools – falls squarely on an oftentimes overworked counselor with swelling student ratios (Kimura-Walsh et. al., 2009). In the absence of necessary counselor supports, like post-secondary planning curricula and a distributed guidance model that includes school-wide staff and teachers, many counselors in these schools have no choice but to triage, like an overwhelmed ER doctor. In this scenario, counselors are only able wholly serve those high-performing students who are a shoe-in for college, or students at-risk of not graduating (Kimura-Walsh, et. al., 2009; Perna et. al., 2008). This leaves limited time for quality one-on-one counseling made available to the rest of the junior and senior classes who are in need of guidance or support.

In place of quality, engaging, consistent one-on-one work with all students to help them make meaningful and relevant post-secondary decisions, many high schools often rely on a shorthand, top-down approach to post-secondary planning. In this model, adult counselors who possesses college admissions knowledge and information deposit the information they believe students need to make post-secondary decisions, rather than an inquiry-driven approach to
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Counseling that emphasizes post-secondary planning as an experience. This faintly comes out in Michelle Obama’s comments to those Georgian high school students when she underscored the idea, “I’m giving you some insights”. It is also reminiscent of the banking method of classroom instruction Paulo Freire (1970) described in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In Freire’s words,

> Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories...instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat…the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits (p. 244)

In the absence of student-centered, one-on-one counseling that encourages students to make use of college admissions information within their personal contexts, checklists, college admissions steps, or college admissions booklets rife with complicated information are typical resources found in school guidance offices. This approach treats post-secondary planning as a generic process, rather than a meaningful and inquiry-driven experience. If a student *does* receive one-on-one time with a counselor, this time is brief. It usually involves the review of a checklist in order to assemble a college list, based on generic information about the student that the counselor gleans from a student report card, like course grades or attendance. And, perhaps a hurried chat, before she must move on to the next student in her swelling caseload. College information and knowledge is considered bankable currency, rather than meaningful and situated. Lori Chajet and Sierra Stoneman-Bell (2008/2009) typify this by explaining,
Rather than using student-centered, inquiry-driven, experiential approaches, [many counselors] resort to telling students what they need to know and then expect them to follow the necessary steps to get into college. The result: many…students blindly follow a rote college application process rather than taking control of it themselves…many end up at colleges that do not meet their needs or expectations; others, after realizing that they never fully understood their financial aid packages, are unable to make their first payment and never begin; and still others, despite their desire to attend, never complete the application process (p. 41).

The “rote”, mechanical nature of this approach to post-secondary planning that many students experience – particularly those enrolled in low-resourced schools without necessary one-on-one counseling with counselors or other important resources – hinges on information and facts, rather than making meaningful choices based on personal context. When post-secondary planning does not hold meaning for students, by way of “student-centered” or “experiential” approaches guided by school staff, they cannot strategically make use of dense information toward making perceptive and savvy choices about their future. College admissions knowledge and information is irrelevant to students if they are unable to contextualize it; if they are unable to make sense of it. As a result, as Chajet and Stoneman-Bell (2008/2009) highlight, many students may end up making ill-informed college decisions, or never attend college at all.

The fundamental problem with this method of post-secondary counseling is that it privileges college admissions knowledge and information over the process of using it. It neglects the highly situated, complex nature of college information that is contingent on how students make use of this information within the context of their own lives. Simply possessing or having this knowledge is not enough, since using it within a student’s own personal, familial, financial, and social lives in order to navigate the college landscape and make decisions about their future is the very nature of this experience. It is what makes post-secondary planning an experience rather than a checklist. In most cases, this neglect is not to the fault of an overworked counselor, but rather the only option they have without adequate resources or personnel to support their
A local New York City example of how post-secondary planning can be treated like bankable currency is the 156-page *New York City College Planning Handbook*. Made available online, this handbook is distributed to students throughout the city, and is commonly found in college and guidance counselor offices. In the absence of quality one-on-one counseling, this handbook is the main source of support for many students. The lengthy document is rife with information and college vocabulary, as well as many tables and graphs. It contains sixteen graphs or data tables, and fourteen checklists or series of “steps”. In order to effectively navigate and use the handbook, it requires a number of skills – such as interpreting graphs and tables, translating data and statistics, and learning new vocabulary within the context of post-secondary planning. In other words, it reads like a “how to” guide or direction manual. As a supplementary resource, this handbook can be helpful. However, without adequate counseling and support from adults to help students make sense of this information within their own lives, this handbook is meaningless.

Throughout my years of working with young people in New York City as a researcher, youth organizer, college access specialist, and college professor, I have come across many examples of how this banking approach toward post-secondary planning plays out in the lives of students. For example, years back I began to have conversations with my own college students about their experiences in high school with the process of applying to college, since most were recent graduates of New York City public schools. One that always stands out in my mind is the case of Alison. Her post-secondary planning process very much mirrors a banking, and also reveals potential consequences of such an approach. She is one of the brightest students I have ever taught, and was studying education at a local City University of New York (CUNY) college.
when I met her. Three years prior to having her as a student in an education course I was teaching, she had graduated from a large, comprehensive high school that only had three counselors to support over 1,000 seniors at the time of her own senior year. She was to be the first in her family to go to college, and took that role very seriously. According to Alison, her school had no formal protocol for supporting students during post-secondary planning, meaning it never required students to meet with the college counselors, and there was no kind of post-secondary planning curriculum in classes. So the onus, even from the start, was on Alison. She explained to me that,

> When I would go to the college office starting in my junior year, they pretty much just threw brochures on schools or a checklist at you. They didn’t really help you to fill out financial aid and college applications, or help you understand how to make choices. I didn’t know how to do that, my parents didn’t know how, so I had to figure it out on my own. When I was looking at these applications, it was like a foreign language.

> Even those brochures and checklists were never formally distributed to all students. Only students who took initiative to visit the college office would receive them. For Alison, this instigated a heightened stress because, as she explained,

> One of the checklists that I found in the college office at the end of my junior year, it tells you all the steps you should take starting freshman year for college admissions. But, they never gave that to you at freshman orientation or anything. I felt like I was so behind, I didn’t start planning for everything until the end of junior year. But, the checklist, it prepares you starting from freshman year, telling you when to start taking your SATs, when to do this and that, when you should have things done.

> In Alison’s experience, the college counselors really only helped her mail out college applications, and provided her shorthand information about colleges. She was tasked the very big job of processing and filtering this information toward making college decisions. She told me that, “I didn’t know what I was doing, and my parents didn’t know what they were doing. Do
you know how many things I probably screwed up? I felt lost”. Alison followed the rote steps of a generic checklist without really taking control of her post-secondary planning process; without making meaningful decisions based on her larger goals within the context of the vast college landscape.

And, there were consequences with this approach. Alison attended four different colleges in three years, bouncing around between City University of New York four- and two-year schools, as well as State University of New York schools. Due to a combination of financial aid, family situations, and personal preferences, it took her four colleges and three years to settle into a place that seemed suitable toward completing her goal of becoming a teacher. “I mean, I don’t blame my counselor,” Alison reflected, “There were so many of us, and not enough of them. But I don’t think they were very helpful. I just wish they could have helped us figure out what the right place is for you”.

A Disconnect between College Access and Readiness in Policy and Practice: A Piece of the Problem

Alison’s story, among many others I have learned along the way, reminds me how the guidance gap can deeply influence the everyday lives of students. However, stories like Alison’s also underscore the need for policy to be more responsive to school needs and support them in order to meaningfully and effectively help students navigate the complex landscape of post-secondary planning.

An overreliance on counselors and banking approach toward managing post-secondary planning with students, analogous to that of Alison’s school, is entrenched in the very nature of college access and readiness policy across the U.S. In this current moment in education, policy tends to manage college readiness and access with accountability systems, applying indicators that almost exclusively measure the academic element of readiness; like academic content or
critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Mishkind, 2014). A number of recent policy studies that examine state-by-state definitions of college readiness reveal that *none* include concepts explicitly related to post-secondary planning or skills associated with successfully navigating the this process (see: Conforti, 2014; McMurrer et al., 2013; Mishkind, 2014). In other words, no states have college access and readiness policy that explicitly includes or holds schools accountable for *supporting* students toward navigating post-secondary planning. Even in cases when local or state education policy does hold high schools accountable for graduating students who enroll in college, as is the case in New York City, there is no systematic offer of technical support to help schools reach that goal, such as post-secondary planning curricula or coaching that helps schools develop purposeful school-based programming. Current policy focuses on the *outputs* of students navigating the post-secondary planning process, rather than school-based programming or resources for schools to effectively realize these outputs. This engenders a marked disconnect between how policy defines or holds schools accountable for college readiness and access, and the actual needs or skills that students and schools require to meet desired policy outcomes.

Since policy offers little technical support or resources when it comes post-secondary planning, schools are, in a sense, left on their own to make decisions about how they manage this important element of college readiness and access. Chapter three will take a more comprehensive look at how this policy problem plays out in New York City public schools. Without effective provision from policy that prioritizes ways to support schools – policy support that helps direct schools on how to do program work that addresses student needs – many schools are left with few options *but* to use a banking approach that privileges college admissions knowledge over an inquiry-driven post-secondary planning experience. This model oftentimes relies solely on
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guidance staff, like in Alison’s high school, even widening resource disparities among public high schools.

**The Guidance Gap in Research: Another Strand of the Problem**

While my own observations of the guidance gap, explicated above in broad brushstrokes, provide a window through which to interpret the imbalanced landscape of college access and planning work inside high schools, I wanted to understand how *research* treats the topic. While the guidance gap, as a specific term, is not explicitly used in academic research, the idea behind it – how it plays out inside high school schools – is adequately documented.

**Contextualizing College Knowledge within College Access and Readiness**

College guidance counseling and post-secondary planning are implicated within a larger web of elements that work toward a comprehensive definition of college readiness and access. How young people use college admissions knowledge or information in order to make post-secondary decisions is a key component toward students successfully going to - and graduating from - college. However college readiness research disproportionately focuses on the academic element, privileging aspects like academic preparedness (measured by tests like the SAT/ACT), core academic skills (things like critical thinking or research skills, also measured by tests like the SAT/ACT), and in a relatively recent turn, non-cognitive academic skills like motivation, time-management, and self-regulation (Boden, 2011; Contreras, 2011; Lombardi et. al., 2014; Lombardi et. al., 2012; Moore et. al., 2010; Morton, 2011; Porter & Polikoff, 2012; Reid & Moore III, 2008; Watt et. al., 2011).

To illustrate this point, I conducted a search of “college readiness” in the SAGE academic database that includes over 700 peer-reviewed journals. This search returned 357 articles. The majority of this yield addresses at least one of the three abovementioned aspects of
college readiness that dominates research on the topic. I would argue that this trend is largely
directed by policy initiatives that rely on student data related to academic preparedness in order
to measure whether schools and districts are graduating “college ready students” (Mishkind,
2014). These policy priorities, as I argued earlier, influence the programming and counseling
approaches that schools take to college readiness and access, which similarly influences, I will
argue, how research treats the topic.

Alongside the academic and non-cognitive aspects, a nascent body of research that
highlights the role of non-academic elements is beginning to contribute toward an understanding
of college readiness that is more holistic in nature (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012; Conley,
2011; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009; Conley, 2008; Duckwork et. al., 2007). These authors
all call for an understanding of college readiness that includes non-academic and non-cognitive
elements. Examples of these non-academic components researchers have offered include grit
(Duckwork et. al., 2007), academic tenacity (Gurantz & Borsato, 2012) and college and financial
aid knowledge (McDonough & Calderone, 2006).

I critically analyzed current research on college access and readiness. From this analysis I
developed five primary emphases that reside in the research toward defining, understanding, and
examining college access and readiness. Below is a brief description of each:

1. Academic knowledge and basic skills

One strand of research focuses on academic knowledge and basic cognitive skills as a
foundation of college readiness, specific to each academic discipline or subject. For instance, an
understanding of various literary techniques in English is an example of academic knowledge.
Teaching content like factoring equations by way of rote memorization of algorithms is an
example of academic knowledge (factoring equations) alongside basic skills (rote memorization
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of algorithms) (roderick et. al, 2009). this dimension of college readiness tends to be associated with the primary goal of traditional everyday classroom instruction in K-12 schools. They are relatively easy to test by way of standardized testing, and have a long tradition of doing so.

2. core academic skills

Core academic skills span across academic disciplines. Common examples are things like writing, critical thinking, or research skills. They tend to be highly valued by colleges and are essential toward successfully completing college coursework. Conley (2008) argues, via over twenty years of research on the topic, that one of the most significant differences in skill requirements between high school and college coursework is centered around this idea of core academic skills: the type and amount of expected reading and writing, along with those analytic skills required to do this kind of reading and writing. This core academic skill dimension of college and career readiness is tested on standardized tests, like the SAT or ACT. These skills show up in Common Core State Standards in an effort to lead to creation of district-level curricula, and assessment, in order to improve things like critical-thinking skills in math and English.

3. non-cognitive skills

Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman (heckman & rubinstein, 2001) popularized the term non-cognitive, arguing that things like motivation, time management, and self-regulation are important for later life outcomes. Because they are more difficult to measure than academic knowledge and basic or core skills, and are not part of traditional teacher training, and tend to be less of a focus in K-12 schooling. Many youth development and after-school programs integrate non-cognitive skills into their programming. Things like peer education or youth leadership are examples of programming that intentionally focuses on building these non-
cognitive skills in young people. Research indicates that non-cognitive skills are increasingly more important for students as they transition into college and, subsequently, the world outside of schooling (Morton, 2011). While some strands of research aim at examining non-cognitive skills as a predictor of college success (Komarraju et. al., 2013), a dominant turn in research on non-cognitive skills is a call on policymakers to better integrate non-cognitive skills into policy measurement and evaluation (Heckman, 2000). Patrick C. Kyllonen (2012) draws on a number of research studies as well as policy work in order to suggest viable ways to integrate non-cognitive skills into measuring college readiness, such as situational judgment tests. She concludes that there is, “…enough literature available now to suggest some generalizations regarding measurement…there is a need for measures of noncognitive [sic] skills that are more similar to performance tests. Examples of these include collaborative problem solving tests…and creativity tests” (p. 96).

4. College admissions knowledge

Things like understanding how to get into college and navigate the admissions process, paying for college, and taking out loans are all examples of the college knowledge dimension of college readiness. While they are non-cognitive, they are more specific to the post-secondary planning context. David T. Conley (2011) explains that, “Many students fail to apply to college simply because the process seems so daunting, and they feel intimidated or overwhelmed by all of the requirements and activities associated with the application process (p. 23). While college knowledge has not traditionally been considered an element of college readiness, a developing body of research supports the idea that this is a vital step toward becoming ready to go to, and succeed in, college (Conley, 2011; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Knight, 2003; Roderick et. al., 2009). This, alongside evolving “college for all” policy, has tasked schools to rethink how they
managing college knowledge development. Successful strategies employed in schools, when applicable, can be things like emphasizing and developing a college-going culture, or implementing a college inquiry curriculum during student advisory periods that teaches students about the college admissions process. A growing body of literature documents the nature of gaps across groups of students in college knowledge, particularly along racial and income lines, providing evidence that the more college and financial aid knowledge a student has, alongside effective college counseling in schools, the more likely a student is to enroll in college (Bell et al., 2009; De la Rosa, 2006; King, 1996; Plank & Jordan, 2001).

5. Persistence

For a student to succeed in and complete college, it requires the “tenacity to persist through academic challenges” alongside knowledge and skills (McAlister & Mevs, 2012). Schools research describes this as resilience. It is important to note that resilience tends to focus on individuals who have endured tremendous hardships, whereas persistence teases out resilience to encompass all students (Duckworth et al., 2007; Rutter, 2006; Weigler, 2011). College puts significant demands, both academic and other, on students, especially for first generation-to-college students. Resiliency speaks to the ability of students to overcome obstacles, academic and social, that could get in the way of them finishing college. Academic tenacity and the notion of grit are dominant features of persistence in research (Duckwork et. al., 2007). Some school and afterschool organizations incorporate this idea of persistence into their programming, particularly when targeting specific supports for “at-risk” students. An example of this can be Bridge to College in New York City, aimed at first generation-to-college students. The program assigns college coaches to students during the summer before college enrollment to support needs that may come up during this precarious time. The Posse Foundation is another example,
which assembles cohorts of students who will go to college together and does intensive work to provide participants with a built-in community even before they formally begin college. Both programs intentionally build persistence that can “positively impact the likelihood of students overcoming perceived barriers to entering college (Weigler, 2011). As Conley and French (2013) explain, “Persistence can be developed systematically and mastered by all students. It does not require experiencing adversity, although it is a particularly powerful skill for those students experiencing adversity to have” (p. 11).

**Poking Holes in the Problem: How Current Research Frames Young People and the Post-Secondary Planning Process**

Upon identifying and clarifying these five research trajectories – although in many cases they are interrelated – that reflect the landscape of college readiness research, policy, and practice, I began to critically examine research that falls within the fourth category: the college admissions knowledge component. This is in an effort to clarify the nature of current research playing out on the topic of how students develop, and make use of, college admissions knowledge toward post-secondary planning, and the role of schools and college counseling. My ensuing critical analysis of research will pull from more sources that my initial search, but to begin I went back to the Sage Journal database and ran a search for “urban”, “college knowledge”, and “school” between the years 2000 and 2015. The search yielded 67 results, some solely devoted to college admissions knowledge and counseling, and others that integrate the concept into a larger research framework. Scrolling through the results, I made a few initial observations.

“Urban” means poor, Black and Latino students (Knaggs et al., 2013; Smith, 2009). More specifically, research on urban students and post-secondary planning is largely centered on documenting or describing problems and deficits. Things like “potholes”, “barriers”, “talent loss”, and “limitations” are all ideas that do not only manifest in titles, but also in the ways that
research and subsequent findings are framed (Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Knaggs et. al., 2013; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Smith, 2009). For instance, Lindsey & Gable (2013) examine why college-ready urban Black, Latina/o, or Biracial students are not applying to college. One of their three guiding research questions, “What aspects of knowledge of college admissions, financial aid, and other processes are lacking that hinder the higher education pursuits of [these] students”, already takes a deficit-guided approach. The authors use a social capital lens, which is a dominant theoretical or conceptual framework used in research examining college admissions knowledge (Ahn, 2010; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Stephan, 2013). Lindsey & Gable (2013) incorporate qualitative and quantitative data collected, examining a questionnaire and focus groups, in order to make a number of conclusions from their data analysis. Of these conclusions, some are: “low levels of [student] participation in college prep programs”, “quantitative data confirmed that students lacked knowledge of financial aid processes”, and “more than half of students did not seek help with college process” (p. 14-15). Rather than fanning out in order to examine more systematic, structural processes and policies (school-level, and beyond) that could contribute to student and parent disengagement with the college admissions process, the authors primarily locate this disengagement and “lack” of college admissions knowledge within individual students. They also define parent and student engagement in the post-secondary planning process with very traditional, middle-class understandings of engagement, rather than challenging these assumptions and trying to examine the ways students in their study considered or defined engagement in their own words.

Rather than a social capital lens, Kristan M. Venegas (2006) enacts a cultural ecological framework that takes into account family and home, peer, school, and community contexts in
order to examine how low-income students develop an understanding of financial aid via Web-based resources. Venegas conducts focus groups and interviews. She concludes that few students voiced a concern with access to technology and computers, which she defines as material resources. She thus concludes that what is “missing” from those students’ environments who did not exhibit an adequate understanding of financial aid processes is access to instrumental knowledge that is used to navigate the financial aid process. She argues, “Students’ stories recount a lack of instrumental knowledge and access to that knowledge when navigating the financial aid process…from the cultural ecological perspective, this instrumental knowledge was rarely available in school, peer, or familial environments” (p. 1667). Rather than locating a deficit or barrier solely within the individual students, studies along this vein locate the deficit within a student’s larger context of family, community, and peers (Alvarado & Turley, 2012; Grodsky & Jones, 2007).

Additionally, a chunk of the research that examines the “barriers” or “disparities” during the post-secondary planning process among Black and Latina/o students describes how this inequity plays out inside schools (Bell et al., 2009; Corwin et al., 2004; De La Rosa, 2006; Gonzalez, Stone, & Jovel, 2003; Venezia & Kirst, 2005). As an illustrative example, Erin Kimura-Walsh and additional authors (2009) enact an “Opportunity to Learn” framework in order to unpack disparities in the college preparation experiences of Latina high and non-high achievers within a school. The authors find that the primary source students sought out for helping toward post-secondary planning was the college counselor. However, students had incredibly varied experiences depending on their class rank. Students in the top 10 percent of achievement – those highest achieving students – received full access to their school’s “College Corner”, offering one-on-one, ongoing college advising. In contrast, all other students were
actually prevented access from the “College Corner”, along with the other benefits associated with it like consistent access to on-demand, one-on-one college counseling; even denied essential resources like college application forms, based solely on their class rank. Melissa A. Martinez (2014) reveals similar findings in her case study of 10 Latina/o seniors and one counselor. Her study finds that post-secondary planning opportunities are not distributed equally among students, as many seniors were barred access to a college fair. She also describes that college admissions knowledge and information was not distributed among all students via a comprehensive curriculum, as some teachers integrated college admissions knowledge into their daily classroom practice, while others did not.

Research that describes and reveals unequal access to post-secondary planning resources is necessary in order to properly document how schools manage, or sometimes mismanage, this aspect of college access and readiness. However it does not address the larger structural issues – such as overwhelmed and overworked counselors, or the unequal distribution of resources among schools within a given district – that feed this inequity. Furthermore, rather than looking to or seeking out meaningful alternatives to the traditional banking model of college counseling, studies like these reify the model, calling for things like more guidance counselors in order to fill the guidance gap, rather than problematizing this approach. As such, much of the reviewed research on post-secondary planning that happens inside schools treats college admissions knowledge as currency – as something that students have or do not have. There is little talk about how students make use of this knowledge within varying contexts, and instead focuses on the various sources of knowledge. Most of the research reviewed describes barriers or inequity in an attempt to fill the guidance gap, rather than examine reasons why the guidance gap exists, and strategies that could challenge or disrupt it altogether.
Even more troubling with much of the reviewed research is the way that it frames and positions young people: as objects; objects of policy, objects of schooling, objects that receive (or do not receive) information about college. There is little research on post-secondary planning and college access that positions young people as active agents of change in their own lives. For instance, in the Erin Kimura-Walsh and additional authors (2009) study described above, it documents students who are prevented access to the College Corner, but does not examine the ways that those 90% of students did seek out knowledge and information about college; even in the absence of the College Corner support. Kristan M. Venegas’ (2006) study on how students make use of Web-based financial aid support describes how one student successfully navigated the process by way of his peer counseling training, yet Venegas does not interrogate how that student made use of his peer counseling to help other students who needed help.

Some promising models are beginning to take form. Within the larger context of college transition, Cecilia Rios-Aguilar & Judy Marquez Kiyama (2012) suggest enacting a funds of knowledge approach that focuses on the “richness and diversity embedded in Latina/o households and how the academic outcomes of students vary according to this diversity” (p. 10). What is particularly appealing in a funds of knowledge approach is that it works out of the context in which a student live – their families – and examines how students effectively make use of knowledge and skills they develop within the family context in order to successfully navigate the complex process of transitioning to college. A funds of knowledge approach frames the family as a useful, effective source of support during student post-secondary planning, rather than a deficit approach. We need more approaches to research that examine how students, their peers, their families, and their communities act as sources of support and resource during the complex post-secondary planning process, especially around how students develop and make use
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of college knowledge.

Within the broader context of research on/about young people, Shawn Ginwright, Julio Cammarota, and Pedro Noguera (2005) argue (and show in their broad research on young people) that, “Although young people in low-income communities confront barriers that constrain their personal development, they also have demonstrated the capacity to resist and challenge unjust institutional practices” (p. 29-30). The deficit, “barrier”, “pothole” model that lives inside much of the research I have examined above does not make room for students as agents of change during their experiences of planning for college. Instead, students are framed as objects onto which this process happens; onto which policy and school-based programming happens. This is not only problematic in how it frames young people, but also in how it frames the larger issue of the guidance gap. It reifies the idea of the guidance gap being just that: a gap that needs to be filled by more (adult) counselors, rather than seeking out thoughtful and innovative strategies to actively include young people in the post-secondary planning process.

A Way out of the Gap: Motivation for the Study and Youth Leadership for College Access

Motivated to move beyond framing young people by deficits and problems during their post-secondary planning experiences, I look to a special program currently playing out in a number of local New York City public high schools to provide the setting for this dissertation. The Youth Leadership for College Access program is two former high school teachers’ response to the guidance gap. In 2011, Lori Chajet and Janice Bloom founded College Access: Research & Action, an organization that creates spaces to address the needs of first generation-to-college students through a number of programs that bring together schools and community-based organizations.
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One of the programs, *Youth Leadership for College Access*, positions young people to engage their peers, and themselves, in the post-secondary planning process. These young people, Youth Leaders, are trained over three weeks during the summer on the entire post-secondary planning process. Learning the ins and outs of complex aspects of the process, like financial aid or art of creating a well-balanced college list, they also develop important skills related to working with their peers, such as counseling skills, workshop development, and data tracking. They learn what it takes to not only complete the post-secondary planning process for themselves, but also how to make it more engaging and effective for their peers. The summer training culminates in these young people taking on the formal role of Youth Leader in their schools, working inside a college office or other school space, come September – designing and running student workshops on college related topics, working one-on-one or in small groups with high school juniors and seniors as they plan for college, and generally acting as a credible source of college knowledge and expertise among their peers.

In January 2013 I began work with the program, tasked with co-developing and organizing the summer training with Lori Chajet. Prior to this, Youth Leaders received a few of daylong trainings scattered throughout the summer. Lori and I re-conceptualized the training into a three-week, intensive training program that would play out on three local college campuses. Following the summer training, I spent the 2013-2014 school year with Youth Leaders, supporting them with professional development trainings, visiting their sites, talking with them, and gaining an intimate understanding of that cohort of Youth Leaders and their work. This dissertation will explore this work toward reimagining post-secondary planning as a student-centered, inquiry-driven, relevant experience. My experiences planning, and facilitating, this
Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All training, will be the subject of one of the ensuing chapters of this dissertation, alongside a more in-depth description of the research site in chapter two.

Research Questions

The guidance gap is a messy knot that lives inside many high schools. It is a knot generated by many strands of thread. One of these strands – underdeveloped policy that provides little technical guidance to support schools on how to “do” post-secondary planning with students – works toward securing the knot. Policy begets practice, and the knot grows a little tighter by a strand of dominant practice in many schools that relies on banking college admissions information in the absence of deliberate, meaningful work with students on how to make use of this knowledge within their personal contexts; a strand that privileges post-secondary planning information over the context in which students make sense of it. Practice begets research, and the knot becomes even more taut and entwined by a dominant strand of academic research that centers on student deficits and frames young people as objects in the post-secondary planning process, rather than “actors who possess the rights and abilities to shape policy” and practice in their daily lives (Ginwright, Cammarota, and Noguera, 2005). These strands mingle and interweave within larger social policies.

This dissertation is born out of this intricate knot. Or, rather, born out of a search for a way out of the knot. In search for ways that young people can be “radical agents of change” (Fielding, 2001) toward not simply filling the guidance gap, but disrupting it altogether by making post-secondary planning a meaningful, relevant, student-centered experience for their peers, rather than a rote set of mechanical steps of a generic process. In this dissertation I want to examine and answer:
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- How does the Youth Leadership for College Access program reimagine the post-secondary planning process?

I also want to examine and understand:

- What role do Youth Leaders play in transforming the post-secondary planning process as a meaningful, student-centered experience for their peers?

Put another way,

- How do Youth Leaders act as agents of change in the post-secondary futures of their peers?

Outline of Chapters

This dissertation will explore how Youth Leaders act as agents of change in the lives of their peers within the context of post-secondary planning, by reimagining it as an inquiry-driven and student-centered experience, and how these collective actors understand this transformation. In this first chapter I examined how the guidance gap, as a problem with roots in both policy and school-based practice, is currently framed in academic research positions young people as unagentic objects with deficits that must be mitigated. I also briefly introduced the research site, Youth Leadership for College Access, and will go on to highlight the theoretical backdrop with which I will engage toward reframing young people as agentic and purposeful actors toward change in their post-secondary futures.

In chapter two I describe the research design that centers this dissertation, an ethnography anchored by dynamic narrative inquiry, as well as the data I will examine, more about the research site, and my analytical approach to unpacking the data. The third chapter grounds this dissertation in the context of New York City by critically analyzing how the guidance gap plays out in local education policy as well as inside schools. I bring the relationship between policy and practice to the fore by way of policy analysis and a critical inquiry into how high schools in
New York City manage post-secondary planning. This chapter will provide the political and education context that is transformed by the innovative work of Youth Leaders.

Chapter four describes and examines the *Youth Leadership for College Access* Summer Institute training, demonstrating how building adaptive expertise (Kirshner & Gall, 2010) was one way of bringing together Youth Leaders’ lived experience with college admissions information and skills development. I argue that by emphasizing adaptive expertise, the program reimagines post-secondary planning as a meaningful, student-centered, relevant experience, instead of a mechanical set of steps and decontextualized information. Chapters five and six lifts up key elements of the work that Youth Leaders do toward building and sustaining peer-to-peer work that makes the post-secondary planning process meaningful and personal, anchored by an analysis of Youth Leader writings. Chapter five hones in on the peers that Youth Leaders help and the dilemmas these peers present to Youth Leaders, while chapter six examines the methods and strategies that Youth Leaders use toward grounding post-secondary planning by the lives, and personal contexts, of their peers. Finally, chapter seven reflects on the contributions this dissertation can make toward rethinking school change by reimagining post-secondary planning as a meaningful and relevant experience, and the starring role that young people can play toward this radical possibility (Anyon, 2007).

**Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: A Space In-Between**

Because the *Youth Leadership for College Access* program is unique – according to Chajet and Bloom there is only one other program in the country that addresses post-secondary planning similarly – I wanted a better way to understand Youth Leaders and their work. In search of a way to frame the work of Youth Leaders, and how this work contributes toward school change that fundamentally disrupts the ways their schools think about and operationalize post-
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secondary planning, I started to think about the unique position in which Youth Leaders live inside their schools. They are students who are planning for college themselves, just like many of their peers. They are also working in their schools to help support these peers during post-secondary planning, acting as reliable college access coordinators who have received extensive training. It is an exceptional position that interrupts the traditionally thick and pronounced line between staff and student in public schools.

This interruption also plays out in the particularities of the work that Youth Leaders do inside their schools. They navigate practitioner knowledge about post-secondary planning and college admissions *alongside* an intimate understanding about their peers and the communities in which they live. The everyday work that Youth Leaders do with their peers brings together different discourses and experiences, rather than privileging one over the other. In order to help their peers, Youth Leaders sample from knowledge and information about post-secondary planning, counseling and communication skills, alongside their intimate understanding about what it is like to be a student, bringing all of this into their work. This is a markedly different approach to post-secondary planning than the banking approach I discussed earlier in this chapter that tends to happen inside many under-resourced schools. A banking approach privileges knowledge and information associated with post-secondary planning and college admissions without always accounting for how this information can be used by students within their personal contexts and lives. The unique space that Youth Leaders occupy – a space in-between – emerges as a useful framework to unpack the work that Youth Leaders do, and the unique position required to do this work.

Phillip Bromberg (1996; 1998) writes about the complexities of the mind, describing it as a system comprised of related “shifting, nonlinear, discontinuous states of consciousness in an
ongoing dialectic with the healthy illusions of unitary selfhood” (1996, p. 511). As such, for a person to live authentically and self-aware this “dialectic” moves between separate and united self-states. As Bromberg explains, “Each self-state is a piece of a functional whole, informed by a process of internal negotiations with the realities, values, affects, and perspectives of others” (Bromberg, 1996, p. 513). For Bromberg, there is no “real” self. Rather, the ability to define and better understand the multiplicity of selfhood leads to a “functional whole”. He uses this intricate concept of the mind in order to inform the ways psychoanalysts and psychologists treat and diagnosis patients. In order to better illustrate his point, he uses the metaphor of “standing in spaces”, concluding that “health is the ability to stand in the spaces between realities without losing any of them…‘standing in spaces’ is a shorthand way of describing a person’s relative capacity to make room at any given moment for subjective reality” (Bromberg, 1996, p. 515).

An important idea behind Bromberg’s “spaces” is that there is potential in such spaces, especially in terms of the role of the analyst. Bromberg explains that, “The analyst, guided by the patient and by his own experience…allows himself to form relationships with each of the patient’s selves or self-states” (Bromberg, 1996, p. 519). This process of building relationships with different patient selves aids the analyst in providing more effective, holistic treatment.

While Bromberg’s framework is grounded in psychoanalysis and used for individualized treatment, it is an interesting approach toward describing and examining Youth Leaders’ position in their schools in a way that pushes against dichotomies. Bromberg describes the notion of standing in spaces as an “ongoing dialectic”, and this is quite fitting for Youth Leaders. They are not only students in their schools, but at the same time not an adult teacher or counselor. Instead they move across and among these spaces fluidly, occupying them simultaneously. They sample from knowledge, information, and counseling skills that they learn during formal post-secondary
planning training they receive through the program, while also sampling from their peer expertise. They counsel their peers on college-related issues as well as personal issues, talking and reaching out to them as peers or friends. This unique position may offer Youth Leaders opportunity to access different “selves” of their peers, rather than simply the student “self” who adults can access. Youth Leaders live in the same communities as their peers, speak the same languages, walk the same hallways, however they have received a level of training and deep understanding about post-secondary planning—as well as counseling and communication skills—that their peers have not experienced. Bromberg’s metaphor of standing in spaces helps to clarify this position. I will argue that this unique position that Youth Leaders hold in their schools is where potential lives—potential to reimagine post-secondary planning and school change.

The Space in Which I Stand – Insights on the Larger Purpose

Just as the Youth Leaders stand in the space between student and practitioner, I stand in a unique space. The Urban Education program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where I write this dissertation, is a program that challenges educators to examine education practice and policy in a critical, applied method. Alongside my late mentor, Jean Anyon, I consider myself part of a community of critical educators and education researchers who interrogate the entrenched relationship between public policy, communities, and schools toward the pursuit of “radical possibilities” for meaningful change in the lives of young people and their communities (Anyon, 2014). Most everyone in the program has a number of years teaching in elementary and secondary schools under their belt. I, however, have limited experience teaching inside schools. My experience in education comes from teaching and working in alternative settings on the margins—community-based organizations, juvenile
detention facilities, afterschool programs, family literacy programs, and adult education sites. These experiences undoubtedly inform this dissertation.

Nearly four years of community organizing work and research here in New York City also informs this dissertation. Under the guidance of Norm Fruchter, I learned about community and youth organizing at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. I learned about, and experienced, how young people and parents and communities can, collectively, work toward meaningful change. Change in their own lives, and change in the lives of their families and neighbors and communities. Real change. It’s not always easy, and it doesn’t always happen when and where we want. However, when we purposely organize work and spaces that are led by and with young people (Fletcher & Vavrus, 2006) – led by and with communities – Jean Anyon’s idea of radical possibilities can be realized. It is through this work, and in these spaces, where communities and young people will “challenge, resist, and change the root cause of their suffering” (Ginwright & James, 2002).

The purpose of this project is to bring the voices and experiences of young people involved in making daily change – the everyday lives and work of Youth Leaders – to the center, because as Mike Rose (2009) keenly reminds us, “sometimes the view from off to the side is most revealing” (p. 17). While research can reify ideas about young people lead by deficits and problems, it can also reimagine and make room for possibility by listening to their stories and lives, by working alongside them, and by showing. With this research, and the story of Youth Leaders, I hope to show the transformative bedrock of an educative space when it is built by, and for, young people.
Chapter Two

Research Design

I describe this dissertation as an ethnographic study of a youth-generated space, anchored by dynamic narrative inquiry. The data collection process spanned from January 2013 through July 2014. This dissertation is robust because I draw on multiple and varied sources of data to triangulate (Creswell, 2013). This sampling of data – drawing on transcripts of focus groups and interviews, student writings and narratives, program documents, participant observation notes, New York City policy documents, and emails – was compiled in an NVivo database toward analysis. Additionally, survey data was collected and inputted in SPSS databases. I provide descriptions of the analytical process, as well as the research site, and brought data and data interpretations back to Youth Leaders and program staff throughout the process of analysis and writing (Denzin, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Sometimes this “member checking” was formal, during a focus group or Youth Leader meeting, while other times it was more informal, such through email with Youth Leaders or during a conversation with program staff. I also remained at the research site after the formal research was complete, and am still in contact with program directors and former as well as current Youth Leaders (Fetterman, 2010).

This chapter describes the research design that guides this dissertation. I begin by discussing the methodological foundations, and then describe the research site, data collection phases, and data consulted. I also explain and illustrate the approaches I took toward analyzing collected data, centered by Youth Leaders and their perspectives. Finally, I provide insights on
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my own position within the data and research site. All of these processes and approaches are directed by my research questions:

- *How does the Youth Leadership for College Access program reimagine the post-secondary planning process?*

- *What role do Youth Leaders play in transforming the post-secondary planning process as a meaningful, student-centered experience for their peers?*

- *How do Youth Leaders act as agents of change in the post-secondary futures of their peers?*

**Methodological Foundations**

Excerpt from Field Notes: March 7th, 2014:

> I was talking to Obi in the Student Success Center in between classes, and he was asking about the focus group we were going to do later that afternoon. I explained what a focus group is and why researchers like myself use them. He smiled really big and said, “That’s right, because we are experts. What we say matters…our words are important”.

The approach I take toward answering my research questions is one that understands social experience and meaning as constructed, subjective, and varied, and that through research of our lived experiences and interactions a researcher can share these perspectives (Creswell, 2013). I approach my research as an opportunity toward reimagining young people (Youth Leaders) as dynamic agents of change in their own lives, and more particularly in the lives of their peers (Luttrell, 2003). Put another way, I appreciate social science research as a way to, “enable researchers and those who are the subjects of research to change how they see themselves and are seen by others” (Luttrell, 2003, p. 147). This inquiry goes beyond an identity focus to an examination of processes and interactions of individuals in innovative social structures and relationships.

My research is influenced by ethnographies like that of Shawn Ginwright’s (2010) study of a community-based organization in Oakland, California, toward reimagining urban black
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Youth as purposeful actors with agency to make change in their own lives and larger communities. In Ginwright’s research, the vehicle young people use to make change possible is a process he calls “radical healing” (p. 8). Radical healing works to develop “the capacity of young people to act upon their environment in ways that contribute to the common good…and contributes to individual well-being, community health, and broader social justice, whereby young people can act on the behalf of others with hope, joy, and a sense of possibility” (p.8). For the purposes of my research, the catalyst toward developing Youth Leader “capacity” to “act upon their environment” is the Youth Leadership for College Access program, alongside the peer-to-peer connections that they foster with students in their schools. Ginwright explains his methodological influence of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s notion of portraiture, in that both Lawrence-Lightfoot and his own approach, “pays particular attention to the ways in which ‘goodness’ rather than pathology is practiced in everyday life. Studying what is good…rather than only describing problems” (p. 20). This idea of the study of “goodness” rather than problems, and the notion that sound research work should “both inform and inspire” (p. 21) is a driving methodological force of this dissertation. Rather than submitting to a deficit, pathology-driven perspective of young people, this dissertation will pay “particular attention” to the ways that Youth Leaders “inspire” their peers to seek out a meaningful post-secondary future.

I also describe this ethnographic dissertation as anchored by dynamic narrative inquiry. Put another way, this dissertation is framed by the function and goals of narrative inquiry. People use narrative and storytelling in order to do things, and as such it “mediates experience, knowledge, learning, and social change” (Daiute, 2014, p. 4). In other words, discourse is an activity and functions as a tool toward facilitating interactions. As such, narrative inquiry can help to engage participants – in this case, young people – to share and reflect on their
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experiences in relation to diverse circumstances and relationships in their lives, personal experiences, and knowledge. Dynamic narrative inquiry emphasizes the “interactive, communicative, purposeful nature of narrating, leading to strands of meaning researchers can identify to enhance findings about human problems, understandings, and behaviors” (Daiute, 2013, p. 29).

A particularly compelling principle of dynamic narrative inquiry, as it relates to this study, is the idea of “the use principle” (Daiute, 2014, p. 20). This underscores the idea that “discourse is activity”, and that, “Narrating functions as a tool to mediate individual and societal interactions” (Daiute, 2014, p. 20). Because my research questions are concerned with meaning, and how young people (Youth Leaders) make post-secondary planning a relevant, student-centered experience with their peers, dynamic narrative inquiry is a useful way to access how this meaning is enacted. Rather than simply locating themes in Youth Leader work by coding transcripts of interviews and observation notes, dynamic narrative inquiry helps me to show how themes are made use of – how themes are enacted by Youth Leaders – toward reimagining post-secondary planning.

This dissertation aims to bring the voices, experiences, and stories of Youth Leaders to the center. Because, in the words of Obi, what they say (and what they do) “matters”. By positioning Youth Leaders at the center of my research, I hope it will reveal the “nuances, diversities, and powerful uses of narrating” (Daiute, 2013, p. 10) among Youth Leaders toward documenting their work with peers.

The Research Site: Youth Leadership for College Access

Youth Leadership for College Access is one of a number of post-secondary focused programs facilitated by College Access: Research & Action (CARA). This particular program positions
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young people to engage their peers in the post-secondary planning and college transition process. Through comprehensive training and support in the summer, as well as throughout the school year, Youth Leaders develop skills and knowledge that they then use to not only improve their own educational outcomes, but also toward widening post-secondary options for their peers by way of facilitating workshops, working in small groups and one-on-one with peers, planning events, and generally acting as a credible and accessible source of post-secondary expertise. Four key elements work toward the program’s core functioning:

1. Youth Leader roles, responsibilities, work hours, and goals are clearly defined
2. Time is intentionally built into school schedule and space toward connecting Youth Leaders to their peers
3. Youth Leaders receive training and support throughout the year in relevant content areas, skill development, and ongoing supervision by adult supervisors
4. Youth Leaders make valuable contributions to their school and peers, and therefore are compensated through payment

There are three structural configurations that represent the kinds of sites that participate in the program. The first is a stand-alone school, meaning the school participates in the program without any community-based organization (CBO) partnership. The second represents a school/CBO partnership, which indicates that a school strategically partners with a local CBO in order to implement the program. In most cases like this, the CBO essentially runs most, if not all, post-secondary planning and guidance work in the school, such as providing resources and personnel. The third is a stand-alone CBO, which connotes a CBO that provides post-secondary planning and guidance in a local, community space that is altogether separate from a school.
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The program is built within existing school or CBO cultures, and therefore the inner-workings of the program plays out in different forms between schools. For instance, in some schools that have preexisting college or guidance offices, Youth Leaders work inside these offices, and students can make appointments to work with a Youth Leader on a particular topic – like working through a college application or making a well-balanced college list – or they can drop-in for help. However in other schools, those with advisory periods built in student’s schedules that are facilitated by teacher advisors, Youth Leaders work through these advisory periods in order to run workshops on relevant college topics and work one-on-one with their peers during advisory time. And even in other schools, Youth Leaders have caseloads, similar to a social worker, and they are responsible for reaching out and keeping track of those peers and their progress during post-secondary planning in their caseload. The idea behind this is to build Youth Leaders and their work within already existing school structures.

In order to become a Youth Leader, young people apply at their local school or CBO by completing an application. They are also interviewed by their school or CBO staff, and all final hiring decisions are made by such staff, not College Access: Research & Action. In most cases, current Youth Leaders (in those sites that have active Youth Leaders) are usually involved in the interview and decision-making process. While each site has their own method toward making these decisions, I will say that, having spoken to a number of adult supervisors and Youth Leaders about this process, they do not look for an ideal student. In other words, all Youth Leaders are not “A”, hyper-involved students. Some are. However, others are what many Youth Leaders refer to themselves as “average students” – students who are not involved in many afterschool clubs or sports; students who do not receive exceptional grades in their classes. Most adult supervisors explain that they look for new Youth Leaders who have “potential”, and those
who have enthusiasm for the work. There is no rubric or ideal type that sites use during the selection process.

Even though the work is structured differently depending on site, the activities that Youth Leaders do inside their schools or CBOs tend to be fairly cohesive. They predominantly plan and facilitate workshops for their peers that range from early awareness to financial aid, as well as work one-on-one and in small groups with their peers in order to work on a range of post-secondary planning activities, like registering for the SATs, making well-balanced college lists, completing a college application, personal counseling, and financial aid planning, among many other things. They also: plan events and college trips; complete data tracking in order to monitor and document their work; and, they create and maintain a college space in their school or CBO.

Alongside these more tangible parts of the job, Youth Leaders also provide their peers with a model, of sorts, for college going. In other words, they act as a leader in their schools within the context of post-secondary planning, and act as a credible source of all things college-

![Figure 2: College application tree in one school that Youth Leaders created in order to track and celebrate the colleges to which their peers apply](image-url)
related. The everyday particularities of their work will come into focus in two of the findings chapters of this dissertation.

Youth Leaders receive the bulk of their training during the summer, and in the case of the 2013-2014 school year this happened over the course of a three-week, intensive Summer Institute. The particularities of this training will be described in-depth during chapter four. Alongside Summer Institute, Youth Leaders participate in a number of daylong professional development trainings throughout the year. Usually, these trainings happen once in November in order to better prepare Youth Leaders to support their peers with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and in February in order to provide Youth Leaders with tools to support seniors during college selection and choosing a financial aid package, along with specific outreach techniques for 9th, 10th, and 11th grade. A third, which happens in June, brings Youth Leaders together to celebrate the year and their accomplishments. Additionally, Youth Leaders are offered a monthly “Advance and Connect” series which provides Youth Leaders time, and space, to further their understanding of relevant topics and connect with Youth Leaders across different sites. This was a new addition to the 2013-2014 school year.

Twelve different sites were part of the 2013-2014 Youth Leadership for College Access program: seven school-CBO partnerships, three stand-alone CBOs, and two stand-alone school sites. Given that some of the school-CBO partnership sites are housed on multi-school campuses, there were Youth Leaders placed in a total of nineteen different high schools throughout New York City, as well as in three stand-alone CBO sites.

In July 2013, 63 Youth Leaders between the ages of 15 and 19 attended the Summer Institute,
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accompanied by at least one site-based supervisor. Youth Leaders were:

- 62% female and 38% male
- 42% from English-only speaking households
- 28% Latino; 26% African-American; 15% Asian; 19% bi-racial; 12% other
- 64% U.S. born
- Largely first generation-to-college: 75% had a father who attained a GED/HS diploma or less (or unknown), and 60% had a mother with the same highest educational attainment (or unknown)

Data Collection Timeline

Formal data collection for this dissertation began in July 2013, at the start of Summer Institute, and ended in June 2014, at the end of the 2013-2014 Youth Leadership for College Access program year. However I also draw on 2013-2014 program planning and supporting documents and experiences, which began in January 2013 as we started 2013-2014 Summer Institute development. Figure 3 documents this data collection timeline.

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1 After the completion of Summer Institute, the 12th site joined the program right before the school year began with a demonstrated history of youth leadership work around student success. This site is a large high school broken up into a number of smaller schools that is partnered with a local CBO. This site does not reflect Youth Leader demographic information, as this information was collected during Summer Institute.
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Description of Data

For this ethnography, I draw upon a number of different sources, and places, for data in order to provide “corroborating evidence” toward triangulation (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). This helps to “shed light” on different perspectives – including my own – on the Youth Leadership for College Access program and Youth Leader work (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). It is a strategy to give validity to my findings. This data was included in an NVivo or SPSS database for analysis.

Drawing on these varied data sources is also a strategy to accesses the Youth Leader activity-meaning system, which Colette Daiute (2014) defines as, “depict[ing] an environment of everyday life – a cross-context slice of life – wherein relationships across different points of view by different actors in the system interact in some way” (p. 38). For the purposes of organizing dynamic narrative inquiry, particularly inquiry concerned with meaning, the activity-meaning system “make[s] visible and audible the network of relationships and interactions in which each narrative occurs” (p. 42). Therefore not only do I sample from a variety of data stakeholders (Youth Leaders, peers who worked with them, adult supervisors, and the larger
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policy and practice of college access in New York City), but I also asked interviewees to narrate “for different relevant purposes, from different perspectives… [and] for different audiences and different contexts” (p. 42). This all works toward sampling from the Youth Leader activity-meaning system.

Table 4 reviews my research questions and the data sources to which I turn in order to unpack these questions. The subsequent section will describe the referenced data in more detail.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Data sources toward addressing the question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| #1: How does the Youth Leadership for College Access program reimagine the post-secondary planning process? | - Summer Institute program materials  
- Summer Institute survey data  
- Participant observation during Summer Institute  
- New York City Department of Education policy  
- Qualitative data collected (2011-2012) from a previously co-authored college access study |
| #2: What role do Youth Leaders play in transforming the post-secondary planning process as a meaningful, student-centered experience for their peers? | - Participant observation during the school year  
- Narrating activity #1  
- Youth Leader focus groups  
- Peer focus groups  
- Youth Leader exit survey |
| #3: How do Youth Leaders act as agents of change in the post-secondary futures of their peers? | - Participant observation during the school year  
- Narrating activity #1  
- Narrating activity #2  
- Youth Leader focus groups  
- Peer focus groups  
- Youth Leader exit survey |
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**New York City Department of Education Policy**

In order to clarify the context of college access and readiness policy and practice in New York City, so that I can later illustrate how Youth Leaders reimagine this, I looked to New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) policy. This includes policy documents, School Progress Reports, press releases, policy speeches, and NYCDOE online materials that involve college access and readiness. All of these documents were accessed online. I also attended a number of post-secondary readiness workshops and conferences organized by the NYCDOE and other local education research and advocacy organizations. I took notes and gathered any handouts provided during these events. Because Youth Leaders’ work is implicated in a larger “college for all” policy initiative in New York City, it is important to include the policy environment to provide a context for their work, and access Youth Leaders’ activity-meaning system (Daiute, 2014). These policy documents and observation notes were included in the NVivo database in order to conduct analyses.

I also draw on previously collected data and findings in 2011-2012 from a study I co-authored on the landscape of college access in New York City with researchers from *The Center for New York City Affairs* at The New School (Nauer et al., 2013). For this study, I interviewed eight college students about their experiences in New York City public schools during their own post-secondary planning process. They were recent graduates from New York City public high schools during the Bloomberg administration, and represent a range of high school configurations, such as comprehensive high schools, career and technical high schools, and small schools. I additionally conducted interviews with fifteen college access practitioners and experts, including teachers and other school staff, personnel from community-based organizations (CBO), college access professionals, and NYCDOE leadership. These interviews were semi-
structured, conducted in a variety of settings, and transcribed. They were previously included in a separate NVivo database toward analysis for the co-authored report.

**Summer Institute Data**
Throughout the planning phase of the 2013-2014 Summer Institute (January-June 2013), I took notes and collected meeting agendas as well as other relevant planning documents, all included in the NVivo database for analysis. During the course of Summer Institute, we conducted anonymous pre- and post-surveys in order to understand the ways content, experiences, and skills worked toward Youth Leaders generating a better and more nuanced understanding the post-secondary process. The surveys accessed demographic information and asked open-ended questions, alongside scaled and multiple choice questions regarding post-secondary planning content and youth development skills. These surveys were included in an SPSS database in order to compare pre- and post-survey responses, as well as the open-ended questions posed in the surveys.

Youth Leaders were provided a binder that contained all information, workshops, and workshop agendas that guided their daily activities over the three weeks of Summer Institute. This binder was the blueprint for their training experience, produced during the lengthy Summer Institute planning period. I also took observation notes during the three weeks of Summer Institute, describing what I saw and heard, as well as things that I found interesting or surprising (Ginwright, 2010). These program materials and observation notes were included in the NVivo database in order to conduct analysis, and provide detailed descriptions of Youth Leaders and their work.

Youth Leaders also completed a number of projects during Summer Institute, both collaboratively as well as individually. For instance, in small groups they were asked to produce
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a drawing that typifies model characteristics of an effective Youth Leader. They were also asked to write in a journal, initiated by daily writing prompts. While these projects and journal writings were not included in the NVivo database for formal analysis, I consult such manifestations of Summer Institute, when appropriate, to help illuminate research findings.

**Youth Leader Conference Survey Data**

Youth Leaders participated in three professional development conferences throughout the year in November (focused on FAFSA training as well as cross-site conversations about the nature of Youth Leader work), February (focused on strategies to support graduating seniors as well as workshop development for 9th, 10th, and 11th grade), and June (celebrating the year and Youth Leader work). During their June conference, Youth Leaders were given anonymous pre- and post-surveys related to their experiences in the program and the nature of their daily work. This exit survey included a mix of open-ended questions alongside scaled and multiple-choice questions. Data from the Youth Leader June “exit survey” were inputted in SPSS, and analyzed for this study.

**Participant and Program Observation**

I conducted participant observation at nine of the twelve Youth Leadership for College Access sites. Each observation lasted between two and four hours, and I observed the work that Youth Leaders did with their peers – mostly work that happened one-on-one or in small groups, as well as a few workshops facilitated by Youth Leaders for a group of their peers. I took observation notes, describing what I saw and heard, as well as things that I found interesting or surprising (Ginwright, 2010). I also wrote detailed descriptions of the physical space of each Youth Leader office or designated area. These observation notes were included in the NVivo database.
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**Narrating Activities**

In order to access a nuanced understanding of Youth Leaders and the work from their own perspectives, I chose three sites to conduct additional research. At three of the twelve sites, I engaged Youth Leaders (N=21) in two narrating activities, both written. The prompts invited them to narrate from different relational stances within the larger context of *Youth Leadership for College Access* (Daiute, 2014, p. 51). The first prompted them to tell a story about a time they worked with a peer(s) that addresses the kinds of problems students face during post-secondary planning, and are examples of how Youth Leaders can help to address those problems. The second prompted them to write a letter to future Youth Leaders. These two narrating activities were included in the NVivo database, entered as individual data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5: Youth Leader narrating activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prompt</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brainstorm experiences you have had as a Youth Leader that are good examples of the kinds of problems students face in the post-secondary planning process and are good examples of how Youth Leaders can help to address those problems. The experiences can be your work with one particular student, your work with a group of students, your facilitation of a workshop or a series of workshops, your work with families, your work with school staff, etc...Select one of the experiences that you think can tell a story to others about the work that Youth Leaders do, and write about it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Write a letter to future YLs telling them about the job and giving them advice. Think about important things they need to know about the job, characteristics you need to be a good YL, and other things you want to tell future YLs.</td>
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</table>

**Youth Leader Focus Groups**

At the same three sites where I conducted narrating activities, I also conducted two focus groups during the academic year with Youth Leaders (N=21). These focus groups asked open-
ended questions about the nature of Youth Leader work, and how this work influences their schools, their peers, and themselves. The open-ended nature of the questions made room for me to explore, as well as follow-up, with Youth Leader responses so that I could construct meaning and a deeper understanding of their work (Creswell, 2007). They were also conducted in order to clarify and go deeper into the two narrating activities in which they participated prior to the focus groups. Some questions asked them to talk from different relational stances, like from the perspective of students in their school or policymakers (Daiute, 2014, p. 51). These focus groups were transcribed, included in the NVivo database and entered as group data.
Table 6: Youth Leader focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group questions</th>
<th># of Youth Leaders</th>
<th># of sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tell me a little about the story you wrote about and why you picked that one.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you think the work you do with your peers is different from the work adult counselors do with them? Explain and give examples.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Describe the attitudes of students in your school about college? Have you seen these attitudes change in your time as a YL? If so, how and why? Give examples.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. What is the hardest part about being a YL – give an example of what you are saying.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What is the easiest part about being a YL</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. How has your own understanding of the college process been affected by your role as YL? What do you think you know and understand now because of your work? What are your own college plans? Where are you in your own process?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Has being a YL impacted any other areas of your life? If so, explain.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How do you think your work as a YL will affect your own transition into and experiences in college?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Peer Focus Groups

At each of the same three sites where I conducted narrating activities, I conducted one focus group during the academic year with peers who worked with Youth Leaders (total N=20).

These focus groups asked open-ended questions about their experiences with the post-secondary planning process at their school, and the ways that Youth Leaders helped them during this
Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All

process. The goal of these focus groups was to access personal experiences the students had with Youth Leaders in order to provide more detail about the work that Youth Leaders do with their peers (Daiute, 2014). They were also conducted in order to access the Youth Leader activity-meaning system. These peers were a mix of 9th through 12th graders, 7 males and 13 females. These focus groups were transcribed, included in the NVivo database and entered as group data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7: Peer focus groups</th>
<th>Focus group questions</th>
<th># of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. What are your plans for post-high school at this point in time? Did your ideas about what you would do after high school change over time? If so – what changed?</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. How well would you say your school/site prepared and supported you in learning about options for post-secondary education or other choices? What in particular did they do that was helpful? What more could they have done to help you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. How did you make your post-secondary plans? Who helped you and who did you talk it over with? o How did you decide what colleges to apply to? o How did you get through the application and financial aid process? o How did you decide where you would go to college and who helped with this decision? o What were the easiest and hardest parts of the college process for you? Who helped you through them?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. How much work have you done with Youth Leaders at your school/site? Did you like working with them – if so, why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. How is what the Youth Leaders did different from what the adult counselors/staff at your school/site do?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. How did you know about the work Youth Leaders were doing? Do you think others at your school/site know about them? If so – how and what do you think their attitudes towards the Youth Leaders are?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. What more or what else do you wish the Youth Leaders could do for your school/site overall?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. What advice would you give to younger students at your school/site in relation to making post-secondary plans?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All

Supervisor Interviews

At each of the three sites where I conducted narrating activities, I conducted one interview with an adult supervisor during the academic year. These interviews asked supervisors open-ended questions related to the role of Youth Leaders in their schools, the work that they do, and supervisor perceptions of post-secondary planning work in their schools. The goal of these interviews, similar to the peer focus groups, was to access personal experiences the supervisors had with Youth Leaders in order to provide more detail about the work that Youth Leaders do, as well as accessing Youth Leaders’ activity-meaning system (Daiute, 2014). The interviews were transcribed, and included in the NVivo database, entered individually.

Table 8: Adult supervisor interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview questions</th>
<th># of adults</th>
<th># of sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How long have you worked here?</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What do you see as your role in post-secondary planning and college access for your students (based on the position you have in school)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What do you think of the DOE’s policies around college-readiness/access/success? In what ways have the new policies influenced the work you are doing at your school?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What are the biggest challenges in doing college access work?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How would you describe what the Youth Leaders at your site do? What is their role?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What kind of impact do Youth Leaders have on the college process for other students? Do you think their impact is deeper on certain types of students than others - explain?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How does having Youth Leaders impact the overall college-going culture of your school? Who do you think the school would be different if Youth Leaders did not exist?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How do you think having been a youth Leader will help the Youth Leaders themselves in their own post-secondary experiences?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. If you were to advise the Youth Leadership for College Access program, what suggestions would you have?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additional Participant Observation

At each of the same three sites where I conducted narrating activities and focus groups, I conducted an additional participant observation session lasting roughly 4 hours each. I observed the work that Youth Leaders did with their peers. I took observation notes, describing what I saw and heard, as well as things that I found interesting or surprising (Ginwright, 2010). These observation notes were included in the NVivo database.

My Analytic Approach

The process of analyzing the above-described data can be loosely broken down into three parts:

1. New York City policy and practice analysis, which describes and examines the current political and educational context of college access and readiness work in New York City

2. Summer Institute analysis, which works to illustrate the unique approach that the Youth Leadership for College Access program takes toward post-secondary planning and the training of Youth Leaders

3. Youth Leader and program analysis, which teases out dominant features of Youth Leader work with their peers and how this everyday work happens inside schools.

Each phase addresses one, or more, of my three guiding research questions:

- How does the Youth Leadership for College Access program reimagine the post-secondary planning process?
- What role do Youth Leaders play in transforming the post-secondary planning process as a meaningful, student-centered experience for their peers?
- How do Youth Leaders act as agents of change in the post-secondary futures of their peers?

The first phase of analysis involves examining the ways that high schools currently manage post-secondary planning with students in New York City, as well as how policy treats the topic.
All toward creating a policy and practice narrative that illustrates the context for Youth Leaders and their work, a context that I will later argue *Youth Leadership for College Access* and Youth Leader work reimagines and transforms (providing the context toward addressing research questions #1, #2, and #3). The second phase of analysis – Summer Institute analysis – examines data collected during the course of their summer training, such as program documents, training materials and workshops, and pre- and post-surveys, in order to assemble a narrative that addresses how the program reimagines the post-secondary planning process as a meaningful, student-centered experience, rather than a set of mechanical steps (research question #1). The final phase of analysis involves examining data collected during the course of the 2013-2014 Youth Leadership for College Access program year, from narrating activities and focus groups to participant observation and conference data, all toward unpacking the nature of Youth Leader work toward transforming post-secondary planning into a meaningful, student-centered experience for their peers (research questions #2 and #3). The following sections describe this analytic process in more detail, with examples.

**New York City Policy and Practice Narrative**

In order to address my research questions – which turn around the axis of how *Youth Leadership for College Access*, and the work that Youth Leaders do with their peers, reimagines the post-secondary planning process as a meaningful and student-centered experience – I first had to establish how schools in New York City *currently* manage the process. The work that Youth Leaders do happens within the larger context of post-secondary readiness and college access policy, as well as school-based programming, in New York City. Part of the work of showing how Youth Leaders transform this landscape is to, first, describe and document these contexts. In order to include these contexts, and consult the larger activity-meaning system
Imagine What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All (Daiute, 2014) within which Youth Leaders live and work, I analyzed New York City policy and practice during this phase of data analysis. This analysis is the focus of chapter three.

I examined policy documents, School Progress Reports, press releases, public speeches, accountability measures, and NYCDOE online materials, in order to piece together a college access and readiness policy narrative that guided policy decisions during the Bloomberg administration, as well as presently under current mayor Bill de Blasio. I also attended public workshops and forums related to post-secondary planning and policy, and took notes and collected any distributed materials. I framed my analysis of these documents and experiences through the lens of the relationship between policy and school-based programming or practice, looking for: how policy defines post-secondary readiness and college access, the strategies policy uses to hold schools accountable to this definition, and the ways that policy provides support toward helping schools effectively achieve policy goals. In other words, I wanted to examine the relationship between desired policy goals (outputs/outcomes), and the resources or supports that policy provides or examples in order to help schools achieve these policy goals (inputs/activities). I coded all documents, using the themes described above (outputs/outcomes and inputs/activities) in order to understand how policy talks about and engages with these themes (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003).

These categories are loosely based on a logic model toward program or policy evaluation, with the goal of clarifying connections among program or policy activities and outcomes (Newton et al., 2013; K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004). Examples of outputs/outcomes could be the letter grade that a high school receives on their School Progress Report, particularly related to the three “college and career readiness” metrics included (this will be explained in detail during chapter three); or, changes in the percent of students who successfully enroll in, and complete,
college over time. These are the ways that local policy measures and holds schools accountable for “college and career readiness”. On the other hand, *inputs/activities* could be things like: the number of college counselors a school employs, school space specifically designated for post-secondary guidance and college access activities (a college office), post-secondary readiness curricula, training for school staff on the post-secondary planning process, college trips provided for students, or partnership with outside college-focused organizations like the *Youth Leadership for College Access* program or CollegeBound. In other words, these are examples of resources or supports that high schools can make use of in order to realize policy outcomes put forth by the New York City Department of Education.

I will provide an illustrative example of this analytic and coding process. I attended a panel of college access experts hosted by The New School, and Shael Polakow-Suransky, chief academic officer, represented the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). During the panel he responded to a question posed by the moderator: should college guidance be mandated in high schools by New York City. Below is his response, with an example of my coding structure:

I think that **as schools develop out models** (*inputs/activities*) we're trying to put pressure on them through a number of means: by offering them some resources (*inputs/activities*), but also saying to principals, 'your grade on your progress report is going to depend on how many kids actually enroll in college' (*outputs/outcomes*). And, principals are not totally happy with us about that because they feel that, 'I can get a kid into college, but then that period from May to September when they're supposed to go, all kinds of things outside of my control can happen' (*inputs/resources*). And, what we've been saying is, 'yes that's true, but if you lay this foundation well (*inputs/activities*) and you see this as part of your responsibility, a lot more kids are going to get there' (*outputs/outcomes*) And, that's the purpose of that pressure (*outputs/outcomes*). And so in combination I think what you're going to see is much, much more attention is already happening across the system to these kinds of **resources and supports** (*inputs/activities*).
Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All

In the above excerpt, desired policy outcomes and how they are measured are clearly stated: school grades on their annual School Progress Reports and number of students enrolling in college. However, while Polakow-Suransky hints at “resources and supports” that schools can make use of in order to achieve these desired policy outcomes – “develop[ing] out models” of post-secondary planning, “some resources”, “lay the foundation well” – they are not clearly articulated, and rather vague. In other words, this excerpt captures a contradiction between how local policy defines and holds schools accountable for college access and post-secondary readiness, and the articulation of actual needs or resources that schools require to effectively support students in their post-secondary planning. While the policy “pressure” is clear – holding schools accountable to graduate more students who successfully enroll in college on their Progress Reports – the supports and resources to help schools get there are not nearly as clear.

Analyzing New York City education policy documents in this manner helped me to access, and unpack, the relationship between policy and practice.

I also incorporated current research literature on post-secondary counseling in high schools into this analytic narrative, as well as excerpts from findings and interviews with college students, high school teachers and staff, local college access experts, and policy officials that I conducted during 2011 and 2012 for a report co-authored with researchers from The Center for New York City Affairs at The New School. Any data or interview excerpts that I use from this report have already been published. This research involved interviews with eight college students about their experiences in New York City public schools during their own post-secondary planning process. They were all recent graduates from New York City public high schools during the Bloomberg administration, and represent a range of high school configurations, from comprehensive high schools, career and technical high schools, to small schools. I also
conducted interviews with fifteen college access practitioners, including teachers and school staff, personnel from community-based organizations (CBO), college access professionals, and school district leadership. All of the interviews were semi-structured, and happened in a variety of settings. I used a grounded theory approach to code the transcribed interviews, noting repeating ideas and creating themes based on these repeated ideas, particularly themes that are related to strategies or methods that schools use to manage post-secondary planning with students (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003). Excerpts from these interviews are incorporated into the New York City policy and practice narrative to add texture and detail.

**Summer Institute Narrative**

The second phase of data analysis involved examining the formal training that Youth Leaders receive before they officially start work as a Youth Leader in their schools: Summer Institute. I constructed a narrative highlighting this central, three-week training. This narrative, the centerpiece of chapter four, addresses the goals and activities that underpin Youth Leader preparation for the work inside their schools, and the general values that foreground the Youth Leadership for College Access program approach toward reimagining post-secondary planning as a meaningful, student-centered, relevant experience. It integrates analysis of the workshops and sessions that Youth Leaders experienced, alongside basic descriptive statistical analyses, like frequency counts and means, of Summer Institute pre- and post-surveys. I also incorporate my own participant-organizer observations, notes, and experiences during the course of those three weeks.

A primary focus of this narrative is to highlight the goals and activities that happened during Summer Institute. In order to access this, I examined the training binder that Youth Leaders received on their first day of training, which contained all relevant materials. For
instance, during the planning phase of Summer Institute each workshop or session was conceptualized and organized by a “Session Planning Sheet”. These sheets articulated session goals, activities, and role of adult supervisors, and were completed by adults and young people who were facilitating and planning the given workshop. These planning sheets were included in Youth Leader binders, acting as a workshop agenda, along with any relevant materials or paperwork they would need to complete the workshop.

When examining the Session Planning Sheets during the Summer Institute narrative phase of my analysis, I was interested in honing in on the goals of sessions, as well as the nature of learning activities that happened during each session. I used a grounded theory approach to code the Session Planning Sheets, noting repeating ideas and creating themes based on these repeated ideas (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003). When I began analyzing the goals of the workshops and sessions, I found that they fell along four broad themes (these themes will be explained in detail in chapter four):

1. Developing knowledge about the college application process/post-secondary options
2. Skills development
3. College experiences

When analyzing the nature of learning activities that happened during workshops and sessions, I found that they fell into five broad themes (these themes will be explained in detail in chapter four):

1. Individual learning (traditional classroom-based learning)
2. Small group learning activities
3. One-on-one learning activities
4. Interactive/role play learning activities
5. Youth Leaders presenting out information and ideas
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I used these codes to code all workshops and sessions, and the learning activities that happened during these sessions. Table 9 documents an example of how I coded the Session Planning Sheets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Title/Question: First in the Family (90 minutes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goals of Session:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Break down stereotypes of the 1st Gen Student and dispel myths <em>(goal: challenge)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Validate YLs who are 1st Gen <em>(goal: challenge)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ YLs will gain an understanding of the hardships of 1st Gen Students <em>(goal: challenge)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ YLs will learn some strategies to support 1st Gen Students <em>(goal: skills)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activities for Session:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities for this workshop will answer the following questions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Who is the 1st Gen Student? <em>(goal: knowledge)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ What barriers do the 1st Gen Students face? <em>(goal: challenge)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ What strengths do the 1st Gen Students have? <em>(goal: challenge)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ How can you support 1st Gen Students? <em>(goal: skills)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Sit/stand warm-up exercise (5m)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Statistics &amp; Film clip (What Kids Can Do – First in the Family) (30) <em>(activity: individual)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Challenges &amp; Strategies (35) <em>(activity: small group)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Small group brainstorm of challenges they imagine will arise for students in their school/sites around imagining and getting to college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Small group brainstorm of three big ideas they have to help students through these challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. 3 Minute Presentations of Big Ideas (20) <em>(activity: YL presenting out)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I took a backwards approach to writing the *Summer Institute narrative*, writing it only after conducting analysis of Youth Leader narrating activities (this analytical process will be detailed in the following section). This was intentional. Even though the narrative about Summer
Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All

Institute is written from the perspective of my own reflections as a co-creator and co-facilitator, I wanted to be able to frame these reflections by Youth Leader perceptions and work experiences. This only fully emerged after I conducted a full analysis of Youth Leader narrating activities and focus groups. Approaching the Summer Institute narrative in this way was useful in helping me to better organize my thoughts and sharpen analyses. It also provided me the opportunity to compare and contrast my own personal experiences against those experiences and attitudes of Youth Leaders, themselves (Ellis et al., 2011). This *Summer Institute narrative* works to answer my first research question: How does the *Youth Leadership for College Access* program reimagine the post-secondary planning process?

**Youth Leaders and their Work**

The *Youth Leaders and their work* phase of data analysis addresses my second and third research questions:

- What role do Youth Leaders play in transforming the post-secondary planning process as a meaningful, student-centered experience for their peers?

- How do Youth Leaders act as agents of change in the post-secondary futures of their peers?

Because this dissertation is primarily focused on Youth Leaders and the work that they do with their peers, I started the analytical process of Youth Leader program data materials by examining Youth Leaders voices, themselves – via their narrating activities – in order to ground my analysis of all ensuing data. I began by looking at the first of two narrating activities that I conducted. For this activity, Youth Leaders were asked to tell a story (write) about an experience they had working with their peers. Focusing on the “storied nature of discourse”, I analyzed themes and structures by way of a plot analysis (Daiute, 2014, p. 11). Plot analysis, indicative by name, examines plot as the structure of a narrative, focusing on: characters, an initiating action or
As a youth leader, one experience that has been the most impacting to me was being able to work with a student that not a lot of many others would have been likely to help because he was not one of the best students to keep track of. The main issue that I had with this student was that he did not want to apply to any type of colleges and also he just was not as serious about the college process and on top of that he had some serious family issues that did not allow him to have the power to use his family documents. As a youth leader, it was my job to be willing to help even though he did not want it, it was all about sitting down with him and being able to talk to him and tell him the truths about college and all the opportunities. I spent most of my working hours working with this one student because his story just hit me wanting me to do anything I could to get him to the next step in his life.

In order to organize Youth Leader narratives into a formal plot analysis structure, I used Colette Daiute’s (2014) plot analysis template provided in her book. Table 10 examples how Genesis’ narrative, from above, was organized into the below template.
Table 10: Example of a plot analytic approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Working one-on-one with a student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characters</td>
<td>1. first-person narrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. student/peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiating action</td>
<td>As a youth leader one experience that has been the most impacting to me was being able to work with a student <strong>that not a lot of many others would have been likely to help</strong> this is the initiating action in the narrative because it indicates the main problem that the Youth Leader is identifying, and is the lead-in for the many complicating actions that will follow to compound/clarify this main problem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Complicating action(s) | **He was not one of the best students to keep track of**  
The main issue that i had with this student was that **he did not want to apply to any type of colleges** and also he just **was not as serious about the college process**. And on top of that **he had some serious family issues** that **did not allow him to have the power to use his family documents**  
there are five complicating actions, indicating the intensity and complicated nature of this student’s situation as it pertains to college access and knowledge |
| High point (turning point, climax) | **As a youth leader it was my job to be willing to help even though he did not want it**  
*This is the turning point in this narrative, because the Youth Leader moves from describing the complicated student problem, to describing how he will begin to address it within the context of his job as Youth Leader* |
| Resolution strategies | it was all about sitting down with him and being able to talk to him and tell him the truths about college and all the opportunities. |
| Ending/Resolution | I spent most of my working hours working with this one student |
| Coda | N/A |
| Narrator stance | his story just hit me wanting me to do any thing i could to get him to the next step in his life. |

*text in *italics* indicates my own annotation, and text in bold indicates my own emphasis

Once I organized each of the twenty-one narratives from this first narrating activity into a plot analysis template, I began to look for issues addressed in the plot high points, as well as other key structures of the plots about which Youth Leaders wrote, such as main characters, initiating/complicating actions, and resolution. For instance, Youth Leaders spent a lot of time talking and describing their peers – who they are (character), and the particularities of their
problems (initiating and complicating actions). This comes out in Genesis’ narrative above, as she specifies the initiating action – working with a student who “many others would have been likely to help” – and then goes on to illustrate five factors that complicate her peer’s situation:

1. He was not one of the best students to keep track of
2. He did not want to apply to any type of colleges
3. He was not as serious about the college process
4. He had some serious family issues
5. [these family issues] did not allow him to have the power to use his family documents

Plot analysis, especially of Youth Leader narrating activity #1, helped to clarify how Youth Leaders understand their work and their peers. Put another way, plot analysis helped me learn not only what happens when Youth Leaders work with their peers, but also what matters to Youth Leaders during these interactions (Daiute, 2014, p. 119). By using plot analysis as an analytic tool, I was able to hone in on why the particular stories Youth Leaders chose to tell holds meaning for them, as well as how they make the process meaningful for their peers by examining the high points in these stories. For instance, while Genesis’ resolution strategy was “sitting down with him and being able to talk to him and tell him the truths about college”, by using plot analysis to examine her story I am able to access why talking candidly to her peer was meaningful, as she was able to reach a student with many complex problems that labeled him, to many, unable to be helped; unable to be reached.

The plot analysis of Youth Leader narrating activity #1 grew into a script analysis, which is an extension of a plot analysis that “involves identifying the combined plot-logic organizing a narrative conflicts, resolutions, and casual connections among those major plot elements” (Daiute, 2014, p. 143). From this script analysis, I identified “master narratives”, or “dominant
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discourses”, in order to pull out major themes that Youth Leaders value in their work. I was interested in identifying master narratives that challenge or complicate the dominant issues in post-secondary planning and counseling research that I identified in a critical examination of the research provided in chapter one. I was also interested in identifying master narratives of Youth Leader work that challenge or complicate dominant themes in the everyday lived experiences of college guidance work that happens on the ground, something that I will examine within the context of New York City in chapter three. For instance, one master narrative that emerged, one that is present in Genesis’ narrative exampled above, is the idea that Youth Leaders and their work can “reach the hard to reach student”, such as students who appear to be disengaged from school, those students with complex family or personal issues, or undocumented students.

This was a dominant script many Youth Leaders enacted in their narratives, particularly when describing the main character in their stories, and the complicating actions surrounding this character. This is relevant because so much of post-secondary planning research, as well as practice inside schools, highlights the inherent difficulty that adult teachers and staff experience when trying to reach “hard to reach” students during the post-secondary planning process. The script analysis helped to show how Youth Leaders make the post-secondary planning process particularly relevant with those “hard to reach” students, and that Youth Leaders find this a meaningful and important element of their work.

After identifying plots and scripts in this first Youth Leader narrating activity, I used them to code transcripts of Youth Leader focus groups, peer focus groups, supervisor interviews, my participant observation notes, and Youth Leader work logs. For instance, once “reaching hard to reach students” emerged as a script in Youth Leader narrating activity #1, I revisited transcripts from focus groups, peer focus groups, and supervisor interviews, as well as my observation notes
and other data sources, to see if, and how, this narrative played out in these different places. In peer focus groups, many Youth Leader peers identified themselves as formerly hard to reach students before working with Youth Leaders. During participant observation I documented Youth Leaders work through the post-secondary planning process with students with complex situations, such as one student who unexpectedly became a soon-to-be parent in May, drastically changing his plans of working for his family’s local business after high school graduation. These other data sources helped to corroborate and shine a light on the plots and scripts that emerged from the first narrating activity, triangulating findings from plot and script analyses (Creswell, 2013).

This overall analysis of Youth Leader plots and scripts provides the basis for chapters five and six, which explores the everyday particularities of their work. The second narrating activity – letters to future Youth Leaders – was less focused on plot structure. The Youth Leader generated letters, instead, list characteristics that make an effective Youth Leader, from the perspective of Youth Leaders. Overall, they turned out to read more like lists and less like a structured letter. As such, I coded the letters, noting repeating ideas and creating themes based on these repeated ideas (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003). I use this analysis, in chapter six, to show how dominant themes in Youth Leader work, identified in letters to future Youth Leaders, are enacted in their everyday work by way of plot analysis of narrating activity #1. For instance, the theme that an effective Youth Leader should make their peers feel comfortable and cared for came up frequently in their letters to future Youth Leaders (narrating activity #2). However, by triangulating my analysis of these letters with the plot analyses I conducted of narrating activity #1, I am able to show on how this theme is not just talked about, but enacted as a particular resolution strategy in their work to help peers. In other words, I am able to show how this theme
Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All is made use of by Youth Leaders as a strategy toward make post-secondary planning a meaningful, useful, and student-centered experience.

Additionally, I conducted basic descriptive statistical analyses in SPSS, like frequency counts and means, of Youth Leader conference pre- and post-surveys. These surveys measured Youth Leader gains in understanding the college admissions process, leadership and communication skills that they developed during their training, and their attitudes about Youth Leader work. Analyses of these surveys was conducted in order to clarify the roles and responsibilities of Youth Leaders across sites, as well as to get a better sense of the nature of their work as it developed throughout the year from the perspective of Youth Leaders. For instance, by analyzing June conference data, I was able to clarify what areas of the post-secondary planning process Youth Leaders spent the bulk of their time supporting their peers, as well as popularly reported challenges that they experience across sites.

Essentially, my overall analytic approach during the Youth Leaders and their work phase of analysis was to use Youth Leader narrating activity #1 as the springboard off of which most other data sources were bounced, with the exception of my analysis of New York City policy and practice which provides a necessary context in which Youth Leaders work and live, and one that I will argue they ultimately reimagine. This analytic approach was guided by my overarching methodology, one that privileges the experiences of Youth Leaders as credible college access and post-secondary readiness experts. It is a methodology that looks to research as an opportunity to elevate “what is good” about young people rather than “only describing problems” (Ginwright, 2010, p. 20).

Plot and script analysis is relevant within the context of this study, because I can use these methods of analysis in order to move beyond the vague notion of themes, and toward a more
precise understanding of meaning that is enacted by Youth Leaders and their work (Daiute, 2014). How schools and young people can make the post-secondary planning process more meaningful and student-centered is at the heart of my research questions. Therefore, matching these research questions with methods of analysis that capture meaning is a useful approach. My research questions all speak to the idea of meaning, and aim to explore how the Youth Leadership for College Access Program, as well as Youth Leaders, can reimagine and transform post-secondary planning as a relevant and dynamic inquiry-driven experience. As such, the approach I took toward analyzing my data – an approach guided by dynamic narrative inquiry, and rooted in plot and script analysis – is an effective way to access meaning from the perspectives of Youth Leaders. These approaches move beyond locating themes in order to analyze how meaning is enacted in the stories that Youth Leaders tell about their work and peers.

Table 11 reviews the ensuing results chapters and analyses that are included, along with the research question(s) that each chapter addresses.
## Table 11: Results chapters and analyses included

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Research question(s) addressed</th>
<th>Analyses included</th>
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| **CH. 3** | A narrative that provides the political and educational context of post-secondary readiness and college access in New York City, addressing how policy frames these topics, and the methods that many schools in New York City presently use to (try to) address this policy pressure | Provides the context for the research questions, *Youth Leadership for College Access*, and Youth Leader work | - Analysis of NYC policy documents  
- Previously collected data on the post-secondary planning process in New York City (open-ended interviews)  
- Synthesis of current research trends on post-secondary planning and college access |
| **CH. 4** | Summer Institute narrative that outlines the goals and activities that guided how Youth Leaders were trained, and how the program reimagines post-secondary planning as relevant and student-centered | #1: How does the Youth Leadership for College Access program reimagine the post-secondary planning process? | - Analysis of Summer Institute training materials  
- Analysis of Summer Institute participant observation and notes  
- Analysis of pre- and post- Youth Leader surveys |
| **CH. 5** | A deep analysis of the peers that Youth Leaders help, and the problems that these peers bring to them. By examining the peers and problems that Youth Leaders talk about when describing their work, it hones in on how Youth Leaders understand their work toward reimagining post-secondary planning as a relevant, student-centered experience. | #2: What role do Youth Leaders play in transforming the post-secondary planning process as a meaningful, student-centered experience for their peers?  
#3: How do Youth Leaders act as agents of change in the post-secondary futures of their peers? | - Plot and script analysis of narrating activity #1  
- Analysis of participant observation and notes  
- Analysis of Youth Leader focus groups  
- Analysis of Youth Leader peer focus groups  
- Analysis of Youth Leader June exit survey |
A Note on Where I Stand: Role of the Researcher and Reciprocal Relationships

By late June 2014, the 2013-2014 Youth Leadership for College Access program had formally finished. Many Youth Leaders were days away from graduating, while others were celebrating graduation with friends and family. One afternoon that June, an email from one Youth Leader popped up in my inbox. It read:

Hi Tara,
How are you? I was looking for a person who can help me edit my graduation speech as I am the valedictorian for my school. I think you’re the right person to do this. I’m sorry for not informing you before, but graduation is tomorrow, the 25th. So, I will really appreciate it, if you can take a look at it and help me make it better.
Thank you.
Sincerely,
Rishi

I use this email to illustrate that I am not an outside, objective observer who came into this site for the sole purpose of research. I helped to design, organize, and facilitate the summer
training before this dissertation was even a thought, and am one of the first people the 2013-2014 cohort of Youth Leaders met within the context of the program. Throughout the school year we spent a considerable amount of time together, not only when I was at their schools to conduct focus groups or do participant observation, but also during professional development trainings they received over the year, Youth Leader gatherings, and school events. They had my email address, some of us are Facebook friends, and many times they would reach out to me for support or advice on things that were not program related. I spent three weeks with them during training, all day. During summer training, I was responsible for making sure they were fed and that they had enough downtime in between intense and complex workshops. I was responsible for making sure that their classrooms had air conditioning during an unusually hot summer, and that they were comfortable and happy. When a Youth Leader was having a rough day, I made sure to let them know I was available to talk or take a walk with or vent. I took these responsibilities just as seriously as I took their learning and their work, and just as seriously as I took the research I was conducting.

In other words, we formed meaningful and reciprocal relationships (Lather, 1986; Wong, 2010). I believe that these relationships were important toward conducting my research. If I claim to value or privilege those voices and experiences of Youth Leaders in my research – those voices of young people who can be “silenced” or “excluded” (Daiute, 2014, p. 10) by policy, practice, and research – then I also must value their bodies and personhood; their whole self. And, I must give my own whole self toward making sure that those relationships are reciprocal. I shared myself with Youth Leaders through conversation and stories and mutual experiences.

In the pages of this dissertation, while I analyze data and examine concepts, I am also sharing some of the lives – some of the stories – of Youth Leaders. I do not use their real names,
and some information is intentionally withheld in order to honor their privacy. However, I am still sharing their stories, and their voices. And, I am sharing with their consent, and the consent of their families. My approach toward reciprocal and meaningful relationships, this sharing of our stories, made Rishi feel comfortable enough to reach out when he needed help (a day before graduation) with his graduation speech – because he knew me, and knew that I could, and would, be there for him. These relationships did not happen overnight, and, of course, our reciprocal relationships are not based on knowing absolutely everything about each other. I believe that this is an important element when doing research work toward collectively reimagining young people as agents of change in their own lives, and the lives of others. Because, it reimagines how we, as adults, value and forge relationships with young people.

This chapter has reviewed the methodological and analytic context for this dissertation, rooted in dynamic narrative inquiry toward unpacking how Youth Leaders reimage post-secondary planning as an inquiry-driven, relevant, and student-centered experience. The following chapters are the result of the various bodies of data and analyses that were outlined in this research design chapter. I will now move to chapter three, which evaluates the political and educational context of college access and post-secondary readiness in New York City. It will set the stage for later chapters that illustrate how Youth Leaders fundamentally reimage this standard practice and policy, and create opportunity and meaningful experiences for their peers.
Chapter Three

A View from Here:

The Policy and Practice Context in New York City

The landscape of college access and readiness in New York City is vast. Between explicit policy directives requiring schools to graduate “college ready” students, hundreds of public high schools that adopt different school-based approaches to manage college access and readiness programming for students, and hundreds of community-based organizations (as well as for-profit organizations) providing supplementary student support, navigating this complex landscape can prove to be challenging. So, in June 2012 The Center for New York City Affairs – a research policy institute at the New School – convened a panel of college access and success experts to offer perspectives on this landscape, in an effort to better understand the work being done, as well as the work that should be done. The panel was a precursor to an ensuing report documenting this very landscape, a report I co-authored as a consultant (Nauer, et al., 2013).

Folks on this panel ranged from a director of admissions at City University of New York and two directors of local community-based organizations, to renowned researcher and author on the topic, David T. Conley, as well as Shael Polakow-Suransky – chief academic officer of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) at that time. Toward the end of the event, the moderator posed the question I was dying to ask: should college guidance (and college counselors) be mandated in New York City public high schools? Shael Polakow-Suransky, representing the NYCDOE, was quick to jump in, arguing:
I think that as schools develop out models [for student post-secondary planning] we're trying to put pressure on them through a number of means: by offering them some resources, but also saying to principals, 'your grade on your progress report is going to depend on how many kids actually enroll in college'. And, principals are not totally happy with us about that because they feel that, 'I can get a kid into college, but then that period from May to September when they're supposed to go, all kinds of things outside of my control can happen'. And, what we've been saying is, 'yes that's true, but if you lay this foundation well and you see this as part of your responsibility a lot more kids are going to get there'. And, that's the purpose of that pressure. And so in combination I think what you're going to see is much, much more attention is already happening across the system to these kinds of resources and supports.

This response underscores the policies and standard practices of the NYCDOE during the Michael Bloomberg administration regarding college access and readiness, and more specifically, regarding post-secondary planning guidance made available to students. Though high schools in New York City were historically not held accountable for college readiness, the school district in recent years began to rely on high stakes accountability pressure from above to coerce schools into focusing on post-secondary planning for all students. Rather than provide on-the-ground, technical support for schools on how to operationalize college readiness policies, the NYCDOE embraced a top-down policy approach. As Polakow-Suransky argues, if enough policy “pressure” is applied to schools and principals, they will essentially have no choice but to “develop out models” on how to manage the student post-secondary planning process.

Polakow-Suransky’s words capture a disconnect – a contradiction – between how local policy defines and holds schools accountable for college access and readiness, and the actual needs or resources that schools require to effectively support students in post-secondary planning. Since there is no formal regulation of the job of college counselors, or mandated guidance from the school district related to college access, schools address this absence of policy with a variety of different approaches. In New York City, this has led to profound differences among high schools in college guidance staffing and roles, as well as college readiness rates.
measured by NYCDOE metrics (Fruchter et al., 2012; Nauer, et al., 2013). Some schools, like the specialized high schools in New York City, have robust guidance counselor teams and offices that devote all of their professional time toward providing students with the face-to-face support, resources, and expertise towards completing the college application process. In contrast, other schools assign a teacher or guidance counselor to fulfill this role on a part-time basis, with college advising being only one of a number of other responsibilities that their everyday jobs already entail. This uneven landscape engenders a striking gap in college guidance counseling among New York City high schools, a gap that many schools struggle to effectively address.

This chapter provides a snapshot of how New York City is managing student guidance and support around the post-secondary planning process in this current moment, both in policy as well as educational practice inside schools. It will provide description and analysis of both the political, as well as educational, context of post-secondary readiness in New York City. I begin with an analysis of the college access and post-secondary readiness policy context in New York City, both under the recently departed Michael Bloomberg as well as more recent Bill de Blasio administrations. This analysis will show how this context further engenders a guidance gap, underscoring the contradictions between how the NYCDOE holds schools accountable to high stakes college readiness metrics, and the lack of adequate resources and guidance that schools need to realize these metrics. For these initial sections that examine New York City post-secondary readiness policy, I draw on analyses conducted during the New York City policy and practice narrative phase of data analysis, detailed in chapter two. I examined policy documents, School Progress Reports, press releases, accountability measures, and public speeches to piece together a policy narrative. My analysis of these documents was framed by following how policy
Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All

defines post-secondary readiness and college access, and the ways that this definition is codified in policy.

I then move to describe an on the ground perspective, illustrating the methods that many schools use to put this policy into practice, oftentimes struggling without clear policy directive on how to effectively support students during the post-secondary planning process. As described in chapter two, analyses that color this section were conducted during the New York City policy and practice narrative phase of data analysis. For this section, I draw on qualitative research I conducted in 2011 and 2012, in collaboration with analysis of existing literature on post-secondary counseling in high schools. I interviewed college students who reflected on their experiences in New York City public schools with post-secondary planning. I also interviewed teachers, principals, school staff, NYCDOE leadership, community-based organization staff, and college access professionals in order to access a holistic perspective of the landscape of post-secondary planning and college access in New York City. With analysis of these interviews, alongside existing literature, this section will show how two prevailing strategies are used in New York City high schools to address the guidance gap, especially in the absence of effective policy: an over-reliance on school-based guidance staff and community-based organizations (CBO). I explain how, while these strategies can be relatively effective, they are insufficient in successfully addressing the guidance gap and come with significant challenges.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to underscore the embedded challenges of doing post-secondary planning work, both at the policy level as well as on the ground inside schools, as an extension of the critical literature review offered in chapter one; and, to provide a general context for the work that Youth Leaders do inside their schools. Because Youth Leaders are considered paid professionals who work with their peers inside schools, this section provides the
important backdrop for the everyday complexities of their college access and planning work with peers, but also how this backdrop will be reimagined by the peer-to-peer nature of that work. This re-imagination will be further developed in later chapters, within the framework of making the post-secondary planning process meaningful, student-centered, and relevant to the lives of their peers.

A Contradiction between College Readiness Policy and Practice: Measuring and Mandating College Readiness

In response to dismal student data revealing that recent public high school graduates were overwhelmingly under-prepared for college coursework and success, the Bloomberg administration implemented a number of high-stakes accountability policies prioritizing “college and career readiness” in the fall of 2012. Prior to this, college access and readiness had rarely been addressed in local education policy as a priority. One method the administration used to address college readiness was the introduction of high-stakes college and career readiness assessment into the city’s pre-existing annual school Progress Reports. These reports documented individual school performance in each New York City public school and were publicly available on the NYCDOE website each year. Every K-12 school received a letter grade in three categories: student progress, student performance, school environment, and closing the achievement gap. These letter grades were then weighted into one final school “grade”, ranging from A-F. If a school persistently received a low or failing grade, one of a number of interventions were implemented in order to improve performance, such as firing the principal or teaching staff, or closing the school altogether (NYCDOE, 2015).

“College and career readiness” was added as a metric in school Progress Reports in 2012, consisting of three contributing variables and counting as 10 points of the maximum 100-point ranking. This new addition represented a marked shift in how New York City education policy
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framed college and career readiness. Prior to this introduction, the high stakes metrics in school Progress Reports were centered on holding schools accountable for student retention and high school graduation. Below is a brief description of the three college and career readiness metrics that were included in high school Progress Reports in 2012:

1. **College Readiness Index** (worth up to 4 out of the possible 10 overall points): This metric addresses post-secondary remedial coursework at City University of New York schools. Credit is given to schools for each student who achieves SAT, ACT, Regents and/or CUNY assessment scores that are adequate enough to test out of any remedial coursework. In the most recent Progress Report (2012-2013), schools also received credit for students who successfully completed three semesters of college, regardless of these scores.

2. **Post-secondary Enrollment Rate** (worth up to 3 out of the possible 10 overall points): Schools received credit if their graduates enrolled in college, public service (e.g., Americorps, Peace Corps, military), or accredited vocational programs. This metric attempts to capture how well schools help students to make informed and meaningful post-secondary choices. It measures the breadth, not depth, of post-secondary counseling, and does not capture whether students make these choices as a result of in-school counseling, or from relying on their own social and cultural capital (e.g., families, siblings, afterschool advising).

3. **College and Career Preparatory Index** (worth up to 3 out of the possible 10 overall points): This final metric attempts to capture to what degree a high school provides students with opportunities to take more rigorous, advanced coursework. A school earns credit for each student who passes at least one class deemed “advanced” or “college
level” by the NYCDOE, such as Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or early college classes. However, the metric does not assess the quality of its college prep curriculum (NYCDOE, 2015)

These Progress Report metrics served as the backbone of New York City policy on college and career readiness. Other than the accountability system used to measure college and career readiness performance of schools, there were few other structures to ensure the policies were upheld. The district did not provide explicit, systematic training and direct support to schools around how to realize the city’s college and career readiness goals in everyday practice. The policy emphasized measuring the outputs (e.g., the number of students who enroll in college or the number of college-level courses a high school offers) rather than the inputs (e.g., number of college counselors and college knowledge building activities, trips or experiences, and college planning curricula) that schools would need to effectually realize those outputs. As such, it engenders a policy-practice divide between what the policy hopes to accomplish, and how schools can viably achieve those outcomes in practice. This divide appears to remain, even under a new mayor, Bill de Blasio.

**Ambiguity in Post-Secondary Access Policies**

On January 1, 2014, Bill de Blasio was sworn in as mayor of New York City. School Progress Reports were made available to the public on the NYCDOE website in early November. The most visible of changes to these reports were that they no longer included a letter grade. The same “college and career readiness” metrics were included, and revealed modest gains in college readiness. Since the new term began, the de Blasio administration has yet to clearly articulate its policy approach to college readiness. In an op-ed on de Blasio’s education policy in general, Aaron Pallas (2014) critique the new mayor by saying that “…[de Blasio] failed to deliver a clear
message about his goals for the school system – and that ambiguity may leave us with the same, traditional ways of measuring success by test scores and graduation rates…and those [accountability] statistics”.

One indicator of the de Blasio administration’s ambiguous policy on post-secondary guidance and readiness is the actual number of counselors in New York City public schools, and whether that number is sufficient. The American School Counselor Association recommends a counselor caseload of 250, and research reveals that students enrolled in schools with small counselor caseloads tend to be more successful in navigating the post-secondary planning process and making informed, relevant college choices (Carrell & Carrell, 2006; Woods & Domina, 2014). In the fall of 2014, the Committee on Education of the City Council began a set of intense hearings toward introducing a bill – Int 0403 – that would require New York City to collect and report on information regarding: how many guidance counselors and social workers work in each school, the counselor-to-student ratio at each school, and exactly what those counselors are doing (i.e. academic work, college preparation, post-secondary planning, helping students with personal problems). The bill would require the NYCDOE to report demographic information on students and memorandums on college readiness.

Local community organizing groups, like the student-led Urban Youth Collaborative, have been calling on education leaders to make these numbers and duties public for years, without any formal response by policymakers. Such information would help to delineate between guidance counselors, college counselors, and social workers, distinct roles that are often filled by the same people in under-resourced schools. During the hearings on Int 0403, City Council members pressed policy officials to disclose the actual number of guidance personnel working in schools. Yet, those officials were unsure and could only provide a rough estimate of 1,000
Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All counselors in New York City public high schools. Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña reestablished the Office of Guidance and School Counseling to assess the distribution and roles of counselors in New York City. How this office will contribute to meaningful policy change and implementation remains ambiguous.

A strategy that the de Blasio administration is continuing from the Bloomberg era is a college guidance workshop series provided by the NYCDOE to train school counselors. Under the Bloomberg administration, the NYCDOE began offering these workshops as resources to schools as they developed models for college readiness and post-secondary planning programs. The workshops consisted of a strictly voluntary six-part series hosted by the reputable college access community-based organization, Goddard Riverside Options Center. Each high school would send one staff member, either a counselor or teacher or other staff member, to attend the workshops in an effort to ensure that every high school in New York City would have one, in-house college access staff member.

While some have praised the workshops as a step in the right direction, the workshops by themselves simply locate all post-secondary planning information and activities within one person, reifying the guidance gap. Rather than distributing college knowledge across a number of different adult staff and curricula inside schools, or creating clear structures for schools to meet their college readiness goals, this policy relies on the efficacy of one person in the school building. Research indicates that developing a college-going culture – one that distributes the work of supporting students’ understanding about college and the post-secondary planning process among school staff, teachers, counselors, and administration – makes the post-secondary planning process more accessible and equitable for all students (Aldana, 2013; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Oakes, 2003; Oakes et al., 2000). A college-going culture helps to “facilitate
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student learning, college readiness, and college matriculation for all of its students” where both “adults and students hold the values, beliefs, and expectations that college readiness requires effort and persistence” (Aldana, 2013, p. 132-33). Without a school-wide college access culture, the burden inordinately falls on a college (or guidance) counselor, perpetuating the existence of a guidance gap. In the following section, I discuss the perilous effects of disproportionately relying on counselors to support students during the post-secondary planning process.

Over-reliance on Guidance Counselors: One Strategy Toward Filling the Guidance Gap

According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2011 the student per guidance counselor rate in public high schools was 471:1, and this rate has changed little over the past fourteen years (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2013). In their annual survey of roughly ten thousand secondary schools, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) found that the mean number of students per college counselor in public high schools was 348 in 2012. As factors like student enrollment or student poverty rates increase – characteristics common in many New York City public schools – this number grows larger. For instance, when the enrollment of a school reaches two thousand students or more, the student per college counselor increases to 625. These statistics can vary among schools, based on how individual schools define the role of a college counselor.

The NACAC survey also reveals that, nationally, public high school counseling staff spend roughly 23 percent of their time on post-secondary planning counseling, while private schools included in the survey dedicate 53 percent (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2013). The survey notes that tasks taking away time from public school counselors to focus on college and post-secondary guidance work include: choice and scheduling of courses (24 percent), academic testing (13 percent), and teaching (5 percent), among others. In other words, counselors are
expected to do a lot more than college counseling, especially in schools that do not have a
dedicated *college* counselor on staff. This hinders ability to focus on their primary job: providing
guidance and support for young people as they embark on the complex and overwhelming post-
secondary planning process.

The severity of the situation is corroborated in the education research literature. A
number of studies show that counselors do not spend significant time advising students on post-
secondary options (Lautz, 2005; McDonough, 2004). Jean Johnson et al. use data from the Public
Agenda to understand how recent high school graduates perceive their former counselor (2010).
They found that, of the young people surveyed, 48 percent reported that they usually felt like
“just another face in the crowd” when dealing with their counselor (p. 75). The authors argue that
these sentiments are associated with the fact that counselors are expected to juggle too many
unrelated tasks, like administrative work, discipline issues, managing student schedule changes,
overseeing testing programs, lunch duty, attendance monitoring, and substitute teaching (p. 76).
With little policy direction that mandates specific counselor roles and responsibilities, and varied
expectations of counseling staff by school administration, counselors are often pulled away from
their responsibilities to advise and counsel students. The counselors must “juggle” these multiple
and varied duties, while still also being expected to “effectively assist hundreds of students in
planning their futures” (p. 76). This “juggling” is detrimental both to students who require
undivided attention of school counselors, and to guidance counselors, as increasing time spent on
non-guidance duties increases the likelihood of counselor burnout (Demato & Curcio, 2004;
Lambie, 2007; Moyer, 2011).

In New York City, while specific data on *college* counselor time on task is unavailable,
local experts estimate it to be on par with the national figures – around 25 percent. Omar Morris,
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a local college and career pathways expert, explains how guidance counselors are stretched thin among their many responsibilities:

It includes any of the behavioral issues, maybe meetings with parents, which you can imagine takes a lot of time and paperwork. It could include lunch duty. I kid you not. Some guidance counselors serve almost as APs [assistant principals] in their schools. It’s not like there’s one job. Schools have to be very creative in how they use their staff. It’s quite possible that you can walk into any college advisors meeting and ask the counselors what their day-to-day jobs are, and you will get 20 different answers. But the one thing that would be clear is that each person wears 10 different hats. (Nauer et al., 2013, p. 30)

These “10 different hats” are in addition to the various and already complex tasks related to the core work of guiding students through the post-secondary planning process.

Core Responsibilities and Workload

Students frequently report that one source of stress during the post-secondary planning process is keeping track of application materials and deadlines. According to a NYCDOE “College Action Plan Outline” made available online, students should complete six basic components of a college application (if required by a school): the application form, personal essay, test scores like the SAT or ACT, high school transcript, teacher recommendations, and financial aid applications (such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or FAFSA). In reality, students also often need to include application supplements, student loan information, and parent/guardian tax income forms that go along with FAFSA, or opportunity program paperwork like the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for State of New York colleges. The “College Action Plan Outline” suggests that New York City students apply to roughly five colleges. As such, students must maintain six basic components of applications to five different colleges until their college application process is complete.

Multiply this by 348, the average number of students per college counselor in U.S. public schools, and you have the basic job responsibilities of a college counselor.
These caseloads add up quickly when considering the different aspects of applications, as well as shifting deadlines and requirements. College guidance counselors must not only remain aware of deadlines, but also support students as they navigate the post-secondary planning process. A former CollegeBound Initiative college counselor in New York City, Carmen Pena, describes this as a strategic, yet sensitive, experience of “hand holding,” explaining that “[students] often feel that the process is so overwhelming and so stressful that they end up shutting down…you have to reinforce it so many times for them to actually get it” (Nauer et al., 2013, p. 31). While paperwork and deadlines are an important aspect of the college guidance job, it requires a sensitivity that transcends simply filling out forms and mailing application packages. It requires patience, strategy, and empathy through trusting relationships with students – all which counselors need time and space built into their workday to achieve. Yet, many counselors in the U.S. are only able to allot a fraction of their time to work directly related to college counseling, contributing to the uneven landscape that works to engender the guidance gap.

Aside from paperwork and deadlines, college counselors are also tasked with supporting students and families through the challenging process of obtaining financial aid – the FAFSA process. This can be overwhelming for students because it involves family finances, something about which many young people know little. The process also requires coordinating financial and tax documents with families, which can be a sensitive and personal topic for any family, especially those who have a number of different, context-specific living or work situations that further complicate and already convoluted process. Even well trained counselors can struggle with this strategic coordination, as Jeanine Boulay, a college counselor in Brooklyn, explains,

A lot of families are reluctant to release [family information and tax documents], or are reluctant to give us their Social Security number…so we’ll sometimes have to send emails to parents or talk on the phone and tell them it is secure information.
We have very complicated situations, noncustodial parents, where, for example, the student lives with the grandmother and has no interaction with either parent. I often have to remind students and parents that, just because the parent provides financial information, it doesn’t mean they’re responsible (Nauer et al., 2013, p. 37).

Students may grow so overwhelmed by the financial element of the post-secondary planning process that they give up on applications, or never even start them (Kimura-Walsh, et. al., 2009). Others may get accepted into a college, but an aspect of their financial aid falls through, or is incomplete. Without counselors to help them, students struggle to navigate their way through the process. Furthermore, counselors are often unavailable during the summer to advise students; as a result, an accepted and college-eligible student may never make it to her first day of college classes (Castleman & Page, 2012; Hoover, 2009).

While applications and FAFSA can occupy much of a college counselor’s time, equally important is forging meaningful relationships with college admissions offices. While a student may appear unqualified for a certain school, counselors may have an understanding of the student that she might still be a successful candidate. A counselor’s ability and willingness to advocate for and “go to bat” for his/her students is an important skill (Schaeffer et. al., 2010). However, a college counselor can only advocate effectively if they have enduring relationships with college admissions offices, as well as their students. This requires consistent networking and outreach only allotted to counselors in schools that have resources and structures in place for counselors to nurture relationships with colleges, and their students.

Beyond the formal college application process, there are many, more informal and intangible duties of guiding students through the post-secondary planning process. Guiding a student as they consider which college is right, while helping another student determine his next step after receiving a rejection letter; urging one student to stay persistent with college applications when he feels like he is on the verge of giving up, while simultaneously encouraging
another that she should apply to at least one “reach” school that is out of her comfort zone. These are the intangible supports that students need in order to successfully navigate the post-secondary planning process, alongside technical information and knowledge. The interactions between counselors and students build trust and lead to improved college readiness outcomes (Schaeffer et. al., 2010). They are also a part of the many varied layers that make up the life of a college counselor struggling to move beyond the guidance gap.

**Triaging: Dangerous Consequences of Overworked Counselors**

Like overwhelmed emergency room physicians, college counselors often find themselves in impossible situations, attempting to fill the guidance gap in schools that are understaffed or where counselors are under-resourced. A school study by Kimura-Walsh and additional authors (2009) lifts up this idea of *counselor triage*. The authors found that students in the top 10 percent of achievement – those highest achieving students in a school – received full access to their school’s “College Corner”, provided with one-on-one, ongoing college advising. In contrast, those students not included in the top 10 percent were actually prevented access from the “College Corner”, along with the benefits associated with it, like consistent on-demand access to college application support. Even in the same school, not all students receive the same level and quality of counseling, largely a consequence of over-burdened and under-resourced counselors.

This idea of college counselor triage came up frequently during my interviews in 2011-2012 with college students who reflected on their own post-secondary planning processes, interviews conducted for a larger study I co-authored with researchers from *The Center for New York City Affairs* (Nauer et al., 2013). Two student stories in particular, those of Reggie and Joanna, are particularly indicative of the experiences that many have as high school students in New York City. Both were bright students at Brooklyn College pursuing future careers in
education. Both graduated from the same large, comprehensive high school in Brooklyn, three years apart. They had the same two college guidance counselors during their junior and senior years in high school. Reggie was a promising football player, and Joanna was an involved cheerleader. However, they had very different experiences during the post-secondary planning process. In the end, what affected their process the most was the need to manage expectations.

In high school, Reggie was a zoned student who was not enrolled in any formal academic program at his high school. He lived close enough to his high school, so the school was mandated to accept him, regardless of his middle school academic and attendance records. He understands this as a defining factor in the amount and rigor of college advising he received. Even before he formally began the college admissions process during his junior year, Reggie noticed that other zoned students were not provided access to the same kinds of academic resources as non-zoned students. He explains, “I was a zoned kid so I didn’t get offered a lot of opportunities like APs or advanced classes that other students who weren’t zoned got. I had a lot of friends [who weren’t zoned], and talking to them, I realized I didn’t get offered a lot, even though I had the same grades as them.” While some students were expected to take advanced classes and perform well in them, he did not feel those same expectations from his teachers. Even though he dreamed of going to college, and had a cousin who encouraged him to pursue higher education, he received limited support from most of his teachers and counseling staff. He does not remember teachers emphasizing the importance of grades to get into college. Instead, the focus was just to, in his words, “pass and move on and graduate high school.”

Such lackluster academic expectations were also pervasive in the college admissions process. Even though Reggie was an athlete and very involved in afterschool activities, he realized that students in his classes, and his zoned friends, understood far less about the
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procedures and practices of getting into college. He explains this division among his classmates as a kind of “segregation”, continuing that:

[school staff] tried to accommodate everybody, but it just wasn’t the same for everybody. I wish some of us zoned kids would have been offered more opportunities and were talked to more, but it just wasn’t the case… a lot of kids I felt were more prepared that me. They knew so much more about college and applications than I did…and I didn’t understand why, or how. I think about whether it is my fault or I just wasn’t told, but I think it’s just because I really wasn’t ever told.

Reggie tried to access his college counselor and school staff for help as much as possible, but found that the two or three friends he had who were enrolled in more rigorous academic classes were the best sources of college knowledge. It was through these friends that he learned about important college admissions information and activities, such as college trips and application requirements. The one college trip that he made, to Stony Brook University, only happened because one of these friends informed him about it. During the single, required advising session he had with a college counselor during his junior year, the counselor only presented him with information about community colleges. Private colleges or four-year colleges – like Brooklyn College, where he ultimately ended up after transferring from a community college – were never presented to him as viable options.

While now a successful and engaging college graduate, Reggie looks back on his college planning experience as influenced by a label, or stereotype, which was implicitly placed on him the first day of his freshman year in high school: zoned student. He explains that,

I guess [the college counselor] would pick and choose who they thought were going to do well in college. There was judgment there of who they thought would do well. I was on the football team and a zoned student, but I was actually good both academically and in sports. Still there was a lot of prejudgment. I took from it and learned from it, but a lot of my other friends never got to college… they never thought about their futures and no one told them they should.
In stark contrast to Reggie and his experiences, Joanna says that she always felt that she had a support system in their school, comprised of teachers and a college counselor who were there to help. While the process was stressful, she felt encouraged to go to college by her counselor and teachers. She was enrolled in the humanities academic track (as opposed to a zoned student), positioning her to study journalism or English in college.

Even during her first of many advising meetings with the college counselor, Joanna remembers being introduced to the idea of “reach, match, and safety” schools. This concept encourages students to apply to a range of colleges – “safety” schools are those that report average GPA and test scores below a student’s average; “match” schools are those that report average GPA and test scores similar to a student’s average; and, “reach” schools are those that report average GPA and test scores above a student’s average. Because Joanna was encouraged to apply to reach, match, and safety colleges, she applied to CUNY and SUNY schools, and her “reach” school was Penn State University. This was partially because one of her beloved social studies teachers had attended the school. They frequently had conversations about Penn State, and how it would be a good fit for her academic and social goals. Even though she did not ultimately choose to enroll there, Joanna believes that it was a positive experience to have adults in her school that encouraged her to think about options outside of New York City.

The same teacher also helped Joanna make a final college decision once she received her college acceptance letters. Unlike Reggie, who was only ever encouraged to apply to community colleges and did not feel as if he had a support system of teachers and guidance staff, Joanna was able to explore different college options with a number of adults in her school who were familiar with the process. The consistent, one-on-one time with knowledgeable adults in school made a critical difference between Reggie and Joanna’s post-secondary planning experience.
Joanna believes that because she and her friends were considered “good” students, and took many advanced placement classes, they also spent a lot of time together working on applications. She would “run into a lot of my friends in the college office,” so it was always easy to get quick answers from friends to important questions like application deadlines or FAFSA issues, even if a college counselor was not immediately available. In contrast to Reggie, Joanna took trips to visit a variety of schools, after hearing about these opportunities from the college counselor and her friends. The visits helped her gain experiences on college campuses. She notes that she “missed half of my cheerleading games” in order to visit colleges around New York State. She also notes that the trips “helped me figure out what kind of college was a good match for me, because I got to see them in real life and talk to students who went there.”

Teachers in Joanna’s academic classes also made connections between things they were learning in class with college and the application process. For instance, Joanna’s English teacher would regularly remind students of the fundamental elements to an effective college essay. Her teachers would also reflect on their own college experiences or classes. While teachers in Reggie’s classes would tend to simply stress passing the class and graduating from high school, Joanna had teachers who would talk about the relationship between what they did in high school classes to how it connected to college classroom experiences.

Between college counselors, teachers, and friends taking similar coursework, Joanna reflects that she had a network of support in high school, which guided her through the post-secondary planning and college admissions process. She believes that this was the most important factor in choosing a college that suited her academic, social, and emotional needs: a college that was a “good fit.” Joanna explains that, “I had so many teachers and other people in school who really cared. I was so overwhelmed, so that really mattered. They went to college so
they knew about it, and they also knew me because I was in their classes.” In other words, Joanna was surrounded by adults who both expected her to go to college, and “cared” about the choice that she would make. She believes that this was a motivating factor for her to continue to focus on academics and stay consistent with college application deadlines and information.

In large high schools, like the one Reggie and Joanna attended, graduating senior classes are 1,000 students, or more. Oftentimes, they have only one or two college counselors to support these swelling caseloads. When counselor caseloads are this high, by the time a counselor has met with each student during his or her junior year even once, senior year is already upon them. This scenario unfortunately forces many counselors to triage, like a doctor in an emergency room, based on expectations of who seems likely to be college-bound. Unless caseloads are made more manageable for counselors, supplemented by school support and resources, they will continue to be forced to typecast students and only wholly serve the highest achieving students. Such was the case with Reggie and Joanna. The complex and challenging landscape – illustrated broadly in this section – represents the everyday, lived experience of post-secondary planning and programming in many public high schools in New York City, as students and counselors struggle to realize the goal of college-for-all in practice.

Community-Based Organizations: An Alternative Strategy toward Filling the Guidance Gap

A secondary strategy used by some schools in New York City toward managing the post-secondary planning process is to make use of community-based organizations (CBOs) to provide college counseling support to students. During interviews I conducted in 2011-2012 with college students who reflected on their own experiences during the post-secondary planning processes, as part of a larger study I was conducting with The Center for New York City Affairs, one student I talked to was Lillian. She was a smart student in her second year at Brooklyn College, studying
to become a teacher. Lillian had graduated from high school two years ago, so her experiences during the college admissions process were still relatively fresh.

As I talked with her, it became apparent that, for Lillian, the smartest choice she made during the post-secondary planning process was to seek support outside of her own school. With only one college counselor serving all juniors and seniors in her small Brooklyn high school that was co-located with five other schools, Lillian did not receive consistent help from school staff. Her school had no formal requirement that students meet with the college counselor, so students often crowded the college guidance office vying for much needed one-on-one support. In describing her post-secondary planning experience, she explains that, “We had a class that was designated for college counseling, but we didn’t do too much. It was primarily focused on passing the SATs. Everything was geared toward testing, and that’s mostly how our school dealt with the college process.” While this class handled SAT preparation, and her college counselor managed application deadlines and paperwork, Lillian did not find consistent one-on-one support when it came to challenges she experienced during the post-secondary planning process, especially with things like teacher recommendations or finding scholarships. She recalls that she and her friends would “fight tooth and nail” with each other to find teachers to write recommendations, because there were “so many students, and not enough teachers.”

When Lillian began her freshman year of high school, AMIGOS, a community-based organization (CBO), had been recruiting students in her school, offering services like afterschool programming and mentoring. Some of her friends decided to join, and since Lillian was an enthusiastic and outgoing student, she did, too. In retrospect, Lillian sees this as a crucial decision that helped her successfully enroll in college, though she was unaware of how important the organization would be toward her future college plans at the time:
[AMIGOS staff and mentors] were the ones that helped me network, because we were all assigned mentors and they had [college] alma maters, so they knew how the college admissions process worked...they were the ones who explained the college admissions experience to us. They took me on my only college tour...helped me with my [college] essay...and made sure I was on track to graduate.

When Lillian’s high school was unable to offer her resources that were critical in helping her navigate the post-secondary planning process, especially elements that required consistent one-on-one support like college essay writing or teacher recommendations, it was a CBO that filled the holes in her safety net. Lillian’s mentor stepped in, as a surrogate college counselor, to make sure that she was taking the necessary steps toward completing her application and graduating with classes that would help her become a successful college student.

Lillian is one example of many New York City high school students who rely on the help of a CBO or non-profit organization in order to survive the post-secondary planning process. A 2011 study conducted by Graduate NYC!, a collaboration led by the New York City Department of Education in conjunction with the City University of New York, identified a whopping 253 CBOs or agencies that provided college access programs in New York City, and surveyed 154 of these programs. The survey found that these 154 programs served a total of 92,677 students in 2010 (Graduate NYC!, 2011). According to the survey, these programs predominately serve Black and Latino/a high school students through post-secondary preparation activities like college trips, supporting students through the college application process, and college scholarship awareness (Graduate NYC!, 2011). A majority of these organizations also report doing youth development work alongside college admissions and preparation work, covering personal and academic student behaviors like study skills and social behaviors that will prepare students to be successful, independent college students (Graduate NYC!, 2011).
The study also indicates that many critical post-secondary preparation services provided by CBOs or City agencies are delivered to students on a one-on-one basis. 53% of surveyed organizations reported that they provide one-on-one college application support, while 51% help students complete the FAFSA and do financial aid work one-on-one (Graduate NYC!, 2011). This kind of individualized counseling is crucial to helping students make informed, educated post-secondary decisions because it gives them meaningful time with a counseling professional (Johnson et. al., 2010; McKillip et. al., 2012). Veronica Aguilar Hornig, manager of college guidance at The Opportunity Network, cites this as the most important college service that many non-profits and CBOs can provide young people in New York City:

What’s most important when you’re dealing with college is one-on-one counseling, because it makes lasting personal connections. Sitting down one-on-one and talking about [student] options in-depth and frequently is the only way to survive this whole process and do it well. A personal connection makes the difference between a student who gets through it, and does well in college, and the ones who may fall through the cracks (Nauer et al., 2013, p. 48).

Each student has specific needs and concerns during their post-secondary planning process, and individualized counseling is crucial when students have unique situations, such as being undocumented or first generation-to-college students. In these cases, students benefit from having a personal connection with an adult during post-secondary planning. As a result, they are much more likely to persist through the process and successfully enroll in college (McKillip et. al., 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

CBOs and non-profits also offer college admissions support during afterschool and summer hours, providing coverage during a precarious time before college starts when support is not provided for students inside their schools. According to the Graduate NYC! study, 73% of surveyed organizations provided college admissions support during afterschool hours, while 63% provided it during the summer months. During school time, students are doing a number of
different things, like academic classes, test preparation, and extracurricular activities or clubs. However, school-based college guidance counselors and teachers tend to only be available to students during school hours, and during the school year. CBOs and non-profits recognize this gap in college support. For instance, the College Directions Program at Kingsbridge Heights Community Center, a settlement house in the northwest Bronx, works with students from the community during afterschool hours throughout the year, because it fits with their personal schedules. The program serves roughly 200 registered students a year, alongside dozens of students who drop in during the year with quick questions or post-secondary planning needs.

Many students need additional post-secondary guidance or support after high school graduation. Some are accepted to college but never show up on the first day of classes due to problems that arise with financial aid or registration during the summer months before enrollment, a common phenomenon referred to as the “summer melt” (Castleman & Page, 2012; Hoover, 2009). College counselor Jeanine Bouley explains that she “lose[s] a lot of kids to red tape, especially the CUNY-bound, during the summer” because of registration or FAFSA issues (Nauer et al., 2013, p. 52). In these situations, CBOs or non-profits step up to help address this breach in guidance for many New York City students.

**The Benefits of CBOs: Knowing the Community**

One reason many CBOs are able to do successful, meaningful post-secondary planning work with students is because they serve residents in one community. Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, in Brooklyn, offers an array of programming for community members at every age group. It acts as a comprehensive, multi-service CBO that offers things like Headstart, young adult programs, and employment services for adults. The organization
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maintains a strong presence in the Cypress Hills neighborhood by providing the community a variety of resources. Thus, post-secondary work is a natural fit.

CBOs assume a unique position in communities that allows for a nuanced awareness of the challenges that young people and their families face. This proves to be a particular strength of CBOs who do post-secondary planning work. CBOs sometimes have an advantage over schools, because they have a demonstrated history of working with not only students, but also entire communities. For instance, the College Directions Program at Kingsbridge Heights Community Center is only one program along a spectrum that is offered to the community supporting young people’s development and growth from birth into college, and beyond. Allison Torres, former program coordinator of the College Directions Program, attributes this to their capacity to know and understand students in their community. During an interview, she explains that, “We are able to develop relationships throughout the course of their young lives. We see them from afterschool programs in elementary schools, to tweens, to teens, and then to the college program. So we see the full range of their development…and you don’t always get that in schools.” The close relationships CBOs forge with young people throughout their lives are useful toward providing relevant, one-on-one counseling during the post-secondary planning process.

Community organizations also garner parent and local community buy-in during the post-secondary planning process, especially when dealing with sensitive aspects of the process. For instance, FAFSA and financial aid requires families to be transparent about their income and other family information. Some families are hesitant to give this information to schools because it reveals personal information, while for others it becomes a matter of legality, as some students or their families are undocumented (Abrego, 2006; Perez, 2010). Schools report that these
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circumstances make it difficult for schools to be in a position to help families with undocumented parents or incarcerated family members. One former director of college readiness at a local high school in Queens has experienced this with a number of high school students, explaining during an interview:

The NYCDOE legally cannot ask a kid whether they have papers or not. And they can’t ask for their Social Security number because a student is guaranteed an education until 12th grade regardless of whether they’re documented or not. So it’s touchy, a lot of times…[even if] you’re asking for a Social Security number in 11th grade or 12th grade and you’re doing it for the FAFSA purposes…it can be a little bit of a gray area.

A “touchy” or “gray area” for many schools tends to be easier for some CBOs that work with local neighborhoods, because of the meaningful relationships they have formed with families over the years.

The Challenges of Partnerships between Schools and CBOs
Currently the NYCDOE has no formal protocol for how CBOs can, and should, build relationships with schools, especially within the context of post-secondary planning and programming. This proves to be a barrier for many organizations. Some schools have well-articulated partnerships with CBOs, such as American Asians for Equality (AAFE) who have a strong presence within two high schools in Queens. AAFE helps to manage a large portion of these schools’ post-secondary planning work, and AAFE staff is housed inside high school college offices. They work closely with school staff to develop effective programming, and if the school does not have the capacity for certain activities, like college trips or financial aid workshops for parents, AAFE might fill those needs.

Other CBOs do not have this kind of explicit and structured relationship with high schools because they are not located within a school. In these cases, the job of forging a useful and lasting relationship with schools can be difficult. Andrea Soonachan, formerly with Cypress...
Hills Local Development Corporation, explains that, “Schools aren’t always aware that CBOs are a resource to them. They struggle with how to assess the quality of a CBO. They don’t know what they’re looking for and asking for. There’s no systematic way for schools to leverage those partnerships” (Nauer et al., 2013, p. 52). For many organizations that do not have a longstanding relationship with high schools, communicating how they can serve as a strategic resource to schools can be difficult in the absence of NYCDOE policy that helps support this.

CBO’s should not replace a school, but should act tactically to provide college counseling in ways that schools cannot. They can use their resources in local neighborhoods and communities toward contributing to a growing safety net for students during the post-secondary planning process. Monique Darrisaw, who joined the NYCDOE school support structure after serving as a principal for many years, typifies this balance, explaining,

> From my point of view as a school leader, a CBO or a partner organization can’t supplant what I feel is my responsibility. It’s like sending your child to visit somebody. Dinner is my responsibility. If someone gives them a snack, I’m very thankful. You know they went to your house and they had a snack, but it’s still my responsibility to feed and clothe that child. (Nauer et al., 2013, p. 45).

If CBOs can effectively rely on schools to “feed and clothe” students, then they are able to step in to supplement this with support that some desperately need. However, achieving this balance requires that schools and CBOs have an established method to communicate and forge meaningful relationships with one another. This requires NYCDOE policy to provide more strategic, useful direction and support to schools that would benefit from partnering with CBOs to better address student needs during the post-secondary planning process.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the complex political and educational context in which the work of post-secondary planning happens in New York City schools. It is also the context in
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which Youth Leaders work and live. Central to this story is an underlying tension between policy interventions that hold schools accountable to graduate students who are “college and career ready”, and dominant approaches that schools make use of in order to operationalize the policy. This tension is born out of limited guidelines and resources made available to schools at the policy level toward effectively supporting students during the post-secondary planning process inside schools. In the absence of policy and effective school-based resources, two strategies that many under-resourced schools enact to do this work in New York City are to inordinately rely on a guidance/college counselor, or partner with a local CBO. Both approaches come with challenges that could be softened by more responsive policy.

Oftentimes, many over-burdened and under-resourced counselors in high schools only have limited time to reach all students, and must forgo quality one-on-one time with students, replacing it with checklists and an emphasis on college information. As such, rather than making post-secondary planning a meaningful and student-centered experience for students, schools are simply scrambling to fill the guidance gap with college information. Information, however, is not enough. Students need to understand how to position their own personal, family, social, and financial contexts among the dense knowledge and information that colors the post-secondary planning process.

This is where Youth Leaders can come in as a strategy toward reimagining the post-secondary planning process, and how schools structure this experience for students. Rather than simply telling students what they need to know, treating the process like a set of mechanical steps toward completing a generic checklist, Youth Leaders live post-secondary planning alongside their peers. For Youth Leaders, the students they help are not just a name in a caseload that they must get through. They are, instead, their classmates and peers; they are their friends or
family. Youth Leaders are students experiencing the post-secondary planning process – feeling similar feelings and emotions – as their peers. This can make the process, and the experience of this process, markedly different. The following chapter will describe and examine how Youth Leaders are positioned and prepared to do this transformative work, by taking a closer look at their intensive training during the summer.
Chapter Four

Summer Institute:

Positioning Youth Leaders to Help Make ‘Dreams Come True’

The summer of 2014 was especially hot in New York City, and as it ushered in July we were hit with an intense heat wave. While most New York City high school students were enjoying their summer break from school and trying to avoid going underground in the stifling humidity of the subway, over 60 brand new Youth Leaders (with the exception of a few returning) came together from across the city for a new-and-improved, three week Summer Institute training. They came from Red Hook, Harlem, West Farms in the Bronx, the Lower East Side, Flushing, Cypress Hills, and beyond. Most battled the heat and humidity of the subway to get there, in many cases crossing boroughs.

As the young people began to fill the auditorium at Pratt Institute, a Brooklyn arts college that was hosting us this first week of Summer Institute, I handed each a name tag and thick binder containing all of the materials and information they would be engaging with, and learning, over the next three weeks. One group took seat in the first row in front of me, before the introduction formally began, leafing through their binders and chatting among themselves. After a few moments, one of the young people stopped looking through the pages, held up the binder in front of another and said, with a hint of trepidation, “We gotta learn a lot”. The other, without even looking up from her binder, confidently declared, “Yeah…we got this”.

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While containing information and knowledge, that binder was also the key to how these soon-to-be Youth Leaders would learn to reimage post-secondary planning as a student-centered, relevant experience that holds meaning in their lives, and the lives of their peers. And, they would experience this transformation, firsthand, over the course of that Summer Institute training. This chapter will examine both the process of planning Summer Institute, as well as the goals and activities that happened during those three weeks, in order to show how the program reimagines post-secondary planning as something much more meaningful and useful than a set of rote, mechanical steps in a process.

I begin by describing and documenting the process of planning the Summer Institute training, as well as highlight the organizing principles, defining goals, and activities toward realizing these goals. I then move to examine the goals and activities that happened during Summer Institute within one analytic framework: building adaptive expertise. I argue that this idea provides the bedrock of Summer Institute and nature of training that Youth Leaders receive in order to position them to work with their peers. By way of building adaptive expertise, Youth Leadership for College Access reimagines post-secondary planning as a relevant, student-centered experience grounded by the lives of students, rather than a detached set of prescribed steps. This chapter will work toward addressing my first research question: How does the Youth Leadership for College Access program reimage the post-secondary planning process? I will do this by drawing on data and analyses conducted during the Summer Institute narrative phase of my analysis process, documented in chapter two of this dissertation.

As that first week of Summer Institute trudged along through record heat, I grew increasingly struck by Youth Leaders’ focus and engagement with the material during each workshop; by their willingness to learn from, and participate with, the content as well as each
other. They were asked to balance long days and commutes with learning complex information and developing counseling skills at a fast pace; they were asked to face their own fears, and dreams, about the future. They were asked to rely on each other toward building a cohesive group, even though they came from different schools and neighborhoods and communities. However, for the most part, they did this with high energy and enthusiasm. I was struck by the level and depth that they, in the words of one Youth Leader that first day of training, truly “got this”.

At the end of each day Youth Leaders were asked to write a short journal entry by way of a prompt. As that first week came to a close, and they bounded out to leave for their coveted weekend off, I casually glanced through some of their entries. I came across one in particular that caught my eye, written by Sonia. It read:

When I think about counseling others, I feel most confident about empathizing with my peers and being able to communicate openly. This is easy for me to do, especially because I know who I am talking to. When I think about counseling others, I worry about not being able to impact my peers in the most beneficial way. I would not want to discourage anyone from achieving their goals or making their dreams come true.

In her first week of training, Sonia already had a sense of the complexities and nuances in delivering a college for all policy in such a diverse, expansive landscape like New York City. She was preparing to try to actively address a policy problem that she lived and breathed every day. She understood that helping her peers get to, and succeed in, college – helping them achieve “their goals” in a way that truly “benefits” them – is a daunting and incredibly important task; and, that it is something much more than a set of academic standards or checklist of steps. Sonia was beginning to understand that her job as a Youth Leader is about making the post-secondary planning process meaningful for her peers, by “empathizing” with them and “counseling” them
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in a way that makes a lasting and relevant “impact”. Because, after all, it is about their “hopes and dreams”.

The Planning Process

In years prior to the 2013 Summer Institute, the Youth Leader trainings had consisted of a number of daylong workshops sprinkled throughout the summer. However in January of 2013, I was brought on to the Youth Leadership for College Access team to help one of the founders, Lori Chajet, develop Summer Institute out into a three-week, intensive training. In early March, adult supervisors from sites and schools who had both participated in the program the year before, and were going to participate in the upcoming year, were invited for the first of a number of Summer Institute planning sessions. The goal of this first meeting was to examine evaluation data collected from Youth Leaders and supervisors reflecting on summer training the prior year, and to begin thinking through the goals and objectives of the new Summer Institute.

Figure 4: Timeline of Summer Institute planning, and ensuing trainings during the 2013-2014 school year
We took a backwards-planning approach to that first meeting, meaning we asked folks to reflect on the *content*, *skills*, and *experiences* they envisioned Youth Leaders to have developed by the end of the summer training. The goal of this initial process was to produce a set of goals grouped into these three categories that would ultimately yield thematic sessions and workshops for the Institute. Three blank, large format pieces of poster paper were posted on the walls of the meeting room titled *content*, *skills*, and *experience*. Supervisors were asked to mingle the room and write down their ideas associated with the three concepts on post-its, then post them on the corresponding poster paper. Once all post-its were posted, as a group, we began to group them from across the three concepts in order to start thinking about how individual content, skills, and experiences could grow into a cohesive workshop or session. Once this grouping process was complete, we provided participants with an exit slip asking to indicate which of these preliminary sessions or workshops they would be interested in planning with their sites and any Youth Leaders who would be returning for a second year.

From there, informed by the preliminary workshops created by the group during that initial planning meeting, Lori and I developed a first draft of the calendar. Summer Institute was scheduled during the month of July, over three weeks, Monday through Thursday. On Fridays, Youth Leaders were to meet with each other and supervisors at their school or CBO in order to work on more site-specific training or planning for the upcoming year, as well as make time for Youth Leaders to complete various elements of their own post-secondary planning process. We shared the first draft in-person with some seasoned Youth Leaders, who knew the lay of the land and nature of the work. They gave us useful feedback from a Youth Leader perspective that we incorporated into the draft. Once the calendar was drafted, the group of adult supervisors met, again, in April in order to read over the draft and edit. During this planning meeting, new sites
that were joining the program for the first time were invited. We shared out the notes from our first planning meeting in order to reorient our minds to where we were at that point, alongside the first draft of the calendar informed by those notes. The larger group divided up into small groups, with an intentional scaffolding of *Youth Leadership for College Access* experience so that groups represented varying levels of program familiarity. In these small groups, we examined the calendar in order to garner reactions, thoughts, and feelings about this first calendar draft.

Unsurprisingly, there were a lot of reactions. All of the supervisors come from a youth development and education background, so they are seasoned experts at developing curriculum and giving feedback. Most of the feedback was positive, alongside many, many edits and additions. I noted each and every comment, and from there we began talking about school and CBO ownership over specific workshops and sessions. We wanted sites to all have an investment in Summer Training, especially since they were spending a significant portion of their summer at Institute. We also wanted to incorporate their expertise, since they work on the ground with young people within the post-secondary context every day. Sites were asked to choose workshops they felt they had expertise and interest toward planning and facilitating, come summer. They had the option of planning and facilitating alone, in collaboration with another site, or with Lori and/or myself. Lori and I had developed a Session Planning Sheet, much like a lesson plan template. We gave this to sites in order to organize their work toward planning a workshop or session. Sites were given two weeks to complete the Session Planning Sheet and return back to us, so that we could start working on revising the calendar and gather all materials needed.
All workshops and sessions were open for their choosing, other than four days of Institute which dealt with counseling skills, as well as the landscape of: City University of New York (CUNY), State University of New York (SUNY), and private colleges. For these four days, we partnered with Goddard OPTIONS, a CBO with a demonstrated reputation doing college access and knowledge development work across the city. While Goddard planned these sessions, they were open to school or CBO staff to help facilitate.

Once sites returned their Session Planning Sheets, and we communicated back and forth during a lengthy editing process (both in person while visiting their sites, and by email). Lori and I developed a binder that included all of the materials and activities for Youth Leaders and their supervisors. This master binder included everything Youth Leaders would need during Summer Institute, and was envisioned as a source for them to refer to during the school year when they had questions working with their peers or needed information about a given topic. It also contained the final, edited Summer Institute calendar that would guide the organization of Summer Institute. We met with the supervisors of all participating sites once more, in June, to review each session and workshop.

**Organization of Summer Institute**

Summer Institute was organized into three weeks. From Monday through Thursday, Youth Leaders met together for daylong workshops and sessions. On Fridays, rather than meeting as a group, sites met individually in order to work on particularities of their work and planning for the upcoming year, and Youth Leaders worked on various aspects of their own post-secondary planning process, such as drafting a college essay. Each week, a local college hosted Summer Institute, giving Youth Leaders the opportunity to spend time and build experiences on
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a college campus. Days were long, and other than their lunch break, Youth Leaders were participating in workshops and sessions all day.

An overarching theme guided the workshops and sessions that occupied each week. Week one was titled, “Who Am I and What Do I Want: Personal Post-Secondary Planning Process”. This week predominantly focused on Youth Leaders exploring their own goals within the context of post-secondary planning. They also took actionable steps in their process, like making their own annotated college list (similar to a “reach, match, safety” list of college to which they plan to apply), and beginning to draft a personal statement or college essay. Week two, titled, “What Do I Need to Know to Help Others: College Knowledge”, worked toward supporting Youth Leaders develop a deep, nuanced knowledge of the post-secondary planning process, and the many facets of this process. For example, Youth Leaders learned about (and digitally completed) different kinds of college applications (CUNY, SUNY, common application, and supplemental), as well as the financial aid process. Finally, week three, “What Do I Have to Do to Help Others: The Work of a Youth Leader”, grounded what Youth Leaders had learned during week one and two by their particular role as Youth Leader. For instance, among other things, they developed their own, personal “Youth Leader pitch” to garner peer interest in working with Youth Leaders, as well as worked on creating, and facilitating, workshops. They also learned about the data tracking process, since they were required to track their work with peers during the school year.

Merging Disparate Discourses: Activities of Summer Institute

In terms of the individual workshops that shaped Summer Institute, after analyzing each Session Planning Sheet used to organize the intended outcomes and activities, they fall into four broad categories, or discourses, associated with post-secondary planning. With the caveat that
many times these categories are inter-related and, oftentimes, overlap. These discourses represent
the larger goals of Summer Institute, and shaped the activities that facilitated meeting these
goals. It is important to note that we did not explicitly plan Summer Institute within the
framework of these four categories. Rather, reflecting back on the training as a whole and
analyzing the workshops as data, these four discourses emerge as a useful way to analytically
unpack and examine the work that happened during Summer Institute, and the larger goals.

1. **Knowledge of the college application process and other post-secondary options**

This speaks to a range of ideas, concepts, an information that work toward Youth Leaders
developing a solid foundation of knowledge and understanding of the process of applying to
college, as well as alternative post-secondary options. This involves things like: the landscape of
CUNY, SUNY, and private colleges; college admissions criteria; creating a well-balanced
college list; the components of a college application; the particularities of for-profit colleges and
other non-college options; and, financial aid and paying for college. For instance, a full day of
workshops and sessions were devoted to paying for college, and covered the complex landscape
of financial aid by way of role-playing activities and scenarios that grounded knowledge and
information in real-life situations. Youth Leaders were even given examples of real student
financial aid packages offered by a number of colleges, and tasked to compare and contrast in
order to determine which college presented the most lucrative package.

All of this is very much informed by the college admissions process and post-secondary
planning, and includes dense, complex information. The goal of workshops and sessions along
this vein were to help Youth Leaders develop an understanding of relevant vocabulary, key
terms, and ideas associated with the post-secondary planning process so that they could make
relevant choices for themselves, as well as help their peers do the same. In other words, it was
not enough that Youth Leaders knew information and knowledge, but also understood how this information is associated with different post-secondary choices. For instance, Youth Leaders were expected to be able to describe to one another, and their peers, the difference between a loan and grant, or a bachelor’s and associate’s degree; and, the long- and short-term consequences related to choosing these different post-secondary pathways. They were not only expected to define terms, but explain how these terms or ideas are implicated in post-secondary decision-making.

Figure 5 is a graph that documents findings from an analysis of pre- and post-surveys given to Youth Leaders at the beginning and end of Summer Institute. It illustrates some major areas covered that implicate knowledge and information related to post-secondary planning, as well as the gains that Youth Leaders made in developing a comprehensive understanding of the particularities of this process. These questions were open-ended.

Figure 5: Summer Institute response means for college knowledge questions in pre- and post-surveys

0= "Don't know" or incorrect response; 1= partially correct response; 2= correct response
N=53/54
For instance, when Youth Leaders were asked to define and describe “reach, match, safety” on the first day of Summer Institute – an important idea during the post-secondary planning process that refers to a list of potential colleges that students develop, representing a varying degree of anticipated student acceptance given her GPA, test scores, and other admission requirements. For this question, the pre-survey mean was 0.4 (when 0 = “don’t know” or incorrect response; 1 = a partially correct response; and, 2 = a fully correct response). However, the post-survey mean increased to 1.5. Gains along these lines show how Summer Institute encouraged Youth Leaders to develop an understanding of relevant concepts, vocabulary, and ideas necessary to effectively navigate the post-secondary planning process.

2. *Skills development*

The second discourse addressing the goals of Summer Institute is *skills development*. Workshops that included skills development aimed to help build key counseling, leadership, and professional skills that Youth Leaders would enact in order to work with their peers, such as counseling skills, data tracking, and workshop development and facilitation, among others. This also includes skills that facilitate the work that Youth Leaders do throughout the year, like speaking in front of groups or talking with adults. Sessions during Summer Institute that integrated skills development helped Youth Leaders contextualize the knowledge and information that they were learning within the interactive work that they were to do with their peers, come September. In other words, workshops also emphasized skills necessary to help filter complex information toward making relevant post-secondary decisions or choices.

As an illustrative example, one workshop reviewed various counseling responses when working in a counseling situation. Following this review, Youth Leaders were provided case studies with an accompanying scenario, and were asked to role play both student and counselor
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perspectives in order to practice skills they learned. This exercise not only worked toward developing counseling skills, but also required Youth Leaders to assume a number of different perspectives when working with their peers, so that they could practice using college knowledge or information within different student contexts and situations. There were also sessions devoted to team building, both within sites and across sites, so that Youth Leaders forged relationships with one another. Activities like scavenger hunts and interactive team building activities encouraged this.

Workshops and sessions that included skills development also relate to skills that Youth Leaders would need in order to navigate the post-secondary planning process, both for themselves as well as when they help others. For instance Youth Leaders completed a full CUNY and SUNY application online, as well as created a CollegeBoard account, during Summer Institute. While these activities helped Youth Leaders gain knowledge, they also helped them cultivate skills toward successfully completing online components of the post-secondary planning process, and how to effectively troubleshoot if need be. During the school year, I witnessed dozens of Youth Leaders working with their peers as they completed online applications. During one of these observations, for instance, a Youth Leader pointed at the screen and declared, “Okay, when I did this application over the summer I messed up here because…” and went on to explain particular points or steps that could confuse a student, or present a problem.

Youth Leaders developed many skills necessary to successfully navigate aspects of the post-secondary planning process over the summer. The graph below illustrates results of Youth Leader reported confidence in a variety of dominant skill areas that were addressed in sessions and workshops during Summer Institute. Youth Leaders were asked to assess their confidence
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levels in a variety of skills after participating in Summer Institute, on the final day of the training.

3. College experiences

Thirdly, on different occasions Summer Institute workshops or sessions provided Youth Leaders with *college experiences*. These experiences allowed Youth Leaders an understanding of life in college for themselves, but also so that they could integrate these experiences into the work that they do with their peers. In most cases, Youth Leaders had never actually set foot on a college campus, even though they have walked by or go to school near one. As one Youth Leader, Ferah, puts it when talking about herself and her peers: “I found it odd how even though a majority of us had all grown up walking past these CUNY schools, no one knew anything about them nor what they had to offer”. Positive, authentic experiences on college campuses
during both middle and high school can help young people “imagine a future [that includes] post-secondary possibilities”, as well as develop college knowledge and grow “deeply positive feelings about college” (Previts & Bauer, 2014, p. 1).

Examples that helped to cultivate college experiences are activities like the anatomy of a college syllabus, where Youth Leaders examined a range of college syllabi in order to learn about what college courses look and feel like, discussing their reactions and questions with professors who teach at local colleges. They also participated in scavenger hunts on each of the host college campuses, which encouraged Youth Leaders to interact with college students and staff toward learning about the many services that colleges can offer. During these college scavenger hunts, Youth Leaders were required to visit various offices and spaces that college students frequent, like a bursar office, library, and departmental offices.
There were also sessions that explored both how students have fun in college, as well as college Opportunity Programs that enable students to enroll in college who do not meet traditional academic guidelines but show promise and financial need. Both sessions featured interactive panels of college students so Youth Leaders could ask questions about life in college from a student perspective. These panels provided inquiry-driven platforms for Youth Leaders to build experiences and understandings about college, rather than just providing information about these things on a worksheet or during instruction.

Aside from programming, it is important to note that Summer Institute physically happened on three, separate college campuses across New York City. This, in itself, facilitated Youth Leader development of positive experiences on college campuses; it helped to make the post-secondary planning process meaningful, relevant, and real for Youth Leaders. They ate lunch in college cafeterias, their workshops and sessions were conducted inside actual college classrooms and lecture halls, and they were expected to navigate college campuses throughout their days (they were provided with college campus maps in their binders). Youth Leaders brought these many experiences to their work throughout the year with peers in order to make post-secondary planning relevant for their peers. For instance, Pratt Institute hosted the first week of Summer Institute, an arts college located in Brooklyn. Youth Leaders learned about what an arts college is, and visited various classrooms, labs, and studios during the week.

Months later during the school year, I observed one Youth Leader who was working with a peer interested in graphic design. Once the student noted his interest in graphic design, the Youth Leader, Diana, exclaimed, “I spent a week at an arts college this summer! It’s so cool, there are digital labs and art studios and students’ art is all over the campus…it would be a great place for...
you”. In this situation, Diana directly drew on her Summer Institute experiences to connect her peer’s post-secondary goal with a real-life, local example.

4. Challenge socio-historical perspectives on college

Lastly, some Summer Institute workshops or activities pushed Youth leaders to rethink socio-historical perspectives and patterns on college and college-going in the U.S. Put another way, Sessions or activities that focused on unpacking and challenging themes that tend to be framed as “barriers” for students toward enrolling in college that exists in both research and larger public discourse. The goal was to demystify student myths about barriers or obstacles in college-going. For instance, one session examined what it means to be a first-generation-to-college student, a title many Youth Leaders were planning to assume, themselves. Youth Leaders reviewed statistics on first-generation-to-college students and watched a short video documenting the lived experiences of such students. They then divided into small groups and

![Figure 8: Youth Leader posters brainstorming challenges and support strategies for first-generation-to-college students during a Summer Institute workshop](image)
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brainstormed both the challenges around imagining and getting to college, as well as strategies that support students toward addressing these challenges.

Another session encouraged Youth Leaders to critically examine the experiences of undocumented students and their successful path to college, as oftentimes being undocumented is framed as a sizeable barrier in college-going and completion, both in scholarly research as well as public or political discourse (Abrego, 2006; Huber & Malagon, 2007; Terriquez, 2015). We watched a short documentary that depicts the everyday lived experiences of people, including college students, who are living undocumented in this country. We then invited a speaker-activist to speak about her own experiences living undocumented and navigating the post-secondary planning process. Youth Leaders participated in a Q&A with the young woman, and we did an activity that asked them to research ways, and sources to consult, to best support peers during who are undocumented. Workshops or activities along this vein did not romanticize or oversimplify these complex topics, but instead supported Youth Leaders in building a comprehensive understanding and effective toolkit toward effectively supporting themselves, and their peers, in moving beyond elements or contexts of the post-secondary planning process that are frequently framed as barriers.

Even when the primary focus of a workshop was not to challenge themes that tend to be framed as barriers for students toward enrolling in college, many workshops touched on this idea through an activity. For instance, Youth Leaders received an extensive training about financing college. Much of this workshop was focused on introducing Youth Leaders to key terminology, teaching them how to read financial aid packages, and developing financial literacy. However, one activity during the workshop – a “human barometer” interactive activity – encouraged Youth Leaders to explore, and challenge, their own assumptions about finances and college. For
instance, during this activity many Youth Leaders voiced that they believed 4-year colleges are only viable options for wealthy students, while others expressed that they thought only students with high grades and SAT scores can receive college scholarship money. During this activity, these commonly held misconceptions about financing college were broken down, and Youth Leaders learned strategies to actively address these issues. This activity is an example of the different opportunities made available to Youth Leaders during Summer Institute that operated to challenge student myths about financial barriers or obstacles in college-going.

Ultimately, these strands – these discourses – come together within the context of post-secondary planning to provide a more holistic, alternative approach to the banking method used by many schools that I described in chapter one. These larger goals of Summer Institute, manifested in the workshops and activities that happened over the three weeks, represent how the Youth Leadership for College Access program fundamentally reimagines post-secondary planning as more than just knowledge and information in order to complete a set of generic steps in a process. Instead, post-secondary planning is framed as relevant, grounded by an inquiry-driven approach to teaching and learning.

Alongside participating in workshops and sessions framed by the four broad discourses described above, Youth Leaders also engaged in assignments toward a student portfolio. This portfolio asked them to complete a number of assignments, many of which were intentionally built into workshops. This portfolio, upon completion, provided Youth Leaders with tangible products that were created during Summer Institute, products that they could use both toward their own post-secondary planning as well as in support of their peers during the school year. The portfolio components were as follows:
• **Written reflections:** Youth Leaders were given a daily prompt to focus their writing toward the end of each day. These reflections were intended to help Youth Leaders unpack and reflect on their daily work, as well as provide adult supervisors with an understanding of how Youth Leaders were processing the work they were doing.

• **Career inventory:** Youth Leaders completed a career/major/colleges handout using an online program, CareerZone. This inventory was an important entrance-point into Youth Leaders completing their own post-secondary process, enabling them to explore their interests and future goals.

• **Annotated college list:** An annotated college list, in the context of New York City, identifies CUNY and SUNY schools that Youth Leaders are interested in applying, along with explanations of why. Some students also identified private colleges as well. This list helps to align student interests and goals with colleges that fit their academic qualifications and future goals.

**Figure 9: Youth Leader researching colleges for her annotated college list**
- **Practice college application**: Youth Leaders completed a practice CUNY and SUNY application. While the applications were not “live”, given it was summer, they were able to learn the ins and outs of completing the applications so that, come September, they were able to more effectively complete their own applications, as well as support their peers.

- **Youth Leader pitch**: Each Youth Leader drafted a series of pitches that they could use in order to explain, and promote, their work to a variety of audiences, such as peers, adults, school staff, and others. This is commonly known as an “elevator pitch”.

- **Observation guides of two host colleges**: After completing a scavenger hunt of two of the host colleges (the third host college was CUNY Graduate Center, a massive building that houses all CUNY doctoral programs, and therefore was less relevant in this activity), Youth Leaders completed a College Observation Guide. This guide encouraged them to think about aspects of college campuses within their own interests and goals. They were asked to reflect on things they liked about the college campus, things they still wanted to know about the college, and the kinds of things they would want to tell their peers about the college.

- **First draft of a personal statement**: All Youth Leaders were asked to brainstorm ideas for their personal statement, and these ideas contributed toward a draft of a personal statement. Most of the personal statement writing happened during Fridays during their site-specific meetings.

Also included in Youth Leader portfolios was a site-based plan, to be collaboratively completed by each site and their supervisor. Because participating sites were different, it was important that Youth Leaders and their supervisors pieced together a vision of the work within
the context of their own school or CBO. Site-based plans asked Youth Leaders and supervisors to draft a mission and goals, setting (where Youth Leader work would physically happen inside their school or CBO), Youth Leader outreach plan to students and teachers, Youth Leader schedules, workshops content and calendar, special event planning, data tracking, personal statement completion, and a supervision plan. These nine elements work toward the program working effectively and efficiently in their schools or CBOs.

The workshops and sessions, together with Youth Leader portfolio and site-based plan, all described in this section, encompass the activities of Summer Institute 2013. The organizing principles and goals of Summer Institute are reflected in the four strands described in this section that characterize the nature of workshops and learning activities. These different ideas – these different discourses – worked together to give Youth Leaders the confidence to not only complete their own post-secondary planning, but also to feel that same level of confidence in supporting their peers.

When prompted to reflect on their own feelings of preparedness to do a number of activities related to their work during the school year – activities that require them to call upon skills, content, and experiences we worked to develop during Summer Institute – Youth Leaders generally felt prepared. For instance, over 96% of Youth Leaders felt prepared to both counsel students as well as to complete their own college process. This indicates that Youth Leaders left Summer Institute feeling fairly confident in completing their own post-secondary processes, as well as supporting their peers. Figure 10 illustrates Youth Leader reports of preparedness after participating in Summer Institute.
The four strands that characterize the nature of activities and workshops that happened during Summer Institute – the four discourses – do not operate separately. Instead, as I implied in this section, these four strands mingle and overlap during post-secondary planning. Youth Leaders need to sample from many of them in order to complete any number of activities or actions during post-secondary planning, especially when helping their peers. For instance, in order to help a peer make sense of a financial aid letter, they need to enact information about financial aid, as well as counseling and communication skills in order to learn about the student and her particular personal context and needs. The Youth Leader may also need to draw on college experiences, or clarify student misconceptions about financing college, in order to help her make a relevant college decision. Youth Leaders need to draw on a number of different...
discourses in order to ground post-secondary planning by their own lives, or the lives of their peers.

Examining the sessions and activities that happened during Summer Institute, one analytic lens emerges that helps to unpack and understand the nature of these sessions and activities: developing adaptive expertise. We did not explicitly enter into the planning of Summer Institute with this goal. However, upon describing the process of planning and sequencing of activities and workshops during the course of this chapter, it emerges an anchoring goal implicated in the nature of summer training and larger post-secondary planning work of Youth Leaders toward making the process meaningful and student-centered.

‘Putting What I Learned into Practice’: Building Adaptive Expertise, Reimagining the Post-Secondary Planning Process as Meaningful and Student-Centered

During the final week of Summer Institute, one of the daily written reflections prompted Youth Leaders to explore their excitement for, and fears associated with, being a Youth Leader in the fall. One Youth leader wrote,

I am most excited about putting what I learned into practice. Over the last two weeks, I’ve learned a lot, from making a well balanced college list to helping undocumented students. This training has been a lot of work and I know that hopefully in the end, it’ll be worth it. I am most nervous about actually helping someone. I have gained so much knowledge and experiences but I am nervous that while I am helping a student I might not know what to do.

In response to that same prompt, another Youth Leader wrote,

I am excited about learning new things and experiencing my abilities. I’m eager to put all of my work into play. I’m however nervous of doing something knowing I could’ve done better. I want to be the kind of Youth Leader anyone can come up to & know what to do and have advice that can help out my fellow peers.

What both of these Youth Leaders are speaking to – their excitement toward “putting what I learned into practice” or “put all of my work into play”, and fears of “not know[ing] what to do” while helping a peer – is the idea of adaptive expertise.
Research on knowledge and expertise tends to differentiate between routine and adaptive (VanLehn, 1989). Routine expertise relies on solving recognizable types of problems within a specific domain quickly and accurately based on familiarity and a specific body of knowledge. In other words, routine expertise “reflects the ability to complete a familiar task efficiently” based on knowledge and familiarity with the specific problem at hand (Kirshner & Geil, 2010, p. 6).

Expertise that moves beyond this routine familiarity speaks to adaptive expertise. Adaptive expertise, in comparison, relies on “flexible, innovative, and creative competencies” toward solving a problem, and the ability to adapt to new situations or problems as they come up (Hatano & Oura, 2003, p. 28). Oftentimes, adaptive expertise requires sampling from different domains or discourses toward finding an appropriate and dynamic solution to a problem. Adaptive expertise does not simply require knowledge, but also how to make use of this knowledge within varying contexts or situations. As Hanno & Määttä (2011) explain, “while a routine expert is able to make an efficient and high-quality performance in unchanging situations, the adaptive expert is able to acquit oneself well also in new, constantly changing situations” (p. 92).

Within the distinct framework of education and schooling, Hatano & Oura (2003) argue that, “a majority of students possess fragmentary, inert pieces of knowledge they do not know how to use” as a result of the way learning is structured in schools. In order to intentionally help students develop adaptive expertise, rather than this fragmentary knowledge associated with routine expertise, we must give young people, “opportunities to use the same set of skills [and knowledge] in a variety of disciplines, enabling them to think creatively, analytically, and practically” (p. 28). The authors argue that, within the context of education, schooling should focus on building this kind of adaptive, creative expertise, which tends to happen in outside-of-
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school settings because of the more “open-ended and unpredictable nature of problems found there” (Kirshner & Geil, p. 6).

An illustrative example of distinction between routine and adaptive expertise is the difference between two chefs. One enacts routine expertise by way of following the steps in a recipe effectively, whereas the other enacts adaptive expertise to creatively and spontaneously use new, unfamiliar ingredients and cooking tools toward creating something new (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999). In this example, both chefs have access to cooking knowledge and tools. The difference lies in how they make use of this knowledge.

Within the specific context of post-secondary planning, this distinction between routine and adaptive expertise can be a useful way of examining the methods or strategies that schools use to support students. As I argued in chapter one and chapter three, oftentimes schools predominantly manage the post-secondary planning process by way of banking college knowledge and information for students; with an emphasis on generic checklists and rote steps in a process. This is particularly evident in schools with high enrollment rates and limited resources or counseling staff. A banking method toward post-secondary planning counseling emphasizes routine expertise – addressing a recognizable type of problem (post-secondary planning) within a specific area (the college landscape) quickly and accurately, based on familiarity and a specific body of knowledge (college knowledge and information). It deduces post-secondary planning to a set of generic steps with a finite beginning and end point, rather than a meaningful process; it grounds post-secondary planning by a specific set of knowledge and information, rather than grounding the process by the student.

As I argued in chapter one, a banking method of post-secondary planning neglects the situated, complex nature of college knowledge that hinges on how students make use of college
knowledge and information within the context of their lives, families, and communities. Students must navigate college knowledge among their (sometimes changing) personal, familial, financial, and social contexts. In order to reimagine post-secondary planning as a relevant, meaningful, student-centered process, it requires students – and counseling staff – to enact adaptive expertise and sample from a number of different discourses and skillsets.

This adaptive sampling of different discourses and skillsets is what the activities and goals of Summer Institute emphasized. Virtually every workshop or session relied on interactive learning rather than simply banking concepts and information. Learning activities, like role-playing and scenarios, were central. For instance, when learning about college admissions requirements across different schools, Youth Leaders broke up into small groups, each assigned a real college. They were given profiles of their college, with information like the average GPA and SAT scores of entering freshmen and the college’s mission statement. Then, they were given applications of five different students – an application that included teacher recommendations, a college essay, and student transcript. Youth Leaders were to assume the perspective of their assigned college admissions office, by way of the college profiles they were provided, and tasked to determine which students the college would accept, waitlist, and reject, based on the student applications they were tasked to review. This idea of assuming different perspectives and vantage points was a primary learning method enacted by the interactive activities in which Youth Leaders participated.

Even when a workshop was focused on developing complex knowledge and information within the frame of the post-secondary planning process, for instance Financial Aid and how to pay for college, Youth Leaders were asked to make use of this knowledge within varying contexts and situations. During the Financial Aid workshop, Youth Leaders were given three
student financial aid package letters and, in groups, asked to weigh the different options in order to make a decision based on the most affordable college within the context of their assigned student. Or, during the counseling skills development sessions, Youth Leaders were given case studies of different scenarios, asked to play the role of counselor and student. These role-playing activities required Youth Leaders to not only call upon knowledge and information, but to *make use* of it within varying, situated contexts.

Youth Leaders were also expected to rely on each other to help solve problems and find answers, rather than simply asking an adult. While team-building activities focused on encouraging inter-site bonding, almost all learning activities happened in small groups of Youth Leaders from *different* sites. This was intentional, so that Youth Leaders were positioned to work with peers from different places; peers who they did not know. They could not rely on prior knowledge about a peer or friend from their school, and instead had to ask questions and make use of counseling skills they were developing in order to find out about and get to know these peers. This provided Youth Leaders a platform to practice getting to know and communicate with peers who they may have never met before, in preparation for the work they would be doing, come fall.

Much of Summer Institute also expected Youth Leaders to learn by doing. For instance, rather than simply reviewing a CUNY or SUNY online application, Youth Leaders completed them for themselves. This not only gives Youth Leaders personal experience, but experience from which to draw when they go into their schools or CBOs to work with peers. Later, during a workshop aimed at exploring the different aspects of a complete college application, Youth Leaders were provided scenarios. In one group, I was playing the role of a student who is trying to complete her CUNY application. Below is the prompted role provided to me:
I am trying to complete my CUNY application online. I keep trying to move onto the next page and it is not letting me! I am so frustrated with this computer that I just don’t even want to finish the application.

I presented my problem and frustration to the group. One Youth Leader immediately jumped in, explaining that he had recently completed a CUNY application online and related to my frustration. He explained, “Oh man, I know what you’re saying, I had that same problem when I was doing it”. I went on to emphasize that I am feeling like I want to give up. My Youth Leader partner went on, “No one in my family has ever gone to college, and they don’t know a lot about computers, so it’s not like I could’ve even asked them for help when I was doing my app. I feel your frustration. Here, I can help you. Don’t worry, I got this”. He then used his technical and content-related knowledge about CUNY and the application that he learned during Summer Institute in order to walk me through elements of the online application.

In this scenario, the Youth Leader used adaptive expertise to navigate multiple discourses in order to work me through my problem. He integrated his own experiences with post-secondary planning, his personal and family context to relate with me and the problem I was experiencing, as well as information and knowledge about the post-secondary planning process, all to walk me through the problem toward a viable solution. He also enacted counseling and communication skills that he learned and practiced during Summer Institute. In other words, this Youth Leader sampled from a number of different thematic strands that reflect the goals of Summer Institute workshops toward helping me. This is only one example of many exercises and activities that pushed Youth Leaders to enact adaptive expertise within shifting, varying contexts. I will further use the lens of adaptive expertise in the next chapter by examining how Youth Leaders call upon adaptive expertise in the work that they do with their peers; by looking at how their work, in the words of one Youth Leader, puts what they have learned “into practice”.

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Through this analytic lens of adaptive expertise, I would now argue that much of the work that we did during Summer Institute was toward the goal of strategically supporting the development of adaptive expertise, so Youth Leaders are able to navigate and sample from different discourses and skillsets in order to respond to evolving needs of their peers; in order to help their peers solve problems. Adaptive expertise helps Youth Leaders successfully sample from the four dominant discourses that typify the themes and goals of workshops that Youth Leaders experienced, described in the earlier section of this chapter, alongside their own personal experiences that connect them with their peers.

**Conclusion: “It’s Not Just About Knowing about College, It’s about Knowing Them”**

On the final day of Summer Institute, Youth Leaders were given large pieces of poster paper and markers, asked to draw a picture that illustrates the ideal qualities and attributes that makes an effective Youth Leader – an “ideal Youth Leader”. I sat in with one group for a bit. They circled around the paper, shouting out ideas for their “Youth Leader Timmy” titled drawing, and one began to draw the group’s many ideas.

One Youth Leader suggested to, “put a big ear on him, because we need to be good listeners”, while another asked to, “make big eyes and glasses…since we see a bright future for everyone in our school”. A third added, “YLs have to be hard workers, so put muscles on him”. The group-designated illustrator drew out each of the ideas, as different Youth Leaders contributed their thoughts.
At one point, a Youth Leader, Benny, shouted out to “put some shoes on him”. The YL illustrator looked up, a little confused, and asked why. Benny explained that,

Being a YL, we have to understand where the peers are coming from. It’s our job to walk in their shoes so we know where they’re coming from, and so we can get them to where they wanna go. It’s not just about knowing about college, it’s about knowing them, so that we can take them places.

The rest of the group agreed with Benny’s suggestion, and one advised the illustrator, “Yeah, put that down…we take you places! That’s true.”

This chapter has explored the process of planning the Youth Leadership for College Access Summer Institute, as well as defining characteristics of the organizational structure that fed the overarching goals and activities. I also introduced the concept of adaptive expertise as a lens through which to examine the nature of teaching and learning that played out, toward
reimagining post-secondary planning as a meaningful, relevant, student-centered process, rather than a rote set of mechanical steps and bankable college information or facts. Calling on the words of Benny, the Youth Leader in the scenario described above, Youth Leadership for College Access reimagines the post-secondary planning process as more than simply “knowing about college”. Instead, the program also emphasizes the need to “know” students, so that Youth Leaders can help their peers meaningfully realize their hopes and dreams; so that Youth Leaders can take them “places”. The program also emphasizes that Youth Leaders enact adaptive expertise in order to contextualize dense information about college admissions and post-secondary planning. This is a departure from a “banking” approach that many under-resourced schools often take to post-secondary planning with students, an approach I discussed in chapter one. I argue that by reframing post-secondary counseling as more than just having information and knowledge, and training Youth Leaders use adaptive expertise in order ground their work by the lives of their peers, the Youth Leadership for College Access program reimagines post-secondary planning as a relevant, student-centered process.

The ensuing chapters will illustrate how Youth Leaders make use of their training in order to work with peers in their schools. The next chapter, chapter five, will examine the students who Youth Leaders help, and the problems that they present, from the perspective of Youth Leaders. While, chapter six will highlight how Youth Leaders make use of what they learned during Summer Institute toward supporting their peers during post-secondary planning, examining specific strategies they enact. It will shine a light on how Youth Leaders use adaptive expertise in their everyday work. Chapters five and six will both show how Youth Leaders reimagine post-secondary planning a meaningful, relevant, student-centered process, rather than simply a set of generic steps.
Chapter Five

Youth Leader Peers and their Problems:

‘He Has a Story”

By May, college admissions letters have been sent out and most students who are planning to go to college are finalizing their decisions, often weighing financial aid packages and consulting friends and family. Many would think that, by this time, high school college or guidance offices have quieted down from the winter craze of deadlines and forms. However, when I visited one Youth Leader site in May, the college office was in a visible panic.

Once a large, comprehensive high school in Brooklyn, the school has since been broken down into five small high schools – the result of local school restructuring policy under Michael Bloomberg, designated to “help” those “low-performing” schools. The five schools currently housed in the building have a strong partnership with a local community-based organization (CBO). The CBO provides one adult college counselor for each of the five high schools, and CBO staff directly supervises Youth Leaders, as well as other college access programming.

When I arrive at the college office in the basement that Friday in May, it looks and feels chaotic. Paperwork and forms are strewn throughout the relatively large space, with Youth Leaders and adult counselors filing through them at different spots around the room. Three Youth Leaders are helping younger students sort out last-minute details for an SAT exam, scheduled for the next day. A number of them are confused about the location of their test site, and Youth Leaders are working to clarify for them. A few other Youth Leaders are hovered
around some desks, planning out workshops they have scheduled in the upcoming days for 9th and 10th graders. Senior students are popping in and out of the college office, seeking out help from whoever is available, and shouting out questions about financial aid packages and college assessment or placement tests to whoever may be listening. It is loud. I immediately feel a heightened sense of stress, even as an outsider.

I take seat at a large table, among four seniors leafing through financial aid packages and City University of New York (CUNY) assessment test paperwork alongside one Youth Leader helping them. After about ten minutes, I notice a male student walk onto the scene, taking a seat at an open computer. He looks confused, as if the college office is an unfamiliar space, scrunching his face and moving his head back and forth; like he is looking for something, or someone. One adult counselor huddled around a group of students at computers across from him looks up and squints her eyes, acknowledging his presence. The student then blurts out, “I gotta go to college.” The counselor looks at him with noticeable disbelief, and then comments, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you here before. What are you asking me? You know it’s May, right? May!” He shrugs his shoulders and continues to sit at the computer. The counselor looks around the room until she sees a Youth Leader, Lakshmi, sitting at a desk, and shouts out, “Lakshmi, I need your help. Help him. I don’t know what he needs.” She motions to Lakshmi and points to the student.

Lakshmi sits down next to him. He emphasizes again, “I gotta go to college”. Lakshmi does a double take, and asks, “You know it’s May? Most people have already applied and are accepted.” The student nods his head, and then explains that he is graduating in June and was not planning to ever go to college. He was going to help his parents manage a small grocery shop that they own. Lakshmi nods her head and listens on. The student hesitates a little, and then
clarifies, “I got a baby on the way in September. I gotta go to college now. I gotta. You telling me it’s too late?” Lakshmi sinks down into her seat, and her face softens with a smile. She nods her head and then says, “Yeah, you gotta go to college. It is NOT too late; we’ll get you somewhere. Most of the CUNY two-years are still open for fall enrollment.” She grabs the mouse on the computer and opens a new window, pulling up the CUNY admissions website, and then says, “Here, let’s get you started”.

Later that afternoon, I accompany Lakshmi upstairs, where she is preparing to facilitate a “college myth busting” workshop for 9th and 10th graders. We have a few minutes before the workshop starts, so I ask about her earlier one-on-one work with the student who is expecting a baby. She explains to me, “If we didn’t have YLs [Youth Leaders], that kid wouldn’t have made it past the door. You saw, it was crazy in there! The adults have a lot going on. If a kid walks in just starting the process now, they don’t have time for that.” I ask why she wanted to help him, and she responds, “His story…he has a story.”

This chapter will take a look at the students who Youth Leaders help, as well as the problems that these students bring to them, particularly from the perspective of Youth Leaders. Using plot analysis of Youth Leader narratives that tell stories about the work that they do, this chapter hones in on the particularities of the characters (peers) around which Youth Leaders center these stories, alongside the problems that they help these peers solve. This analysis – triangulated by focus groups, participant observation, and program data – will show that Youth Leaders make the everyday work that they do around post-secondary planning meaningful for themselves, as well as their peers, by emphasizing the specific personal and social contexts within which their peers live. In other words, Youth Leaders make the post-secondary planning process meaningful by intentionally positioning their work around the particular “stories” that
they learn about their peers while supporting them through the post-secondary planning.

I begin by examining the peers that Youth Leaders talk about when describing their work, and how they perceive that a large portion of their job is committed to pulling in, or reaching, those students in their schools who have been labeled “hard to reach”. I then move unpack the problems that these peers bring to Youth Leaders for support or guidance, and the ways that Youth Leaders talk and think about these problems. In order to do this, I use plot analysis of twenty-one Youth Leader narratives, particularly examining the nature of problems Youth Leaders talk about, and complement this analysis with data collected during my ethnographic research on Youth Leaders. These analyses will show how Youth Leaders focus their work on the particularities of the lives of their peers – in the words of Youth Leader Lakshmi, student “stories” – making post-secondary planning a student-centered process rather than a rote set of mechanical steps. This chapter will work toward addressing the research question: What role do Youth Leaders play in transforming the post-secondary planning process as a meaningful, student-centered experience for their peers

**Reaching the Hard to Reach Students**

Most Youth Leaders make a clear distinction among the peers with whom they work. Some are regulars, who visit to the college office – or whatever physical space that a school or CBO designates to house Youth Leader work – frequently and consistently. One Youth Leader, Malina, calls these students the “residents”. They are deeply committed to realizing their post-secondary goals and completing the post-secondary planning process. Youth Leaders do not need to spend much time reaching out to them or following-up. Some of these “residents” are already friends of Youth Leaders, and others become friends through their invested collaboration. An example of a “resident” is the student with whom José was working in the description I provided
in the introduction to this chapter. When speaking with her, he says that she is there virtually “every day”, and as a result he knows her well. Once a peer becomes a “resident”, Youth Leaders no longer worry, at least as much, about their overall progress during the post-secondary planning process, because they know that they have reached them.

Not all students who Youth Leaders help and work with are “residents”, or at least they do not start out as such. Many are what I describe as “hard to reach” students. These are students who many adult counselors have trouble accessing, or even persuading to step foot in the college office, because of complex issues, such as students who are: non-high achieving (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009), undocumented (Nienhusser, 2013), first generation-to-college (Engle et al., 2006), balancing family obligations like work or caring for siblings, seemingly apathetic or disengaged (Savitz-Romer, 2012), battling personal or family health issues, and/or younger 9th and 10th graders for whom college is barely even a distant thought (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Oftentimes a “hard to reach” student fits into more than one of these descriptions, among others. Effectively reaching these students can grow more challenging in schools relatively with high student-to-counselor ratios, which is the case in many where Youth Leaders work and attend.

In the plot analyses of Youth Leader narrating activity #1, which prompted them to talk about a time they worked with a peer(s) that typifies the nature of Youth Leader work, a “hard to reach” student(s) was cast as the main character around which the plot happened in 62% of the narratives. Table 12 illustrates a breakdown of the main character(s) who grounded Youth Leaders narratives.
In her narrating activity, one Youth Leader, Malina, describes a particularly “hard to reach” student. She begins by describing this student upon his first visit to the college office, a student who she ended up working with over many weeks. She explains,

Suppose you’re a teenaged boy from Mexico whose family recently migrated to USA. You barely understand English, much less even speak it. Your grades are pitiful, not because you stay behind the corner smoking pot but because you were up all night working for your little “hermano” and sick mother. Your buddies at school kept talking about strange places that they call “college” and although you’re pretty much contented working at Al Karim’s Deli for life, you can’t stop the nagging feeling that there is more to life than selling bacon and cheese bagels. Now this story is exactly what Diego told me as his reason for coming to the college office.

Some students, like Diego, have complex personal and family situations that make them especially hard to reach during the post-secondary planning process. Diego is a student with limited English language proficiency, has work obligations, is committed to family responsibilities, and has immigration complexities – all which Malina frames as potential barriers to his post-secondary planning. In Diego’s case, all of these factors coalesce. During a one-on-one conversation after reading Malina’s narrating activity, she told me that Diego “didn’t even know what college was, he said ‘give me college’. And, it’s not like teachers or adults in school could help him, because all they knew about him were his bad grades…and [that]
sometimes he wouldn’t show up for classes. They didn’t know his story, but I did”. Malina sees it her duty, her job, to reach him so that he can get where he wants to be after high school, especially in the absence of direct adult or teacher support.

Youth Leaders believe that most students are hard to reach, or at least are perceived as being hard to reach, because they do not appear to be engaged in the post-secondary planning process – or in high school academic work. These students may not believe that college is “for” them. Whether it is because of complex personal situations like Diego, their grades, or a host of other reasons, these students do not see themselves as college students; they do not see college as a viable, real option. So, they appear disengaged. These are the students who, according to Youth Leaders, are not necessarily on adults’ radar. In other words, they are the students who can fall through the cracks during post-secondary planning. In a Youth Leader focus group, Maria and Justin elaborate on this, explaining,

Maria: We get to those students who are not in school, but you’re [friends with them] on Facebook. [We] know them, but they just don’t come to school all the time…the counselor or school is not going to know who they are, or where they are. [but] the point is…even though we don’t talk to each other all the time, we know each other…[we] know what they want [to] do, what they act like, what they like and what they don’t.

Justin: [nodding his head] Those are the type of students, they do come to school but…not 100% of the time. Or they quiet. Maybe they’re not into studying or reaching out or looking for things or asking questions. They just come to school, do their things, and go back home.

Even though counselors or other adults in their schools may not “know who they are” – they may not be able to reach these students – Youth Leaders, like Maria and Justin, believe it their job to do so. Because Youth Leaders “know” those students who may not necessarily be in school all of the time, or do not appear to be engaged in actively thinking about post-secondary
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life, they believe that they can garner more buy-in than an adult; that they can “get to” these students in a way that adults cannot.

Other hard to reach students are those 9th and 10th graders who are far removed from the process. For these students, college is barely a distant thought. Even those underclassmen with college aspirations can have misconceptions or myths about college, myths that could get in the way of fully realizing college down the line. In his narrating activity, Rishi calls upon this type of scenario. In an excerpt of his narrative, he writes,

This year, as a youth leader I have been spending most of my time working with seniors and helping them fill out their CUNY, SUNY, Common App and FAFSA. Therefore I didn’t really get to help and know the new 9th graders. So, I scheduled a few 9th grade early college awareness workshops with the teachers that I will be doing during the whole month of March. Yesterday, I facilitated a 9th grade workshop which is called College Vocab Jeopardy. There were different categories of questions where students could choose from. There was one question that required the students to name 4 community colleges. As the 9th graders weren't very knowledgeable about college, most of them stayed quiet. However, a student raised his hand with confidence and answered that NYU, SUNY, City College, and BMCC were the four community colleges he remembered. I was very glad to hear his shocking answer and happily explained the differences between community colleges, CUNY, SUNY, and private colleges. I was not only happy for dispelling their confusion but also seeing the satisfaction on their faces after acquiring some college ideas at the beginning of their high school. This incident provided me huge enthusiasm as a leader. I felt really happy as I was able to help these young students and talk about different colleges with them. Also, they were more interactive with me as they knew I was a student at their own high school. By the time these students become seniors, they will be a lot more knowledgeable and influenced to go to college as Youth Leaders continue to arrange these workshops throughout the year.

In his narrative, Rishi recognizes that he had been spending most of his time with seniors, so intentionally carved out time to provide workshops for underclassmen, especially because his school provides limited post-secondary planning opportunities for them. His narrative is centered on this workshop, and the misconceptions and misinformation that these underclassmen have about college. He elaborates on this later in a focus group, reflecting on his two years as a Youth
Imagining What Could Be: The Role of Youth Leadership in Realizing College for All Leader, explaining that, “I think at the beginning of 9th grade, they do not really know a lot about college. Most of them…they do not know if they are going to college or not”. Rishi believes that by seeing Youth Leaders and interacting with them early, it will help to actively engage underclassmen with the post-secondary planning process early and more effectively. He explains in the focus group that, “As they grow up…their attitude changes and they are more willing to go to college because they have heard so much about colleges”. As such, he makes it a point to incorporate this into his work as a Youth Leader.

The strategies and methods that Youth Leaders use to reach students will be addressed in the next chapter. However, I do not want to imply that this work of reaching hard to reach students is easy, even for Youth Leaders. They make clear that this process is difficult and time-consuming. During focus groups and conversations with Youth Leaders, they use verbs like “tail”, “stalk”, “hunt down” or “tracking down” when describing the practice of reaching, and following up, with peers who are not those “resident”, engaged students.

In an exit survey conducted in June, Youth Leaders were asked an open-ended question, prompting them to describe one specific challenge that they experienced during their year as a Youth Leader. They cited reaching, or “tracking down”, peers as the biggest challenge that comes with the job (40%). The next most popular challenge was time management (27%). Table 13 documents the breakdown of challenges that Youth Leaders cited in June.
Table 13: Challenges Youth Leaders experienced during their work, June 2014 exit survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reaching or tracking down students</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data tracking</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing work with personal post-secondary planning process</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with parents to get family documents</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting workshops</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Overwhelmingly, Youth Leaders reported that helping a peer(s) was what made them most proud. Table 14 documents their responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helping peers</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping peers complete a college application</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning workshops or school events</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth or development</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping peers with SAT registration</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In most cases, however, Youth Leaders did not go into much detail about the nature of this help. They would use broad statements, like: “being able to help students with [the] college process”; “helping out my peers when they need it the most”; “being able to help numerous students”; or, “I’m most proud of the help I’ve been able to give my fellow seniors”. Youth Leaders did not describe the kinds of problems that their peers came to Youth Leaders for help and support.

In order to move beyond this general theme of “helping peers”, I used plot analysis in order to examine the twenty-one narratives I collected from Youth Leaders, describing a time that they helped a peer (narrating activity #1). By conducting plot analyses of these twenty-one narratives, and then examining three plot elements that speak to the central problem that Youth Leaders talk about in their narratives (initiating action, complicating action, and high point), two broad problem scripts arise that demonstrate how Youth Leaders talk about the problems that their peers present to them: technical problems or contextual dilemmas. A technical problem
script involves a Youth Leader addressing a peer problem that is technically driven, requiring them to enact a specific set of steps or troubleshooting strategies to resolve it. A contextual dilemma problem script, however, requires a Youth Leader to respond to a student-centered issue that brings together peer personal, family, or social factors within the context of post-secondary planning. Table 15 documents the breakdown of contextual dilemma and technical problem scripts in Youth Leader narrating activity #1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The problem</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contextual dilemma problem script</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>71.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical problem script</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Technical Problem Script**

Technical problems refer to technical or procedural snafus that can transpire during post-secondary planning. They can occur during a range of activities – while registering for the SAT or ACT, or completing a CUNY or SUNY application; during the process of creating a CollegeBoard account, or by confusing important deadlines. In most cases, addressing or resolving a technical problem requires a Youth Leader to follow a general set of steps, or troubleshooting guidelines, in order to resolve the issue. Put another way, a technical problem that peers bring to Youth Leaders often requires them to enact routine expertise toward helping their peers. In their June survey, 88.4% of Youth Leaders reported that they helped their peers register for the PSAT/SAT/ACT “a lot” or “a moderate amount”, and 78.8% reported helping their peers complete a college application with this same frequency.

While these technical aspects of post-secondary planning can seem straightforward or innocuous, they often pose incredible challenges for students while navigating the process, as well as for adult counselors who must respond to dozens of students and questions. For instance,
during a site observation at a large, comprehensive high school in Manhattan, I observed a Youth Leader, Janice, working with a peer on completing her SUNY supplemental application for roughly 40 minutes. There were conflicting dates regarding a deadline, and the relevant deadline was contingent on a number of factors, such as to what program a student was applying and her financial aid needs, among others. Janice ran over to the college counselor, and within a minute the issue was resolved. Later that afternoon, while talking to the adult counselor who was new to the school that year, herself, she referred back to this incident. She explained,

At any time during the day there are at least 12-15 students working on things in the College Office. After that situation you saw with Janice and her peer it really made me think: what would I be doing if our school didn’t have YLs [Youth Leaders]? Many times, when YLs are working with students on these technical kind of issues, they are doing a lot of the filtering – they are listening to student back stories, what lead up to the problem. So, even if YLs come up against a question that they aren’t sure about, the YLs have filtered it. They also know exactly what and how to ask because of their experience and training. So usually when YLs ask me a question it takes all of 1 or 2 minutes, maximum. If YLs were not here the whole process would just take so much time, even for small questions like that.

This excerpt illustrates how even when something seems technical during the post-secondary planning process, it can still take a time or troubleshooting to resolve. Youth Leaders are able to “filter” technical problems because of their “experience and training”, resolving them quicker and more efficiently than their peers.

Technical problems also grow more difficult to address when they simultaneously manifest in groups of students, or multiple characters. One Youth Leader, Justin, focuses on this idea for his narrating activity. He writes,
It was a normal day at school, as always I would go to class and as soon as my 6th period lunch break started, I headed straight away to the college office in the basement next to the cafeteria. It was September, the month where I usually register seniors for the SAT’s at the [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) website, but I didn’t believe my eyes when I opened the door at the office and saw approximately 20 to 25 students waiting to be registered for the SAT’s. My youth leader partner wasn’t there to help me and all I could do is take responsibility, therefore, I took my first step into the office and asked for everyone’s need, there were people wanting to register for the SAT’s and people seeking college information. First of all, I separated each student by: students with a CollegeBoard account, students without an account and students who needed college information. Furthermore, I assigned a computer to each student and gave the steps to register to all of them, the work got easier when my school’s college counselor stepped in and helped me provide assistance with the registrations and instructions on what to do the day of the SAT test. Being a Youth Leader can be tiring with all of the responsibilities at guiding all 200 students from my school, but the experience I get with my Youth Leader partners and Counselors by helping other students is amazing once you realize that without all the people at the college office, these students wouldn’t have gotten as far on the process without extremely over stressing.

Justin’s narrative reveals that, even when problems appear to be straightforward and technical during post-secondary planning, they still provide a challenge for students as well as counselors – indicated by complicating actions as well as the need for multiple resolution attempts. This is especially the case when working with groups of students who are at different points in a process. As his narrative reveals, addressing this technical problem involves a number of steps: sorting students by need, assigning computers, and providing directions for each group of student depending on their technical issue. Just calls upon routine expertise in order to tackle the problem. He enacts a specific skillset (SAT registration) within a defined context or scenario (students who have CollegeBoard accounts, and those who do not), and prescribes steps that he learned during his training to address the problem at hand. While technical in nature, Justin recognizes that without completing these tasks, students “wouldn’t have gotten as far” in post-secondary planning “without extremely over stressing”.

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Contextual Dilemma Problem Script

While some Youth Leaders talked about helping their peers resolve these technical aspects and problems during post-secondary planning, most Youth Leader narratives in narrating activity #1 focused on multi-faceted, highly contextualized student problems. Using the words of the counselor quoted earlier, student problems that are deeply entrenched in their individualized “back stories”. I characterize these problems a dilemma that Youth Leader peers experience when their goals or ideas about going to college are in tension with personal, family, or larger socio-historical perspectives about going to college. While they may involve more formal or technical aspects of post-secondary planning – such as completing a college application or FAFSA forms – the nature of the problem hinges on the personal, social, and family context of the peer, rather than simply needing help completing these tasks. One Youth Leader, Diana, describes this in her narrative as when a “student [has] a conflict between applying to college and their current situation”.

In order to illustrate this, below is an example of one Youth Leader’s narrating activity, Kavitha. She writes:

As a youth leader I encounter many students with different situations and problems. One student in particular was an undocumented student, as well as one of my best friends. He would feel discouraged at times to apply to college and come to senior seminar while everyone is applying to FAFSA. It was a very stressful process for him. I helped apply to many different scholarships and let him know that he can still go to college even though he has a particular financial issue. I believe that the financial aid night that we help set up helped in some ways, but he also felt less discouraged by the day. He got accepted into many schools now and he got accepted into many different scholarships, and I am extremely happy for him. It felt good to help someone with the situation that he had.

Kavitha writes about a peer, and also one of her best friends, who is an undocumented student. She explains that he was “discouraged at times to apply to college”, because undocumented students do not receive federal aid toward paying for college, causing “stress”.

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This is one example of a peer dilemma that Youth Leaders called on during their narrating activity. While this student wants to go to college, he comes up against conflict between this goal and his undocumented-ness. This problem is less technically or procedurally driven, and more conceptual and contextualized.

One way to describe this kind of dilemma or problem is an “I want to go to college, but…” problem script. Youth Leaders enacted this script in 15 of the 21 narratives for narrating activity #1 (71.5%). Common strands of this problem script in narrating activity #1 were: “I want to go to college but I can’t afford it”; “I want to go to college but my family expects me to work after graduation”; or “I want to go to college but I’m not smart enough”. These dilemmas embody a clash of discourses: one that advocates a “college for all” mantra present in education policy and practice that is reinforced by unprecedentedly elevated student aspirations for college (Roderick et al., 2009), and one that represents larger socio-historical processes that tend to be framed as barriers to college, as my critical review of the literature illustrated in chapter one (Knaggs et. al., 2013; Plank & Jordan, 2001). In other words, contextual dilemmas broaden the context of post-secondary planning to include social relational structures, rather than simply the technical aspects of planning for, and applying to, college.

This idea comes out in some of our focus groups. For instance Maria talks about how she sees this clash of discourses – these dilemmas – in her local community. She explains,

In our community, there are mostly Latinos and Hispanic people, where they think that they came to this country just to get a job and succeed on it. When it comes to college, it’s not an option, because some of them are, ‘I’m not documented so I’m not going to do it.’ ‘I don’t have the money, I’m not going to do it.’ ‘I’m not a Gringo, I’m not going to do it.’…That’s the first thing you’ve got to change when [it comes] to the [college] application.
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Maria highlights that college does not seem like a viable “option” to many in her Latina/o community, because of larger socio-political discourses that frame their lives or personal situations as barriers to college, rather than opportunities or possibilities. She explains that this dilemma – perceiving these factors as barriers to college – is “the first thing you’ve got to change” when reimagining college as a real “option”.

Oftentimes the “but…” is not one factor, but many, and these factors manifested in the complicating actions of Youth Leader plots. The twenty-one Youth Leader narratives that talk about examples of their work yielded 65 total complicating action sentences or phrases. Upon examining the nature of these complicating actions, they were overwhelmingly character-centered, rather than action-centered. In other words, the complicating actions – or factors – that Youth Leaders called upon in order to express and contextualize a problem that they helped their peer(s) overcome were usually compounded by their peer’s own personal, family, and social context. Table 16 shows this emphasis in complicating actions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of complicating action</th>
<th>Total number in narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal or family</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer lacks college knowledge or information/has misinformation</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical or procedural complication related to post-secondary planning</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>65</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Average number of complicating actions per narrative**: 3.1
As an illustrative example, below is an excerpt from one Youth Leader’s narrating activity #1, Genesis. She writes:

As a youth leader one experience that has been the most impacting to me was being able to work with a student that not a lot of many others would have been likely to help because he was not one of the best students to keep track of. The main issue that I had with this student was that he did not want to apply to any type of colleges and also he just was not as serious about the college process and on top of that he had some serious family issues that did not allow him to have the power to use his family documents. As a youth leader it was my job to be willing to help even though he did not want it, it was all about sitting down with him and being able to talk to him and tell him the truths about college and all the opportunities. I spent most of my working hours working with this one student because his story just hit me wanting me to do any thing I could to get him to the next step in his life.

Genesis’ narrative includes five complicating actions that she associates with the main problem in her story, one of “work[ing] with a student that not a lot of many others would have been likely to help”. These complicating actions are:

1. He was not one of the best students to keep track of
2. He did not want to apply to any type of colleges
3. He was not as serious about the college process
4. He had some serious family issues
5. These family issues did not allow him to have the power to use his family documents

The five complicating actions that Genesis includes in her narrative all turn around the axis of her peer and his individual, personal context. They are less complicating actions related to technical or knowledge areas of post-secondary planning problems, as they are complicating factors, specifically related to Genesis’ peer. Genesis spends the largest portion of her narrating activity #1 talking about this peer and his personal context, highlighting how this social and personal context complicates his pathway toward post-secondary planning.
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This general emphasis on their peers that colors Youth Leader narratives that tell stories about their work, speaks to what matters most to them when they talk about the work that they do: their peers. Conducting plot analysis of the 21 Youth Leader narratives from narrating activity #1 helped me learn not only what happens when Youth Leaders work with their peers (the problems presented), but also what matters to Youth Leaders during these interactions (Dauite, 2014, p. 119). By using plot analysis as an analytic tool, I was able to hone in on why the particular stories Youth Leaders chose to tell holds meaning for them, and their peers as an extension.

As this chapter has shown, analyses of character, problem, and complicating actions in the plot structures of narrating activity #1 all specifically revolve around the “who” – the peers – that generates the particular story each Youth Leader chose to tell. Their peers, and the particularities of their lives, are the driving force in these stories, rather than the technicalities of the problem. In this light, Youth Leaders reimagine post-secondary planning a meaningful process by casting their peers at the center of their work, and this literally comes out in the stories they chose to tell when prompted to talk about an example that represents the work that they do as Youth Leaders. This chapter has highlighted that the everyday work Youth Leaders do is less directed by a formal checklist or steps to get through, and, instead, is grounded by the specific lives of their peers. As Genesis puts it in her narrative, included earlier in this chapter (italics for emphasis), “I spent most of my working hours working with this one student because his story just hit me wanting me to do anything I could to get him to the next step in his life.” Similar to many of her Youth Leader colleagues, the driving force in her narrative – and the underlying motivation for helping the peer about whom she writes – is all about “his story”.
Conclusion: Student-Centeredness

At the end of the school year, Youth Leaders came together for a final meeting to celebrate their year of work and accomplishments, and were given an exit survey so that program coordinators could get a better sense of Youth Leader everyday work. In part, this survey prompted Youth Leaders, as well as their adult supervisors, to assess the frequency that Youth Leaders completed various elements of the work. These elements ranged from facilitating workshops or planned special events, to helping their peers complete financial aid or complete college applications, among others. As I began to examine these surveys, I noticed that there were some marked discrepancies between how Youth Leaders reported the frequency of elements to their work, and how supervisors assessed this frequency of Youth Leader activity.

One discrepancy that especially stuck out to me was the difference between how Youth Leaders and their supervisors responded to one question: how often did you/Youth Leaders talk with or counsel students about personal issues? 61.6% of Youth Leaders responded “a lot” or “a moderate amount”, while 0% of supervisors reported “a lot” or “a moderate amount” when evaluating how often Youth Leaders talked with or counseled students about personal issues at their sites. There could be a number of different explanations for this discrepancy, however contextualizing it within analyses of narrating activity #1, alongside participant observation and focus groups, I believe that the answer lies in the question, itself.

The stories that Youth Leaders chose to tell during narrating activity #1 show that, more often than not, the work of post-secondary planning and counseling is inextricably tied to the personal; the work is tied to student “stories”. A student may have to complete a college application, however finding the time and space to do this while balancing an afterschool job to help support family, and caring for younger siblings, oftentimes makes this completion difficult. A student may have to locate ways to help finance her college education, however if she, or her
family, is undocumented, this process can seem like an impossible feat. In other words, asking Youth Leaders to disentangle the work of helping a peer do something like complete a college application from talking with them about personal issues is not a very productive – or realistic – question. This chapter has shown this.

This chapter has examined the peers that Youth Leaders spend their time helping, and the nature of the problems that these peers experience. Anchored by an inquiry into narrating activity #1 using plot analysis, and supported by focus groups, participant observation, and program materials and data, this chapter has demonstrated one way that Youth Leaders make the post-secondary planning work they do with their peers meaningful: by centering this work around the individual students and their lives. This student-centered focus in post-secondary planning is a marked departure from the generic checklists and steps that color the dense, 156-page *New York City College Planning Handbook* discussed in chapter one. Youth Leaders are less focused on the technicalities of the problems their peers are experiencing, and emphasize how these various problems are entrenched in their personal, family, social, and economic realities; how these various problems are related to their peers’ “stories”. This is one way that Youth Leaders reimagine the post-secondary planning process as meaningful and student-centered, rather than a rote set of mechanical, meaningless steps and information.

Chapter six will move to look at the strategies that Youth Leaders enact toward supporting their peers resolve problems they experience along the way. This chapter will show how Youth Leaders move their peers away from an “I want to go to college, but…” script, and transform these perceived challenges and barriers into opportunity. By honing in on resolution strategies that Youth Leaders call upon during their work with peers, I will illustrate how they
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effect adaptive expertise toward transforming post-secondary planning as meaningful and relevant
Chapter Six

The Work Enacted by Youth Leaders:

‘Don’t Worry, I Got You. You Can Do This.’

November is usually a hectic month in high schools. Students are frenzied over college applications, deadlines are approaching fast, and counselors are inundated with application packages that they must review before sending them off to colleges. I happened to be conducting a round of Youth Leadership for College Access site observations in November. One of these observations brought me to a large, comprehensive high school, with well over one thousand juniors and seniors enrolled. The school population is racially and ethnically diverse, and English Languages Learners represent twenty percent of the entire school population; close to one-fifth of the school population are students with special needs.

The college office is a relatively large space, as far as college offices in New York City go, located in the basement of the school. The walls are decorated with college posters and information virtually from floor to ceiling. There is an over-sized dry erase board calendar that indicates important post-secondary planning deadlines and events, like the upcoming Financial Aid Night for students and parents, hosted by Youth Leaders.

One area of the college office has a colorful board on the wall titled, “Meet Your Youth Leaders”; decorated with pictures of each Youth Leader, their name, and the school periods they formally make themselves available for their peers in the college office for one-on-one work. It
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also advertises the official Youth Leader school email and Facebook page that they created. There is one couch, a long table that seats about ten, as well as a computer corner comprised of about ten computers. Connected to the college office, by a door, is the college counselor’s office, housing the sole counselor serving all students at the high school. Other than this door, the space is open.

When I arrive at the college office that day in November, there are about five students sitting at computers as José, a Youth Leader, makes his rounds among the five students. A few are working on SUNY (State University of New York) applications, while others are working on CUNY (City University of New York) applications. Another Youth Leader, Malina, is preparing to leave the office, presumably to go to class. On her way out she glances at the group of her peers working on computers and says, “Hey guys, remember there is no personal Facebook use in the college corner”. A student looks up for her computer with a bashful smile, guilty of using Facebook in the college officer. Malina laughs a little, too, before reiterating, “But really, get back to work”, and then heads out.

José continuously walks among the students, checking in with them to see how they are doing; asking if they need help with anything. He seems acutely aware of each student’s keystroke. One student raises her hand and declares that she is finished and “ready to submit” her application. José suspiciously cocks his head to the side and asks, “Did you go over the application and review it”? Her eyes widen a bit, and she shakes her head no, with uncertainty. He shakes his head a little, displaying an assuring smile, and walks over to her, hovering over her seat to begin to review the CUNY application with her. A sixth student arrives at the college corner and begins saying to José, in Spanish, that she has an appointment with him. He responds also in Spanish, noting that this is her first visit to the college office, and then motions for her to
take a seat at an empty computer. Another Youth Leader, Akosua, who had dropped by the office to grab some paperwork and was on her way out, similarly acknowledges that this is the student’s first visit, welcoming her to the office with a smile and wave.

José continues to review the student’s CUNY application, eventually blurting out, “You see, this why you have to go over the application”, wryly pointing to the screen at a question that his peer had mistakenly omitted. The student and José both laugh, and he explains, “You always have to go over this stuff. It’s just like when you’re in class – you never look over your homework and stuff before you turn it in. I know you”. They share another laugh. He shows her how to correct her mistake, and once she makes this correction José explains,

It seems like everything is completed now. I need you to read through this one more time, then you can click submit. You still need to pay for the CUNY application but you can ask for a fee waiver, if we still have some. You also don’t have to worry about paying now, you can pay later. But you need to pay for your application to be processed. In order for us to know if you qualify for a fee waiver we need your parent’s tax info. You’re here [in the college office] almost every day so tomorrow make sure you bring that information in and we can try to get you a fee waiver.

The student nods her head in agreement, but I sensed, as an outside observer, that she was a little overwhelmed. José must have felt this, too, because before directing her to the counselor for an application fee waiver, he pats her shoulder and assures her, “Don’t worry, I got you. You can do this. You’re almost there”. He then turns to the student waiting for her appointment, and begins speaking to her in Spanish.

This chapter peeks into the everyday particularities of the work that Youth Leaders do with their peers, by examining the strategies that they enact in order to help these peers address problems or dilemmas that arise during post-secondary planning. This examination will lift up how Youth Leader work reimagines post-secondary planning as a meaningful and relevant process, by way of the dynamic resolution strategies they enact through adaptive expertise. As in
chapter five, this chapter is anchored by analyses of the twenty-one Youth Leader narratives, asking them to describe a time they helped a student. After analyzing these narratives, I situated other sources of data, like participant observation, focus groups, interviews, and additional narrating activities, within this analysis in order to make sense of the strategies that Youth Leaders enact to support their peers.

I begin by examining the relevance of one-on-one counseling work that Youth Leaders do as an effective way to mine their peers’ “stories”, and help them overcome perceived obstacles during post-secondary planning. I then move to take a look at the particular resolution strategies that Youth Leaders enact during their work with peers, exampling and describing those dominant strategies. I then example how Youth Leaders make use of these strategies by adaptive expertise, sampling from a number of different resolution strategies in order to ground complex college knowledge by the personal contexts of the lives of their peers. At the heart of these analyses is the idea that Youth Leaders pivot among a variety of different resolution strategies when working with a particular peer, in order to make college knowledge and information relevant and meaningful. This approach is a departure from the “banking” method of post-secondary planning that many under-resourced schools rely on, exampled in chapters two and three.

**The Relevance of One-on-One College Counseling Work**

During focus groups among three different sites with Youth Leaders, I asked them each about their work, and particularly how it is different from the work that adult counselors do with their peers. Across the board, Youth Leaders emphasized the one-on-one work that they do with individual students, and the impact that this work has on the decisions that they make. In most Youth Leader schools, the number of adult counselors is limited, which leaves little time for in-
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depth one-on-one work. However, as chapter five revealed, oftentimes this kind of personal, ongoing counseling is required in order to access student “stories” and effectively support them during post-secondary planning. One Youth Leader, Ferah, emphasizes the value in the one-on-one work she does with her peers, explaining,

A lot of students that I worked with personally didn’t have an idea of where they wanted to go [to college] at all, and I had to kind of start from basics with them and go from there… it opened their minds a little bit. I feel like if we weren’t able to have those one-on-ones, they still wouldn’t know where they were going to go or what they were going to do.

As described in chapter two, the everyday post-secondary planning work that Youth Leaders do with their peers tends to fall within three configurations: working one-on-one with an individual student, working with students in small groups, and conducting workshops. When Youth Leaders were asked to talk about an experience that is an illustrative example of both the kinds of problems their peers face and how they help peers address these problems, during narrating activity #1, all three of these configurations were represented. However, Youth Leaders overwhelmingly talked about one-on-one work. Table 17 illustrates the breakdown of work configurations represented in narrating activity #1.

| Table 17: Configuration of Youth Leader work, as presented in narrating activity #1 |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| (N=21)                                           | Total # of narratives                    |
| Working one-on-one with a peer                   | 14                                       |
| Conducting or planning a workshop               | 5                                        |
| Working with peers in a small group             | 2                                        |

The value of one-on-one work within the context of successful post-secondary planning, as well as the challenges of doing effective one-on-one counseling in diverse high schools with
large enrollment rates, has been amply documented in research (Corwin et al., 2007; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Perna et al., 2008). In a traditional high school counseling scenario, one adult counselor may be assigned caseloads of well over the National Association for College Admission Counseling recommended 250 students, among other school-based responsibilities, which I documented in chapter three. This can make the quality and quantity of one-on-one work with students during the post-secondary planning process slim. Once a counselor makes it through one round of her caseload of seniors, meeting with most just one time, it may already be January or February.

As chapter five demonstrated, frequently student personal and social contexts are deeply enmeshed with issues or problems that they experience during post-secondary planning. Youth Leaders see much of their work as accessing these contexts – their peers’ stories – toward transforming the post-secondary planning process as more meaningful and student-centered. One-on-one work with students serves as the most effective – and student-centered – method to access, and respond to, student problems during the post-secondary planning process, especially when the student issues are sensitive or more complex. Many Youth Leader narratives expressed that they spent multiple one-on-one sessions with a particular peer in order to meaningfully respond to their problem and story. And, as evidenced in Table 15, Youth Leaders understand the one-on-one work that they do with students as particularly important, and meaningful, for their peers, given the overwhelming emphasis on one-on-one work in narrating activity #1.

One Youth Leader, Rishi, emphasizes the value of one-on-one work that they do with their peers, explaining in a focus group,
Most students in this school, they’re dependent on others in terms of getting help with college applications and other stuff. So, they really need [someone to] sit next to them and help them [and] ask them, “What's next, what's next”. It’s a lot of repetition, too. College or guidance counselors can’t do that, and they’ll just tell the students, “Go home and go to this website.” But most of the students are reluctant to do that at home. They’re the kind of students that you need to push and keep telling them to do that. So, Youth Leaders do this repetition job a lot because every day, from September to December, during lunch we’re [helping with] applications or SAT or whatever they need.

Rishi talks about the one-on-one work that Youth Leaders do with their peers as an effective strategy toward helping, and reaching, many students in his school. He explains that most students need one-on-one counseling during post-secondary planning, because they are “the kind of students that you need to push” and one needs to “keep telling” what to do next and encouraging. However, according to Rishi, counselors “can’t do” this repetitive, one-on-one work, due to time constraints and workload that was later explained by Youth Leaders in the focus group. Therefore, Youth Leaders are the ones who can, and are willing to, “do this repetition job” with their peers. Rishi is connecting a specific strategy (Youth Leader one-on-one counseling work) as a method to successfully reach and support the needs of students with which Youth Leaders work in his school (the kind of students you need to push and work with repeatedly and consistently). Put another way, Rishi is observing a need in post-secondary planning work in his school, and positioning Youth Leader one-on-one work as a valuable strategy to address this need.

**Youth Leader Resolution Strategies: “More than Just Telling Students What to do”**

For narrating activity #2, Youth Leaders were asked to write a letter to future Youth Leaders. These letters revealed many characteristics that Youth Leaders believe are important for an effective you leader to possess when doing the work that they do with their peers. They represent larger themes that Youth Leaders associate with the work that they do with their peers.
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Table 18 shows these characteristics, which range from things like being responsible and knowledgeable about college and post-secondary planning, to being motivational and being comforting or emotionally supportive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Total # of mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsible (organized, strong time-management skills, on-time)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident or confident leader</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedicated to helping others</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatable to peers</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliable or trustworthy</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possess communication and counseling skills</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard working</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comforting or emotionally supportive</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivational to peers</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventurous or willing to take chances</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>117</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While this analysis is helpful in locating dominant themes and concepts associated with Youth Leader work, from their perspectives, this does not show how Youth Leaders incorporate these themes in their work. In other words, understanding how Youth Leaders make use of these themes in their work toward helping peers solve problems that they face during post-secondary planning cannot be addressed by this line of analysis. However, I conducted another narrating activity that provided Youth Leaders with an opportunity to narrative from a different perspective and to a different audience (Daiute, 2014, p. 19). For narrating activity #1, Youth Leaders were prompted to write a story about a time they worked with peers. Analyses of these
narratives help to move from themes of Youth Work that are revealed in my analyses of narrating activity #2, to showing how these themes are enacted as strategies to support their peers and help resolve problems.

Plot analysis of the twenty-one narratives responding to narrating activity #1 reveals the resolution strategies that Youth Leaders enact when working with peers to help address problems and dilemmas that they face during post-secondary planning. Table 19 documents these strategies, aggregated into six categories. These categories encompass many of the themes that Youth Leaders identified as guiding characteristics in their daily work during narrating activity #2, however now I can show how these themes are enacted as strategies to work with their peers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resolution strategy</th>
<th>Total # of resolution strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use technical or college knowledge</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage in a personal conversation using communication or counseling skills</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide comfort, emotional support, or assurance</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relate to the peer</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a personal sacrifice</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask for help from an adult or other Youth Leader</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average number of resolution strategies per narrative</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nearly all narratives call upon technical or college knowledge, oftentimes numerous instances within one narrative, which makes sense given the context of Youth Leader work. This means that Youth Leaders make use of college knowledge or technical skills related to post-secondary planning as a method to help their peers resolve the particular problem at hand. Examples of this in Youth Leader narratives are things like: “I helped her come up with a
complete college list”; “After I got Youth Leader training and [was] working for a few months as a Youth Leader in school, I gained a lot of new information to help her”; or, “I advised him about his post-secondary options. The usual breakdown of FAFSA, TAP and other next steps after his application was done”. These are all strategies that enact formal college knowledge or post-secondary planning information in order to help their peers resolve a problem they are experiencing. In narrating activity #1, this kind of resolution strategy is often signaled by verbs like “help”, “advise”, “explain”, or “describe”, and then follows with concrete information or actions associated with post-secondary planning or the college admissions process.

However, Youth Leaders enact a number of complementary resolution strategies in order to support their peers, all documented in Table 17. These complementary resolution strategies function to contextualize formal college knowledge or information within the personal lives of the Youth Leader peers. In other words, they are strategies that Youth Leaders call upon in order to make use of college knowledge within the specific context of a student’s “story”, transforming post-secondary planning as directly relevant to the lives and goals of their peers. These resolution strategies came out during Youth Leader and peer focus groups, as well as during supervisor interviews and program participant observation, as dominant themes in Youth Leader work. However, by using plot analysis to examine Youth Leader narratives prompted by narrating activity #1, I am able to also show how Youth Leader enact them as specific resolution strategies.

Resolution Strategy: Engage in Personal Conversation
Many Youth Leaders call upon communication and counseling skills in order to engage their peers in a personal conversation. One Youth Leader, Pooja, makes use of this strategy in her narrative when helping a peer, explaining, “We had a nice conversation of what college looks
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at”. This conversational strategy differs from using college knowledge, because it involves mutual engagement and interaction, rather than simply telling or giving their peers the answer to a question. Fifteen of the twenty-one Youth Leader narratives prompted by narrating activity #1 enacted personal conversation as a strategy to help their peers work through issues or dilemmas they are experiencing at least once.

Personal conversation as a strategy came up during focus groups frequently; particularly as a Youth Leader resolution strategy that differs from the way adults often help students in their schools. Malina underscores this difference during one Youth Leader focus group when I ask what would happen if her school did not have Youth Leaders. She responds, “Students need someone to talk to, and counsel them, because they have some problem that they need to get over with before they start the application. If there are no Youth Leaders, the counselors are just going to tell them ‘Oh, these are the schools you need to apply to’ and that’s it.” Rather than just “telling” them the answer to college-related questions or problems, Malina explains that Youth Leaders act as “someone to talk to” and “counsel” their peers. This conversational element helps Youth Leaders tackle different “problems” that their peers need to “get over”, sometimes even before starting the formal college application process.

Oftentimes, Youth Leaders make themselves available to their peers for personal conversations or “counsel” outside of school space and hours. This happens by way of Facebook, text messaging, and other virtual supports. During a focus group, Genesis illustrates this idea, saying, “Sometimes people would hit me up on Facebook…They had access to me.” Another Youth Leader, Ferah, jumps in, adding, “Yeah, late night text messages also at two o’clock in the morning.” When the moderator asks Ferah if she responds to these late night calls for help and support during post-secondary planning, she responds, “Yeah, you have to. It’s part of the job.”
Ferah understands it as her “job” to be available to her peers, to talk to and provide counseling or support, even if that requires “late night calls”. These personal conversations, in school and out of school, are used by Youth Leaders as a strategy toward helping their peers work through issues or dilemmas during post-secondary planning.

**Resolution Strategy: Provide Emotional Support**

Youth Leader narratives also show how they use comfort or emotional support, framing this as a particular resolution strategy when working with their peers. This is signaled in their narratives by phrases like: “I introduced myself to make the students feel comfortable”; “I smiled and made him comfortable”; “I sat down and I tried to calm him down a little”; or, “I looked [her] in the eye and sympathized [with her]”. These are all examples of strategies that comfort or assure their peers when they present post-secondary dilemmas to Youth Leaders. Nine of the twenty-one Youth Leader narratives prompted by narrating activity #1 made use of providing comfort or assurance as a strategy to help their peers work through problems or dilemmas they are experiencing at least once.

Akosua’s narrative typifies this kind of emotional support and comfort as one resolution strategy that she enacts, among others. She is a returning Youth Leader from the year before, and discusses a time she helped a peer who not only has concerns about college related to test scores and grades, but is also battling Lupus. She writes (italics included for emphasis):
Last school year, I had the opportunity to use my counseling skills with a Senior who was going through so much personally. As a Youth Leader, you are attentive to the student, look them in the eye, and sympathize with the student. She had Lupus and felt like her SAT scores and GPA will not get her into college. My responsibility was to revive her self-confidence, make her smile and see the positive side of her situation. Because of my cheerful, optimistic, and sensitive personality, I was able to make her happy, help her apply to colleges, and also be there for her whenever she needed someone to talk to. The role of a Youth Leader is to relate to student situations and try as much to be positive else it destroys the confidence and esteem of a student.

In this example, Akosua provides comfort for her peer in a number of ways. She is “attentive” and “sympathize[s]” with her, understanding it as her “responsibility to revive her self-confidence, make her smile” and make her “happy”. Akosua is “there for her whenever she needed someone to talk to”, acting as a source of extended support during this peer’s time of need. She notes that ignoring these elements of comfort and emotional support for a peer during post-secondary planning can “destroy the confidence and esteem of a student”.

When talking with Youth Leader peers during focus groups, this idea of emotional support – of “moral support” provided by Youth Leaders – came up frequently. For instance, when I asked about her experiences with Youth Leaders, one peer, Denise, explains

I was about to say the moral support. I think they did just an amazing job picking the Youth Leaders, especially the ones I worked with. One of them was my best friend and another one I’m close to because of the program that we were in last year. The college process was stressful, and sometimes when I get too stressed, I cry. Like, my eyeballs start to sweat. It was safe to know that even though I was stressing out, they knew exactly what I was going through. It’s easier for them to help me go through and offer me simpler ways to get around it and say, ‘It’s okay. Everything is going to work out. This is what you have to do. It’s going to be a little bit complicated and it’s going to get harder, but as all seniors say, we be at it’

For Denise, the “moral support” that Youth Leaders provide works as a strategy to ease her “stressing out” during post-secondary planning, making her feel “safe”.

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Resolution Strategy: Relating to Peers

The excerpt from a peer focus group above, with Denise, hints at another resolution strategy that Youth Leaders make use of when working with their peers: relatability. Youth Leaders use and foster their peer-to-peer connection as a method to help students during post-secondary planning. As Denise puts it, Youth Leaders, “knew exactly what I was going through”. During another peer focus group, another Youth Leader peer drives this point home, explaining, “The Youth Leaders are students at the school. They take the same exact classes that we do. They understand what we’re going through a lot more than another teacher.”

This relatability – knowing “what we’re going through” – is called upon by Youth Leaders as a strategy to support students in their work, made use of in narrating activity #1. To illustrate this strategy, Youth Leaders use phrases in their narratives like: “I put myself in his shoes”; “I tried to be a peer that understands his situation”; “I explained that I related to his situation”; “I looked at him understandably and said, ‘It’s ok. I can’t afford First Class seats on the plane either’”. In their narratives, oftentimes Youth Leaders directly identify that they “relate”, “understand”, or “sympathize with” their peer, or the problem the peer is experiencing, in order to support them by emphasizing commonality. Eight of the twenty-one Youth Leader narratives prompted by narrating activity #1 made use of peer relatability as a strategy to help their peers resolve issues or problems they are experiencing at least once.

While other times, they enact relatability by using an inclusive “we” or “us” when talking with their peers. For instance in his narrative, Youth Leader Leo is helping a peer who is unsure about going to college. He explains that that his resolution strategy is, “As a Youth Leader, and her friend, I share my personal story with her”. He then moves to have a conversation with his peer, explaining to her that (italics included for emphasis): “If we go to work right after high school, our job opportunity is very limited…we are still young and we should try to gain more
life experiences and find out what we like the most”. His resolution strategy, a conversation with his peer, involves five instances of “we” or “our”, indicating that he is relating with his peer in order to connect with her and the dilemma she is experiencing.

Often, relating with a peer also means connecting with them as friends. Youth Leaders do this by bringing laughter and humor to the oftentimes-stressful post-secondary planning process. During a focus group, Akosua locates the importance of laughter and humor that Youth Leaders bring to the process, especially in contrast to adults in her school. She says that, “Adults are so serious sometimes…I would say I’m always relaxed…I’m also calm with people. Whenever [peers] approach me and I’m explaining something, I kind of make it funny. You need to make it funny and engaging for the student”. In their narratives, Youth Leaders frequently call upon humor – “joking” or “laughing” with one another – as a specific strategy to connect with their peers on a friendly, personal level.

Language is another way that Youth Leaders connect and relate with their peers. Recall the beginning of this chapter, when I described José working with peers in his college office. He moves from speaking English with some peers, to quickly using Spanish in order to effectively communicate with another. In his school, over twenty percent of the study body are English Language Learners. During a focus group, José underscores this idea, noting that, “a lot of times they [peers] don’t feel comfortable with the counselor they’re speaking to”. Malina jumps in and explains that, “we are a very diverse group. We have Mandarin, Korean, we have Spanish. Miss Lee and Mr. Shih [adult counselors] they speak Korean and Chinese, but José right here he can speak Spanish. Those Spanish-speaking students, José can help them out”. Within the formal classroom setting of teaching and learning, Ofelia Garcia et al. (2012) refer to this as “translanguaging” in order to “adapt instruction to best meet the needs of Latino students”
toward a larger ethic of caring (p. 809). “Translanguaging” is an example of one way that some Youth Leaders effectively connect with those peers who may not feel comfortable, or confident in, speaking English.

**Resolution Strategy: Making a Personal Sacrifice**

Lastly, Youth Leaders sometimes make a personal sacrifice as a strategy toward helping their peers resolve a particular dilemma or problem. Personal sacrifices enacted in their narratives include: paying for SAT registration out-of-pocket when a peer does not have the money; skipping class in order to facilitate a college workshop; or, paying more attention in Spanish classes and seeking out extra tutoring in order to better communicate with a peer who needs help. Youth Leaders use personal sacrifice as another approach toward helping address problems that their peers bring to them. Six of the twenty-one Youth Leader narratives prompted by narrating activity #1 enacted personal sacrifice as a strategy to help their peers work through problems or dilemmas they are experiencing at least once.

For her narrating activity, Youth Leader Maria writes about helping a peer, Rogelio, when he had a problem with his SAT registration. While he thought he applied for the June SAT, he actually applied for the March test date. By the time he realizes, it is too late to reschedule without paying a fee, and Rogelio does not have the money. Maria describes how she jumps in to help resolve his problem:

I didn’t hesitate as soon as i knew it. i was prepared and looked for all the quick options that he had. The only option that he had was to pay in the moment. it was already too late so i payed [sic] for the changes with my card and we just adjust that. he won't have to pay me back. Even though I needed the money i knew his case was more important.

Maria makes a personal, and financial, sacrifice in order to help her peer: she pays for his SAT date-change, even though she “needed the money”. She acknowledges that “his case was
more important”, and therefore trumps her personal financial needs. She also explains that he “won’t have to pay me back”, indicating that this personal sacrifice will not have a (financial) return.

These different complementary resolution strategies that Youth Leaders enact when working with peers echoes a larger “do whatever it takes” sentiment that most Youth Leaders believe comes with their job. In a letter she pins to future Youth Leaders, Lakshmi explains that, “Being a youth leader is not only about working while you’re in the office, once you’re a youth leader that title will follow you everywhere. You must be reliable…because your peers will have a lot of trust and hopes pinned on you.” This responsibility that Lakshmi feels – the idea that students “pin” their “trust and hopes” on Youth Leaders – means that they must make use of a number of different strategies in order to help their peers realize those very “hopes”.

Plot analysis of the twenty-one Youth Leader narratives prompted by narrating activity #1 shows how dominant themes in their work are enacted toward making post-secondary planning more meaningful and relevant for their peers. For instance, the theme of “relating to peers” frequently came up during focus groups with Youth Leaders and their peers, as well as in interviews with adult supervisors. Youth Leaders, their peers, and adult supervisors all talk about the Youth Leader peer-to-peer connection as a beneficial, valuable virtue of their work that cannot be replicated by adults. By using plot analysis to examine Youth Leader narratives, however, I am able to shine a light on how this theme is not simply talked about, but enacted as a resolution strategy in their everyday work; how this theme is made use of within the larger context of their work with peers.

Plot analysis also helps to identify the number of different resolution strategies that Youth Leaders enact in order to address a given peer dilemma or problem. As Table 17 reveals, Youth
Leaders use a number of different resolution strategies per peer interaction. I will argue that this reflects how Youth Leaders use adaptive expertise as an overarching strategy – a resolution script – toward making post-secondary planning meaningful and relevant to their peers.

**Pivoting Among Resolution Strategies: Adaptive Expertise in Action**

In chapter four, I argued that a fundamental skill that Youth Leaders learned during their Summer Institute training was how to enact adaptive expertise within the context of post-secondary planning – the ability to flexibly and creatively move between and among different discourses toward solving problems as they arise. Plot analysis of the twenty-one narratives reveals that, on average, Youth Leaders enact roughly three resolution strategies per narrative (see Table 17). Put another way, Youth Leaders pivot, or navigate, between and among an average of three different strategies when working to help a peer resolve a problem or dilemma that they face during post-secondary planning. Pivoting among different resolution strategies is an example of adaptive expertise in action. Rather than relying on one strategy to help peers solve a problem, Youth Leaders make use of a number of different strategies to help resolve peer problems and support them, all turning around the axis of the specific context of the lives of these peers.

This was illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, in the description of José and the work he does with peers at his large, comprehensive high school that I observed. He literally moves between different peers in need of help with various aspects of post-secondary planning. When working with a particular peer as she completes her CUNY application, José pivots among a number of different resolution strategies to respond to her specific post-secondary planning needs within the context of who she is and what he knows about her:
1. He makes use of formal college knowledge, as well as technical expertise, when helping his peer identify a mistake she makes on an online college application.

2. He enacts peer relatability and knowledge, laughing with her and joking as friends do. He also notes that “knows her”, reminding her to always review things because, when they are in classes together, she frequently forgets to look over her homework before submitting.

3. He uses comfort and assurance to calm her nerves, patting her shoulder and promising, “Don’t worry, I got you. You can do this. You’re almost there”.

4. He also uses language flexibly, moving between speaking English some peers, as well as Spanish with others, depending on their language proficiency and comfort.

Nearly all of the narratives prompted by narrating activity #1 enacted college knowledge and technical information about the post-secondary planning process as a resolution strategy, just as José does in order to help his peer successfully complete a CUNY college application online. However, this is usually complimented by additional strategies, among those described in the earlier section of this chapter. This implies that, in order to help their peers, Youth Leaders do not simply tell them what to do, or give them an answer. This would signal routine expertise - solving recognizable types of problems within a specific domain quickly and accurately based on familiarity and a specific body of knowledge.

Instead, Youth Leaders are using college information and knowledge that they learned during their Summer Institute training within the larger contexts of the lives of their peers, making use of additional resolution strategies to help make this knowledge meaningful and relevant for them. This is adaptive expertise in action: to flexibly and creatively navigate among different discourses, or strategies, in order to address an, oftentimes, evolving problem. Youth
Leaders sample from a variety of different resolution strategies, described in the previous section, in order to make post-secondary planning and information relevant to their peers, rather than simply answering a question or giving them information needed complete an aspect of the process. As one Youth Leader writes in his narrative, “Being a Youth Leader is more than just telling students what to do about their post-secondary options. You become a friend, a confidant and a role model to students”.

In order to clarify how Youth Leaders astutely and delicately address student dilemmas during post-secondary planning by way of adaptive expertise, I look to one Youth Leader, Malina, and her narrative focused on a hard to reach peer, Diego. Diego has come to the college office because he wants to know more about college, even though he has limited knowledge about college. Diego is not very proficient in English, has a questionable immigration status, works long nights to help support his younger brother and sick mother, and receives less-than-stellar grades and spotty attendance at school. Malina explains how she first begins to address Diego’s problem: like many adult counselors in her school, by way of providing a great deal of complex information. She writes (italics added for emphasis):

I sat with him on one of the computers at the office. I scattered an array of college resources: the glossy CUNY Viewbook, a SUNY Brochure and the CUNY/SUNY admissions profile. I put my “professional-Youth-Leader” face on and asked the usual questions to him.

“Did you take your SATs yet?”
“What major would you want in college?”
“Do you have any colleges in mind yet?”

I felt like a doctor trying to diagnose the problems of Diego. Or even a lawyer trying to interrogate him on the things he thought of or did. He looked at me with eyes of confusion. His eyes scrunched up and suddenly I am a doctor and he was my patient. I would explain ‘Hypertension’ and ‘Calciphylaxis’ to him and expect him to follow along.

The initial strategy Malina enacts toward helping Diego is to overwhelm him with college resources and information. She asks all of the “usual questions”, taking a “professional-
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Youth-Leader” approach and “expect[ing] him to follow along”. This strategy, reminiscent of the banking method I discussed in chapter one, is a dominant strategy many under-resourced schools use to manage the post-secondary planning process with students, illustrated by the dense 156-page *New York City College Planning Handbook* that I described. This first resolution strategy that Malina uses – one that she describes as a “doctor trying to diagnose the problems of Diego” – underscores the idea of routine expertise. Malina is trying to solve a recognizable problem (how to apply to college) within a specific domain (college-specific counseling) based on familiarity and a specific body of knowledge (the college application process). Many Youth Leaders and their peers express that this strategy is common among adult counselors in their schools. For instance, during a focus group Akosua, one Youth Leader, explains that oftentimes when students go to adults or counselors for help, the adults, “Go into commando mode”. When ask her what she means, she says, “It means that they just are giving you instructions and everything”.

Malina quickly realizes that her initial resolution strategy is “going in the wrong direction”. As such, she pivots toward a different approach, still using college knowledge but enacting adaptive expertise in order to respond to Diego’s specific needs and context (italics added for emphasis):

*I knew I was going in the wrong direction.*

*So, I started simple.* I said, “What do you want to be in the future?”

He replied “No se”

I knew enough Spanish to understand that.

“Do you like computers? Maybe computer science? A graphic designer, eh, fashion designer?”

He laughed.

“No!”

“Nurse? Doctor? Chef?”

I have probably gone through a decent number of professions, from a plumber to a baker (I was hungry) to the presidency of Mexico. I can even vaguely remember bringing up the papacy of the Church.
Again and again he laughed. Perhaps this guy was only trying to have fun with me, and that’s exactly what this session turned out to be. Instead of rigid hardcore seriousness, we entered a conversation so carefree and enjoyable. It was like talking to your brother or a friend in a way.

Out of nowhere, he tilted his head, smiled bashfully and proclaimed “I will be a Pilot. Or a Police.”

It was so random that I almost fell of the chair!

“What? So you have me explaining the requirements into being the pope and you wanna be a Pilot? Or a police?”


I comically punched his shoulder and said:

“Okay but did you take your SAT yet? It’s a long exam you take in Junior year or Senior year”

“No, Malina.”

I said, “No te preocupes. We can get you to a community college. They offer aviation and criminology courses. You don’t have to present a 3.0 average and it’s pretty cheap too!”

Malina continues to enact college knowledge as a dominant strategy to help Diego, however now she uses different, complementary strategies to help him unpack dense college information within his personal context. She explains community college as a viable college option, given he did not take the SATs, has a relatively low GPA, and needs something affordable. Rather than throwing college knowledge at Diego, expecting him to “follow” it, she filters it and provides the information that is relevant to Diego and his particular situation. In other words, she makes use of college knowledge within the personal context of her peer.

Malina also samples from a number of complimentary resolution strategies to help Diego. Rather than a more formal advising session, she engages in a personal conversation, explaining, “Instead of rigid hardcore seriousness, we entered in a conversation so carefree and enjoyable. It was like talking to your brother or a friend”. During this conversation, she occasionally calls upon her (limited) Spanish skills when she can, making him feel more comfortable. She also relies on her peer-to-peer connection with Diego, “comically” punching him and having “fun” with Diego, as a friend would. This turn from her initial approach illustrates how Malina enacts
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adaptive expertise in order to adjust to diego and his needs, drawing on multiple resolution strategies toward helping him.

malina’s narrative moves along, and she continues to use adaptive expertise, sampling from a number of different resolution strategies to continue to help diego as she learns more about his personal and family life (italics added for emphasis):

throughout our many conversations, i feel it best to also learn a tad bit more of spanish. i paid more attention in my spanish class, only so i could communicate better with spanish speaking students like diego.
one day, while i was working with him and asked of his social security number, he gave me a nervous look. i inquired, “social security? lo tienes diego?”
for a moment, i thought he would bolt away from the computer as hastily shifted away from me. slowly, he relaxed himself and said in a low voice “lo siento malina. pero when i came here, i was eh, economy class.”

i looked at him understandably. “it’s ok. i can’t afford first class seats on the plane either.”
“no malina! i dont [sic] have social security.” he tried to look away.

i stared at him disbelievingly for a minute! after i recovered, i managed a chuckle and said “ah, cuny accepts “economy class” students too diego! geez, dont [sic] be a worrywart! te tengo.”

“serious!?”
“yep.”

the hug he gave me made my monday.

and with that session, i was able to guide him through his cuny application. he enthusiastically listened to my descriptions of the colleges, and how being a college graduate is one of the best things the world has to offer. he researched the community colleges and realized that the flexibility of the college schedule would work well with his job. i advised him to “start simple” and things will flow from there. i was glad to be able to help diego attain his first step into college.

malina draws on different resolution strategies to address the evolving nature of diego’s post-secondary planning needs in the above excerpt. for instance, she begins to pay closer attention in spanish classes so that she can communicate effectively with diego, making him feel more comfortable and at ease when they work together. this is an example of malina making a kind of personal sacrifice, going out of her way to learn more spanish in order to help diego.
Even when Diego meets yet another challenge on his way to college, no Social Security Number, Malina uses adaptive expertise in order to adjust to his evolving post-secondary planning needs. She draws on multiple resolution strategies toward realizing a viable solution to his problem; toward realizing opportunity for Diego to go to college. For instance, she draws on her peer-to-peer connection with Diego, “understanding” and connecting with a shared financial situation. When she realizes that he does not have a Social Security number – he came to this country by way of “economy class” – she uses peer humor to lighten the mood and his stress, telling him not to be a “worrywart” and talking with him casually as friends do, while also comforting him by using college knowledge to assure him that CUNY schools still accept “economy class students”. Malina navigates these different discourses, or resolution strategies, in order to show Diego that there is hope for college, rather than submitting to the “I want to go to college but…” dilemma. Malina does not simply support Diego, but provides him with an expanded toolkit so that he can navigate the post-secondary planning process for himself. By the end of the excerpt above, Diego is researching community colleges.

Malina’s narrative concludes (italics added for emphasis):

The last time I saw Diego was when I was sitting on the college sofa, glaring at the face of Death, well, Trigonometry Homework. He smoothly sat down beside me, quite jolly in fact.
“Hola Angela! What’s up?”
“Hahaha, I’m [sic] getting started on my financial aid.”
I glanced up at him.
“Really? Great job! Just wait for them acceptance letters then you’re off piloting.”
We laughed.
I concentrated yet again on my work.
“Well, I have to go to class, Angela. I’ll see you around.”
“Yeah sure” I replied, not exactly paying attention to him as my world is currently run by sines and cosines.
He gave me another hug. A tighter and warmer one. I was caught off guard.
Then he said, in his thick, rich Spanish accent that I oh-so-want to copy
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“Angela...just “Start Simple”.
The sly guy gave me a wink and jogged away.
I guess I had to thank him for my 100 in both Trigonometry and Spanish.
Yep. Just start simple.

The conclusion of Malina’s narrative illustrates the transformation Diego has undergone. At the beginning, he knew very little about college, and was confused and overwhelmed. Now, in Malina’s conclusion, Diego is confident and even “jolly”. He is actively engaging with the post-secondary process on his own, as she notes that he is beginning to embark on the financial aid and scholarship process in order to help fund his dreams of becoming a pilot. Diego transformed from a student with little hope, focused on the barriers to college in his “story”, to a student who is actively taking ownership over his future. This transformation is facilitated by Malina, making use of adaptive expertise to draw on a number of different resolution strategies toward not only helping Diego address specific problems that he faces during post-secondary planning, but showing him a viable pathway to college; meaningfully transforming his “story”.

In the end of Malina’s narrative, Diego flips the script and offers her some of her own advice as she struggles with Trigonometry: to “start simple”. However, as Malina’s narrative shows us, the strategies that she enacts in order to help Diego are anything but simple.

I witnessed many other Youth Leaders do this similar pivoting among and between different resolution strategies, relying on adaptive expertise in order to adjust to their peers’ personal, situated contexts. For instance, during a site observation I watched one Youth Leader, Solange, working with her peer, Jessica, on a scholarship search in their college office. Jessica was applying for a competitive scholarship in order to go to her number one college choice, and believed that this scholarship was the only way that she would be able to attend her dream school. While Solange worked with her, Jessica started to read former scholarship winner profiles online. This caused visible panic and unease. Jessica exclaimed, “Reading these other
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kids’ past stories, it’s like holy shit I’m not going to get it! How can I compete…look, this one was on Good Morning America and ESPN”. Solange remained calm, trying to center Jessica like a friend would do, while simultaneously drawing on college knowledge and expertise in order to provide her with actionable solutions. Solange explained,

First of all, you never know. You can’t sit here freaking out until you know what is gonna happen. Second of all, we have a backup plan: loans. I know they’re not your first choice, but instead of freaking out we need to have a backup plan so that either way you’ll be okay.

She then continued:

I mean, I’m gonna have to take out loans and find scholarships, too. I get it. We’re gonna be okay. You’re gonna be okay. Also, they literally have scholarships for everything. Let’s figure out some more now. Mail in all your scholarship stuff before [winter] break starts so that you get everything in early. Here, let’s close this up [website with scholarship winners]. Remember, we gotta get all of this done before break, or the latest before Dec 31.

Jessica starts to dwell on the scholarship again. Solange interrupts her before she can even begin, and the following conversation ensues:

Solange: What other colleges did you apply to?
Jessica: Alfred.
Solange: Oh, I’ve been there before! It’s like a 6-hour drive.
Jessica: It’s long.
Solange: Yeah, but there are buses that come back and forth a lot. There are options.
Jessica: Yeah and they get lots of snow. I like snow.
A third peer: Wait, Alfred is that far? It’s like a 6-hour plane to ride to South Africa. Man, Alfred is far!
[Solange and Jessica look at each other confused, and start laughing]
Solange: What are you talking about? Africa is like a 12-hour plane ride!
[They all start laughing]

In this scenario, Solange enacts adaptive expertise by responding to Jessica’s evolving (panicked) problem, and draws on multiple resolution strategies. She uses college knowledge and information about scholarships, her peer relatability, as well as personal conversational and
communication skills. She commiserates with Jessica by revealing that she, too, needs scholarships or loans to go to college. Rather than submitting to the “I want to go to college but I can’t pay for it” script, Solange uses adaptive expertise, pivoting among a number of different resolution strategies, in order to help Jessica see opportunity and possibility.

Solange also diverts Jessica’s attention away from the scholarship in order to inspire excitement, instead of anxiety, about college, asking about the other schools to which she applied. When Jessica mentions Alfred, Solange develops even more common ground with her by explaining she has been to the campus, forging another connection with her. She then pivots to a different strategy, drawing on her knowledge about SUNY colleges when her peer notes how far away the college is, explaining that, “There are buses that come back and forth a lot. There are a lot of options”. The two also share a moment of laughter during another student’s humorous interjection, relaxing the mood, and Solange’s peer’s overall attitude.

Malina and Solange underscore how Youth Leaders enact adaptive expertise to help their peers. Adapting to the evolving contexts of their peers’ problems requires them to pivot between and among different resolution strategies, bringing them together within the context of a specific peer and their dilemma or problem – within the context of student “stories” – in order to grow hope. These various resolution strategies turn around the axis of college knowledge and information, and work to make this college knowledge relevant and meaningful to their peers. In other words, Youth Leaders act as a filter. They are able to screen complex college knowledge and information, transforming it into relevant tools used to resolve particular peer problems or dilemmas. During a peer focus group, one student who worked with Youth Leaders explains that, “It’s easier for them to help me go through the [post-secondary planning] process, and offer me simpler ways to get around it”. By bringing together different resolution strategies within the
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situated context of their peers, Youth Leaders pull their peers through the post-secondary planning process, showing them a way out of their dilemmas. Youth Leaders show their peers a path in order to move beyond perceived barriers, and toward hope and opportunity in college.

Conclusion: Authentic Care and Post-Secondary Planning

At one point during a focus group with Youth Leader peers, I asked them why they approached Youth Leaders for help in the first place. The students explained:

Peer 1: It’s not annoying. They’re friends, but at the same time, they’re trying to help you. When adults do it, it’s like they’re doing it just because it’s their job.

Peer 2: Obi [a Youth Leader] will make sure that you do it [sign up for SATs]. He does not play

Peer 3: He’ll see you every period and be like, ‘You gotta go downstairs. You gotta go downstairs [where the college office is located]

Peer 2: ‘You gotta sign up for this right now. RIGHT NOW.’

Peer 1: They [the Youth Leaders] are always there, as opposed to adults… they really don’t pay attention to us as much.

Tara: The adults?

Peer 1: Yeah.

These students make the point that a main reason they look to Youth Leaders for support and help is because, from their perspective, while adults help them because “it’s their job”, Youth Leaders, like Obi, do not have that same job-related obligation. In other words, Youth Leaders do not have to be helping them, and are instead doing it because they want to; because they care. Also, Obi is constantly hounding them, saying, “you gotta go downstairs” to the college office virtually “every period” during school. Youth Leader peers view this heightened attention that they receive from Obi as “a good thing”, in contrast to many adults in their school who “really don’t pay attention to us as much”.

Obi’s peers are speaking to the larger idea of authentic care. Within the context of teacher-student relationships inside classrooms, Angela Valenzuela (1999) defines the concept of authentic caring as a turn toward “school functionaries embark[ing] on a search for connection
where trusting relationships constitute the cornerstone for all learning” (p. 263). This is in contrast to aesthetic care, which centers teacher-student relationships on “institutional priorities, such as programming, rules, policies, procedures, and accountability mechanisms” (Maulucci, 2010, p. 629). Maria S. Rivera Maulucci (2010) argues that while “aesthetic caring may be crucial to the smooth operation and effectiveness of school”, if “schools privilege aesthetic caring over authentic caring, subtractive schooling ensues” (p. 269). Authentic care grows out of Nel Noddings (1995) idea that moves beyond “a warm fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and likable. Caring implies a continuous search for competence (p. 676). Versions of authentic care have been made use of as a conceptual or analytic framework by a number of school researchers (García et al., 2013; Garza, 2009; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012), however usually within the context of teacher-student relationships in schools.

Providing authentic care for students is necessary in order to help them successfully navigate the post-secondary process, and requires moving beyond simply “banking” college knowledge and information for students. Young people take this process seriously, resulting in stress, which many Youth Leader narrating activities, like Malina’s, showed. The dilemmas that Youth Leaders talk about in their narrating activities characterize their peers as stressed and overwhelmed: she had “a lot [of] stress”; he was “really worried”; “she didn’t know what to do”; “he would feel discouraged”.

In order to help students move beyond this stress and discouragement that can come with post-secondary planning, it requires more than just college knowledge and information. Students must make use of this dense knowledge within the larger contexts of their personal lives. This is where resolution strategies and adaptive expertise come into play. Youth Leaders use adaptive expertise to pivot among different resolution strategies in order to help their peers make sense of
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college knowledge within the context of their lives and the particular, oftentimes evolving dilemmas, they experience. Post-secondary planning is not just about enrollment statistics or application packages. It’s about the students, their lives, and the potential for these lives to be changed.

All of the complementary resolution strategies that Youth Leaders enact in order to help their peers resolve these dilemmas, examined in detail in this chapter, hinge on the idea of authentic care: engage in personal conversations; relate to peers through peer-to-peer connections; providing comfort and assurance; and, making personal sacrifices. These strategies, delicately navigated by adaptive expertise, are the vehicles that Youth Leaders use to build trust and forge meaningful relationships with their peers. These resolution strategies, in other words, are what work toward making post-secondary planning a meaningful and relevant process for Youth Leader peers. Plot analyses of Youth Leader narratives prompted by narrating activity #1 – triangulated by focus groups, supervisor interviews, participant observation, and other program data – shows that Youth Leaders ground their work by the lives of their peers; by their stories. And, they do this work by enacting a number of different resolution strategies in order to transform these stories – their dilemmas – into opportunity.

During a peer focus group, one student notes that,

Some teachers they just need to get this done. Miss Bates [college counselor] just needs us to hand in the applications so she has what they have done. The Youth Leaders were that bridge between adults. They have all the information necessary to make sure [we] were successful in the [college] process, but also make sure that, as students, we knew we had people that understood what we’re going through. That we had people that cared about us.

The “caring” relationships that Youth Leaders cultivate with their peers are facilitated by the dynamic resolution strategies they enact when working with them. Resolution strategies that transform student dilemmas of “I want to go to college, but...” into hope, and a vision for their
futures as a college student. This chapter has examined the everyday work that Youth Leaders do with their peers, focused on exploring the resolution strategies that they enact in order to both address the problems that their peers experience, as well as forge meaningful, caring relationships. I argue that Youth Leaders exercise adaptive expertise, sampling from different resolution strategies and skillsets, in order to transform their peers’ perceived barriers to college into productive pathways toward college. This reimagines post-secondary planning as a relevant, meaningful, student-centered experience rather than a generic checklist found in a college planning handbook or manual.
In May, I was visiting a Youth Leader school. While most seniors had already made their post-secondary choices, Youth Leaders were still hard at work, preparing some of their peers who were taking the SAT the following morning. One Youth Leader, Obi, was talking to a peer, giving him some final words of advice for the next morning: “Be there at 7:30am. I’m gonna call and wake your ass up – I don’t care if you don’t like mornings”. They both laughed, and Obi gave his peer a pat on the shoulder for encouragement before sending him on his way. He turned to me and said, “You know, we set a record this year. 90% of students took their SATs this year, and that’s a record for our school. It’s never been that high. Never. And it’s because of us. WE’RE ALL GONNA GO TO COLLEGE!” Obi put his hands up over his head and shook his hips, doing a kind of celebration dance.

Obi was excited. Really excited. And, he was proud. He is a junior, returning for a second year of Youth Leader work next year, so he was not explicitly including himself in that “we” quite yet. What Obi was speaking to, though, is the idea that his work – the work of Youth Leaders – is not just about helping themselves, or individual peers, with post-secondary planning. It is about getting them to college, or whatever post-secondary goal they envision. It is about transforming the fabric of their schools by reimagining college as a meaningful, viable,
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real option, and positioning young people as active change agents in this transformation, rather than objects onto which change happens.

making school change by living it

over the past ten years, or so, those of us involved in k-12 education have heard a lot about how high schools must create a college-going culture in order to foster a school environment that encourages the option of college for all students (college board, 2006; corwin & tierney, 2007; engberg & Gilbert, 2014; mckillip et al., 2013). a college-going culture can be defined as “one in which students find encouragement and help form multiple sources to prepare them with knowledge needed for college success (mckillip et al., 2013). schools can adopt a number of different approaches – integrating “multiple sources” – to build a college-going culture. for instance, the college board suggests a variety of small-scale and large-scale ideas to grow a college-going culture and “make your school college friendly” (college board, 2006, p. 8). these range from hanging college posters around the school and encouraging school-based staff to wear college sweatshirts of their alma maters on designated days, to curricular interventions like bringing in advanced placement courses or partnering with outside college-focused organizations like gear up or upward bound (college board, 2006, p. 8-11). while, some researchers suggest forging strategic partnerships with families and the communities in which students live in order to effectively promote college access and readiness (bryan et al., 2013; hines et al., 2014).

a problem with these common interventions, as i see, is that they tend to treat young people as objects onto which change happens. the business of creating a college-going culture – of rethinking how to effectively and meaningfully support students with post-secondary thinking and planning – is usually about schools adopting different strategies, ideas, and services toward
transforming the school into a place that supports the option of college for all. The agents of school change are teachers, or other adults, or curricula, or outside partner organizations. Rarely are students included in conversations about how to foster a college-going culture. Rarer still, do schools position young people as active school change makers.

This dissertation has argued, and shown, that Youth Leaders and the *Youth Leadership for College Access* program can act as a strategy toward reimagining post-secondary planning by positioning students at the center of this reimagination. Rather than simply telling students what they need to know, making post-secondary planning a set of mechanical steps toward completing a process, Youth Leaders *live* it alongside their peers. For Youth Leaders, the students they help are more than a name in a caseload, because they are classmates, friends, and family. Youth Leaders experience similar feelings, emotions, and challenges associated with post-secondary planning as their peers. They are able to find commonality and relate to their peers, and their struggles. Youth Leaders make change in the lives of their peers, and in their schools, by not only doing it, but also by living it with them.

As such, the ways they help their peers can be markedly different than adults, alone. Chapter five showed how Youth Leaders ground their work by the particularities of their peers and their lives – their “stories”. In other words, they make post-secondary planning a student-centered and relevant experience. Chapter six revealed the strategies that Youth Leaders enact in order to help their peers. These strategies – things like providing comfort, engaging in personal conversations, and relating to their peers, among others – function to contextualize dense college knowledge and information within the personal lives of their peers. They are strategies to help their peers *make use of* college knowledge within the specific particularities of their personal lives, all toward helping them make relevant, meaningful post-secondary decisions. They are
also strategies that, oftentimes, adult counselors are unable to access. A Youth Leader may use text messages or Facebook to contact their peers late at night when students are working on college applications and have questions, while another may relate to and sympathize with a peer who is having a tough time finding scholarships to fund their college goals. These are examples of strategies that Youth Leaders use to help their peers, strategies that adult counselors cannot make use of sometimes because of school rules, and other times because of the simple fact that they are not students, themselves. By examining the work that Youth Leaders do, from their own perspectives and experiences, we can learn how they are able to reimagine post-secondary planning and college access work that happens in schools as a meaningful and relevant student-centered experience, rather than a barrier or roadblock to young people’s goals for the future.

**Blurring the Boundaries and Rethinking School Change**

A big part of making – or doing – meaningful school change is about rethinking the way that things have traditionally been done. This can be hard. When I was studying at New York University, my master’s thesis advisor, Leslie Siskin, used to say that changing American high schools can be one of the most difficult endeavors in organizational development. She echoes this sentiment in a “thought paper” commissioned by the Chicago Community Trust. In it, she writes, “The first point I want to make is that high school change is hard work. Researchers have repeatedly pointed to the “resilience” or the “resistance” of high schools, and the reform reports of the past decade have been consistent with that assessment” (Siskin, 2001, p. 1).

*Youth Leadership for College Access* is pushing high schools to not only rethink the way they have traditionally managed post-secondary planning and college access programming, but also rethink who does this work. The role that Youth Leaders play in reimagining post-secondary planning is by living and working in a space in-between – by “standing in spaces” (Bromberg,
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1996) of both student and college access coordinator simultaneously. They are paid college access coordinators in their schools who have received training and resources, but they are also students living the post-secondary planning experience alongside their peers. As this dissertation has shown, Youth Leaders use this unique position to ground post-secondary planning by the lives and personal stories of their peers, toward making it a relevant, meaningful experience rather than a set of steps in a generic process. In Bromberg’s “standing in spaces” theoretical framework, the role of the psychoanalyst is to form relationships with “each of the patient’s selves” in order to provide effective counseling (Bromberg, 1996, p. 519). Along a similar vein, this dissertation has shown how Youth Leaders forge meaningful relationships with their peers on different levels. They access more than just their peers’ “student selves” that involves course grades and student transcripts. Youth Leaders tap into their peers’ personal lives, learning about their individual “stories” and contexts in order to make post-secondary planning a relevant and meaningful process; in order to make dense college admissions information pertinent to the individual lives of the peers with whom they work. This helps their peers make useful connections between their goals for the future and own lives.

During a peer focus group, one student, Mario, underscores this unique position in which Youth Leaders work and live in his school. He explained to me:

Youth Leaders are students at the school. They take the same exact classes that we do. They understand what we’re going through a lot more than a teacher. Some teachers they just need to get this done. [Our college counselor] just needs us to hand in the applications so she has what we have done. The Youth Leaders were that bridge between an adult, with all the information necessary to make sure we are successful in the process, but also making sure that, as students, we knew we had people that understood what we’re going through; we had people that cared about us.
Mario reminds us that post-secondary planning can be emotional and personal, because it deals with young people’s hopes, dreams, and possibilities for the future. We ask students to face their future and goals, and we also ask them to face themselves. As Mario notes in the excerpt, while it is important that students are “successful” in their post-secondary planning, it is equally important they feel “cared” for; that they feel “understood”. Youth Leaders provide this for their peers in a way that adults simply cannot, because of the unique position in which Youth Leaders live and work in their schools – “standing in spaces” of both student and college access coordinator (Bromberg, 1998). While this dissertation contributes to research on school change and college access, it also provides concrete approaches and strategies that position young people as agents of school change.

Moving Ahead and Continuing to Reimagine

The excerpt referenced above from Youth Leader peer, Mario, also underscores a number of ways that schools and policymakers can begin to reimagine post-secondary planning, even in the absence of Youth Leaders. In the following, I outline three ways in which schools and school districts can begin to rethink post-secondary planning in a student-centered manner.

1. Develop post-secondary planning programs as purposeful learning opportunities

The post-secondary planning should be a meaningful learning experience, providing experiential learning where young people develop skills they will need for the rest of their lives, not just to complete a process. Effective schools often develop post-secondary planning curriculum that emphasizes student inquiry as opposed to mechanical steps or irrelevant information, so that students can develop college knowledge through a variety of intellectual and skill-building experiences. The process should also be student-centered. For example, using a peer-to-peer
model, Youth Leaders do not simply deliver college knowledge, or guide peers through a set of steps, but they also act as a source of social and emotional support.

2. **Education policy must focus on how to support schools, rather than outputs alone.**

An output-driven model alone will not productively fill the guidance gap. Policies must leverage and provide the *activities* and *inputs* that schools need, and already have, to address student needs during post-secondary planning. For instance, *Youth Leadership for College Access* utilizes students as resources for their peers, focusing on the ways in which the post-secondary planning experience is an important stage in students’ lives, rather than something that, in the words of Youth Leader peer Mario, “just need[s] to get…done.” A shift in focus away from outputs alone, and toward meaningful activities and supports, will lead to more effective college readiness and access polices that provide resources that schools need to effectively support students. There is more to post-secondary planning and college access than college enrollment statistics, and the work of Youth Leaders reminds us of this.

3. **Listen to experts…and that includes students**

In order to create effective policies that address college access and readiness, policymakers should consider the advice of college access experts, teachers, principals, researchers, and parents to fully understand the different areas of need. They should also learn directly from the very students who live and breathe education policy inside their schools every day. Listening to student experiences and insights will provide them the information they need to design a better guidance program in schools to serve young people. Some youth-led community organizing groups, like Urban Youth Collaborative here in New York City, harness the expert knowledge of students in order to organize around education reform, like equitable college access. Work along
this vein, which positions young people as agents of school change, should to similarly happen inside schools.

**Implications for Future Study**

The research project reported in this dissertation has systematically sampled and analyzed the guidance gap, and specific strategies that schools could use to begin to productively address it that position young people as agents in this change. Because such a study has not been done before, the design and analyses are developmental, and now hold promise for future research. Results of this study suggest that this principled analysis of the innovative practice of *Youth Leadership for College Access* can be extended to a research model, stating relevant active components for further inquiry into how young people can have unique positions and knowledge in college access work. Not to replace college counselors, but to play active roles in understanding problems and strategies within a broader system of economic inequality.

A research model could help determine the effect that interventions like *Youth Leadership for College Access* can have on narrowing the guidance gap over time. This study has identified the guidance gap (a geographic landscape of high- and low-resourced schools within the context of college guidance and access), and mapped onto this how one intervention (Youth Leaders and the *Youth Leadership for College Access Program*) influences that kind of college access work that happens inside schools. This research samples a range of perspectives within such a system, with a focus on the interpretive center and power of Youth Leaders’ knowledge, experience, and strategies toward helping peers. That design could be extended to a research model to apply to other similar interventions.

Additionally, a research model could consider how Youth Leader perspectives – for instance, the complicating actions that interfere with their peers’ goals, and the resolution
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strategies they use to address those complications expressed in their narratives – might differ across a variety of relevant circumstances, like Youth Leader professional development practices, neighborhood or school resources, and so on. In other words, with a developed research model I would be able to examine how an intervention like Youth Leadership for College Access influences college access work inside schools over time and across various variables. This would test whether Youth Leader resolution strategies change in number or sophistication over time, or how Youth Leaders talk about their peers and work (via complicating actions) changes over time and amount of training received during their tenure as Youth Leader.

Another possible direction for future study would be to take a deeper look at the Youth Leaders, themselves. Not only how programs like Youth Leadership for College Access influence and impact youth participants while they are involved in the program, but also if, and how, participants migrate skills developed during their time with the program into their lives after high school or program completion. A follow-up study on Youth Leaders should consider the post-secondary paths they took after high school, their reflections on the program, and what kinds of skillsets and knowledge they have continued to make use of since high school, are all useful trajectories for future study and research.

Finally, this study has revealed the kind of program findings that are possible with ethnographic and narrative research. While the goal of this dissertation is not formal evaluation of a youth program, many of the findings speak to ways that the program effectively and uniquely functions. If program directors and evaluators want to comprehensively understand a youth program, they must ground their methods by youth participants and their experiences involved. This entails more than simply interviewing participants and analyzing program
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outcome data. It may involve in-depth participant and program observation, and incorporating other ethnographic methods in order to develop a nuanced understanding of a program. It also may involve narrative research, such as providing youth participants with narrative prompts or scenarios. While this kind of research takes time, nuanced analysis, and patience, it can also yield deeper, more textured program evaluation findings.

Conclusion

I was recently talking with Lori Chajet, co-founder of the Youth Leadership for College Access, and she told me that they are beginning to scale the program up, bringing it to a number of local City University of New York (CUNY) community colleges. First year community college students will now have access to college Youth Leaders who have finished their first year, and are positioned to help support first year students during their beginning college experiences. Just as high school Youth Leaders, and their work, reimagines how students experience post-secondary planning, college Youth Leaders can begin to think about how to reimagine ways that students experience community college.

This idea of rethinking how we do things in education is important, because when we begin to reimagine the way things have been done, we make opportunity to also reimagine the role that students can play in their own lives, and the lives of their communities. This dissertation has explored strategies and approaches that rethink post-secondary planning so that it is a relevant and meaningful experience for students, positioning young people at the center of this transformation. An important element toward realizing this transformation is intentionally carving out space and opportunity for young people to be heard – a space that values their experiences, their lives, and their capacity to be dynamic agents of change. Within the context of
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college access, I hope this dissertation has shown that when we do this purposefully and thoughtfully, we no longer need to worry about filling the guidance gap, because we disrupt it.
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