A Dissertation

entitled

Understanding a College-Going Culture in the Secondary Level for At-Risk Students

by

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First-generation, low-income, underrepresented students are considered an at-risk population for higher education. Scholars have identified three main types of students who fall under the category of at-risk students: first-generation students, low-income students, and underrepresented students. The reasons for low college-going rates for at-risk students who are traditional in age vary. Some reasons include insufficient college-knowledge within the family or community, low degree aspirations, lack of social support, and insufficient college readiness.

Knowledge about a strong college-going culture for at-risk students is limited. There is a gap in research regarding school cultures which promote college attendance for at-risk students. Many studies focus on the barriers and issues that at-risk students face in the college choice process. However, there is a lack of information regarding a school culture designed to prepare at-risk students for attending college.

The purpose of this study is to explore a strong college-going culture designed specifically to prepare traditional-age at-risk students for college. The methodology used for the research is a case study. The site selected for the case study is Cristo Rey Jesuit
High School Twin Cities. As part of the methodology, Schein’s theory of organizational culture was used.

Based on the research, there were three basic underlying assumptions at Cristo Rey; care and love for the individual student, commitment to educating the poor and building student self-esteem and confidence. All the basic underlying assumptions were seen as critical in improving the college-going rates for the at-risk students.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

On November 23, 1927 a 36-year-old Jesuit stood in front of the execution squad in Mexico City. His name was Miguel Pro. He was a native of Mexico and returned to his homeland a year earlier from Europe. He came back to serve the people who were being persecuted for their Catholic faith. As Miguel stood before a firing squad, he refused a blindfold and forgave his executioners. In the last moments of his life, he stretched out his arms and cried out “Viva Cristo Rey!” At that moment, he was shot dead (Campion, 2009).

Almost 70 years later Miguel Pro’s last words were still ringing in the heart of another Jesuit, Rev. John Foley. He observed the poverty and desolation of a south Chicago neighborhood. Young sons and daughters of Mexican immigrants were under-educated and impoverished. Few had any opportunity for a better future. Seeing this bleak environment, Rev. Foley began a Jesuit school to serve the poor and disadvantaged. This was done at a time when Catholic schools were closing, not opening. His educational concept would be criticized and met with skepticism. Yet he still believed a difference could be made. In 1996, a new Jesuit High School began. The last words of Miguel Pro echoed “Viva Cristo Rey!” (“Long live Christ the King!”). The name of the new school to serve sons and daughters of Mexican immigrants would be named Cristo Rey (Kantrowitz, 2006).

Within a short period of time, this small school’s pedagogy and innovation would blossom. New Cristo Rey schools began across the nation. This one idea has turned into an educational network of 25 nationwide schools, all with the mission of serving an at-risk student population.
Background of the Problem

First-generation, low-income, underrepresented students are considered an at-risk population for higher education. Aaron Pallas (1989) considers students at-risk if they have been exposed to inferior educational experiences in the family, school, or community. Scholars have identified three main types of students who fall under the category of at-risk students: first-generation students, low-income students, and underrepresented students. First-generation are considered those students who attend college and grew up in a household in which the guardians or parents did not attend college (Horn & Chen, 1998). A low-income student is “an individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount” (Federal TRIO Program Current Low-Income Levels, 2011). The average poverty rate for the 48 continental United States is $33,525 for a family of four (Federal TRIO Program Current Low-Income Levels, 2011). Underrepresented students within higher education are those students whose ethnic classification is African American, Hispanic, or Native American (Gandera & Bial, 2001).

College-going Rates for Traditional-Age At-Risk Students Nationwide

Underrepresented students. Across the nation, higher education has studied traditional-age at-risk students. College–going rates of at-risk students in traditional college-going age (18-24 years old) are lagging behind those who are not classified as at-risk. Figure 1 shows the percentage of high school completers who were enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges immediately following high school completion by race/ethnicity from 2003-09 (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp, Tahan, & Mallory, 2011, p. 69). The figure demonstrates little growth in enrollment rates for the White, African American
and Native American student population who completed high school and attended a 2 or 4-year College. The Asian population has increased close to 10% from 2003 to 2009. There has been a slight increase for the African American and Hispanic community. The Asian population continues to rise while the White population peaked in 2005, declined, and then made a slight recovery in 2007. The lack of growth for underrepresented students who completed high school and attended college is disappointing. This graph communicates little progress in college attendance by ethnicity and the need for improvement.

**Figure 1:** Percentage of high school completers who were enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges immediately following high school completion, by race/ethnicity from 2003-09 (Aud et al., 2011).

The low college-going rate of underrepresented student populations corresponds to their low college-graduation rates. Eighteen percent of African Americans have a bachelor’s degree, (Census Bureau Data, 2005). Twelve percent of Hispanic adults have a bachelor’s degree according to the 2005 Census Bureau Data. In comparison to the
Hispanic and African American populations, 31% of non-Hispanic Whites and 49% of Asian Americans have earned a bachelor’s degree (Vanderkam, 2008).

**Low-income students.** The traditional-age college-going rates for those students who are classified low-income are demonstrated in Figure 2. There is a gap in college attendance between individuals who are classified as low-income and those who are classified middle or high-income. Figure 2 demonstrates college-going rates for all levels of income since 1975. The information is from the National Center for Educational Statistics and their report The Condition of Education 2011 (Aud et al., 2011, p.69).

![High School Completers Who Enrolled in 2- or 4-Year Colleges Immediately Following High School, by Family Income](image)

*Figure 2:* Percentage of high school completers who were enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges the October immediately following high school completion, by family income: 1975-2008 (Aud et al., 2011).

**First-generation students.** First-generation students are yet another kind of at-risk students. A first-generation student is someone who is the first member of the family to attend college (Horn & Chen, 1998). First-generation students have low college-going and low college-graduation rates. “The body of research indicates that first-generation college students experience difficulties prior to and during their college experience that
make them vulnerable to lower academic performance and problematic transitions” (Nichols & Sanchez, 2007, p 6). Despite the great amount of research as to why the college-going rates for first-generation is low, higher education continues to struggle with programs to help at-risk student populations. In their study of first-generation students in the college search process, Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) found that first-generation students had lower degree aspirations. In addition, first-generation students also had a lower amount of support from home when searching higher education. Also, first-generation students devoted a smaller amount of time discussing college and future aspirations with peers and teachers (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Many first-generation students are also classified as low-income. Often due to the lack of education, family income for first-generation students is lower. Eighty-nine percent of first-generation and low-income students drop-out of college within 6 years (Peale & Ramsey, 2010).

Statistics show that enrollment trends for the different kinds of at-risk students have slightly increased within the past few years; however, research demonstrates that there is still a significant gap in the college-going rates for at-risk populations. According to Olive (2010), first-generation college students face obstacles similar to other at-risk populations. Often, many first-generation students are poor, underrepresented, and speak a language other than English at home. These barriers contribute to a lower college-going rate.

**Reasons for the Low College-going Rates for Traditional-Age, At-risk Students**

The reasons for low college-going rates for at-risk students who are traditional in age vary. Some reasons include insufficient college-knowledge within the family or
community, low degree aspirations, lack of social support, and insufficient college readiness.

Families without college knowledge are unable to assist with basic information regarding the college experience and cannot properly support their son or daughter in the college search process (Olive, 2010). As a concept, college knowledge refers to information needed in the college search process. The lack of family support affects student priorities. Behaviors are different in the college search process for those students who are classified as at-risk (MacAllum, Glover, Queen, Riggs, 2007).

Society and the American government have struggled with solutions to promote college-going for those traditional aged students who are classified as at-risk. “The failure to educate poor minority children has remained an intractable problem, unsolved after almost 40 years of sustained federal efforts, despite the creation of the U.S. Department of Education in 1979” (Birdsell, 2009, p. 20). Despite a tremendous amount of funds contributed toward programs for increasing college attendance, low enrollment continues to be a problem (Birdsell, 2009). The financial issue of attending college is a barrier for many. Providing grants and aid for those who are at-risk is a step in the right direction to attract at-risk students. However, the availability of grants and aid for the traditional-aged students who are at-risk is not the only solution. “Every year, according to America’s Promise Alliance, more than 1 million students turn down additional free education and drop out of (high)school” (Vanderkam, 2008, p. 43). Other solutions to improve the college-going rate for traditional age at-risk students include offering more outreach programs which are based on mentorship and guidance, involve family and social support, and provide college knowledge.
Outreach programs provide intervention strategies designed to increase college-going rates (Tierney, Colyar, & Corwin 2003). Many of the outreach programs to prepare first-generation, low-income, underrepresented students are labor intensive and cost prohibitive (Tierney et al., 2003, p. ii). They involve a high amount of mentorship and continuous academic and social support. “Outreach programs have begun to come under increased scrutiny. Current programs are expected to meet higher levels of accountability from foundations and granting agencies. And yet, there still is no consensus on what makes a program successful” (Tierney et al., 2003, p. ii). What is more, Tierney et al. (2003) assert, “Numerous programs have been created, revised, dissolved and recreated, but programmatic success still remains a mystery. According to many researchers, little empirical evidence has been collected about program effectiveness” (Tierney et al., 2003, p. ii).

College preparation programs can be grouped according to program focus. They include programs which focus on academic preparation, quality academic counseling, co-curricular activities, cultural wealth, family influence, peer group influences, task mentoring, evaluating quality and determining priorities, and time-frame for beginning the college search (Tierney et al., 2003). Examples of college preparatory outreach programs include TRIO Upward Bound and Talent Search programs (Upward Bound Program, 2011). Upward Bound and Talent Search are both designed to reach out to the traditional-aged at-risk student populations. They focus on mentorship, advising, college knowledge, and experiential learning to increase college readiness. Upward Bound and Talent Search are federally funded.
KIPP and Cristo Rey are two examples of schools which have a distinct educational pedagogy. KIPP is an acronym for Knowledge Is Power Program. KIPP is a public school charter program which educates students in underserved communities. All students served are classified as at-risk. Eighty-five percent of KIPP middle school graduates go to college (Radnofsky, 2006). Of all the different outreach programs that serve traditional-aged at-risk students, one stands out - the Cristo Rey school network. One of the unique features of Cristo Rey is its non-reliance upon governmental or public funding. Instead, Cristo Rey is self-sufficient within the community; its funding comes from private businesses within the local sector. In turn, Cristo Rey students work in community businesses in exchange for the financial assistance. It is a symbiotic relationship which is beneficial to the traditional-aged at-risk students and the local business community. As a result, Cristo Rey schools have blossomed into a nationwide network of 25 schools designed to improve college attendance for the at-risk student.

Characteristics of Cristo Rey include a cooperative work program, faith–based education and value system, mentorship, and an extended school day. Cristo Rey network’s college-going rate has been very high. Of the 25 schools, Cristo Rey network has an average college attendance rate of 85%.

**Statement of the Problem**

Knowledge about a strong college-going culture for at-risk students is limited. There is a gap in research regarding school cultures which promote college attendance for at-risk students. Many studies focus on the barriers and issues that at-risk students face in the college choice process. However, there is a lack of information regarding a school culture designed to prepare at-risk students for attending college. Significant resources
are invested to improve college-going rates for at-risk student populations (Birdsell, 2009). Unfortunately, success has been limited. Higher education has had a disappointing track record for attracting and graduating traditional-aged students, who are first-generation, underrepresented, and from low socio-economic backgrounds (Tierney et al., 2003).

A major component of any program which addresses the college-going rates for an at-risk student population is the development of a positive college-going culture. Because such culture would be geared towards at-risk student populations, such culture, as research attests (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009), would take into consideration culturally-relevant educational approaches for underrepresented student populations. In addition, such culture would impact beliefs, behaviors, values, and attitudes (Schein, 2010). Value systems, relationships, and behavioral results, such as college-going rates, are explained by understanding culture. “Culture is both a ‘here and now’ dynamic phenomenon and a coercive background structure that influences us in multiple ways. Culture is constantly reenacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by our own behavior” (Schein, 2010, p. 2). Understanding how to develop and maintain a culture which improves the college-going rate for at-risk students is important. A strong college preparatory culture would impact the college-going rates for at-risk students.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore a strong college-going culture designed specifically to prepare traditional-age at-risk students for college. The study will focus on the Cristo Rey network of schools which has demonstrated a strong track record for
sending students considered at-risk to college. The college-going rate for Cristo Rey is more than double the national average.

The study follows a case study design. Case study methodology provides an opportunity to explore decision-making and the influence of different factors at an in-depth level, and “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events-such as … school performance” (Yin, 2009, pg. 4). The ability to obtain rich and impactful information is strong in this type of methodology.

The site selected for the case study is Cristo Rey Jesuit High School Twin Cities. This school serves as an ideal institution for a case study. Cristo Rey Jesuit Twin Cities has many commonalities with other Cristo Rey schools across the nation. Some of these commonalities include an urban environment, similar administrative structure, enrollment size, Roman Catholic affiliation (Jesuit), mission, student demographics, and educational and work-program model.

Cristo Rey Jesuit Twin Cities graduated its first class of 61 students in 2011. One-hundred percent of the student body had been accepted to a college (Grayson, 2011). This statistic is similar to other schools within the Cristo Rey network. Almost all students graduating from Cristo Rey schools are accepted to a 4- or 2-year college or University (“A School that Works,” 2012). The Cristo Rey Jesuit Twin Cities student demographics are typical for all Cristo Rey schools. Over 90% of come from underrepresented populations (Shenoy, 2011). Similar to all schools in the network, Cristo Rey Jesuit Twin Cities serves students who are low-income. In fact, all students enrolled within the Cristo Rey educational network are classified as low-income. And similar to all schools in the network, the curriculum at Cristo Rey Jesuit Twin Cities is
college preparatory (“A School that Works,” 2012). In fact, college preparation is part of the mission of all schools within the Cristo Rey network, which aim to provide a rigorous academic curriculum designed to prepare students for successful college or university work.

This study was guided by the work of Edgar Schein (1985) on organizational culture and leadership. Schein (1985) identified three levels of organizational culture. The three levels are artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlining assumptions. Artifacts are defined as those items which are on the surface. Espoused values encompass the goals and philosophies of the organization. Basic underlining assumptions are values that exist largely at an unconscious level (Schein, 1985). Examples include observable behavior, language, customs, and traditions. Also, the network’s basic belief systems, social climate, behavior patterns, rituals and traditions are also important (Schein, 1985). Schein’s cultural framework guided the data collection and analysis of this study.

The study also takes into consideration recent research into culturally-relevant educational approaches geared towards underrepresented student populations. In line with Critical Race Theory assumptions, a culturally-relevant pedagogy is “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing a critical perspectives that challenge inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Within current research on Critical Race Theory, Ladson-Billings (1995) wrote that students must understand and appreciate their own culture and identity as well as achieve academically. Ladson-Billings (1995) noted research conducted by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) in which certain African-American students were considered academically successful. However, these student were
ridiculed by the peers because they “identified a phenomenon entitled, acting White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 176). Being academically successful by losing their own racial identity is not acceptable. Students needed to be academically successful and have an appreciation and understanding of their cultural identity.

Ladson-Billings (1995) wrote that teachers needed to help students succeed academically and appreciate their own cultural identity, but they also needed to help students understand and recognize social inequalities. The researcher continued by writing that this recognition was important in the educational process and teachers needed to help students with this critique. Finally, Ladson-Billing (1995) wrote “culturally relevant teaching must meet three criteria: ability to develop students academically, and willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness” (p. 483).

Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995) discussed Critical Race Theory through the concept of multicultural education. Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995) wrote, “multicultural education has been conceptualized as a reform movement designed to effect change in the school and other educational institutions so that student from diverse racial, ethnic, and other social-class groups will experience educational equality” (p. 61). Multicultural education is a concept which supports that all students, regardless of culture, race or socio-economic scale will receive an education which is equal to any other culture or social-class group. Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995) wrote that race is a major factor for discrimination in schools. In order to achieve equality, educators must recognize the inequality and implement specific intervention strategies to ensure equality.
for students of all backgrounds. The concept of multicultural education must be
engrained in the educational process, teaching methods, and curriculum development.

Research Questions

The following two research questions guided this study.

1. How is a strong college-going culture for at-risk students shaped?
2. Why is this college-going culture shaped in such a way?

Significance of the Study

This study aimed to contribute to both research and practice. As a contribution to
research, this study brought a stronger understanding of:

- the culture of a high school which prepares at-risk students for college at
  exceptionally high rates;
- at-risk traditional-aged high school student populations;
- the role of administration in creating a strong culture in a faith-based school; and
- the role and functioning of the Cristo Rey School Network.

Although research on at-risk student populations is increasing, research on school
cultures that prepares at-risk students for college are limited. The study provided a new
perspective on the traditional age, high school at-risk students. Much of the literature
focused on the barriers that prevent many at-risk students from going to college. This
study looked at college-going rates for at-risk students from a different perspective – the
one of culture.

In addition, this research brought insights into the administration of a faith-based
school as well as into the Cristo Rey Network of schools. As a relatively new school
network, the Cristo Rey network remains understudied. The network is independent of
governmental regulations, public financial assistance, or oversight. It is a school system 
which financially supports the poor and the underserved from within the local 
community. Local businesses and agencies take responsibility for its financial existence. 

The study also provided practical insights for school administrators. Since Cristo Rey’s inception, the educational concept has spread nationwide. Within 15 years, 25 new 
schools have risen across the country and continue to emerge. This study provided useful 
information on building a strong school culture and enhanced opportunities for at-risk 
students. The insights can inform other schools serving at-risk students and their own 
self-assessment. With the information, many can analyze their own practices and 
prioritize policies related to their culture and the preparation of at-risk students for 
college. The information can also be useful to those who would like to begin schools 
within other impoverished communities. 

**Delimitations**

There are a variety of schools and educational networks which serve traditional-aged, 
at-risk students. A few of these schools focus on improving their students’ college-going 
rates. Understanding that each school system develops a specific college-going culture, 
the research needed to limit the focus. For purposes of answering the research questions, 
the researcher limited the research to the examination of the culture of one school 

**Limitations**

In order to understand successful school cultures which serve at-risk students, case 
study methodology was used. Data obtained in a qualitative case study is typically rich 
and in-depth. The case study method served as an ideal method to answer the research
questions of this study (Merriam, 2009). However, one limitation to a case study methodology is ability to generalize. Currently, there are 25 different Cristo Rey schools. However, the research was limited to studying one institution out of these 25. Thus, conclusions were drawn regarding the culture of Cristo Rey Twin Cities, without generalizing to the entire Cristo Rey School Network.

**Definition of Terms**

**At-Risk Students**

Aaron Pallas (1989) considers students at-risk if they have been exposed to inferior educational experiences in the family, school, or community.

**Low-Income Students**

Low-income students are “those whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount” (Federal TRIO Program Current Low-Income Levels, 2011).

**Opportunity Youth**

Bridgeland and Milano (2012) use the term opportunity youth to describe “youth ages 16 to 24 who are currently out of school and do not expect to enroll in school next year, have not been employed for at least six months, do not hold a college degree, are not disabled to prevent long-term employment, are not incarcerated, and are not a stay-at-home parent with a working spouse” (p. 9).

**Chronically Disconnected Youth**

Chronically disconnected is a term used for those who have never gone back to high school, did not graduate from college, or never worked.

**First-Generation Students**
First-generation is considered as a person whose mother or father did not graduate from a four-year university (Attinisi, 1992).

**Underrepresented Students**

Underrepresented students include those whose ethnicity is designated as Hispanic, African-American, or Native American (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

**College Knowledge**

College knowledge is defined as “information and skills that allow students to successfully navigate the complex college admissions and financial aid processes, as well as develop an understanding of college norms and culture” (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009, p. ).

**Cultural Capital**

Kirshner, Salvidar and Tracy (2011) define cultural capital as the “knowledge about the institutional system and how to navigate to act in the better interest of one’s self” (p. 109). The definition continues that success in school is not only about understanding technical concepts, but more importantly about learning to decode the higher education system (Kirshner et al., 2011).

**Outreach Programs**

Outreach programs are a variety of intervention strategies designed to increase college-going rates (Tierney, Colyar, & Corwin, 2003).

**Organization of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore a strong high school college-going culture designed to educate traditional-age at-risk students. Chapter 1 summarized the study, provided the problem and purpose statement, explored the significance of the study, and
identified the research questions. Chapter 2 provided an extensive literature review that covered higher education’s national problem, the traditional age-at-risk student population, factors that improve college-going rates for at-risk students, the college-going culture, intervention strategies for improving college-going cultures, the Cristo Rey Network, and the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 examined the methodology, research design, site selection, data collection, participant selection, advanced preparation, entry and exit procedures, theoretical framework, data analysis, delimitations, and limitations. Chapter 4 reported the findings at Cristo Rey Twin Cities. Chapter 4 also included information regarding the school culture and how it developed a strong college-going rate. Chapter 5 analyzed the findings and summarized the research. Contribution to research was also discussed.
Chapter 2

Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to explore a college-going culture and environment for traditional-aged at-risk students. The study examined cultural artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlining assumptions. Areas to research which pertained to understanding college-going culture included observable behavior, language, customs, and traditions. Values, belief systems, social climate, behavior patterns, and rituals were also important in understanding culture (Schein, 1985). Two research questions guided the study: 1) How is a strong college-going culture for at-risk students shaped? 2.) Why is this college-going culture shaped in such a way?

This chapter covered five primary areas. The first area discussed the higher education’s national problem. Inequality to higher education negatively impacts society and our national higher education system. With limited opportunities for an education, poverty subsists. The next section focused on at-risk students including low-income, first-generation and underrepresented student populations. The section looked closely at how they are defined, the disparity in college attendance, dropout rates of at-risk students, and perceived attitudes and beliefs regarding higher education. Section 3 examined reasons for low college attendance of traditional-aged, at-risk students including a lack of cultural capital and college knowledge, substandard educational environments, the digital divide, social class differences, limited family resources and awareness, low self-efficacy of at-risk students, limited peer and social support, and low educational aspirations. The fourth section was an examination of the strategies that have historically been successful in supporting at-risk student populations. Different outreach programs served as an
example of using various strategies to help traditional aged, at-risk students. The fifth section of the chapter described in detail Cristo Rey and its network. Finally, the researcher discussed the theoretical framework used for the study. Schein’s (1985) theory of culture and leadership was examined to help understand Cristo Rey’s college-going culture. In addition, Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) culturally relevant pedagogy was considered.

**Higher Education’s National Problem**

Accessibility to a college education for all, despite socio-economic status, is a key component to breaking the cycle of poverty (Gladieux & Swail, 2000). Inequality in college access is a national problem. As Gladieux and Swail (2000) asserted, “Opportunities for education beyond high school remain unequal across society. Wage and wealth disparities have reached unprecedented extremes, and the least educated and least skilled are getting an ever smaller piece of the pie” (p. 688). Disparity is apparent along economic, racial, and cultural divides (Gladieux & Swail, 2000).

**The Economic Impact of a College Education**

Reimers-Hild, Fritz and King (2007) maintained that college education is invaluable in a knowledge-based society. A college degree has a major financial impact on life (Reimers-Hild et al., 2007). Statistics support this conclusion. A four-year college graduate will earn, on average, $1,053 per week; in comparison, a high school graduate will make and average of $638 per week (Reimers-Hild et al., 2007). A person with a 4-year college education will earn twice the income of a person with a high school degree over a life time (Reimers-Hild et al., 2007). “Economic disadvantage has a well-documented association with educational attainment. Early disadvantage is a strong
predictor of college enrollment” (Crosnoe, Mistry, Elder, 2002, p. 692). The financial gains are only the beginning. Opportunities for a healthy, richer, and fuller life are much greater with a college degree (Crosnoe et al., 2002). The chain of poverty keeps cycling generationally with those who lack a high school or college education (Crosnoe et al., 2002). Gladieux and Swail (2000) supported the argument that there is a direct correlation between poverty and the lack of college education.

High Drop-Out Rates

Despite great advantages of a college degree, thousands of students drop-out of high school every day. As Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox (2010) argued, “If the nation cuts the dropout rate for minority students living in the nation’s largest metropolitan areas in half, the nation’s economy would experience increased earnings of $2.3 billion in an average year, an additional 17,450 jobs from the increased spending in their local economies, and increased tax revenues of $249.7 million” (p. 42). Seven-thousand two-hundred students drop out of high school in the United States each day (Hooker & Brand, 2010). This is a total of 1.3 million who fail to graduate from high school and attend college each year (Hooker & Brand, 2010). One-fourth of all public high school students and close to 40% of minority students (African American, Hispanic, and Native American) fails to graduate with their class (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

There is a large disparity between Whites and underrepresented students when examining college access and the high school attrition rates. Looking at the national attrition rate by ethnicity for high schools, 91% of Asian, 81% of White, 64% of Hispanic, 64% of Native American, 62% of African American students graduated in 2008 (Balfanz et al., 2010). For high school graduation, there is a 15-18 percentage gap
between Whites and the underrepresented student population of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans (Balfanz et al., 2010).

**At-Risk Students**

Within educational literature, there are many definitions for at-risk students. Aaron Pallas (1989) considered students at-risk if they have been exposed to inferior educational experiences in the family, school, or community. Martha Maxwell (1997) maintained that at-risk students have "skills, knowledge, motivation, and/or academic ability [which are] are significantly below those of the 'typical' student in the college or curriculum in which they are enrolled” (p. 2). A common term in literature often associated with at-risk students is disadvantaged. This term can be associated with gender, family, social or economic status (Williams & Butler, 2010).

**Low-Income Students**

Because of the family’s low financial means, there are students labeled at-risk in the college-search process. Low-income students are “those whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount” (Federal TRIO Program Current Low-Income Levels, 2011). In 2010, the average poverty rate for a family of four in the 48 continental United States was $33,525 (Federal TRIO Program Current Low-Income Levels, 2011). Chart 3 illustrates the disparity in the college-going rates of students by income status.

*Figure 3: Chart showing the percentage of high school graduates who enrolled in college within one year of graduating from high school. The high school graduates are categorized by income. (Aud, Hussar, Planty, Snyder, Bianco, Fox, Frohlich, Kemp,
For students who come from a low-income background, higher education was often seen as a luxury in comparison to working and contributing financially to the household (Aronson, 2008). Literature tells us that many low-income students have a sense of guilt as if they are abandoning their family. Developing friendships in college is difficult because they feel like outsiders. Also, they have reservations regarding their own
abilities to adapt and succeed academically (Aronson, 2008). Gladieux and Swail (2000) concluded, socio-economic status is directly tied with who goes to college and who does not.

There is a 23% gap in the dropout rate between low-income students and students who come from affluent families in 2008. When examining college-going rates by economic status, there is also a significant gap. One in 5 students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile enrolled in four-year institutions. In comparison, two out of three students from the highest quartile enroll in a four-year institution (Gladieux & Swail, 2000). Axelroth (2009) explained why the dropout rate is out of proportion for low-income students. “Half of these dropouts come from just 15 percent of high schools in our nation’s high-poverty neighborhoods. Nearly a third of all public high school freshmen…fail to graduate with their class. Forty to 60 percent of all students say they feel disconnected from school: unsupported, unsafe, academically unchallenged, and disengaged. Among children living in urban areas, 49 percent (9.7 million) live in low-income families” (p. 1).

Academic performance suffers. Eighty percent of low-income students scored below proficiency on the 2009 national exams. Half of 4th graders, who are considered low-income, did not achieve the score needed for basic grade level. As a result, those who do not reach basic grade level are considered to be at a high risk of dropping out of school (Balfanz et al., 2010). “By the time these students enter high school, they have one foot out the door and are not prepared to succeed in a rigorous college-readiness high school curriculum” (Balfanz et al., 2010, p.16). Many who look at the challenges that low-income students face feel that the problem arises early in the child’s academic career.
Many low-income students are enrolled in schools located in poverty stricken areas. The academics are often lost in the quagmire of providing the basics of living, such as food, security, and emotional health. As a result, a low-income student’s academic pursuits are often secondary in importance. Literature tells us that the culture of the school is affected by poverty (Gladieux & Swail, 2000). Higher education is seen as inaccessible. Students elect to take non-college preparatory courses. Poverty affects culture and course-taking patterns, thus affecting academic success (Gladieux & Swail, 2000). “The problem is that the course-taking patterns of low-income students make it difficult for them to meet their expectations. As a result [of course-taking patterns], they [low-income students] are less prepared, on average, than higher-income students” (Gladieux & Swail, 2000, p. 690).

With few educational opportunities, the cycle of poverty and unemployment continues. Bridgeland and Milano (2012) used the term disconnected youth to refer to youth who are not working, not in school, and are leading to negative outcomes in their lives. Close to 3.4 million young adults between the ages of 16 to 24 are classified as chronically disconnected. Chronically disconnected is a term used for those who have never gone back to high school, did not graduate from college, or never worked. Of the group of 3.4 million chronically disconnected, over 1 million are heads of households whose income level is below the poverty line. This is roughly 9% of all 16 to 24-year-olds (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). In the summer of 2011, unemployment was at 18% for 16 to 24-year-olds (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). These are young adults who have dropped out of high school with no prospect of attending college. The unemployment
rate is twice that of the national average. The unemployment rate was 30% for African Americans, and 20% for Hispanic (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012).

Bridgeland and Milano (2012) used the term opportunity youth to describe “youth ages 16 to 24 who are currently out of school and do not expect to enroll in school next year, have not been employed for at least six months, do not hold a college degree, are not disabled to prevent long-term employment, are not incarcerated, and are not a stay-at-home parent with a working spouse” (p. 9). Of this group, more than half are underrepresented students and 75% are first-generation students (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012).

First-Generation Students

A first-generation student is considered a person whose mother or father did not graduate from a four-year college or university (Terenzini et al., 1996). When examining the college-going rate of first-generation students, the evidence unequivocally shows that first-generation students are at a disadvantage for a variety of reasons. First-generation students are likely to have a poor experience with academic success or persistence (Terenzini et al., 1996). “The picture suggests that these [first-generation] students come less prepared and with more non-academic demands on them, and they enter a world where they are less likely to experience many of the conditions that other research indicates are positively related to persistence, performance and learning” (Terenzini et al., 1996, p. 18).

First-generation students experience cultural, social, and academic issues when evaluating and attending higher education (London, 1989). To experience cultural or social difficulties is not unusual for any student transitioning into college; however,
transitioning challenges are even greater for students who are first-generation. Often, first-generation students lack the parental support and college knowledge needed for a smooth transition into higher education (Phinney & Haas, 2003).

To compound the issue, first-generation students typically have lower cognitive scores (Balfanz et al., 2010). First-generation students have lower ACT scores, lower grade point averages, and are often ill-prepared academically (Terenzini et al., 1996). Low test results on cognitive scores are usually caused by an education in poor performing schools. In 2008, there were 1,746 schools which were considered dropout factories (Balfanz et al., 2010). Dropout factories are defined as schools where 60% of the enrolled students do not graduate (Balfanz et al., 2010). There are a disproportionate number of first-generation students enrolled in schools which are considered dropout factories (Balfanz et al., 2010).

First-generation students have lower-degree aspirations in comparison to their peers whose parents graduated from a 4-year university or college (Lee, Sax, Kim & Hagedorn, 2004). Parental influence has a major effect on their child’s college aspirations. In one study that examined degree aspirations on first-generation college students, researchers discovered that “low-income students of parents familiar with higher education reported planning to attend college at a higher rate than first-generation low-income students by 23%” (Lee et al., 2004, p. 3). Retention is also affected. First-generation students have shown to have lower retention rates in school (Horn & Chen, 1998).

**Underrepresented Students**

Based on ethnicity, underrepresented students are considered those whose ethnicity is designated as Hispanic, African-American, or American Indian. Underrepresented
students are often classified as at-risk. Many traditional age underrepresented students are not ready to start college. For example, only 43% of high school students who were Hispanic were academically qualified and ready to start at a 4-year college or institution (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, 2009).

Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca, (2009) identified three significant indicators for academic success at in higher education. The first indicator is the level of difficulty of the curriculum at the high school level. The second indicator for academic success is the high school grade point average. The final indicator is standardized testing or achievement test scores. Examples include ACT or SAT scores. When examining results of these three criteria by ethnicity, there are significant gaps amongst different ethnic student population (Roderick, Nagaoka & Coca, 2009). In addition, there is a significant gap with in the college-going rates between Whites, African Americans, and Latino students.

High School Completers Who Enrolled in 2- or 4-Year Colleges Immediately Following High School, by Family Fincome
Figure 4: The percentage of high school graduates who enrolled in college with one-year of graduating from high school. The percentage breakdown is by race (Snyder & Dillow, 2012).

To help explain the racial gap based on college-going rates, researchers have found that underrepresented students perceive discrimination while in the college search process (Phinney & Haas, 2003). As a result of the perceived differences, underrepresented students feel like outsiders in the college search process. They feel that they are prejudged on their race and not on their merit or accomplishments (Phinney & Haas, 2003).

In addition, the types of majors commonly chosen by underrepresented students are out of proportion compared to the types of majors of chosen by the general public. Underrepresented students have historically chosen majors which are outside of the math and science fields. In the U.S., 12.6% of all professional Math and Science degrees were awarded to underrepresented students (Yelamarthi & Mawasha, 2010). Less than 16% of students who earn a bachelor’s degree in science or engineering were underrepresented students (Yelamarthi & Mawasha, 2010).

Factors Hindering College-Going Rates for At-Risk Students

The educational system in the United States has impediments which negatively influence college-going rates for traditional-aged, at-risk students. Some of these
impediments include a lack of college knowledge or cultural capital. Others are low educational aspirations, negative peer, and social support, low self-efficacy, negative family influences, a lack of technological resources, enrollment in a poor educational environment, and a divided social class. Building a positive culture which influences academic success for traditional-aged at-risk students is a deliberate process. This section focuses on areas which negatively influences college-going rates for traditional age, at-risk students.

**The Lack of Cultural Capital and College Knowledge**

Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009) identified four primary areas important for the development of college readiness. The four areas are 1) content knowledge and basic skills, 2) non-cognitive skills and norms of performance, 3) core academic skills, and 4) development of college knowledge. Although all these areas are important for college readiness, the area of college knowledge is crucial for any student interested in pursuing higher education. Roderick et al. (2009) define college knowledge as “information and skills that allow students to successfully navigate the complex college admissions and financial aid processes, as well as develop an understanding of college norms and culture” (p. 190). The two terms college knowledge and cultural capital are used interchangeably by researchers. Kirshner, Salvidar and Tracy (2011) defined cultural capital as a “knowledge about the institutional system and how to navigate to act in the better interest of one’s self” (p. 109). The authors emphasized that success in school is not only about understanding technical concepts, but more importantly about learning to decode the higher education system (Kirshner et al., 2011). “The ability to succeed in school is as much about using cultural capital to navigate the academic system as it is
about knowing calculus” (Kirshner et al., 2011, p. 108). Obtaining cultural capital or college knowledge is an important tool of success for traditional aged, at-risk students.

Knowing where to get help, and to know when and what questions to ask in the college search process is not innate. Information regarding college knowledge is passed on by college educated parents, yet students who do not have parents who graduated from college never receive college knowledge from parents. York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) found that first-generation students lack basic knowledge of college and the college search process. They also have a lower personal commitment toward post-secondary education. “These findings suggest that non-first-generation students have a broader understanding of the range of college choices available to them and take a more cosmopolitan comparison-shopping approach to their college-going decision making” (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 419). In support of the conclusion that at-risk students lack college knowledge, Sarah Turner and Amanda Pallais (2006) used SAT data to show that students who are low-income and first-generation are less likely to send their testing scores to colleges which are classified as top-tier institutions. At-risk students limit their college choice options. At-risk students do not understand the college search process or how to apply for financial aid. They have difficulty in understanding how to pay for college or even understanding what questions to ask, or where to start (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009).

Tornatzky, Cutler and Lee (2002) found that college knowledge is also lacking in the Latino community. Researchers provided a questionnaire of college knowledge to Latino parents. Two-thirds of the parents missed at least half the questions on the questionnaire (Downs, Martin, Fossum, Martinez, Solorio, & Martinez, 2008). Although progress in
the college-going rate has been made in the past twenty years by the Latino community, there is still a great divide between White and Asian populations and the Latino community.

First-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students make decisions regarding higher education based upon their perceptions, experiences, and world-views. If their experience of college is limited, then there is a lower probability that they will attend college (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). A person can only make good decisions based on timely and accurate information. “College and career readiness involves the development of a wide variety of skills, abilities, and dispositions well beyond the academic domain” (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 76).

Addressing the issue of college knowledge and cultural capital is daunting. “College knowledge is a critical component in ensuring that young people, especially first-generation and low-income youth, are able to progress to college and into careers” (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 75). The student’s comprehension of college knowledge is impactful on the probability of attending higher education. However, many may ask why secondary schools do not communicate college knowledge or cultural capital. Many first-generation students are in failing schools, or enrolled in schools which lack the human resources to deal with at-risk students. “There are often hundreds of students in need of intensive supports from caring and committed adults. Often there simply is not enough manpower in high-needs schools to provide these supports at the scale needed” (Balfanz et al., 2010, p.16)

At-risk students have can have a high college-going rate, but they will not attend college because they lack the information. During the college search process, there are
many unanswered questions regarding higher education. As McPherson (2011) wrote, “Students often fail to meet their goals because they don’t have the money, don’t know that there is financial aid available, and don’t know how to access those funds. They also lack the academic preparation that would allow them to succeed in further study; they don’t know how to choose appropriate programs of study; and they don’t have adults to turn to who have the knowledge, experience, and confidence to guide them on successful paths” (p. 34).

**Substandard Educational Environment**

Balfanz et al. (2010) found that effective teachers within the classroom have a dramatic impact on students’ college-readiness. Highly effective and well-trained teachers are unevenly distributed in our nation’s schools (Balfanz et al., 2010). The majority are in more affluent school districts. Schools that have a high population of low-income, underrepresented students are shown to have a larger portion of under-qualified and ineffective teachers in the classrooms (Balfanz et al., 2010). McPherson supported the argument that many at-risk students are enrolled in poor performing schools, stating “Too many [at-risk students] grow up in environments not conducive to successful learning, attend under-resourced and dangerous schools, and are in no position to make wise choices or overcome steep odds in taking steps toward a satisfying and productive future. Our efforts to improve college access must address this larger picture” (McPherson, 2011, p. 35).

**Digital Divide**

The use of technology has become more prevalent in the college search process. New technologies and recruiting tactics involving the latest technology are continuing to
evolve. However, research finds that White and Asian students go online and use email more frequently than at-risk students (Goode, 2010). In a college search system where the use of technology has become much more prevalent, low-income students are at a disadvantage. Sixty-eight percent of affluent families have high-speed Internet access at home while only 21% of underrepresented families have high broadband access (Goode, 2010). The digital divide is relevant because many of the college websites utilize multimedia which requires high-speed Internet access. Online college applications, searches, virtual campus tours, registration procedures are now online. The digital divide negatively affects low-income students and the college-going rate (Goode, 2010). At-risk students typically do not have the same access to technology as affluent students. Goode (2010) wrote that “students in some schools have minimal opportunities to simply use computers and go online. High schools attended by students of color and poor students provide less access to computers than students attending schools serving White and middle-class students. In California, students attending high schools in poor communities have a student-per-multimedia computer ratio of 11.5 to 1, compared to 7.7 to 1 for middle-class schools” (p. 589).

Social Class Differences

When examining access in higher education and inequality in the college search process, the student’s race, social, and economic class makes a difference. In fact, Critical Race Theory research maintains that racism, prevalent in the U.S. educational system, plays a significant role in school inequity and creates educational differences by race. According to Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate IV (1995), “race is a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States and that the society is based
on property rights rather than on human rights” (p. 58). Latinos, African Americans, and other underrepresented students face racism in our educational system, and unequal opportunity to access higher education.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) contended that there is inequality in our school system. She wrote that the inequality is based on property rights of individuals. Race based on differences in property rights is the primary factor in educational inequality. She writes, “Race is still a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States and that the society is based on property rights rather than on human rights” (Ladson-Billing and Tate IV, 1995, p. 58).

Although race is a critical determinant of inequality, a 10-year study (Adams, 2012), conducted by a Harvard researcher discovered information that refutes the assumption of race as the sole barrier. The study found that White students were more apt to attend college than underrepresented students. However, when the researchers coupled those students who had similar achievements and socio-economic backgrounds, they found that the racial divide in the college-going rate had either been nullified or reversed (Adams, 2012). The report also showed that college-going rates vary dramatically by high school. Students with similar academic achievements had different college going-rates based on the high school they attended (Adams, 2012). The research leads to the conclusion that social class differences and a culture, which does not promote college achievement and academic success, are also significant barriers to college access. At-risk students are often limited in the college access because of their social status and environment.

To improve college access for at-risk students, social changes are needed. According to Aronson (2008), “the pervasive and deeply rooted nature of class differences means
that educational reform needs to move beyond an emphasis on individual motivation to a focus on institutional and social change” (p. 51). Very early in the education process, students who are in different socio-economic statuses are offered different educational opportunities, including different school choices, available educational resources, and quality of facilities (Aronson, 2008). Instead of breaking down the barriers, the educational system reinforces the social classes (Aronson, 2008).

Students go through an educational process in which many do not graduate. As students go through the system, fewer are unable to pass through the system. Students are limited by their social class, income, or college knowledge (Aronson, 2008). A school system with a negative academic culture perpetuates a high dropout rate and poor academic performance (Aronson, 2000). “Whether young people go on to college and the type of postsecondary education they pursue is a class-based process. Youth from poor or working-class backgrounds and those whose parents did not attend college are disproportionately likely to drop out of high school, or end their education at the high school level” (Aronson, 2008, p. 42).

At-risk college students tackle a myriad of challenges in college access. A fundamental lack of knowledge regarding the college search process is coupled with a variety of other cultural issues (Terenzini et al., 1996). But at the root of the problem educational system which differentiates the quality of education by social class differences (Aronson, 2008). Our educational system is unequal. (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). There are differences in the quality of education based on race and socio-economic status (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995). The issues are complex and not the
sole responsibilities of the parents or the school. Social class differences are often times
community, neighborhood, and societal issue (Aronson, 2008).

Limited Family Resources and Awareness

Family influence, beliefs, and pressures are major factors which impact college-going
rates. Parental involvement dramatically improves the student’s chances of going to
college. This is true regardless of the student’s background or income status (Balfanz, et.
al, 2010). Lee and Bowen (2006) studied factors that influenced academic achievement
of at-risk students. Within their study, parental influence or involvement emerged as an
important variable. In order to truly make a difference for the at-risk population, higher
education counselors must team with parents and use their influence as a resource. Smith
(2009) wrote that the assumption that parents of traditional-aged at-risk students do not
care about their child’s future is untrue. Parents of at-risk students often care deeply;
however, they often lack key resources and information. Embracing the parents as
teammates in their child’s future educational aspiration is crucial (Smith, 2009).

The perceived lack of parental support is related to cultural knowledge. York-
Anderson and Bowman’s (1991) research indicated that first-generation students receive
little support from family while they are in the college-search process. “First-generation
students face a lack of support from family. Many don’t understand problems and issues
associated with attending higher education” (Phinney & Hass, 2003 p. 707). Parents who
did not graduate from a four-year college do not possess the information needed to
understand the college-going process. They are unaware of the timelines and structures,
and lack the awareness of the system (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Therefore, family
influence in such cases is found to be negative (Hooker & Brand, 2010).
Parents of first-generation college students tend to be more pessimistic regarding their children’s ability to attend and graduate from a post-secondary institution (Brewer & Lander-McMahan, 2005). Typically, families who are low-income or economically disadvantaged are pessimistic about their child’s chances of attending college (Crosnoe, Mistry, & Elder, 2002). They are very concerned about cost, finances, and the academic ability of their child to be successful in college (Brewer & Lander-McMahan, 2005).

By contrast, the amount of information that students receive from college educated parents is much greater. College educated parents have experienced emotional issues that are associated with a college education. “College educated parents are typically more aware of long-term benefits of acquiring a college degree, and they thus share information with their children” (Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004, p. 2). Parents who have not attended college have little understanding of the benefits of higher education. They have less knowledge of the social and financial gains from a post-secondary education (Lee et al., 2004). Michael J. Smith (2009) maintained that underrepresented and low-income students are marginalized. The students may have the academic qualifications to attend a selective university, but many choose not to apply. According to Smith (2009), society looks upon those who are underrepresented or low-income as not ambitious or uninvolved in their child’s education. Yet this negative connotation is a misperception by mainstream America (Smith, 2009).

There is a higher probability that at-risk students will not be involved in campus activities. Typically, this is due to working obligations and commuting (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). As a result, at-risk students have a more difficult time connecting to
college life (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Coupled with academic pressures, many problems continue to arise (Phinney & Hass, 2003).

**Low Self-Efficacy**

Self-Efficacy is defined as a person’s belief in his/her ability to accomplish a goal or task. These beliefs fluctuate with experience and social interaction (Lent et al., 1996). Students’ self-efficacy develops and is influenced by environmental factors and personal interactions (Lent et al., 1996). Torres and Solberg (2001) define self-efficacy as “one’s judgments about one’s ability to organize thoughts, feelings, and actions to produce a desired outcome” (p. 53).

Emotional support from family is critical. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) noted that parental involvement can increase a high school student’s college readiness by 18%. The lack of emotional support from family even affects students after they enroll in college. The likelihood of persistence and commitment toward a degree is affected by parental belief (Lee et al., 2004). Having that family support is essential for a student’s self-confidence (Lee et al., 2004). Within the college search process, many traditional aged students have self-doubt in their own academic capabilities. For students who are at-risk, the lack of confidence can inhibit a student from pursuing college. Many are afraid that they will fail in the process of obtaining a college degree. A family support system is an important role in an individual’s feeling of security and stability. A student has a need for an emotional base of support. A strong base of support reduces stress and increases an individual’s self-confidence (Torres & Solberg, 2001).

First-generations students have a lower sense of self-efficacy than traditional students (Hellman, 1996). Self-efficacy and social support go hand in hand. One builds on the
other (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Unless a person believes that she/he can achieve something, the likelihood of meeting an objective decreases dramatically. “Stronger academic self-efficacy expectation results in better college outcomes because students with high self-efficacy perceive failure experiences as challenges rather than threats” (Torres & Solberg, 2001, p. 53; Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992). Typically, a strong self-efficacy will increase student interaction with faculty, increase involvement, and will result in a strong confidence in one’s own ability. At-risk students with high self-efficacy perceive the college search process as a challenge rather than a barrier (Torres & Solberg, 2001).

Underrepresented students have difficulty attending higher education and transitioning to a college environment. They have a heightened awareness that others judge their academic performance as confirming or debunking a negative stereotype (Fischer, 2010). Group stereotypes affect individual performance (Fischer, 2010). An at-risk student’s identity is negatively affected by negative stereotypes. With lower self-esteem, student effort is decreased. Motivation is lowered. Also, academic results are negatively impacted. These negative factors were self-induced and produced a heightened anxiety (Fischer, 2010). “The results underscore a clear pattern whereby minority students who feel as though their academic performance is judged by others as representing their group are under the most pressure to perform. The pressure leads to lower performance” (Fischer, 2010, p. 38).

Counseling and positive role models play important roles in developing self-confidence (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). College-going rates are directly affected by the
belief that one can be successful in college (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). People naturally avoid areas in which they believe that they will fail.

**Limited Peer and Social Support**

Self-efficacy and social support are directly linked (Phinney & Hass, 2003). The lack of self-confidence directly effects human behavior. When students are unsure, intimidated, or fearful of failure, they tend to withdraw and become uninvolved (Terenzini et al., 1996, p. 3). The lack of involvement compounds the negative emotions and creates social barriers, and limits social interaction. Peer and social support impacts student satisfaction and the college search process. “[At-risk] students are at a greater risk than are their traditional peers largely because of lower levels of academic and social integration” (Terenzini et al., 1996, p. 3). Socially, traditional aged, at-risk students have problems because they receive less support from their peers and friends. They believe that school officials (counselors and teachers) are not as encouraging with their development (Terenzini et al., 1996). If at-risk students believe that they receive little support from school administrators or teachers, they will typically not ask for help or assistance. College-going rates will increase with support (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Cecilia Rios-Aguilar and Regina Deil-Amen (2012) found that family and social support are crucial to Latino educational development and transition to higher education. Without the support, the likelihood of Latinos attending higher education is diminished greatly. Latino students must reconfigure social groups or create new social groups in order to advance to higher education and successfully navigate through college (Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012).

**Low Educational Aspirations**
Educational aspirations are a major factor for at-risk students’ college-going rate (Olive, 2010). Goal setting and the ability to believe that one can achieve that goal is a great motivator. However, college attendance is typically not a goal for at-risk students. First-generation, low-income students have lower educational aspirations (Olive, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996). Educational aspirations are very important in understanding deficiencies (Olive, 2010). “During sophomore year of high school, expectations to earn a bachelor’s degree were more than double for students with two parents who had earned a bachelor’s degree, as compared with expectations of first-generation college students [78% to 36%]” (Lee et al., 2004, p. 3).

Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, and Fox (2010) found that high school dropout students did not find a connection between staying in school and achieving career and life goals. An individual is seen as the primary determinant in one’s own behavior, with environment and genetics as a secondary determinant. Career and college choice is an important example of student goals (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Balfanz et al. (2010) asked students who had dropped out of school why they discontinued their education. Students commented that they were bored with school, and they did not want to take classes that were not relevant to what they would need in life (Balfanz et al., 2010). They felt little connection to taking classes to reach a goal of attending college.

**College-Going Culture**

As Colin Powell (2012) wrote, “Time is of the essence. Although still the place of dreams and opportunity, America’s light in the world has dimmed educationally and economically. We have one hope to turn this around, our young people” (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012, p. 2). A positive college-going culture of the high school environment is
important in increasing the college-going rate for at-risk students. A positive culture is
developed, nurtured, and cultivated. It requires leadership and a deliberate attempt to
initiate strategies (Schein, 2010). At-risk students of traditional age face many barriers.

Programs that focus on college-going rates for high school students typically have a
strong curriculum. Providing college knowledge is an important part. Faculty and staff
play a critical role in imparting knowledge (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Expectations for
attending college are nonnegotiable. Faculty and staff who encourage students to enroll in
more demanding classes are important for establishing a college-going environment
(Hooker & Brand, 2010). Other key areas to promote college-going culture for at-risk
students of traditional age include bridge programs, learning labs, intrusive advising,
tutorial programs, and a comprehensive academic support programs (Hooker & Brand,
2010). All these strategies lead to building a college-going culture in a high school
environment. Enrollment in a college-going culture impacts traditional student
involvement and increases individual student effort in high school. College-going
culture improves college-going rates and educational outcomes (Terenzini, Rendon,
general keys to improve at-risk students’ college-going rates and persistence. The keys
are to promote awareness, provide early validation, involve faculty members in new
student orientations, orient parents and students, and provide information on institutional
accommodations. “First-generation students should be identified and provided
information and experiences that allow them to envision and observe real opportunities
for success” (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 420).
In addition, cultural relevance is increasingly found to be of utmost importance in the educational processes of underrepresented student populations. Gloria Ladson-Billing’s culturally relevant pedagogy (1995, 2009) captures the idea of embracing the culture of the minority group in efforts to create inclusive learning environments. The term culturally relevant pedagogy is a “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspective that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Culturally relevant pedagogy stresses a practice of an education which infuses a pride in one’s own culture and heritage. There is a need for students to have an appreciation of their family background. For Ladson-Billings (1995), three criteria are needed for teacher to be effective in a culturally relevant environment: “an ability to develop students academically, willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness” (p. 483).

**Intervention Strategies for Improving the College-Going Rates**

It is important to remember that the American higher education system is the most accessible and diverse higher education system in the world. Despite this fact, there are still issues that need to be addressed (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Affordability of higher education is one major area. The ability to pay for college has been an area of emphasis by the federal government. Many look at affordability for at-risk students as the only factor affecting college attendance. “Financial aid is not enough. To equalize college opportunities for the poor and for minorities, more fundamental, complementary strategies are required” (Gladieux & Swail, 2000, p. 692). While financial aid is
important, financial barriers are not the only challenge. There are many additional factors which are just as critical in affecting the college-going rate. These factors include the digital divide, lack of college knowledge, low of peer and parental support, educational inequality at the high school level, low educational aspirations, and low self-efficacy for traditional age high school students.

There has been a substantial increase in the number of programs that provide interventions with the goal of improving college access for at-risk students (Saunders & Serna, 2004). Hooker and Brand write that policy makers need to take a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to supporting programs which address college-going rates (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Student skill development, peer mentoring, counseling, experiential learning, a strong college-preparatory curriculum, and the development of coping skills are examples of major factors that positively influence the college-going rate of at-risk traditional age students. The following are examples of school systems and programs that implement strategies to strengthen the high school college-going culture and improve college-going rate of at-risk high school students.

**Student Skill Development**

Intervention programs can play a major role in improving the success of at-risk students. One such program is talent search, under the umbrella of TRIO. Within the program, high school participants are classified as at-risk are given special services. They include “aptitude assessment, test-taking and study skills development, academic and career counseling, financial aid workshops, cultural enrichment activities, and job shadowing” (Brewer, Lander-McMahan, 2005, p. 205). In 2003, there were 475 Talent Search programs across the country, all targeting at-risk students. Talent Search has demonstrated great academic successes. In a study done in Tennessee, 93% of
participants in Talent Search enrolled in college, as compared to 42% in a similar control group (Brewer & Lander-McMahan, 2005). Talent Search, similar to other TRIO programs, has proven to be very successful in assisting first-generation, low-income, underrepresented students. Despite the positive results, funding is limited by the federal government. TRIO serves less than 10% of the eligible population (Gladieux & Swail, 2000).

**Parent Mentoring**

Social support for families with traditional age at-risk students is important in the college-going process. Intervention programs that improve college-going culture have emerged. One support program offered is Parent to Parent. The program involves matching a Latino family who has a child attending college with a Latino family with a high school age child. The family with a child attending college serves as a mentor to the other family. A college admissions profession assists with the program. There is a weekly format program which allows for six sessions. A relationship is established between the participants, parent volunteers, students, and professionals. The weekly sessions become a time during which questions are answered, and a sense of safety and community is developed (Downs et al., 2008). “The family resource center became a place where all who came could comfortably access college and career information in a safe, supportive setting and work with the help of others toward achieving important goals” (Downs et al., 2008, p. 237). Food is offered. Also, a comfortable environment or physical space is provided. Researchers found that this model is cost effective, sustainable, and practical (Downs et al., 2008).

**Counseling**
College counseling is often designed to provide college knowledge. However, many traditional at-risk students are not provided useful information to attend college. One such program which addresses the lack of college information to the traditional at-risk student is Upward Bound. Upward Bound is a federally funded TRIO program. Through college counseling, practitioners mentor, counsel, instruct, and provide cultural enrichment for at-risk students. The success of the program is judged by the number of first-generation and low-income students who receive a college degree (Upward Bound Program, 2011).

**Experiential Learning**

There is a growing trend for schools to merge real-life experiences with a rigorous academic curriculum. An example of a program using experiential learning to increase college-going rates for traditional at-risk students is found at Wright State. The program is called STEPP [Science Technology and Engineering Preparatory Program]. STEPP is designed to help first-generation, low-income, underrepresented students. It targets students in the 7th – 10th grade. The program involves hands on experiences for students, opportunities for mentoring, and exposure to the technical field. The administrators of the program have found that experiential learning increases student interest in the Engineering field (Yelamarthi & Mawasha, 2010).

**Strong College-Preparatory Curriculum**

“Attending high school with a strong college-going culture was the most consistent predictor of whether students took steps required for college enrollment” (Hooker & Brand, 2010, p. 77). Improving the college-going rate for at-risk traditional students is reliant upon students to enrolling and completing a rigorous college preparatory
curriculum (Gladieux & Swail, 2000). The types of courses taken from primary grade to high school make a big impact on the development of the student (Gladieux & Swail, 2000). “The problem is that the course-taking patterns of low-income and minority students make it difficult for them to meet their expectations. As a result, they are left less well prepared, on average, than higher-income, majority students” (Gladieux & Swail, 2000, p. 690).

An example of a school system which addresses the issue of a weak curriculum is KIPP [Knowledge Is Power Program]. KIPP began in 1994 as a public school charter program which educates students in underserved communities. KIPP is comprised of 109 schools in a 20 state region. Sixty-one are middle schools; 30 are elementary schools, and 16 are high schools (Radnofsky, 2006). Over 85% of the students enrolled in KIPP are low-income and 95% are either Latino or African American. Over 32,000 students are currently enrolled in a KIPP school (Radnofsky, 2006). KIPP has had great success in getting graduates to college. Eighty-five percent of KIPP middle school graduates go to college. Some key features of KIPP’s success are extended school days and a structured, rigorous curriculum. Teachers and the principal are accountable for the success in the classroom. Adaptability and change to the local environment is quick and innovative. As a result, KIPP has a high college-going rate for underrepresented and low-income students (Radnofsky, 2006).

**Improving Coping Skills**

A student’s ability to cope with barriers and difficulties is a key factor in his or her ability to navigate through the college search process. Coping is important in dealing with unforeseen events or issues which may be perceived as uncontrollable (Phinney &
Haas, 2003). “The two most important determinants in a person’s ability to cope is self-efficacy and social support. They must believe in themselves” (Phinney & Haas, 2003, p. 722). Social support is critical in an individual’s ability to improve their coping ability (Phinney & Hass, 2003). Coping mechanisms should be recognized and promoted for at-risk students. The ability to be self-reliant and overcome barriers is critical in college-going success. The skill of coping can be taught and promoted in programs which promote college-going rates for at-risk students.

The Cristo Rey Schools

Intervention strategies and programs which address traditional aged at-risk students are complex. Many of these excellent programs employ various strategies and points of emphasis. One such program which has proven results in increasing the college-going rate for the traditional aged at-risk student population is Cristo Rey. The Cristo Rey network serves first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students. It is a nation-wide educational network of 25 schools.

The original Cristo Rey School began in an urban area of Chicago. It started from the desire and need to assist first-generation, low-income underrepresented students. In a certain area of Chicago, there is a significant population of students whose parents are Latino immigrants. It is an impoverished area. Gang presence is significant and violent crimes are common. In 1996, Rev. John Foley s.j. saw an extensive educational need and became a catalyst for a new and innovative type of educational system, a system which would make a definitive impact in this area of Chicago. Foley’s idea was to ask local companies and businesses within the Chicago region to assist in funding a Jesuit Catholic High School for the poor and disadvantaged (Archer, 1998). The idea involved students
to work in a corporate office five days a month to ‘earn’ money for their tuition. Initially, the corporate work-study program was simply used as a means to fund their education. The idea of a work program was initially met with skepticism. There was a lot of uncertainty how students would behave and interact in a corporate office. Despite the skepticism, Jesuit administration approved the idea and agreed to a $400,000 start-up fund (Archer, 1998).

One of the most obvious differences between Cristo Rey schools and other types of educational models that focus on high school at-risk students is the work component. “All students are required to perform a work component of the education. Each student is required to maintain positive employment in a local business or a national company. In return, the company agrees to pay for a portion of their tuition. Typically, that portion is 70%” (Zehr, 2006, p. 6). Students work not only as individuals, but as teams. Certain schools will send multiple students for one position, with the company paying an average of $20,000 to $30,000 per position (Mathews, 2003). The work program funding pays for part of the tuition costs. In addition, the families pay an average of $2500 toward their tuition (Vanderkam, 2008). The regular school day is extended to accommodate the program.

The work component has developed into something more than just paying for tuition. Mentorship and relationship building by students with individuals from corporate America are established (Vera, 2009). “Not only are students exposed to different businesses and professions, but many find mentors who guide them to careers they never thought were possible for themselves” (Vera, 2009, p. 11). Initially, mentorship and the prospect of changing attitudes and thoughts regarding the students’ outlook on life were
never considered. Ideas and thoughts changed with time after seeing the work component in action. Administrators of the Cristo Rey program soon found that the work component was more than a way to cover for the tuition expense (Vera, 2009). The understanding that it would change students’ outlook on life had become more and more prevalent as the work program continued. As Vera (2009) writes, “It has been significant in influencing students into certain career paths and furthering their education” (Vera, 2009, p. 11). Even the U.S Department of Labor Regulations has recognized this faith-based educational system as a worthwhile program. “Proposed child-labor-rule changes—the most ambitious in 30 years –would carve out a permanent exemption to U.S. Department of labor regulations for the work-study program run by a national network of Roman Catholic high schools” (Cech, 2007, p. 1). The students have responded through their performance. “Across the network, 92% of students receive an ‘outstanding’ or ‘good’ rating from their supervisors, and 87% of employers re-up” (Vanderkam, 2008, p. 47).

The work program provides student exposure to a work-environment that they would normally not have the chance to see. Laura Vanderkam (2008) wrote that students enrolled in Cristo Rey schools are shown careers and jobs that they could get in corporate America. Many of the students, who are primarily Hispanic and African-American, will experience the jobs that they will have if they go to college and succeed academically. Ninety-two percent of Cristo Rey students are African-American or Latino (Vanderkam, 2008).

Another distinctive difference is that the Cristo Rey network is faith-based. Initially, Cristo Rey schools were only Jesuit sponsored. The Jesuits are an order of Roman
Catholic priest whose ministry focuses on education (Mills, 2010). The Jesuit educational system is the largest and oldest educational network in the world, founded over 450 years ago. In 2009, over ten-thousand students graduated from Jesuit schools and were college ready (Mills, 2010). A Jesuit education is distinctive and unique. Jesuit schools have the philosophy of educating the entire person. The educational goal is that students will achieve their greatest potential both in and outside the classroom. Jesuit schools strive to educate in a holistic manner. The emphasis is on personal, academic, emotional, and spiritual growth. Cristo Rey schools are now sponsored by other Catholic orders. Each order has a different religious-based philosophy. However, all serve the mission of the Roman Catholic Church.

One of the primary purposes of the Cristo Rey network is to break the cycle of poverty through education. As Birdsell (2009) notes, “The Cristo Rey Network has some lessons for all schools in the United States, but especially for those serving the poor, because it is a direct response to three immediate needs: providing college preparatory education that accelerates student learning; providing proper preparation for students to enter the workplace; and running schools on a sound financial basis” (p. 21).

The success for the Cristo Rey network is noticed nationwide. As a result, foundations are providing significant funding to establish and develop additional Cristo Rey schools. Millions have been provided from foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. California philanthropist B.J. Cassin provided $22 million for Cristo Rey network expansion. Even corporations who provide work programs are contributing (Vanderkam, 2008). As Vanderkam (2008) shared, “JP Morgan offered a student a
scholarship to Fordham University and internships for the duration of the (student’s) college career” (p. 47).

These gifts have allowed the Cristo Rey network to grow dramatically since its inception in 1996. Based on results and the solid financial support, the Cristo Rey educational network is expanding rapidly, as is its enrollment. The educational model has now expanded to 25 high schools and continues to gain success. Cristo Rey schools cover 22 different cities in 17 states. Currently, over 6,500 students are enrolled in the United States of whom 95% are underrepresented. Graduates of the Cristo Rey educational network system are going to and succeeding in college. As one alumnus of Cristo Rey states, “I don’t think I would have gone to college if it hadn’t been for this school” (Kantrowitz & Springen, 2006, p. 81). In 2007, Chicago Cristo Rey had 316 out of 318 students accepted to a college (Vanderkam, 2008). Cristo Rey network of 25 schools has an average college attendance rate of 85%. The average household income for a family with an enrolled student in Cristo Rey is $36,000 per year (“Schools,” 2011). The Cristo Rey network’s mission statement reads “Our mission is to prepare students for college success.” (“Cristo Rey Network”, 2011).

**Theoretical Framework**

Culture is an organizational element that scholars of higher education have started to focus on only recently. A variety of definitions exist for organizational culture (Jahoda, 2012). Schneider, Ehrhart, and Macey (2013) elaborate on the overall impact of culture stating that “Organizational culture is briefly defined as the basic assumptions about the world and the values that guide life in organizations” (p. 361). Culture is an organizational element which impacts behavior, decisions, and performance. A positive
culture must be developed and maintained in any organization. This includes schools (Schneider et al.). To influence college-going rates for at-risk students, school leaders and administrators need to enact purposeful strategies to cultivate a culture that supports college preparation for at-risk students. Understanding the importance of culture is critical in understanding how college-going rates for at-risk students can improve.

This study was guided by Edgar Schein’s (1985) theory on organizational cultures. Schein (2008) emphasizes shared learning experiences and group behavior. He delves into groups and organizational dynamics, leadership structures, and thought processes (Schein, 1985). Schein organizes elements of culture in three levels. The three levels include artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1985). Through Schein’s (1985) perspective of organizational culture, he focuses much of his research on human behavior.

Schein (2010) calls the first level of culture the artifacts defined as “visible and feelable structures and processes” (p. 23). Artifacts are signs, symbols, emblems, markers, and structures which are very easy to observe. Artifacts are easily seen, but are also very difficult to decipher (Schein, 2010). Examples of artifacts in a faith-based school culture may include mission statements on the wall, statues, visible belief statements, religious symbols, ceremonies, crests, visible school colors, and mascots. Although these types of artifacts are easy to see, they are often difficult to decipher without speaking with a member of the organization (Schein, 2010).

The next layer of culture for Schein is espoused values. Schein (2010) defined espoused values as “someone’s [original leader(s)] beliefs and values, or his or her sense of what ought to be” (Schein, 2010, p. 25). Espoused values originate from the founder or
leader of the organization. For faith-based schools, this may typically be the sect’s or denomination’s belief or area of educational emphasis. Only after a number of shared experiences in which the espoused value is successfully asserted, will the organization’s members be transformed from a shared value or belief to a shared assumption (Schein, 2010). Shared assumption is part of the community and a common belief.

The third and final layer of culture within organization is the basic underlying assumptions. Schein (2010) defines basic underlying assumptions as beliefs and values which are taken-for-granted. Basic underlying assumptions are treated as reality. It is not a hypothesis or hunch, but a belief that is treated in the organization as absolutely factual and true. Basic underlying assumptions are taken-for-granted, with little variation within the group. It is a “result of repeated successes in implementing certain beliefs and values” (Schein, 2010, p. 27). Behaviors outside basic underlying assumptions are seen as inconceivable by the group. Schein (2010) described basic underlying assumptions as “nonconfrontable and nondebatable” (p. 28). Basic underlying assumptions are extremely difficult to alter.

In addition, to Schein’s (1985) work, this study was guided by the ideas on culturally relevant pedagogy developed by Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009). Ladson-Billings (1995) asserted that education should “match the home and community cultures of students of color who have previously not had academic success in schools” (p. 466). Underrepresented students must be successful and accomplished academically, but also have a pride and appreciation for their own cultural identity. The must develop and retain their cultural identity while succeeding academically. Underrepresented students must also develop a sense of self and others, be part of a learning community which supportive
and reciprocal and have conceptions of knowledge. Imparting knowledge from teachers should be active and shared. Students should critique information and continuously strive to build on their content (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

**Conclusion**

Accessibility for all is a national problem in higher education. Because of various reasons, the opportunities to go to college are unequal in today’s society. Without a college education, the chain of poverty keeps cycling. First-generation, low-income, underrepresented student are classified as at-risk. Data has demonstrated that students classified as first-generation, low-income, underrepresented have a lower college-going rate than their peers (Gladieux & Swail, 2000; Balfanz et al., 2010; London, 1989; Phinney & Haas, 2003).

A variety of barriers in our educational system negatively affects college-going rates for traditional aged, at-risk students. Some of these barriers include a lack of college knowledge or cultural capital. Others are low educational aspirations, negative peer and social support, low self-efficacy, negative family influence, a lack of technological resources, enrollment in a poor educational environment, and a divided social class.

A strong college-going culture is important in increasing the college-going rate for at-risk students. A strong culture is developed, nurtured, and cultivated. It requires leadership and a deliberate attempt to initiate strategies (Schein, 2010). Student skill development, peer mentoring, counseling, experiential learning, a strong college-preparatory curriculum, and the development of coping skills are examples of major factors that positively influence the college-going rate of at-risk traditional aged students. Examples of different programs and educational systems which have successfully
implemented these strategies include TRIO, Upward Bound, and KIPP. One such example is the Cristo Rey network. Cristo Rey serves at-risk students and has a high college-going rate. To understand a positive college-going culture for traditional-age at-risk students, the Cristo Rey network was examined. The study was guided by Schein’s theory on culture (1985), and Ladson-Billings ideas on culturally relevant pedagogy (1995, 2009).
Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to understand how a college-going culture serving at-risk students is shaped and why it is shaped in such a way. To address the research questions, a case study was used as the methodological approach. One such educational system which serves at-risk students is the Cristo Rey Educational Network. The educational system has historically been effective building a strong college-going culture for at-risk students. Cristo Rey Twin Cities has been chosen as the site selected for the case study. Cristo Rey Twin Cities was chosen because the school has many commonalities with other Cristo Rey Network schools.

In order to maintain trustworthiness, triangulation amongst several data sources was conducted. Data sources include individual and group interviews, document review, observations, and field notes. The interviews consisted of small focus groups and individual interviews. Participants selected for interviews include parents, administrators, teachers and students. An interview guide was followed to provide consistency in the interviewing and aid in keeping the interviews focused. Different types of documents were analyzed including accreditation and evaluation documents, historical documents, popular culture materials, and internal records. Field notes were also kept. The field notes were highly descriptive and assisted in explaining activities or behaviors.

The theoretical framework used for this study was Schein’s (1985) theory on culture. Within his theory was a discussion of discovering artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions. I collected and analyzed data related to a strong college-going
culture for at-risk students. A coding system was implemented to assist in organizing the data.

Research Design

In order to effectively answer the research questions, a case study was used as the methodological approach. There are multiple definitions of a case study. Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg (1991) defined a case study as “an in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon. The study is conducted in great detail and often relies on the use of several data sources” (p. 2). Merriam (2009) defined a case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 40). Yin (2009) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (p.18). Savenye and Robinson (1996) wrote that a case study presents detail data that creates a picture of perceptions, use, attitudes, reactions and learner/teacher environments” (p. 1047). In summary, a case study is seen as an in-depth investigation, reliant upon different sources, of a phenomenon within a real-life context.

There are different types of case studies. Case studies include historical and observational, intrinsic and instrumental, and multisite case studies (Merriam, 2009). Historical and observational case studies are studies in which the unit of analysis is observed and studied over a period of time (Merriam, 2009). Intrinsic and instrumental case studies are different from one another but have similarities. Stake (2005) stated that an intrinsic case study is intrinsically interesting to the researcher. There is something unique or very interesting which draws the researcher’s attention (Stake, 2005). An
instrumental case study “is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, and it facilities our understanding of something else” (Stake, 2005, p. 437). A multisite case study includes multiple sites for research (Merriam, 2009).

The present study followed an instrumental case study design (Stake, 2005). This case study design will guide the exploration of one example of a strong college-going culture. In any case study, there is a deep focus or emphasis on one organization or area (Stake, 1995). Limiting the research to one organization offers the researcher an opportunity to explore a particular phenomenon in depth. The phenomenon examined in the present study was a strong college going-culture for traditional-age at-risk students.

I focused on the college-going culture of the Cristo Rey Twin Cities High School. The Cristo Rey Twin Cities site was chosen because it shared many commonalities with other Cristo Rey schools. In this way, the Cristo Rey Twin Cities School served as a typical example of a Cristo Rey school. By analyzing Cristo Rey Twin Cities through field work and document analysis, the researcher gained a comprehensive understanding of college-going culture for at-risk students. Field work allowed me to go into an organization and analyze or acquire knowledge of a phenomenon (Fidel, 1984). Document analysis allowed me to view supporting material.

Site Selection

The site selected for the case study was Cristo Rey Jesuit High School Twin Cities. Cristo Rey Jesuit Twin Cities was a typical representative of the network. The first commonality was the religious affiliation. The majority of Cristo Rey schools were

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Jesuit in affiliation, and all were Catholic sponsored institutions. Twin Cities was Catholic and Jesuit sponsored.

The location and enrollment size was typical of other Cristo Rey schools. The total enrollment for Twin Cities was close to 270 students (Shenoy, 2011). Most Cristo Rey schools had an attendance between 200 and 400 students. Cristo Rey Twin Cities was also located in an urban environment. An urban location was typical for all Cristo Rey schools. Cristo Rey Twin Cities opened its doors in August 2007. The very first Cristo Rey School began in 1995. The majority of twenty-five Cristo Rey Schools have existed within 10-years. Also, the administrative structure for Cristo Rey Twin Cities was similar to other Cristo Rey schools. All had a Board, President, and Principal.

The demographics of the school population were similar to other schools within the network. Over 90% of the student population at Cristo Rey Twin Cities consisted of underrepresented students. Also, all students enrolled within the school were classified as low-income. Cristo Rey Twin Cities graduated its first class in 2011. One-hundred percent of the student body within Cristo Rey Twin Cities had been accepted to a college (Grayson, 2011). Almost all students graduating from Cristo Rey Network schools were accepted to a 4 or 2-year college or University (“A School that Works,” 2012). Cristo Rey Twin Cities graduated 61 seniors in 2011. Fifty-eight of the sixty-one are planning to go to college while the other 3 are entering the military (Grayson, 2011). The college-going rate for Cristo Rey Twin Cities was comparable to other Cristo Rey Network schools.

The college preparatory curriculum and the mission were also similar to other Cristo Rey Network schools. The curriculum at Cristo Rey Jesuit Twin Cities was college
preparatory (“A School that Works,” 2012). The mission for all schools within the Cristo Rey network was to provide a rigorous academic curriculum in order to prepare students for successful college or university experience.

The school’s work program and school calendar model were similar to all schools within the Cristo Rey network. On average, the work program financed 50-70% of the educational cost of a student’s education. Cristo Rey Jesuit High School Twin Cities work-program provided clerical or other office positions within the business community. Each student worked five full work days during the month. The work program underwrote more than half of the educational cost for an education. The school operated under an extended school day and a lengthened school year (“Hire 4-Ed Work-Study”, 2012).

Choosing a site requires the researcher to build or have a relationship with the organization or agency (Schein, 2010). Schein (2010) wrote, “The researcher must create a relationship with the organization that permits him or her to become a researcher/consultant to ensure that reliable and valid data will be forthcoming because it is in the organization’s interest” (p. 192). I have been able to establish a relationship with a key administrator. The relationship assisted me in obtaining access to data sources.

**Data Collection**

In a qualitative study, multiple types of data are usually collected from a variety of sources (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data can be collected by examining various documents, reading articles or publications, conducting interviews, or observing participant behavior. These are just a few of the different ways a researcher can obtain information in a qualitative study.
Document Analysis

The purpose of document analysis was to provide the researcher another means for studying a college-going culture for at-risk students. Typically, within qualitative research, document analysis complements other research methods (Bowen, 2009). However, it can also stand on its own. Bowen (2009) defined document analysis as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material” (p.27). Another definition was given by Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002), who wrote “the purpose of [document] analysis is to bring meaning, structure, and order to data” (p.31). Document analysis required that the research was examined and analyzed to gain insight, understanding, and meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I reviewed institutional records, planning documents, historical documents, and statistical records, including information such as current college-going rates, demographic data on entering freshmen classes, and information available regarding the school environment.

Accreditation and evaluation documents. Accreditation studies are third party evaluations from an external team, which often document the origins of programs and the culture of an institution. Cristo Rey network schools are all part of the Cristo Rey Network Association. This association has an assessment or accreditation visit. Within the visit, the evaluation team examines the educational pedagogy, culture, and administrative effectiveness. Students, parents, and administrators are questioned. These teams focus on attributes within the school. Also, they provide suggested areas for improvement. Developing long-term goals is an important component of this process.
The documents provide valuable information on the established culture of Cristo Rey schools.

The Jesuit Secondary Education Association assessment was another important document reviewed in this study. JSEA (Jesuit Secondary Education Association) assessment occurs every five years from an external team. Close to half the Cristo Rey schools are Jesuit and all the others are sponsored by another Catholic religious order. Many of the religious orders have their own assessment and external review process. In the review by the external team, the educational pedagogy of the school was examined, and the culture was analyzed. The school’s progress toward meeting the mission was reviewed. The process is typically 2 ½ days with a final report. The JSEA assessment was valuable because the assessment provided valuable information regarding culture and mission. The assessment concluded with recommendations and commendations.

Valuable information regarding espoused values and basic underlying assumptions was obtained from the Jesuit and Cristo Rey accreditation study and review. Leaders and primary decision makers were interviewed during accreditation. One would look for ideas, goals, values, ideologies or rationalizations. It was also important to focus on student formation and not just academics when evaluating culture.

**Historical documents.** Historical document analysis is typically found in qualitative research studies (Savenye & Robinson, 1996). Savenye and Robinson (1996) wrote, “qualitative studies typically include interviews, and observations, but many also include case studies, surveys and historical and document analysis” (p. 1046). Historical documents can be used to complement research in qualitative studies. It builds on
existing data from interviews, observations and other research techniques. For purposes of this research study, historical documents were analyzed.

Documents which chronicle the start of Cristo Rey Twin Cities were beneficial. This information was found at the Cristo Rey at the school. Within the proposal to establish a Cristo Rey Twin Cities, an environmental analysis of the Minneapolis/St. Paul area was conducted. The document petitioned for a new school by demonstrating an established community need and an economic viability.

**Public records and popular culture documents.** Popular culture documents are defined as documents which are written to entertain, persuade and inform the audience (Merriam, 2008). This may include articles related to community outreach, philanthropy, press clippings, and other local news media information. Public records include information available to the public. Examples may include U.S. census material, government documents, local and state information. An environmental analysis assisted in a better understanding the culture of the community and the school. These documents included population and census material, major jobs locations, income and education levels, population demographics, and community education levels. Information which documents the public and private school ratings within the community was important. The locations of area schools and community perceptions were beneficial.

**Internal documents.** Additional documents analyzed were internal documents related to college attendance, admissions information, retention, and academic success. College entrance exams and other standardized testing were assessed. Admission information regarding incoming student demographics, student selection process,
enrollment master plan, and marketing material also assisted in understanding school culture.

**Interviews**

Interviews can be divided into two different ways, group/focus interviews or individual interviews. Focus groups or group interviews involve people who have the ability and the knowledge to discuss a certain topic or subject in everyday conversation but do not typically discuss (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004). Focus groups are useful in understanding culture. “Focus groups are useful for studying dominant cultural values and for examining workplace culture” (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 300). To address the research questions, the interview process were individual and in small group or focus group settings. Small group settings included students and faculty. The individual interviews will be conducted with administrators, staff, and faculty. Each interviewee had a distinct role in the school’s culture, value system and school climate. Interview questions addressed culture, particularly the questions regarding artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1985).

To assist in establishing interviews with school members, the Principal was first contacted. I communicated that the purpose was to understand the culture of Cristo Rey and its relation to the college-going rate. Typical interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 1 hour. There 24 individuals were interviewed in the process.

**Individual interviews.** Individual interviews involve one interviewee and can also be used to assess culture. Schein (2010) wrote that “culture can be assessed by means of various individual and group interview processes, with group interviews being by far the better method in terms of both validity and efficiency” (p. 326). Individual interviews
with administrators, faculty, and key personnel were conducted. Those interviewed included the school Principal, President, and Assistant Principal, Guidance and/or College Counselor, Director of Admissions, and various faculty from different Academic disciplines. The Athletic Director, Director of Admissions, and Student Affairs professionals were also interviewed. It was essential to understand the decision-making processes, attitudes and opinions of key decision-makers and those effecting the school environment.

**Focus groups.** Information from students was also collected. Focus groups were the selected method for interviews with students. By using focus groups, there was a greater opportunity to obtain data which explained student beliefs and values. “Focus group participants get to hear each other’s responses and to make additional comments beyond their own original responses as they hear what other people have to say. However, participants need not agree with each other or reach any kind of consensus. Nor is it necessary for people to disagree. The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (Patton, 2002, p. 386). Focus groups provided rich information. “The facilitator should explain that the aim of focus groups is to encourage people to talk to each other rather than to address themselves to the researcher” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 300). If properly conducted, opinions and ideas are expanded upon (Merriam, 2009).

**Interview Guide**

An interview guide was used by the researcher. An interview guide provided consistency in the interviews and aided in keeping me focused on the research questions. “Interview guides ensure good use of limited interview time; they make interviewing
multiple subjects more systematic and comprehensive; and they help to keep interactions focused” (Hoepfl, 1997, para 26). Hoepfl (1997) continued by defining an interview guide. Hoepfl (1997) wrote that an interview guide is “a list of questions or general topics that the interviewer wants to explore during each interview. Although it is prepared to insure that basically the same information is obtained from each person, there are no predetermined responses” (Hoepfl, 1997, para 26). The interview guide assisted me in structuring the interview.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) identified two types of interviews, structured and unstructured. Structured interviews include predetermined questions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Unstructured interviews “are not dictated by any predetermined set of questions” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 27). I used a combination of structured and unstructured interviews to collect data. Corbin and Strauss (2008) wrote that both types have advantages. Unstructured allows for a more comfortable conversation. The interviewee may be more willing for self-disclose and provide more information. Structured interviews allow the researcher to keep a focus on the topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

For the purposes of this study, data was collected under several categories listed in the interview guide. The categories include: cultural capital and college knowledge, educational environment, digital divide, social class, family influence, social and peer support, self-efficacy, and educational aspirations (see appendix A).

Patton (2002) identified six types of interview questions. They were experience and behavior questions, opinion and values questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions and background/demographic questions. In this study, the I used different types of interview questions.
Observations and Field Notes

Field notes were taken as part of the observation process. Merriam (2009) stated that “field notes should be highly descriptive. What is described are the participants, the setting, the activities or behaviors of the participants, the setting, the activities or behaviors of the participants, and what the observer does” (p. 130). When reading the field notes, the reader should feel as they are at the site location (Merriam, 2009).

There were opportunities for spontaneous conversations with staff, faculty and students within the halls, cafeteria, lounges, and common meeting areas. With permission from the Principal and the teacher, I observed classes and common meeting areas to understand student behavior and social dynamics. Social dynamics in and out of the classroom was valuable in understanding culture. Student behavior was an indication of the environment climate. A college-going environment has expectations of behavior and workload.

Participant Selection

The definition of participant in a qualitative research study is “the individual being studied” (Merriam, 2009, p. 162). Choosing who to interview involves identifying who has the needed information desired, and from what perspective (Merriam, 2009). Once the participants were identified, the next step was to gain access and elicit information from the participant. Approachability and rapport was developed to gain trust and confidentiality (Schein, 2010).

The participants selected for the interviews in this study were divided into two primary groups. The first groups included administrators, staff, and faculty. These included the President, Principal, Associate or Assistant Principals, Guidance and/or
College Counselors, Academic Department Chairs, Faculty, Athletic Director, Director of Admissions, and Student Affairs professionals. Others interviewed include the Work Coordinator and Development Officer. The second group includes students. Freshmen through seniors were interviewed.

**Advance Preparation**

In order to solicit reliable and valid information, the researcher must establish a relationship with the organization and agency (Schein, 2010). Trust, confidentiality, and transparency were issues I addressed before conducting an interview and research. I needed to establish or reestablish the relationship with the agency. My responsibility was to communicate why the study was taking place. As Schein (2010) wrote, “a culture assessment is of little value unless it is tied to some organizational problem or issue” (p. 326). I communicated to the interviewees that the purpose of the visit was to research the college-going culture to improve college-going rates for at-risk students.

All interviews were arranged in advance, and a permission to record them was obtained prior to each interview. There was a need to lay initial ground work with the Principal before formal interviews. The Principal was contacted and requested to ask the participants if they could be interviewed. This was done in advance to establish credibility and trust. The I also gained background information regarding the interviewees from the Principal before the actual interview. This assisted in the interview by not asking questions which were unnecessary and wasted the interviewer’s time (Hoepfl, 1997).

**Entry**
The Principal was asked to assist in arranging interviews. There was reliance upon the Principal to assist in setting the time and location for the interview. I followed-up after the initial appointment with an email to confirm the time. The explained the expectations, the purpose of the visit, and the approximate length of time for the interview. The initial contact was made by the principal, with follow up information provided by me to the interviewees. Information provided included the purpose of the visit, expected duration of the interview and a note of thanks.

My primary purpose was to collect reliable and valid data from the participants. In a group setting, I created an environment which was casual and relaxing. My hope was to have the focus group in a comfortable setting. The entries into the interviews were conducted with an acknowledgment and an appreciation of the participants’ time. The sessions began with open questions to allow the participants to feel comfortable in the setting. Also, permission was asked to record the interviews. Sensitivity to the interviewees’ feelings was also a focus.

Individual interviews had the same goals of creating a relaxing and comfortable environment. One on one interviews were conducted in an office and classroom setting. It was important to acknowledge an appreciation of the participant’s time as well as explanation of the purpose of the research and their role in the study. Communicating the importance of confidentiality was made. This allowed the interviewee to feel open in providing honest information.

**Research Setting**

The importance of the setting was to create an environment which would elicit information from the participants. A comfortable and relaxing environment was
important. Faculty, staff, students, and administrators typically felt comfortable in their own office setting and school or classroom or familiar environment. An area in which conversations cannot be overheard was a priority. The feeling of confidentiality was also a priority. Research was conducted within the school offices and meeting rooms. It was important to conduct interviews in the setting or climate of the school with administrators and students.

**Exit**

I made certain that there were no concerns or issues regarding the interview process. I reemphasized confidentiality. I also asked for any questions or unresolved issues or comments. Upon completing the research and the interviews, I thanked the participants. Interviewees I left with the option of asking questions regarding the research and the interview process. This was provided at the conclusion of the researcher’s time at the school.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of how information will be mapped, organized and understood (Merriam, 2009). “Qualitative data analysis is essentially about detection, and the tasks of defining, categorizing, theorizing, explaining, exploring and mapping are fundamental to the analyst’s role” (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, 176). For purposes of this study, the data analysis was organized in three distinct phases, the beginning process, data management and organization through coding, and finally interpretation.

The data set consisted of field notes from observations, interview transcripts, and various documents. A vast array of information was available. The information was then be coded. Coding allowed the researcher to couple similar concepts into groupings. By
grouping the information from different sources and perspectives, triangulation occurred. Triangulation was important because it increased the validity and reliability of the research. Analyzing the data for patterns of an ongoing strategic action was important. Data was continuously analyzed during and after the collection phase (Merriam, 2009).

Coding was used to help manage and organize the data. Like information was coupled together for organization purposes. Data for transcripts, field notes, documents were combined into organized subjects. The data was then used to analyze and answer the research questions. At the heart of this study were the research questions. Analyzing data to understanding culture was a necessity in successfully completing the research and answering the research questions.

**Coding**

An important part of the methodology was using a coding process to break-down, categorize and analyze data. Coding is a typical technique used in qualitative data research. An initial step in the coding process is assigning codes to data. The assignment of codes to raw data marks the beginning phase of constructing categories or groupings (Merriam, 2009).

At the beginning of the research process, open coding was used. Open coding is the process of “breaking data apart and delineating concepts to each other” (Corbin & Strauss 2008, p. 198). It is the initial phase of the process and requires a researcher to be open minded and an active listener in the interview process. Merriman discussed the process of open coding as the period during which the researcher is open to anything possible (Merriam, 2009). In this study, in addition to coding openly, some predetermined codes
were also be utilized where information was identified as either denoting artifacts or espoused values, or basic underlying assumptions.

**Discovering artifacts.** Artifacts are visible items which a person sees within an organization. Artifacts are difficult for a person who is unfamiliar with the organization to decipher (Schein, 1985). As a researcher, a person would pay attention to artifacts while walking the halls and grounds. Typical pieces of information that a researcher would notice while looking at artifacts are written statements on a wall, banners, statues, and other visible material or artwork. School colors or mascots are artifacts. Building layout and the look of school grounds are also important while examining artifacts (Schein, 1985).

Examples of questions in the interview guide that pertain to artifacts included… meaning behind artwork, or statements on the wall. Questions regarding meanings of banners, or information on bulletin boards were helpful. Pictures or comments on marketing and promotion material were also helpful in discovering artifacts. Questions within the interview guide assisted me in discovering artifacts.

**Espoused values.** The next layer in Schein’s (1985) theory of organizational culture is espoused values. Schein (1985) wrote that espoused values are the original beliefs and values from the founder. Espoused values are assumptions about what is right and wrong within an organization. When examining a school which serves at-risk students, I looked for intervention strategies to improve college-going rates. Espoused values are at the root of many intervention strategies. It was a major influence on why policies were enacted. Much of the college-going culture was developed through the espoused value system (Schein, 2010).
Schein (1985) wrote that the founders of an organization establish a shared value. The shared value then grows and blossoms from within the organization. Beginning with the founder, the shared value will spread. After the value has taken a hold of many within the community, the value then becomes a shared assumption. Schein (1985) continued that the transformation processes from a shared value to a shared assumption is unintentional. Members within the organization forget that the original value was originally the founders and not their own. They operate within the organization and believe that they always had the shared assumption. The community takes ownership of the shared assumption. Examples within a school may include how to improve college attendance, how to communicate to parents, and admittance policies.

Questions in the interview guide included information regarding communication plans to parents and students. Also, values that the interviewees felt were important to keep the institution successful. Other questions included the beliefs that they shared with other members. These were all questions were included in the interview guide.

**Basic underlying assumptions.** At the core or the very center of culture are basic underlying assumptions. Basic underlying assumptions are formed through common experiences of the organization. These common experiences are called social validation. Schein (2010) defined social validation as “means that certain beliefs and values are confirmed only by the shared social experience of a group” (p. 26). Basic underlying assumptions have a growth process through multiple experiences. Once the shared social experience of the group occurs, basic underlying assumptions are formed (Schein, 2010).

Basic underlying assumptions are unconscious and taken-for granted. They are values and beliefs systems which are never questioned (Schein, 2010). Those within the
organization feel that the solution to a problem repeatedly works; therefore, the solution should never be questioned (Schein, 2010). The solution is absolute truth and works naturally (Schein, 2010). What may have once been a hunch or hypothesis is now treated as a reality. Examples within Cristo Rey were the value of certain programs or intervention strategies. Basic underlying assumptions are not negotiable. I asked questions to many within the community to understand the basic underlying assumptions. This included faculty, students, administration, board members, and others involved. Understanding basic underlying assumptions helps determine behavior, thoughts, feelings and perceptions within the organization (Schein, 1985).

Basic underlying assumptions must be found by asking several in-depth questions in the interview guide. I delved deeply with questions pertaining to the core values of the institution. The basic underlying assumptions and beliefs were shared by all and were thought to be non-negotiable. There were questions pertaining to people’s inner-most feelings and beliefs.

In research, the term of categories is defined interchangeably with terms such as a theme or pattern. A category is used to help answer research questions. Merriam (2009) writes that data should be categorized with the overall purpose of finding reoccurring themes or patterns. The process of crosscutting data will be used throughout the interview process. Crosscutting data is “relating of concepts/categories through statements of possible relationships. These relationships will be checked out against incoming data and accepted, modified, or discarded with further analysis” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 203). Crosscutting data was used to insure an opportunity to explore
themes and relationships. This improved the research process because cross-cutting data allowed for modification of the interviews so I could further explore themes or patterns.

**Role of the Researcher**

My role as the researcher was to accurately obtain data without bias, to organize the data pertaining to the theoretical framework, and then to communicate the information. Throughout the process, data was analyzed during the collection, organization, and interpretation phase. My role was to follow these steps.

Maintaining trustworthiness was a major responsibility. Field notes were detailed, providing as much data as possible during interviews and observations. In order to maintain reliability and validity, triangulation was used. Triangulation is the process of collecting data from various sources and perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness can be an issue for qualitative studies (Merriam, 2009). Trustworthiness pertains to validity and reliability of the data (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation is the most common method to address this issue (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation is defined as the use of several data sources to research one topic or subject (Merriam, 2009). By using more than one resource, data was cross-checked against different sources; therefore, reliability and validity was increased. (Yin, 2009).

**Triangulation.** Triangulation or cross-checking data is defined as “using more than one kind of method to study phenomena” (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012, p. 40). Corbin and Strauss (2008) defined triangulation as examining an area from multiple sources. Researchers can use several resources or combinations of different types (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This section is an overview of the types of data that will be collected in
the present study. The purpose of triangulation is to validate data using different methods and viewpoints (Merriam, 2008). Accuracy was crucial in research. Different methods in this case study included individual and group interviews, internal and external document analysis, and field work. Interviews were conducted with multiple individuals with different backgrounds, roles, and experiences. By using different methods and interviewing those of different viewpoints, roles and backgrounds, data was verified for congruence.

After data had been collected, my responsibility was to categorize the information. The technique used in categorizing the information was coding. Information was organized based upon answers to the research questions. Schein’s theory of culture and leadership was used in this study’s theoretical framework. Schein’s (1985) theory of culture, specifically addressing concepts of artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumption were the areas for organizing the data.

I had a strong amount of understanding regarding the culture of educational institutions and leadership. I had participated in site visits with Cristo Rey schools and have been involved in a 3-day Ignatian Identity Visit. This background and history can lead to bias in the research. Based upon previous information obtained from earlier conversations in the Ignatian Identity Visit process, I could have walked into the Cristo Rey Twin Cities with preconceived ideas. It was important for me to have an awareness of a potential bias and to make a concerted effort to minimize this issue.

**Delimitations**

The purpose of the study was to understand how a college going-culture is shaped and what factors help shape a college-going culture. In order to effectively answer these
questions, I was limited to one educational network, Cristo Rey. This was done to allow for a more manageable research process.

**Limitations**

There were certain limitations in this study. The first limitation was that there was one researcher. One researcher may have biases because of his/her past experiences and personal beliefs. Perceptions are one-sided and effected by unintended assumptions. Another limitation in the study was the issue of generalization. In a case study method, one institution is analyzed deeply. However, there are 25 other Cristo Rey schools across the nation. Even though the site was selected because it had many similarities as other institutions, I was still limited in the data location method because of one-site selection.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of the research was to understand how a college-going culture was shaped for at-risk students and what factors help shape a college-going culture. The methodology used in research was a case study. The research design focused on Schein’s (1985) theory of culture. The Cristo Rey School Network culture was analyzed by exploring artifacts, espoused values and basic underlying assumptions. Cristo Rey Twin Cities was used as the site for the case study because of its common traits and characteristics with other Cristo Rey Network schools. The interview process involved faculty, students, administrators, and staff, involving small group and individual interviews. There were some limitations to the research, but these were addressed through triangulation. One researcher was involved in the data collection process. Also, a case study research method had some limitations because of generalization. The interviews and small group facilitation was done on site. Coding was implemented to
assist in analyzing, grouping and categorizing the data. This was done to assist in answering the research questions and to further understand a college-going culture.
Chapter 4

Results

To live in poverty with no hope of a better future is one of the most depressing and heart-breaking scenarios for a person. Watching a fifteen-year-old child living a life which leads to heartache, poverty, and depression is even more gut-wrenching. To stand idle and watch this occur is immoral to some. There are those who have made it their mission to provide support, love, and care for those in need. For five days, I observed an educational environment whose mission was to “save” kids from a life of poverty. I was able to see first-hand the compassion, tears, and the emotional rollercoaster of those who worked in a school that was focused on breaking the cycle of poverty through education. Their mission was to save “their students” from a life of poverty. This chapter organizes and synthesizes the findings of the data collection stage. This study aimed to shed light on a high school’s college-going culture. Two research questions guided the study: 1.) How is a strong college-going culture for at-risk students shaped; 2.) Why is this college-going culture shaped in such a way? Schein’s (1985) theory of organizational culture and Ladson-Billings ideas on culturally relevant pedagogy provided the framework for the study. By focusing on Cristo Rey Twin Cities as a case study, I was able to obtain valuable Insights into a strong college-going culture for at-risk student populations.

Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ mission statement communicates that they are a college preparatory school for at-risk students. The mission statement reads that the mission of Cristo Rey Jesuit High School-Twin Cities is to provide an education in the Jesuit tradition which integrates college preparatory academic and profession work environments thereby preparing students from under-resourced families for success in
college life. In order to achieve the mission, a college-going culture has been developed. From interviews, documents, observations, and field notes, I was able to gain an understanding of the school culture, which increased the college-going rate at Cristo Rey Twin Cities.

Edgar Schein (1985) wrote that to truly understand an organization, one must understand the organization’s culture. According to Schein (2010), “culture is to a group what personality or character is to an individual” (p. 13). He defines culture as “a pattern of basic assumptions-invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration-that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1985, p. 9). Thus, the basic underlying assumptions are at the core of an organization’s culture. They are “unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and values. They determine behavior, perception, thought and feeling” (Schein, 2010, p. 24). Beliefs represent the essence of culture and are manifested through values and behaviors. Schein (1985) saw beliefs, values and artifacts as three hierarchically ordered levels. The core level is basic underlying assumptions. The next level is espoused values. Schein (2010) defined espoused values as “someone’s [original leader(s)] beliefs and values, or his or her sense of what ought to be” (p. 25). The outer layer or visible pieces of a culture are classified as artifacts. Artifacts are defined as “visible and feelable structures and processes” (Schein, 2010, p. 23).
Figure 5: Onion diagram of Schein’s theory of organizational culture. The diagram illustrated Schein’s three levels of organizational culture. (Schein, 2010).

This chapter presents my findings in two parts. The first part of this chapter summarizes the field notes that I collected during my one-week visit at Cristo Rey Twin Cities. The field notes are comprised of stories, comments, and observations, describing what I did as a researcher. There are many examples of student hardships, aspects of respect, trust, care, as well as other areas pertaining to culture.

The second part of the chapter discusses the information collected in the field organized according to Edgar Schein’s (1985) framework. Through my research, I was able to discover three dominant basic underlying assumptions at Cristo Rey Twin Cities. These basic underlying assumptions, the espoused values, and artifacts that manifest them are described in the second section of the chapter.
The first basic underlying assumption is care and love for the individual student. The belief in caring for students permeated throughout the organization. Faculty and staff expressed a deep devotion to the students in a variety of ways. There were three espoused values closely related to the basic underlying assumption of care and love. The espoused values were a care for the physical and emotional needs of the student, care for the community, and trust and respect. I found visible artifacts related to care and love, and programs which expressed care and love for each student.

Figure 6: Diagram of Cristo Rey’s Twin Cities Culture.
The second basic underlying assumption was a commitment to educate the marginalized and disadvantaged. This belief was communicated through interviews, observations, and field notes. Many interviewees commented that the educational system matched their own personal beliefs. They believed in educating at-risk students in order to break the cycle of poverty. There were five espoused values related to a commitment to educate the marginalized and disadvantaged. One of the espoused values was modeling and mentorship. Many of the faculty and staff viewed themselves as role models for others overcoming hardships. They believed they could help those they mentor so they may achieve a college degree. Several faculty, staff, and administrators identified with the students because they went through similar hardships. Identifying with student hardships was part of the Cristo Rey Twin City culture. Within interviews, several faculty and staff commented on faith and a vocation to work with under-resourced students. The Catholic, Jesuit ideology was a strong espoused value of the Cristo Rey Twin Cities culture. The emphasis on academics and developing life-lessons were also classified as espoused values.

The third basic underlying assumption was the importance of building student self-esteem and confidence. Interviewees within the organization felt that developing confidence and student self-esteem was vital to increasing the college-going rate. In many of the interviews, faculty, staff and administration expressed a need to increase the students’ self-worth and value. Many of the at-risk students had been told that they could not be successful in college. These negative feelings were counter to the culture of Cristo Rey. Three espoused values aligned with the belief of building self-esteem and confidence. These values included teaching college knowledge, establishing student
goals, and providing hope and opportunity. Artifacts which reinforced building self-esteem, self-worth and confidence were found throughout the building.

The culture that emerged through these explorations stood strong and positive with its emphasis on love and care (values that were very much pre-determined by the Jesuit foundations of the school), commitment to educating the poor and much personal sacrifice to this end, and commitment to empowering the students. At the same time, few artifacts of cultural relevance emerged, and weaker connections to values and underlying beliefs in the importance of synergistic relationships between home/community culture and school culture was evident. Ladson-Billings (1995) communicated that underrepresented students need to achieve academically as well as develop a strong sense of cultural identity. At Cristo Rey Twin Cities, the development of cultural identity needed to be more prominent in the education of the underrepresented students.

**Triangulation**

Corbin and Strauss (2008) define triangulation as examining an area from multiple sources is done by employing multiple methods of data collection. For my research, I collected information from multiple sources including individual and small group interviews with students, faculty and administrators. I ascertained information from publications and literature. I gathered material from the Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ school’s website and newsletters. I compiled field notes. I viewed common meeting areas, saw the students interact with each other and faculty in the classrooms, and gained a general sense of school culture by walking the hallways. By researching these different vantage points, I was able to crosscheck data and findings.

**Organizational and Personnel Structure**
The organizational structure was a very good indicator of the school’s priorities and values. Cristo Rey has a flat organizational chart. This structure communicated an organizational system with a direct decision-making process that did not have a large hierarchy. Cristo Rey Twin Cities also employed two licensed social workers as their counselors, helping students with issues of poverty and broken relationships. In order to maintain and perpetuate a college-going culture, the hiring process of the administration was mission-driven, meaning that they hire employees with similar values as the school with a commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged.

Figure 7: Image of Cristo Rey Twin Cities Organizational Chart

Researcher’s Field Notes of Cristo Rey Twin Cities
I arrived in Minneapolis on the evening of May 26, 2013. My first day of research began on the following day, Monday, May 27, 2013. I arrived each day at 8:00 a.m. and concluded my data collection and field work on Friday, May 31, 2013. My field notes consisted of my observations, pictures, and notes of my impressions. I had two official tours of the building and was able to ask impromptu questions to faculty, staff, and students. The assistant to the Principal was a great help in coordinating interviews and answering logistical questions. I visited classrooms and move freely throughout the building. Often, I would attend classes as a visitor. First, I would ask for permission from the teacher. All were willing to welcome me into their class. I consistently moved around the building to gain an insight to the student and staff behavior. I also conducted interviews, focus groups and conducted impromptu discussions.

This section of the chapter is organized into six parts. I aimed to impart to the reader my understanding of the Cristo Rey School’s learning environment. The first part provides my description of an environment of respect and appreciation. Some of the highlights from my field notes in this area include an all-school assembly and my impression of the student behavior regarding treatment of the facility and each other. The second part includes an environment of support. Faculty and staff provided words of encouragement and care for students within the hallways and the classrooms. Many of the conversations were student-centered and focused on the students emotional needs. The next part is a description of an environment of faith-based education. This section includes my impressions of the artwork, the layout of the building, and the visible artifacts throughout the facility. The next part tells of an environment of poverty at Cristo Rey. Stories of poverty from students are provided, as well as the manner in
which the students conducted themselves within the dining area. The next part is my description of an environment of learning and college knowledge. Descriptions from my field notes include conversations with administrators about academics and my impression of college-knowledge related materials around the building. Finally, I want the reader to learn the ways the culture of the school emphasized self-esteem and confidence. Throughout the building were signs of student confidence builders. These included statements which communicated self-worth. Also, pictures of Hispanic and African American role models were displayed to serve as an inspiration to the students.

**Environment of Respect and Appreciation**

As I walked into Cristo Rey Twin Cities High School, I was immediately greeted by a staff member. I noticed that the building was immaculate. The lobby was all glass with a large abstract art piece displayed at the front entrance. There was a large picture of St. Ignatius and Colin Powell in the main lobby. A “Cristo Rey” sign was at the front of the building. All the students were in professional attire, wearing dress shirts and dress paints. There was a person at the front reception desk who greeted everyone and assisted with questions as you entered the building.

Students carried themselves in a manner which communicated pride and respect. The front lobby was mostly glass. The open and positive atmosphere was reinforced by the bright sunshine on warm and sunny days. The nearly all-glass structure radiated with natural light and looked new. The floors were clean. There were no crumpled pieces of paper or trash on the floor because the students picked up after themselves. Students respected one another and the facility. In an interview with a faculty member, it was
noted that there were very few physical altercations. Student appreciated and respected one another, the building, and the education they were receiving.

*Figure 8:* Main lobby entrance at Cristo Rey Twin Cities. This image provides a snapshot view of the main lobby as one first walks into the Cristo Rey Twin Cities building. Retrieved from www.fieldingnair.com

I remember my impression and feeling at morning announcements. I had only been at Cristo Rey for ten minutes when all the students were assembling in a theater called the Kiva. The room was unique; the center of the theater was a stage. I was caught off guard that this would be the first place that all students, faculty, and staff would attend. Students sat in a carpeted semi-circle step area. All were sitting and looking down on the presenters. The area was dark except for the stage. The program started with some general announcements and then moved on to a short presentation. The presentation was a video which highlighted a teacher who had taught for 49 years. The presentation was emotionally touching because there was a short video from his wife. She said how proud she was of him and how much she loved him. The students cheered and applauded. He
smiled and waved. It was a very humbling moment for the teacher and a show of appreciation and respect from the school community. Without knowing any of the students or the teacher, I could feel the emotion in the room. There was care and love shown. Students appreciated his work, and I could sense the amount of emotion and care that he had for the students.

**Environment of Support**

Support was one of the main characteristics of the Cristo Rey school culture. As I walked into the building, I could feel the emotional need and want of the students. At the same time, I sensed that the staff was student-focused. During many of my conversations with the teachers and staff, they communicated a feeling of urgency to help students. I caught their unquestioned belief that a Cristo Rey education would positively impact student lives long-term. They believed that education would break the cycle of poverty. They were there to be more than just a teacher or administrator; they wanted to change lives and change the world. Cynics in society would describe this attitude and belief as a “crusader” type of personality, coupled with a person who is naive or idealistic. However, the faculty and staff’s conviction and beliefs went much farther than these stereotypes and names. If the faculty and staff were confronted with the notion that they were idealistic, the faculty and staff would be dismissive of such a remark. There was a sense of pride and confidence in what they did. They took pride in the fact that they were willing to get their hands dirty and help those impoverished. They stood tall within the halls. The teachers and staff had a sense of conviction and purpose. The staff and the students made up the culture at Cristo Rey. Conversations were student-centered and focused. There really was not a lot of laughter and joking amongst staff because many
were serious about their work and their business. It was a friendly and welcoming environment, but there was a purpose in their actions. Staff members carried themselves with definitive agendas.

As I walked in the halls and sat and observed the students interact, I saw many adults in conversations with students. Many of the conversations with the students were in a small group or one on one. The educational environment was different. Typically, one would see and hear general announcements at most schools. Examples include year book advertisements, reminders regarding the next athletic events, or information about the next club or activity. However, this school’s culture was different. Signs were placed around the school that communicated support and encouragement. There was a clear message that everyone was significant and mattered. Other signs communicated messages which evoked a sense of pride and support. Common messages of pride in one’s culture or background were throughout the building. Examples of role models included pictures of Cesar Chavez or Martin Luther King.

I recall walking up to the second floor, where several teachers were assisting students. They were sitting individually with students explaining material from notes or books. Many were sitting in large lounge chairs which provided relaxed and comfortable setting. There were pods or groupings of chairs designed for small group discussion. Students did the majority of the talking within the building and the halls; faculty and staff were good listeners. There seemed to be few “control” issues. The environment was collaborative. I observed “bottom up” communication as opposed to “top down.” Students had a voice and their support was emphasized. Often, students would be given a smile or a chuck on the shoulder as a way of support and encouragement.
Figure 9: Furniture for small group discussion. The picture provides an example of the arrangement of furniture at Cristo Rey which was used for discussion between students, faculty, and staff. Retrieved from http://www.ryancompanies.com/projects/

An example of this support was found in one of my classroom observations. The students and the teacher were reviewing for a quiz. Students were sitting in small groups and were going over material. The teacher asked a question and the students answered aloud. If a student provided a correct answer, one would hear “very good” or “nice job”; if a student provided an incorrect answer, the teacher would respond, “You would be right if…” Instead of saying “no, you are wrong,” the teacher focused on building each student’s confidence and self-esteem. The teacher asked a general question, “Are you nervous about this test?” The teacher reassured the students with a calm voice. She made statements such as, “You will do well,” “Study and do your best,” “Get a good night’s sleep,” or “Make sure you review these vocabulary words.” These were all done with the idea of not cowering to fear and anxiety. They were words of support and reassurance.
There was little discussion or classroom work which was related to the Latino and the African American culture, despite the entire class being comprised of underrepresented students. The teacher was very supportive of the students, but the students’ Latino or African American culture was not incorporated in the lessons.

Environment of a Catholic, Jesuit Education

There were symbols, paintings, and artifacts throughout the Cristo Rey building. The artifacts communicated that this was a faith-based school which was Catholic and Jesuit. The chapel was located in the center of the facility and was somewhat difficult to find. However, its very placement in the center of the building communicated that God was at the center. This was a statement made to me by the principal during the school tour.

Figure 10: The Cristo Rey Twin Cities chapel. The smaller chapel provided a small and intimate environment. The chapel was located in the center of the building. Retrieved from http://www.ryancompanies.com/projects/

As I walked into the lobby area at the front of the school, I immediately noticed a huge picture of St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits. Much of the Jesuit educational
pedagogy was based on his teachings. Words like Cura Personalis, or Magis are common statements made and practiced by all Jesuit schools. Another common Jesuit sign found at Cristo Rey was the “Grad at Grad” statement. The Graduate and Graduation is common at all Jesuit schools. The “Grad at Grad” is the expectation that all Jesuit student graduates will embody these characteristics. The five tenants are Loving, Open to Growth, Committed to Doing Justice, Intellectually Competent, and Spiritual. There was a prominent sign communicating the Grad at Grad at Cristo Rey.

Often prayer would begin each class. There was also a Christian Service office as a consistent reminder of faith-based education. As I walked up the three flights of stairs, located on the walls were pictures showing the Ten Commandments, accompanied by pictures and illustrations. I also noticed words communicating that it was a Jesuit school. An example included the naming of the different schedules. Each of the different schedules was named after a Jesuit saint.

The spiritual aspect of Cristo Rey emphasized the importance of faith, hope, and strength. This was noticeable through the school-wide prayer, religious artifacts, and numerous signs and artifacts expressing hope, faith, and strength. Faculty and staff communicated messages to students that each person was significant; all mattered in the school community. Not every student in the school community was Catholic. The majority of the African American students were not Catholic while many of the Latino students were Catholic. However, because of the common messages of respect and love, the different religious affiliations did not deter from the mission. All students, of different religions, were accepted at Cristo Rey.

**Environment of Poverty**
A carpeted lunch area covered the third floor. Almost all students (95%) participated in the government funded free and reduced lunch program. The program was designed to provide meals for students in poverty. There were no packed lunches. Every student received daily breakfast and lunch from the cafeteria. All the students had trays, and the lines were very orderly. There was little food or time wasted. The college counselor commented, “The students have food issues. The free and reduced lunch program is critical here. Those are challenges having good nutrition good healthy habits. We need all that to learn” (College Counselor, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

As a former college admissions counselor and person who traveled to hundreds of different high schools, I have never seen a high school in which the entire student body was eating in a carpeted area. This communicated the hardships that many students faced. Food was not spilled or wasted because students were reliant upon the free and reduced lunch program. Second, the carpeted area communicated the care and respect each student had for the facility. Little food was wasted, and everyone cleaned up after eating. During my tour on the first day, I asked the administrator if eating on the carpet was an issue. He gave me a peculiar look because he thought my question was odd and simply said, “there are no issues.”
Figure 11: Cristo Rey Twin Cities during lunch. This picture provides a view of the food service area. Notice the carpet on the floor. Retrieved from www.fieldingnair.com

Figure 12: Cristo Rey Twin Cities during lunch. This picture shows the type of furniture student’s use. This photo was taken in the same area as Figure 4, except from a different angle. Retrieved from www.fieldingnair.com
Because the students had a dress-code, the extreme student poverty was not immediately noticed. However, the poverty was very noticeable as I drove into the school area. I was able to stay at the Jesuit novitiate, in the city of St. Paul, which was a short distance from the governor’s mansion. This neighborhood was full of bike trails and jogging paths. The area was approximately a 20 minute drive to the school. Within a very short period of time while I drove to the school from the St. Paul area to Minneapolis, and particularly when I crossed the Mississippi River, I saw the neighborhood become increasingly diminished. I saw graffiti, homeless individuals on the streets, garbage strewn about, and other signs of poverty. Cristo Rey was a beautiful building in a neighborhood which was poverty stricken. Looking at the cleanliness and beauty of the structure, the building was an anomaly.

What left a lasting impression were the personal stories of poverty. I had initially assumed that families were unemployed. In many cases, this was not true. Many of the parents were working multiple minimum wage jobs. This left the parents with little time to be with their kids. There were few opportunities to see their children at ballgames, help them with homework, or eat meals as a family. Many parents constantly worked just to survive, to have money for groceries, or to have a roof over their head and a decent place to live.

Deportation and crime were serious issues. Several students discussed hardships created because some family members were not U.S. citizens. Many lived in fear of family members being deported. Crime was also an issue. In one interview, a staff member recalled a student coming into her office and just saying that he was tired. He had just witnessed a shooting, and he was emotionally tired of the crime in his
neighborhood. The Principal casually made a reference to the amount of crime in the local neighborhood. Looking out the window of his office, he told me that in the area outside his office there were seven homicides the year before Cristo Rey was built. Since the start of the school year, crime had dropped.

**Environment of Learning and College Knowledge**

During the tour with the principal, he indicated there were 45 students who would graduate at the end of the academic year (June 2013). Because of the average academic level of students who entered Cristo Rey, there were no advanced placement courses. Students would not be ready for AP (Advanced Placement) classes.

Without question, this was a school which took academics seriously. Many of the students started at Cristo Rey several grade levels behind in different subject areas. This was a point of frustration for several faculty. However, Cristo Rey Twin Cities self-imposed a standard based curriculum. In order for students to advance and move forward in class, students were required to pass proficiencies. It was important that every student had a common proficiency or skill level before advancing in course-work. The purpose of the common assessment was to aid in maintaining strong academic standards. The proficiencies aided academic preparation and assisted in getting the student academically prepared for college. The entire academic mission of Cristo Rey was preparation for college. Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ staff understood that they were responsible for providing academic rigor. Building self-esteem, confidence, support, and a loving environment was useless for improving the college-going rate unless the students could achieve academically.
The importance of coupling hope, belief, confidence, and academic rigor was evident in one of my classroom visits. On one occasion, I had the opportunity to visit a Physics classroom. The classroom environment was very relaxed. This helped in alleviating any student anxiety or tension. I noticed that student homework was hung up on the walls within the classroom. This was done to celebrate student successes and to show examples of outstanding work. I noticed that tables were on wheels with office chairs. There were no traditional school desks. Student could move easily from one small group to another or into the traditional theater seating. Almost all the classes I had an opportunity to visit were orderly and structured. The teachers displayed good classroom management. For this particular class, the day began with a routine. The students started class with si’ (yes in Spanish) and the room light turned on. This seemed to be a classroom ritual and was the way class began each day. Students were professional in appearance; for the boys, collars were buttoned all the way to the neck and sleeves were down. Students were quick to respond with an answer when asked. Structure played a strong role in the learning environment. The class was disciplined and orderly. The teacher simply dismissed the students at the end of the period. There were no bells signifying the end of the period. The lack of a bell or tone gave the school environment a “college type” feel.

Building college knowledge was a fundamental part of the culture at Cristo Rey. Almost all the students were first-generation students, and typically parents could not help their son or daughter in the college search process. Therefore, the school deliberately educated the students on the college search and enrollment process. On a bulletin board, information containing the words FAFSA, Pell Grant, and other financial
aid jargon was provided. Another bulletin board showed the location of Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ students attending college. A message of hope, “How far will you go?” sat above the board. The college counseling office and reception area was located just off the lunch room. The boards were close to the college counseling office. In my conversation with the college counselor, she expressed her strong interest in helping the students and had a very supportive demeanor. For her, it was about teaching the students and the parents about the college search process. She discussed the role of respect for the parents and helping them understand the importance of a college education. Trust was a key. She needed the parents to trust her in order to help the students. College visits involved the students and parents. Parents needed to see the college campuses in order to help their child with the college search process. They needed to see the benefits of a college education first-hand. We discussed how she explained a Student Aid Report, or how to fill out a FAFSA form. All these areas were completely foreign to the students and the parents.

Environment Emphasizing Self-Esteem and Confidence

Building self-esteem and confidence played a crucial role in getting at-risk students to college. Signs of encouragement and support were spread all around the building. As explained by several employees, students had little confidence in their own ability or skills. They had grown up in a neighborhood and in families which were poverty stricken. By living in a poor environment, they had been told much of their lives that they were not good enough, or that obstacles were too great to overcome. Cristo Rey works very hard to change this attitude and belief. The most evident was the numerous artifacts of support and hope.
For example, one bulletin board held positive newspaper articles about Cristo Rey Twin Cities. Another bulletin board nearby was titled “Cura Personalis” (Care for the Person). Famous quotes about love, care, and encouragement were pinned to the board. A poster of Martin Luther King was close to that bulletin board. Also, pictures of Rosa Parks and Cesar Chavez were hung on the wall. Lots of quotes about character, strength, and determination were visible. Individuals such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez were role models who had backgrounds similar to those of the students and who became, by their own actions, change makers. AMDG (Latin for the Greater Glory of God) is a common sign found at all Jesuit schools, and in this school was displayed on the stairwell. These were all signs implying that every person has value and is worthy of a better life.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) discussed the importance of instilling pride in the educational system for the African American and Latino culture. Instead of trying to assimilate students to the mainstream white college culture, students were encouraged to appreciate and be proud of their own heritage. Despite some posters and a few other artifacts, Cristo Rey Twin Cities did not have a lot of programs and in-class work which increased racial and cultural pride. In order to increase student self-esteem and confidence, the student’s educational experience must allow for a stronger appreciation of their own heritage and culture.

A television provided facts about the strengths of Cristo Rey by the “Grad at Grad” sign. Another sign read Cristo Rey, “A School that Works”.

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Figure 13: A School that works.

This sign stated that the students go into the work force, but also that the students go to college.

“A School that Works” is a common statement made by many Cristo Rey schools. It is a statement which originated with the founder of Cristo Rey. Several other televisions mounted on the wall provided information that depicted Cristo Rey as a strong college preparatory school. One illustrated that Cristo Rey students worked in 90 leading companies within the Minneapolis area. Another informed that 100% of the students that graduate are accepted to college.
Schein’s (1985) theory of organizational culture provided the theoretical framework for the study. Schein (1985) organizes culture in three layers. Artifacts comprise the outer layer of organizational culture. Artifacts are visible and can be difficult to interpret (Schein, 2010). Paintings, the school’s website, bulletin board materials, and e-newsletters are examples of artifacts found at Cristo Rey. Espoused values make up the second layer of culture. Schein (2010) writes that espoused values are the original beliefs and values from the founder. Espoused values are assumptions about what is right and wrong within an organization and are at the root of many intervention strategies. These values are a major influence on why policies are enacted. Much of the college-going
culture is developed through the espoused value system (Schein, 2010). I found values of hard-work, respect, goal-setting, strong academics, and others as strong manifestations of Cristo Rey’s culture. The inner-circle or final layer is comprised of basic-underlying assumptions. Basic underlying assumptions are unconscious and taken-for granted. They are values and beliefs which are absolute truth and should never be questioned (Schein, 2010). Three basic underlying assumptions emerged as central to Cristo Rey Twin Cities. They included care and love for the student, commitment to educating the poor and at-risk, and building student self-esteem and confidence. Each of these assumptions and the related values and artifacts are described in detail below.

Figure 15: A diagram of Cristo Rey Twin Cities college-going culture emphasizing the basic underlying assumption of care and love.

The Basic Underlying Assumption of Care and Love for the Student
“Caring for the individual student” emerged as one of the basic underlying assumptions for Cristo Rey Twin Cities. The Jesuit philosophy of care for the student is referred to as Cura Personalis (care for the individual). This Jesuit educational philosophy has a 450-year tradition. This philosophy was at the core of the Cristo Rey Twin Cities, a school founded by the Jesuits. It calls for a holistic educational approach which focuses on the individual. The basic underlying assumption of “care for the individual” seeped through a variety of artifacts, captured in interviews, newsletters, bulletin board materials, electronic promotional materials, and much more. Faculty and staff felt a correlation between caring for each student and increasing the college-going rate. At-risk students needed support and love. They were more likely to attend college if they trusted those that encouraged them. As one staff member stated:

I think we are a caring culture. One where you know a kid needs a ride home. You know, we figure out a way, two cars will follow the kid home so they can be sure they get home okay. Be sure they get into their home… But, a kid hasn’t eaten, finding food for them. A lot of people and kids know who they can go to in this building to ask if they have food, and you know they’re no questions asked. I think that’s kind of the interesting part. I think sometimes about how we just accept our kids, how they are. We expect the same of them regardless of how they are, where they are coming from… I think that’s a lot of the part of our culture (Counselor, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

The term love was used by many to describe the school culture. Many of my interviewees felt that this term expressed the compassion that the faculty and staff had for
the students. Love permeated within the school. In an interview, the President of Cristo Rey stated:

The phrase I think I use the most often is creating a community of concern and love… I know we don’t use the ‘L’ word much because we think that’s somehow reserved for romantic relations and things like that, but when we talk about Curapersonalis [Care for the Individual] and when we talk about care for each other we are actually talking about loving, as Jesus loved us. So now there are branches of how do you create a community of concern and love (President, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

Love and community emerged as terms that were often coupled together in interviews. People referred to community as the Cristo Rey faculty, staff, and students. Some referred to community as the Minneapolis community or local neighborhood. Others referenced community as the Latino or African American community. In an interview with the Executive Director of Corporate Work Study at Cristo Rey, she discussed a loving and caring school culture provided from those outside the building, specifically the student supervisors at the student work site:

A big part of our school culture is the people who aren’t here in the building who continue that culture of love and care for our students… I was interviewing a supervisor of one of our seniors, and we were talking about the student and his growth. She [his supervisor] started crying because of the love that she has for him. It very much humbled me… and made me so proud that we [are] loving and pushing our students, but…who knows how many in our companies who are doing the same thing; who show them love and believe in them. And so I think we
are just so blessed. The schools that I work with, the principals at KIPP [Knowledge is Power Program], at another school called Minneapolis Academy that we work with, and our churches, the other partners who see and pick up on our culture and then become a part of it (Executive Director of Corporate Work Study, personal communication, May 31, 2013).

The Executive Director of Corporate Work Study further discussed community in terms of schools and churches within Minneapolis. KIPP Academy has a similar mission of helping the poor and the disadvantaged. She felt that the culture of care was contagious for other educational institutions that worked with at-risk students. She drew from prior experiences of other educational institutions that developed a college-going culture for at-risk youths. The development of a caring and supportive community played a big part of increasing a college-going culture.

A strong community played a big part of why a Jesuit regent chose to work at Cristo Rey. A Jesuit regent is a person who is temporarily assigned to a work-place while in training to be a Jesuit priest. Many times, the assignment would be a school. In my interview with the Jesuit regent, he stated, “There's a commitment and love that I've never seen anywhere else. There is a love of learning, love of our students, love of our families, love of our community” (Jesuit Regent, personal communication, May 31, 2013). He looked at the culture with a fresh perspective because he was new to the school and the Cristo Rey system. He also mentioned family and community as a recipient of a loving culture.

In an interview, the Director of Admissions commented on the Cristo Rey Twin Cities culture as a community which cared for and loved each student. Students
observed the dedication each faculty and staff member put into helping each one of them. She stated:

I definitely think the students see the love that their teachers have for them. There is a certain amount of tough love obviously... I get to be on the other side of things as far as communications go. I work with kids on writing testimonies about their time at the school. They’ll say things about how our teachers are there until 8 o’clock and 9 o’clock at night and they get up in the morning and they don’t see their children. Not every kid sees, but a lot of them see and reflect upon that and realize that that’s the manifestation of love… they’re [teachers/staff] doing that because they care (Director of Admissions, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

As the Director of Admissions related, every student at Cristo Rey lived in poverty or on the edge of poverty. Most parents worked multiple minimum-wage jobs to subsist. Time spent with their children was limited because many parents chose or needed to work several jobs to pay the bills and survive. Typically, there was little or no time for the family unit. The ability to listen and pay significant attention to the child’s individual emotional needs was sacrificed for the sake of survival. The Director of Admissions referred to time spent listening to students as a form of care and love. She stated:

You know kids. I’ll sit and work on my computer and have two girls sitting here at my desk after school just hanging out. They know that I got work I got to get done. But, I can sit and listen to them, and we can chat about boys and whatever else is going on, prom dresses and what not. Sometimes that’s superficial, but I
think they know that that’s out of love as well (Director of Admissions, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

Similarly in an interview, a student reinforced the feeling that faculty and staff care for the students. The student mentioned how time spent by teachers and staff for their individual needs was seen as a manifestation of love and care. As she stated:

The teachers are caring. They care about every single student. They meet one on one with students. I can relate to people, and they give me all the support, because when I came here my English wasn’t so good...I will actually like meet with my teachers and have like extra lessons. They sit with you one by one. [Teachers will say] this is how I can help you. We can meet and I can teach you the lesson that I taught for three times in school during class. They care or they will ask you what’s wrong when they see you. (Student E, personal communication, May 31, 2013).

Figure 16: Picture of a class at Cristo Rey Twin Cities. In this picture, notice the dress of the students. Cristo Rey Twin Cities had a dress code for all students. Students were
able to sit with one another in rooms which had natural light as well as beautiful and bright colors. Retrieved from www.fieldingnair.com

Publication materials produced by Cristo Rey Twin Cities also communicated care and love for the students. Cristo Rey sends e-newsletters once per semester. In the Spring 2013 newsletter, there were visible signs of care and love for the students. The e-newsletter was student-centered, designed to provide positive publicity for Cristo Rey Twin Cities. The newsletter also created a sense of pride for student accomplishments and showed the compassion and love. The e-newsletter was emailed to all that subscribed including parents, students, alumni, donors, and others.

Figure 17: Cristo Rey Summer 2013 e-newsletter. Many of the articles written in the publication celebrated student success and provided information on Cristo Rey and its college-going mission.
The school website also included many articles, pictures, and accolades of successful students at Cristo Rey Twin Cities. The website was considered an artifact because it was visual and tangible. The website focused on the student success and communicated a caring culture. Throughout all the pages was information which communicated a caring culture. The focus was student success and a celebration of their actions.

![Mission Statement](image)

**Figure 18**: Picture of a graduating class and the mission statement. Cristo Rey coupled a picture of the graduating class with the mission statement. A major component of the mission was to get at-risk students to college.

The picture of the graduating class and the school’s mission statement was a strong example of the school’s mission to build a graduating class of college-bound students.
The picture communicated success and readiness for college. Each student was smiling and looking up toward the camera, alluding to the fact that every person was significant and valued. Every student overcame hardships and barriers, yet were successful in graduating from a college preparatory school.

When discussing Cristo Rey and reasons for the school’s success in sending at-risk students to college, an alumnus reinforced the common theme of support and love. He had experienced hardships and difficulties but was able to go to college. The purpose for his return was to speak in front of a class of freshmen and tell his story. He was there to provide hope and self-confidence for students regarding college. When I asked about why Cristo Rey was effective in getting students like him to college, he said, “They support [you] even after you leave… They are not just going to brush you off. Here [Cristo Rey], they support you until you graduate college” (Alumni, personal communication, May 30, 2013). A support person was a permanent position at Cristo Rey. This person would visit the student in college after high school graduation. The support person visited former Cristo Rey students and provided individual attention and care. The primary purpose was to care for and support them so they would graduate from college. The value of caring for the individual was continued after the students graduated. The personnel structure provided proper care and support for individual students. Because poverty and issues of broken family relationships were prevalent, Cristo Rey had two licensed social workers serving students. The licensed social workers were experts in serving students with difficult home-life situations. The support system was based upon individual attention and care for the student’s emotional needs and welfare.
The discipline policy was founded on the principles of care and love. The Assistant Principal stated that the school follows an unorthodox method of discipline. The discipline system was primarily designed to be a learning experience with support and love. It was not punitive. The Assistant Principal explained:

A lot of students are coming from places where they’re used to more of a military state approach. An administrator is someone on the other team that you try to avoid. The whole idea is that we can support you, and we love you and we can work with you. At the same time, we want to set expectations and boundaries so you can reach your dream (Assistant Principal, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

This supportive approach was evident in the manner in which he and other members of faculty and staff communicated with the students. The goal was to provide care and love for the students. Instead of quickly administering a punishment or some type of reprimand, a discussion with the student took place. Incidents were dealt with conversations about responsibility and trust. The Principal also felt that is was important to provide care and support for each individual student. The focus needed to be caring for the individual and developing his or her inner-core. He stated: “Forming the inner core of a person, not focus on the external stuff. For example, we don’t have JUGS [Judgment Under God] here. We don’t have detentions. We don’t have demerits. The reason is because we feel it’s important to develop the inner-core” (Principal, personal communication, May 30, 2013)
Figure 19: A diagram of Cristo Rey Twin Cities college-going culture emphasizing the basic underlying assumption of care and love and the espoused values.

**Espoused values related to care and love for the student.** The three espoused values that were aligned care and love for the individual student were trust and respect, care for the physical and emotional needs of each student, and care for the community. Each value was part of the college-going culture.

**Espoused values of trust and respect.** Caring for the student was a basic underlying assumption of the school’s culture. Caring for the student was manifested through trust and respect. Many commented that trust and respect were directly related to the culture of care at Cristo Rey. When I asked a counselor at Cristo Rey about the culture and what made the school successful in getting at-risk students to college, she answered, “The
work-study aspect and with that you have mentors and resources. The churches, community, the schools send students to us. They trust us. Our families trust us. There's a sense of commitment, love, and trust” (Counselor, personal communication, May 28, 2013).

Trust was regarded as a fundamental part of the caring culture. To create a culture of trust and respect between the faculty/staff and the students, persistence, patience, time, and hard work were required. The Assistant Principal discussed how trust and respect was fostered and developed, “My door is always open. [I] see the students not only in an academic perspective, but physically and emotionally. Students start to see that [caring]. [Students say], okay, here he is… and he’s with us. He’s caring for us physically, spiritually…also mentally and academically” (Assistant Principal, personal communication, May 29, 2013). Positive interactions with students over multiple occurrences allowed for trust to be cultivated. The college counselor communicated the importance of trust for the students and their families. This proved to be difficult at times because many parents did not want their son or daughter to move out of the home to attend college. Moving away from the family was counter to their family culture. This was especially true within the Latino community. The importance of family was extremely important and powerful. Asking parents to allow their child, especially if parents had never attended college, to move away and attend college was difficult. The college counselor communicated that trust was vital in the college decision-making process. She stated:

I would say the foundation of what we do here … a culture that students are welcomed. They are embraced. They [students] feel like they belong. That
builds trust. When you get the trust, you get buy-in from the kids. You get the buy-in from the families (College Counselor, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

Hospitality emerged as a reoccurring theme. Hospitality was often coupled with building trust and respect. The college counselor continued, “I think it is the secret sauce here in the level of trust and family and commitment. We don't have high turnover here which is amazing given the dedication that it takes for schools like this” (College Counselor, personal communication, May 29, 2013). Communicating the values of respect and trust were linked to the basic belief in care for the student. One teacher explained that there were very few fights or physical altercations between the students. The teacher shared:

There is also a culture of respect. I just know from the experiences that I have been in and the public schools that I have been; there were a lot of fights. We have had very few [fights]. Very little in that way. I feel like they respect the fact that they are here. [Students understand] that they need to get along. Little bickering might happen, but for the most part they respect and care for each other. A lot of times I see people helping students that you wouldn’t assume. I think there is a culture of respect in their flight or journey in education (Teacher A, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

Espoused value of care for the student’s emotional wellbeing and physical health.

The physical safety of the students emerged as important. The school was initially built in a neighborhood with significant crime. Cristo Rey was in an urban setting that was riddled with issues of gangs, poverty, and homelessness. Safety was a concern. The
building had a security system which required identification for access. The front foyer had a front reception desk. In addition, many times there was a person greeting students in the morning as the students arrived. The purpose was to welcome students. Also, an adult was available to observe or prevent issues at the beginning of the school day. As one administrator commented, “we face the challenge of how to get them prepared academically. Poverty is its own trauma. Racial discrimination is a trauma. It is still not a level playing field out there. Crime is an issue. You have security issues” (Assistant Principal, personal communication, May 29, 2013). Another administrator commented on the safety issues and why students enroll at Cristo Rey Twin Cities, “I think the overwhelming reason why families enroll their students at Cristo Rey is because they perceive it is a safe place” (President, personal communication, May 30, 2013). The administrator was referring to the importance of physical and emotional safety. Living in an area in which gangs and violence was prominent presented significant danger for students. They needed a safe place to receive an education.
Espoused value of care for the community. Commitment and care toward community was yet another espoused value that aligned strongly with the basic belief of care and love for the student. Community had several different meanings. One included the local school community; another was the local neighborhood or the south Minneapolis area; the final was Latino, African American, or those who were poor and disadvantaged. In interviews, teachers commented on the effects of Cristo Rey and the neighborhood community. A teacher explained:

I went to Pilsen [original Cristo Rey school], the original one. Something that they talked about that struck me is…the evolution of the neighborhood around them. Long-term, I would love to see the effect [in the local Minneapolis community]. Urban adventures - that organization has done an amazing thing for this neighborhood. It wasn’t too long ago violent crimes were happening outside our door by those in the neighborhood. The neighborhood community is responding. They recognize our students by the uniforms that they wear. So how might that change the culture of the area? In terms of reputation, the neighborhood definitely has a history of not being a nice neighborhood. I think it is making a change. It should be interesting to watch the change (Teacher B, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

The teacher felt that the existence of Cristo Rey would eventually affect the community. The school’s service had ramifications beyond the students that were enrolled at Cristo
Rey. The teachers communicated that the existence of Cristo Rey would eventually revitalize the neighborhood and change the community. The college counselor made additional comments regarding the positive effects of Cristo Rey on the community. She stated:

Well, I think that because we're all in it together. I think the people in our community know about Cristo Rey and care about Cristo Rey… I think we have commitment to those communities. We are partnered with Urban Ventures that runs a lot of community programs. We invite the community to a lot of our programs. I have an open mic. [Microphone] with a college style panel that the community is invited to. Hard work and community would mark beyond the obvious Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. If you are looking at the core of what this school is you will find hard work and community (College Counselor, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

For some, the idea of community was expressed as a team helping students. The school personnel was a team; they worked together to accomplish a common mission and goal. The purpose and mission drew them together. The Director of Activities and Athletics communicated that the students needed support. The way that they received this support was as a team. It could not be individualized by just a few, but the entire faculty and staff had to work together as a community to show the students that they were supported. The Director of Activities and Athletics stated:

We all have to be a team. We all have to work together to make this happen. If I am the Activities Director, I have to be here. Kids need to know that they are supported. I have to be the face of that support. I can’t expect others to
participate if I myself don’t participate. You have to live and set the example. You have to be the example. You cannot ask others to do something that you don’t expect from others. That’s what makes this place work. You guys have to work. You set the example to the students. It is definitely a team effort under the guidance of God. [That is the] bottom line. (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013)

The idea of working toward a common mission developed the community. Collaboration with a common purpose developed the school as a team. As the theology teacher and Jesuit Regent stated, “I saw how things were there and the community, so what they [Jesuits] wanted me to look at was, can you see yourself working at this school? Can you see yourself living in the community?” (Jesuit Regent, personal communication, May 31, 2013). Community played a vital part in the mission of the school. However, a school community must be developed and cultivated. There are different techniques in cultivating community. The President of Cristo Rey explained one technique in building school community:

It’s [community] about all of us. So when somebody dies, when a relative among our adults dies, I always make sure to inquire about the name of the deceased and to share that with the community that is this faculty, staff members, and the family. Let’s pray for them. There’s a sympathy card that’s delivered. Last year we started a slide show for All Souls Day. The entire school community, students and adults are invited to bring in a photograph of someone who has died in the last year in their family. The person’s name and date that they had died [is presented in the kiva]. We have a slideshow of all those who had passed away in
our school and community in the last year…There has been a great embrace of that and it has been one of the more emotional impactful experiences that we have together as a school community…So there are some things that we do communally. Our Kiva, our auditorium allows us to do those things communally, like honoring one for 50 years of teaching or honoring the memory of the dead. That’s why I think the Kiva is so important. It really sets the tone and allows us to accentuate and reinforce these aspects of school culture, that we’re a community of concern and love (President, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

**Figure 21:** A diagram of Cristo Rey Twin Cities college-going culture emphasizing the basic underlying assumption of commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged.
Basic Underlying Assumption of a Commitment to Educating the Disadvantaged and Poor

The commitment of the school to educate those who were marginalized and poor emerged as another basic underlying assumption of the school’s culture. This belief could be captured through a variety of artifacts including the website, e-newsletter, and other promotional material. The faculty and staff felt that the manner in which Cristo Rey conducted its educational system made a difference. There was a commitment from those within the organization to have a positive impact on the students’ lives through education, and this commitment stretched to college preparation. College education was an integral part of their communities.

There is one common truth when educating students who are at-risk; in order to get them to college, it takes a tremendous amount of human effort and financial resources. There are many different strategies available to increase the college-going rate, but the people serving the students are at the heart of a school’s success. Faculty and staff experienced multiple failures and tremendous successes associated with their commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged. The emotional ups and downs are part of working with an at-risk population. It isn’t a coincidence that employees worked long hours; or that they were committed to establishing meaningful relationships with each student. They had a deep and meaningful commitment to the students. The faculty, staff, and administration knew that it took this type of commitment in order for the educational system to be effective.

Many of those interviewed had personal experiences with those impoverished. They felt that their work at Cristo Rey made a positive and significant impact. The Executive
Director of Corporate Work Study made this comment regarding her personal experience with a person who was in poverty. In her thoughts, she felt that involvement in Cristo Rey would have changed this person’s life:

It’s just my own personal values and my relationship I have had with a young woman who is now 22. I met her when she was 13. She lived in dire poverty. [She] moved probably 20 times since I have known her with her family. Now she lives on her own or with her boyfriend and she has a baby. I was the parent who went to her parent conferences. I was the person in her life who encouraged her to continue at school. I was connecting her with people who could help her get a better education. In the end, she got out of high school and she got a degree…

[What] shocked me that this was, she attributes the fact that she graduated from high school to me. Because at one point in high school she had moved out of the state and she was like, screw it, I’m not going back. When she came back, I just forced her [to go to school]. I kind of didn’t realize how much until she told me. That story was one that I thought when I read about Cristo Rey. I was like, oh my God, this would’ve been ideal for her (Executive Director of Corporate Work Study, personal communication, May 31, 2013)

The belief in Cristo Rey’s effectiveness and the commitment to educating students who were under-resourced was commonly felt. The school Counselor commented that the amount of work and time providing personal attention could be overwhelming. The risk of burnout was prevalent. I saw the risk of burnout as one of the weaker areas associated with Cristo Rey. Many employees cared so much for each student, that the tendency for burnout was much greater. A term associated with this type of burnout is
compassion fatigue. In our discussion, the Counselor communicated her satisfaction with her position at Cristo Rey and discussed ways in which she protected herself from fatigue or burnout:

I do things that are important for me, but I do get a lot of fulfillment from helping the students. In seeing two-years of graduates, seeing them succeed - in getting them to know me and call me and tell me they got this huge scholarship. When they ask me to read an essay or I get a phone call saying I got a 4.0 - that's where I get my satisfaction and my fulfillment and contentment - from seeing students six years down the road. A freshman can drive me crazy now, but I am going to be there for them. That's what fills my cup (Counselor, personal communication, May 28, 2013).

Belief in the educational system and making a difference through education was shared by almost all within the organization. A teacher discussed her personal beliefs about Cristo Rey and helping at-risk students. He had previously worked at a school which also educated at-risk students; however, he was dissatisfied with the work-place because he felt that the school was graduating students who were not ready for college. A comparison was made with Cristo Rey and his last place of employment:

If I'm going to be 100% honest, I did not know a lot about Cristo Rey… I saw the job opening and I applied. Then I did the research about Cristo Rey when I got the call back for the interview. It was dumb luck for [me that the] school that had a mission that aligned well with what I wanted to do with my life (Teacher C, personal communication, May 29, 2013).
The comment that the mission aligned well with what he wanted to do with his life was a theme shared by many. People who worked at Cristo Rey had a desire to help those in need. They wanted to help the impoverished and make a difference in the lives of those students who were classified as at-risk. They believed in the Cristo Rey system and the productivity of their work.

In a different conversation with the teacher, the discussion of life-goals and ways of impacting students was part of the conversation. The comments stemmed from a discussion of why he taught in a school like Cristo Rey. In conversation with several teachers, many times, the teachers felt that they were there to teach more than subject content. They were working at Cristo Rey to be a role model and to teach life lessons. This belief went to the heart of why they wanted to work at Cristo Rey, to help those that are disadvantaged and poor. He stated:

That is really the key part, where I see myself as a teacher, trying to teach working class kids, low-income…. [Teach] the realities of the world so they may maneuver it skillfully - Being honest about that reality. A college prep school that serves that demographic has to start here. I think we do a decent job here

(Teacher C, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

Burnout was an issue when working with at-risk students, yet the teachers and the staff continued to educate at-risk students despite the challenges. The commitment to educating the poor provides challenges and difficulties, and not every student’s story was successful. The teacher’s next comment was an acknowledgement of the continued challenges and difficulties he faced. He knew, despite the highs and the lows of working with at-risk youth, there would always be a battle to eliminate poverty. His response was
prompted by the question of how Cristo Rey should change to improve the college-going rates for students. Is Cristo Rey as impactful and making a difference? Will there always be a need for Cristo Rey or this educational model? A teacher stated:

If I say no then that implies that I don’t think we will get economic justice. Not any time soon. I think there will be a need, sadly for this school for a long time. I hope that Cristo Rey is around for people who want a Jesuit education, but the public schools and everyone is serving at the same level. I hope the achievement gap is done. I don’t think it will happen in my lifetime… Cristo Rey schools have to do it, or our country’s future isn’t that bright (Teacher C, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

He continued his comments that the Cristo Rey model worked, but it was not the only system that made a positive impact on at-risk students. Other schools had positively affected the impoverished. However, in his opinion, Cristo Rey’s method was a difference-maker.

The commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged was a basic underlying assumption at Cristo Rey. The belief in educating the poor was never challenged or questioned. For all who worked at Cristo Rey, the value was an absolute truth. Education was the means for eliminating poverty, albeit, one student at a time. In order to work at a school which helps at-risk youths, the personal values must align with that of the school culture. In a discussion about Cristo Rey’s values, a teacher commented on Cristo Rey communities’ value system and that her values aligned with Cristo Rey’s. Those affiliated with Cristo Rey frequently commented that their own personal beliefs and values matched that of the organization. She stated:
I actually heard about this network at a professional development conference. We were intrigued by the setup. When I move to the public system, my Department Chair alerted me to the opening. I like it. It was a good match between some of the things that I was good at and some of my professional goals and desire to help inner city schools. I had worked at an inner city school prior to my work. Cristo Rey takes a practical approach to the problem. They don’t complain that there isn’t enough money so on and so forth. They have a plan. They come up with a solution. It is extreme in two ways. It is extreme in the amount of work because it is a challenge to take students that are behind academically in getting them through college. But it is also extreme in its rewards. I feel that a lot of these students wouldn’t make it to college if it wasn’t through Cristo Rey (Teacher B, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

The school community’s commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged was reinforced with the next statement about Cristo Rey’s effectiveness. A teacher expressed that the education at Cristo Rey was different than other schools. He felt a true passion for the education at Cristo Rey and the schools effectiveness in helping the poor. His cited opportunities such as meeting CEO’s, networking with business executives or community leaders. In a small group discussion, the teacher commented,

We always have a few [students] that could go somewhere else but they wouldn’t be the same person. And I think they recognize it at some point. Maybe not when they start or even graduate, but at a point they will look back and realize. Most people don’t know heads of companies. People don’t normally do that at
high school. They say the grass is always greener, well I say the grass is greener here (Teacher A, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

Basic underlying assumptions are unconscious and taken-for granted. They are values and beliefs systems which are never questioned (Schein, 2010). The commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged was prevalent throughout the school because all within the school believed that education was the means to breaking the cycle of poverty. This belief was never questioned or challenged. All felt a mission or calling to educate those that are disadvantaged.

Figure 22: A diagram of Cristo Rey Twin Cities college-going culture emphasizing the basic underlying assumption of commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged and espoused values.
Espoused values related to a commitment to educate the poor and disadvantaged. Five espoused values related to a commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged. The five values included modeling and mentorship, teaching life lessons, hard work, spirituality, and strong academics. These values were seen by faculty and staff as an effective means toward improving the college-going rate. Schein (2010) communicated that espoused values typically guided policy within an organization. I found this to be true in many instances. There were several policies enacted at Cristo Rey Twin Cities based on the espoused values of strong academics, mentoring, hard work, or a faith-based education.

Espoused values of modeling and mentorship. Modeling and mentorship emerged as espoused values that aligned with the faculty and staff’s commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged. Many of the faculty and staff had a strong belief in the effectiveness of mentorship and its critical role in educating at-risk students. Cristo Rey employed several strategies for increasing the college-going rate. One was the work program; another was hiring teachers that held a belief that they were an example of growing up poor and still being able to get a college education. A teacher commented on modeling and why Cristo Rey had a positive impact on the college-going rates:

I think it is just modeling. The students are from similar circumstances. We [teachers and students] are all in the same boat. When they see someone succeed from here, they say that I can do that. They are from the same neighborhood, went to the same middle school that I did. I know that they are going through similar things. They see it. For me, just standing in-front of the class, honestly as much as people of color teaching people of color, I think people from working
class families relate to people from working class families…They can relate.

There are a lot of similarities. Even though I am a white male, I have a working class background. I can remember what it was like to eat Ramen noodles during the summer. I made it. It [Life] is going to be hard but you can make it. I rely on that personally (Teacher C, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

Coming from a work class background and finding similarities with his own life and the lives of the students at Cristo Rey gave him a sense of purpose. The teacher’s commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged tied directly to his own childhood and the way he was raised. He felt that because he grew up poor, he could be an effective mentor and a role model. He expressed his commitment to educating the poor because his own personal experiences gave him a sense of purpose. He continued by sharing his feelings on the role of mentorship and service and why Cristo Rey’s commitment to educating the poor was important to him:

> Our students state that they are serving others. I think that is part of what makes us the best human beings - to be is serving others. For me, to serve is giving back to my community. I want to serve inner city kids. I am from here. You see me on the bus. Kids will see me on the bus, which can be awkward but other times great. It allows for connections [with students] that makes effective teaching. When they see you living the same life, going to the same stores, the same places, it adds something to the classroom. Being in the community is something that I wanted to do. (Teacher C, personal communication, May 29, 2013)

This teacher identified with the students because they lived in the same neighborhood and had grown up in a similar environment as his students. He felt that he was a role model
and that the students identified with him. As a working professional, he earned a college degree and he came from a similar background and environment.

The Director of Activities and Athletics had similar experiences and feelings. He felt that the idea of role modeling was important in establishing a strong college-going rate for at-risk students. The work program was a strategy used by Cristo Rey to get students to college. Not only did it help pay for their education, but it also provided role models and mentors to the students. Working in a professional environment and observing others in 9-5 professional career helped students see and experience a life that could be theirs. The Activities and Athletics explained his role as a mentor and the role of the work program at Cristo Rey. He stated:

I think our students, the student who comes to Cristo Rey, often don’t have role models who went to college that are in a 9-5 job in a professional career...The reason that it (the work program) is such an important part of what we do is, because it finances our school, but also it takes kids, one at a time,…into an adult environment and requires them to step up… They are surrounded by college educated people, and maybe some who aren’t, but they can see what a college education can give you and what a non-college education gives you...They can see what hard work looks like (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

The Director of Activities and Athletics grew up in a very difficult environment. He identified with many of the students at Cristo Rey. This was very similar to many of the others who worked at Cristo Rey. Identifying with the students gave them a sense of purpose and meaning. The commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged had
relevance to many because they had grown up poor and disadvantaged. They felt that their ability to overcome their hardships and get a college degree serves as an example that the student can go to college and get a degree. Within this next statement, the Director of Activities and Athletics communicated his own fight against stereotypes and how he had overcome those obstacles. He continued by discussing how he was a role model to students at Cristo Rey.

I am counter to the African American stereotype. People wanted to know about me or understand me than the other guy. I remember when I did my internship. About the second week in the program, I was selected to keep the weekly journal. It was a great, great experience. But I understood one of the large reasons why they asked me to do it because I was one of the few African Americans in the program. And that it would look good on their program to have me on display. I get that. Instead of me being upset, I embrace that opportunity. Instead, I can stand as an example of how things can be. I can help redefine. That is what I try to do with our students here, especially, African American boys. You don’t have to have your pants sag just to be cool. I can speak the street talk with the best of them. But you have to learn how to switch it. You have to learn how to speak with whom you are speaking to. There is a time and a place for everything. That is what I am trying to work on with that group of kids. My goal and purpose is not for one particular group but for all our students. So I try to help our students in any way that I can. (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013)
As part of the value system of modeling and mentorship at Cristo Rey, many of those who worked at the school identified with the students. This led to a stronger connection to the students and served as a catalyst for many faculty and staff willing to be role models and mentors. Initially, conversations started with how the interviewees were affiliated with Cristo Rey. Many commented that the value system of the school matched their own belief system. They felt that their work made a difference in the lives of those impoverished or at-risk. Much of this stemmed from understanding that many who worked at Cristo Rey may have grown up in poverty or were labeled at-risk. Many of the hardships that the students went through, they had gone through themselves. For many of the interviewees, seeing the student hardships was personal. The Director of Activities and Athletics stated:

I am from Los Angelos California, more specially from Compton. I don’t know if you know much about Compton California. It has been a focus for hip hop and rap. People like Easy E and Dr. Dre, those that were really making the cultural scene at Compton at that time. Unfortunately, it wasn’t necessary a positive thing. So I myself had to grow up with gang issues myself. I ran the risk of being jumped or shot at. The issue of drug dealers in my community and graffiti on my garage door every other day. We would paint it and it would be there the next day. I had to deal with a lot of those negative elements in my life...I realized, you know what, ‘I have got to give back’. I enrolled into my master’s program for education. I started to think about all the wonderful teachers that I had. I said, there are so many people who helped shaped my life. Those who instilled education as being that safety net. I know there are so many kids out there who
are lost; who needs someone to give them guidance too. This is my opportunity to pay it forward. This is my opportunity to give it back like. (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013)

Espoused value on teaching life-lessons. Teaching students about life-lessons was an important part of building a college-going culture. Students needed to understand the efforts needed to be successful and graduate from high school and college. This value had a close association with modeling and mentorship. Many of the faculty and staff identified with the students, and wanted to teach them certain life-lessons such as hard-work, obtaining good grades, and keeping positive attitudes. During a discussion regarding life-lessons, I asked a group of upper-class students what advice they would give themselves when they were freshmen. A student stated, “I would tell myself to not to worry about the small stuff. All that just falls into place. What I should be worried about is school work and stuff like that” (Student B, personal communication, May 30, 2013). Another student commented:

I would tell myself that there’s always a time to have fun. I’ve always had that perspective of class clown. That’s what I wanted to be. But now that I think about it, it’s not even worth it. My grades are more important. Those are the money makers. Make girls priority number two (Student A, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

A third student stated that she has learned to “not to give up as easily. Look at everything as an advantage instead of a disadvantage.” Another student shared, “Try to maintain your mind clear of distractions, which would include any family struggles and anything that bothers you outside the school environment. (Student B, personal
communication, May 30, 2013). Personal growth and development as a person was an important part of the college-search and decision making process. The development as a person is a natural part of the high school experience; however, Cristo Rey developed students to create and believe that they could succeed. A student stated:

I grew a lot after freshman year. Like freshman year I was still. I don’t know, I was kind of like still [passive]. I would say I just began to grow after that, after that first year of high school experience. That’s when I really started to grow. Over that summer my whole mindset changed. I was more prepared for the next year and the rest of high school…Now I’m proactive (Student D, personal communication, May 31, 2013).

Espoused value of hard work. Another value under the umbrella of commitment and belief to educate the poor and disadvantaged was the emphasis on hard work. The faculty, staff, and administration worked long hours. Because of the individual attention for each student and the amount of care that is put into helping each student, the value of hard work was emphasized in the Cristo Rey culture. Some emphasized the amount of work put into the organization as a source of pride while others looked at it as a necessity. Many felt that the students noticed their work. They saw hard work as part of modeling. They are reinforced by how they [students] see the faculty and staff see you work, our real care and dedication. Kids see you working hard for them. They see how you set it up for them. Modeling, they see us coming in here and working our butts off, and kids see you go. You got to do it. A lot of our kids don’t have the best role models, so we have to be the role models within the community. We have to be the light in what the rest of their day may be darkness. They come
from tough situations. Give them what they need. It is an honor to work here. I see how hard our kids work and how hard our colleagues work. I’m thankful to God. I see us pushing our mission, our goals and our objectives. Understand that there are good and bad times, but those things pass. Things will always get better (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

The value of hard work was coupled with the commitment to educating the poor. The time commitment also served as an expression of the care and compassion that each staff and faculty member had for the students. The rational was that if the students saw you working hard for them, they would see that you were committed to helping them. In order to work hard, one must be committed.

The value of hard-work can take an emotional and physical toll. Many of the faculty and staff at Cristo Rey invested their hearts and souls into helping students. There was a deep passion for their work, a true commitment to educating at-risk students. Many felt that they were saving students from a life of poverty and hardship. This put a tremendous amount of stress and pressure on themselves. Many felt that the quality of their work determined another’s future. This emotional commitment was even stronger for those who identified with the students, especially for those who grew up in poverty. That was why an education like Cristo Rey could take an emotional and physical toll. No matter how hard one may try, for those fully invested in the mission, one cannot avoid disappointments. The Director of Admissions spoke about giving 100 percent to accomplish the goal of getting the students to college. This commitment would take a toll on many. She stated:
We have a culture of hard work. I, many of us in the building as far as adults, realize that we are very fortunate and blessed. [We] had a lot of really great opportunities and want to do everything to make that happen for our students. We’ll give nothing less than 100 percent of ourselves in order to make that happen. [We] expect the students to give and families to come in. It’s not going to be easy. This is not a free ticket to college by any means. It’s going to be hard work and that’s the building block of who we are. Rising to the occasion, it will all be worth it. (Director of Admissions, personal communication, May 30, 2013)

**Espoused values of spirituality and a higher calling.** As I walked through the halls and within the classrooms, there were religious artifacts and signs of a Jesuit Catholic school. A large picture of St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, hung in the front of the building. I knew that St. Ignatius plays a prominent role in all Jesuit high schools. He is seen as the father of the Jesuit educational system. Also, the chapel was located in the center of the building. The ten-commandments were aligned on walls in the stairwell. Crucifixes were located in the halls and offices. Crucifixes are small replicas of a cross with Jesus on the replica. Every morning there was prayer and signs of being a Jesuit school were prevalent. All of these artifacts showed that Cristo Rey was a Jesuit, Catholic, faith-based school.

All interviewed had a strong belief in the educational system. Many commented on the importance of spirituality with the school culture and its impact on the quality of education. Not all who worked at Cristo Rey considered themselves religious but many felt a higher calling. They acknowledged that they were part of something bigger than themselves. In several interviews, the commitment toward social justice was
communicated. This was not unusual for a Jesuit school. Part of the Jesuit educational pedagogy is an emphasis on social justice. One administrator commented:

Ultimately it is faith-based. There is no way we could do what we do, put the hours in that we do, without God being around and helping us. Every teacher works 10 hours a day, some days 15. I have a wife and kids I love being around. There are Saturdays sacrificed, evenings sacrificed. You have to understand the bigger picture. You have to take yourself out of your individual circumstance. You have to see that there is something bigger here. The mission for this school encompasses the whole. (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013)

The administrator coupled the faith-based educational environment and the belief in God with the commitment needed to educate poor through hard work. There was a common theme or message for why Cristo Rey was effective. It was based upon, for many, the belief in faith-filled educational environment. Schein (2010) wrote that espoused values often originate from the leader or the founder of the organization. Cristo Rey was founded by a Jesuit and was modeled after the Jesuit educational system. The development officer discussed the founder of the Cristo Rey network when explaining why Cristo Rey was effective. He had similar beliefs when referring to why Cristo Rey was successful. He stated:

Certainly faith is a component. One of the things that John Foley says, founder of our network, it that Cristo Rey network is a school with a soul, something that is pervasive throughout the school. I agree with that. I wonder if charter schools that don’t have a faith-based component, but have principles of honors of respect
and dignity feel the same. I think that the faith-based component of our school does add value. We are in this – something bigger than us. We are doing this for the greater glory of God. He [the President] tries to communicate this down through the entire staff. I would say that most of the staff feels that same way.

(Director of Development, personal communication, May 28, 2013)

The idea of a faith-based education was critical in Cristo Rey’s success. Faith, service, and social justice were values emphasized in the organization. As the President commented, “Every time we have an assembly, we finish with guided by faith, prepared for life, and serving others. Those three definitely because we believe in those and obviously them prepared for life is getting that education” (President, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

The commitment to educating the poor and a faith-based educational environment of serving others were related. The Director of Admissions explained how her faith and commitment to educating the poor were tied together. She had served in an orphanage in the Peace Corps for several years and had a strong calling to serving the poor at Cristo Rey at the end of her service in the Peace Corp. As the Director of Admissions shared, “I volunteered in an orphanage in Honduras for 2 years. When I was there my father was talking to me that they were opening a Cristo Rey School here in Minneapolis, knowing my affinity for the Jesuits. I went to Marquette, [it matched] my own faith” (Director of Admissions, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

Other statements which supported the value of spirituality within the educational system included a comment from the Director of Activities and Athletic. Although he
was not Catholic himself, he had an affinity for Catholic education. He associated it with a small, intimate environment:

I really enjoyed a Catholic education. There was something about the way Catholic schools worked that I really, really liked. I like the small size, allowing me to have direct contact with my teachers. Faith based and you always use prayer in your life. I always valued that. And that fact that they are open to people of different backgrounds, cultures. (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013)

I spoke with the Assistant to the Principal, who had just started to work at Cristo Rey a few months ago. He had finished working in the Peace Corp earlier in the year, and had expressed a commitment to helping those who were poor and in need. We discussed his personal value system and how it aligned with the values at the Cristo Rey organization. Within the Peace Corp, he worked with the globally disadvantaged; he viewed that working at Cristo Rey was helping the locally disadvantaged. This was typical for many that were employed at Cristo Rey. They worked at the school because the organization’s culture and mission was a magnet for those with similar values and beliefs. The assistant to the Principal commented:

It feels like helping a community. I mean in a general sense it feels like helping a community that doesn’t often get the kinds of resources that the majority [get]… [I] transitioned perfectly from Peace Corps which is about helping the disadvantaged community - globally disadvantaged. But this is locally disadvantaged. To me it is the same idea. I think it’s the sense… supporting a disadvantaged community. Supporting individuals who…want to be here and are
willing to push themselves and be pushed. Also [at-risk students] need to know that people are supporting them. Because being pushed and pushing themselves is not an easy thing to do. (Assistant to the Principal, personal communication, May 30, 2013)

The emphasis on a caring and supportive culture was communicated by almost all interviewed, and some felt a sense of obligation to help the disadvantaged. There was a belief in the Cristo Rey system. The work that they were doing made a positive difference for students in need. The Director of Admissions commented,

Finding Cristo Rey really gave me the same amount of purpose and drive and satisfaction that I found in the home. The families and what they need, our students and the affirmations and how much I enjoy being with them. It’s an answer to my prayers. (Director of Admissions, personal communication, May 30, 2013)

Schein (2010) wrote that “social validation means that certain beliefs and values are confirmed only by the shared social experience of a group” (p. 28). The Assistant to the Principal discussed his shared social experience at Cristo Rey; he referred to it as a shared vision. Everyone within the organization had a common belief in helping the poor and disadvantaged. It was a value which was not questioned or challenged. Being new to Cristo Rey, this shared vision was very noticeable. When asked about his thoughts regarding the culture of Cristo Rey, he stated:

I didn’t know what to expect…in a place like this. [Cristo Rey] is more socially responsible. You know, Christian-oriented, but also definitely socially-oriented vision. I’ve worked in a marketing firm. I’ve worked at my college. I’ve worked
in restaurants. But [I have] never [worked] in a place where everyone knew what we’re working for, and working for the same thing. It wasn’t just for the paycheck; there was a broader social vision. I feel like the people I work with share that vision and that’s why they work hard and work well. (Assistant to the Principal, personal communication, May 30, 2013)

Spirituality and the commitment toward social justice was prevalent within the school culture; these values aligned with the value system of the employees.

**Espoused value of academic preparation for college.** Strong academic preparation was critical in preparing at-risk students for college. Students needed a strong academic curriculum to be successful in higher education. Unfortunately, many at-risk students attended a poor educational environment. Many of the teachers I interviewed commented on how students were several grade levels behind when they entered Cristo Rey. Poor academic preparation before high school was one of the barriers that many at-risk students faced. The teachers also felt that they needed to build confidence in the students so they could prepare the academically. As one teacher commented:

> If they get to Cristo Rey, many are reading at a fourth grade level. We are a college prep curriculum which is implemented well. Students will struggle. That’s where that honesty comes in. We have to build that confidence. It is not where you are at, it is about where you will end. You will end well here. We have to build that confidence level. Infuse that confidence in that knowledge where they are at. I think it is a balance we need to find. (Teacher C, personal communication, May 29, 2013)
Another staff member discussed the academic preparation in terms of hard work, valuing education, and staying academically focused. The espoused value of academic preparation for college was important. Schein (2010) wrote that many of the policies from the school were based on espoused values. An example of a policy enacted based on the important of a strong academic preparation was the policy of passing proficiencies after each course. The Assistant to the Principal stated that he thought the main value was its academic preparation for the at-risk student. The school was focused on getting at-risk students to college. He shared:

I think the main value, though obviously not the only one, is it’s academically focused. So, it’s …hard work…valuing education, valuing leaning, and preparation for college. I feel it’s so focused for everyone. We’re getting everyone to where they need to get to college and through college. (Assistant to the Principal, personal communication, May 30, 3013)

Having the expectation and the determination that at-risk students would succeed was a common belief for many teachers and administrators. Despite the many barriers that the students faced, one of their primary goals was to prepare them for college. A teacher discussed the hard-ships and difficulties of under-resourced students. However, despite those barriers, there was a commitment that they would graduate from high school and be academically prepared for college. For this teacher, academic preparation for college was the biggest value.

Taking students who are under-resourced, that can mean a lot of things, financial or academically, and taking those students and guaranteeing that they will graduate from college. I feel like that is central. Whenever we make a decision;
that is what we are looking at. That is our goal. Obviously that is the biggest value. (Teacher A, personal communication, May 29, 2013)

Another teacher made similar comments which supported that statement that their goal was to get at-risk students academically ready for college. “We are college prep. Our students will attend and graduate from college. It is taking a lot of [work to help] students who are coming behind grade level and catching them [up] and making sure they survive and succeed in college” (Teacher B, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

Figure 23: A diagram of Cristo Rey Twin Cities college-going culture emphasizing the basic underlying assumption of building self-esteem and confidence.

**Basic Underlying Assumption of Building Self-Esteem and Confidence**
Emphasis on building student self-esteem and confidence was the third basic underlying assumption of Cristo Rey’s organizational structure. Almost all the students that attend Cristo Rey were poor and underrepresented. The importance felt by Cristo Rey to build student confidence and self-esteem could not have been more evident than in the case when students were asked to present in front of their classmates. Students were asked to recite a poem and express their feelings about Cristo Rey. These were freshmen at the end of the academic year. At the time of the presentation, students expressed a lot of emotion. Stories of heart-break and emotional pain were common. Several counselors, teachers, and administrators were in the back of the room. All were there to listen and offer support. There were multiple purposes for the presentation. One was to allow students to tell their story for healing; another was to build self-worth and value. The stories of heart-ache and pain were coupled with statements of thanks to what Cristo Rey has provided. Growing up in poverty had taken a toll on the students’ self-confidence and worth. The lack of self-esteem negatively affected academic performance, socialization, goal-setting, and much more. The staff knew that in order to educate the students and prepare them for college, they needed to build up their confidence. Living an environment of constant negativity creates a self-inflicted barrier to attending college. Many at-risk students had been told that they were unable to attend college because of limited financial resources or other reasons. An administrator commented on the student experiences:

Try to put yourself in that mindset. No one in my family graduated from college. No one in my family has graduated from high school. You have that pressure and expectation. If you achieve then everybody in your family is going to come to
you for advice, recommendations. It happened to me. It even happened to me. My family graduated from college. But my friends came to me because I went to a major university. Two or three years of college in particular. They called me. Even though I hadn’t achieved yet. That is the perception. So our kids that are first-generation, they say I am 18 years old and I am the brains and the achiever of the family. If I do not succeed, if I do not graduate, then my family will be right back to square one. It must be a very heavy burden. I have seen some of our kids flame out with that pressure. It’s all about confidence. Even though some can do, there is that self-doubt. Am I worthy of this? (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013)

The Principal also had strong beliefs in building student self-esteem. Much of the battle to get students to college was to develop their own self-esteem. The students had to believe that they could attend college. The ability to attend college was already within them. He commented on the creating a college-going environment as to the process it took Gutzon Borglum to sculpt Mount Rushmore. He stated:

Our biggest challenge is to get our kids to understand that it is within them that they can go to college. Borglum, the man who sculpted Mount Rushmore, said the faces were always in the rock. I just took away the layers. For our school, we want our families to know that it is within them [their child] to go to college; we just provided the environment so they can do that. (Principal, personal communication, May 30, 2013)

Specially designed student-based programs were held in the auditorium called the Kiva. The Kiva was a theater used for general assemblies every Monday and Friday.
Often, programs within the Kiva celebrated student successes. The Kiva was a general seating area which created an environment of community and support. The programs also created positive self-worth and confidence. An administrator described the Kiva in terms of it building student self-esteem and confidence:

Kiva is the all school homeroom or all school assemblies. I call it all school homeroom because we gather for prayer and announcements; but they are also honoring ceremonies. Every time a senior…has been accepted, [we announce their] name in lights and there is a lot of fanfare and a great deal of excitement. Students are called out and called down because you have been accepted to college and families are invited to school that day to join in. (President, personal communication, May 30, 2013)

*Figure 24:* Assembly in the Kiva. The picture illustrates an assembly of students and staff in the Kiva. Every Monday and Friday, the entire student body would assemble in the Kiva in the morning. Retrieved from www.fieldingnair.com
My final experience at Cristo Rey was a video that celebrated student success and built self-confidence. It was developed by the work-coordinator. Within the video were positive comments from the employers about student performance at the work-site. As a student would appear on the video, others would applaud and provide encouragement. Music was set to the background to the video. The lyrics of the song communicated support and encouragement. This video built student self-esteem and confidence.

Throughout the building I would find and see signs of encouragement. It was also common to see faculty members provide words of encouragement and support. On one occasion, a student was distressed regarding some matter. The administrator simply lowered the tension and anxiety felt by the student and told him that the situation would be “OK.” There was a sense of desperation felt by the student, but after the faculty member reassured him, the situation calmed. Often, faculty and staff made eye contact during class changes, providing a welcoming hello or a reassuring smile.

Within the halls were reminders of those recent alumni who were successful. Also, current students were given accolades and confidence boosters. On one bulletin board, a visual map had pins where recent graduates were attending college. Signs of encouragement and confidence builders were prevalent throughout the halls and in the classrooms. The website provided information on college acceptances and showed a commitment by Cristo Rey to develop a strong the college-going rate for their students. The website celebrated student acceptances to different colleges. Also, information about student accomplishments was provided. The website allowed for multiple facts to be viewed. It was used as a means to celebrate student successes and focused on the importance of being accepted to college and enrolling in college.
**Figure 25:** Accepted to college. The picture was taken front page of the Cristo Rey Twin Cities website. The picture celebrated the number of students accepted to college in February.

**Figure 26:** Employees of the month. The snapshot was from the front page of the Cristo Rey Twin Cities website. The picture identifies student who were awarded the employee of the month for third session.
In order to build self-confidence and self-esteem, Cristo Rey created a safe environment for their students. This safe environment allowed the students to have multiple successes and build their confidence level. Cristo Rey intentionally created an environment which the students felt safe, loved, and protected. However, this safe environment did have some negative consequences. The safe environment made it difficult for the students to leave. A Jesuit teacher shared:

To get them to know that there’s more than what was just here. It’s sometimes hard to get graduates from Cristo Rey to leave this school, because they always come back. It’s just showing them that there’s a far bigger world out there. Sometimes being in the classroom, I tell them…see the world…It’s so interesting how small of a world vision that they have. [They feel] it’s just here. It’s right here. Everything they need is right here. (Jesuit Regent, personal communication, May 31, 2013)

To help counter the apprehension to leave this protective environment, students at Cristo Rey were required to participate in the work study program. The work study program was initially designed to provide financial resources for their high school education. However, the work-program had other benefits. Students had opportunities to gain corporate work experience, and the experience provided confidence. A recent graduate commented on his work experience, “I feel it prepares you better than any other school. I mean the jobs and then it’s a college preparatory school and it’s challenging. I saw it as a better opportunity than another school” (Alumni, personal communication, May 30, 2013). He continued to say that the work experience gave him confidence and self-worth. It provided a sense of responsibility:
Senior year I felt I had to be more responsible than I had because I worked at Best Buy. I had to maintain my grades. The sense of responsibility…was more of challenging at first, but then the year went by. From sophomore you get better. Junior year you are supposed to be on top of your game, a role model. I feel right now that it shaped me into the person I am. I feel so responsible. The work experience created a feeling of responsibility and self-confidence. The program is a great asset in developing the confidence level needed to succeed in high school and college (Alumni, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

When discussing the work experience, students communicated positive feelings. A student stated, “It is life changing. You just never expect yourself to be working or doing stuff that we are doing right now, especially since we are so young. We are sort of paving the way” (Student B, personal communication, May 30, 2013). Another student shared her story about how the work program has changed her life. She compared her life to that of her mothers. Her mom’s dream was to work as a receptionist in a professional setting. In the work program, she was able to live her mother’s dream. This experience built confidence and self-worth for the student. She knew that she could accomplish these goals because she had experienced work in the professional setting. The student stated:

It’s life changing. My story came to this; my mom’s dream job when she was my age was to be a receptionist. That was her dream job. I work at DDS and I am a receptionist part time…It’s interesting how you can see yourself living in the future applying for a job like that, instead of you know like manual labor. It gives you hope or at least background information you can use when applying (Student C, personal communication, May 30, 2013).
And another student communicated that his aspiration was to become a janitor. However, the work-experience changed his thoughts regarding this profession. He wanted a different type of life and profession. Without the work experience, the student confidence level would be negatively affected. The experience created a stronger feeling of self-worth. The students stated, “My job kind of affected what I wanted to be. This year I thought I [would] like to be a janitor. That’s not what I want to be, but I learned a lot from the accounting business” (Student A, personal communication, May 30, 2013).

The coordinator of the Executive Director of Corporate Work Study explained the positive impact of the work program. Students experienced true life lessons and understood the importance of hard work. They may have experienced failure, but they were also given the opportunity to learn from their mistakes:

I don’t even know if our students can identify why that is so big. I see it as someone showing up on a consistent basis. It is somebody modeling hard work. It is somebody taking the time to teach them to be successful. It is failing but not being fired [or] it is failing and being fired. [They] are then learning why that happened and going through a process and getting a second chance. Kids completely excel when they have a second chance. It’s all the things that they wouldn’t see anywhere else. It’s making them professional. (Executive Director of Corporate Work Study, personal communication, May 31, 2013)
Espoused values related to building self-esteem and confidence. Three values associated with the basic underlying assumption of building self-esteem and confidence emerged for me. They included building college knowledge, providing hope and opportunity, and setting life-goals. Building college knowledge was an important part of the college counseling office. These are programs which help students understand college terminology, enrollment processes, and other programs. Building college knowledge was related to building self-esteem and confidence because students needed to
be able to understand that they could go to college and that they were capable of succeeding in college before they would take part in programs which build college knowledge. The second espoused value was providing hope and opportunity to the students. Much of this was done through the building structure and through various programs. Students needed hope and an opportunity to succeed in order to build their own self-worth and confidence. The final espoused value was goal-setting. Students needed to set life-goals and aspire to success. The faculty and staff at Cristo Rey purposely developed program which pushed student’s to set positive goals for themselves. They wanted them to look into the future and aspire to great things.

Espoused value of building college knowledge. First-generation, low-income, at-risk students typically do not understand the college-search process. Information about choosing the right college, financial aid, campus environment, and the application process are pieces of information that first-generational students would not receive at home. College knowledge was taught at Cristo Rey. An administrator at Cristo Rey stated:

We do a great job of helping our kids get through. We hold their hands figurative and sometime literally across the way. When you go out to the real world, you don’t have that. You are on that college campus on you own. You have to have to make your own decisions. You have to decide if you are going to class. You have to decide on long you are going to study for the test. Sometimes are kids are not prepared for the realities of that. As a faculty and staff we tell them what is coming. We try to drill it into their head. You are going to need X amount of time for studying. I think sometimes
they hear and say to themselves that they can do it. Until you are in that situation, they will say perhaps I wasn’t prepared as I thought. (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013)

Another teacher discussed college-knowledge in terms of building a college environment. He discussed the importance of establishing the idea that everyone would graduate and go to college. College counseling played an important role in developing college knowledge; however, all the faculty and staff felt obligated to share their personal experience about college. Building college knowledge was a responsibility for all staff and faculty members. He said:

Talk about building a college culture, we have to build that. It is not assumed.
Not at a school where it is known that everyone will graduate and go on to college. Here, college counseling has done a wonderful job. But, all the teachers have done wonderful jobs saying what it [college] will feel like. This is what you are going to have to do to get in and do well. (Teacher B, personal communication, May 29, 2013)

The college counselor stated that the students were provided with college visitation trips with the parents. The process was in place for the families to meet admission counselors, visit campuses, and discuss concerns and issues after visiting the campus. The visitation was important because it included the student and his/her family. The visitation was designed to increase college knowledge and to build a stronger understanding of higher education.

One example of a way in which the school built college knowledge and alleviated fear of college was to bring back recent graduates to talk to the current students about their
first year in college. Students asked questions such as what college was like; how hard were the classes; and other issues of competency. Often the questions had to do with “is it possible” or “how hard.” There were questions filled with self-doubt and a lack of confidence. Typically, the answers would be reassuring to the students. The alumni answered all their questions, and provided information to alleviating anxiety. A large portion of problems came from fear of the unknown.

Espoused value of setting life-goals. One of the most important aspects of going to college is emphasizing the importance of setting life-goals. The expectation from Cristo Rey was that all students who graduate were going to college. The Principal stated: “Students come first. We do everything within our means to help a student advance. That’s the key thing. Our goal is that 100% who graduate from Cristo Rey, a 100% will graduate from college” (Principal, personal communication, May 30, 2013). Cristo Rey had 100% of their graduates accepted to college. They may have attended and enrolled in a two-year or four-year college, but the expectation for post-secondary education remained. Developing life-goals was related to building self-confidence and self-esteem because student needed confidence to believe that they could achieve a college degree. Building a culture of high expectation was part of the process. Faculty and staff were determined that each student’s goal was to go to college. As one teacher stated:

The most intense stuff has been here. I feel like we have a culture of very high expectations. People understand that this is what you are going to do. It is not something like we want all our kids to go to college, you are going to college. We are going to do whatever it takes to get you to go to college. (Teacher C, personal communication, May 29, 2013)
As students entered Cristo Rey, the idea of going to college was not in their plans. The thought or the idea of attending college was difficult. However, as the students continued their enrollment at Cristo Rey, their goals changed. College was a stronger reality for them. In a small group conversation with Cristo Rey students, they discussed the change in their thought process as they continued their education at Cristo Rey. “College is in the plan for me. It hasn’t been always that way. I didn’t even think about college until I was like late junior year, just accomplishing one of my goals in life” (Student A, personal communication, May 30, 2013). I asked whether graduating from college was a goal in life. He responded, “Yes, just doing what my parents couldn’t do, that’s kind of what it is” (Student A, personal communication, May 30, 2013). Another student made a similar comment:

   My freshman and sophomore year I could care nothing about school. My last thought was school. My first thought was having fun. I wasn’t even thinking of my future. It wasn’t going to happen…Now; I’ve set life goals up for myself of what I want to do. I’m just going to accomplish all of those goals, like graduating. (Student B, May 30, 2013)

Espoused value of hope and opportunity. One of the emphases of building a college-going culture was the ability of the faculty and staff to provide a sense of hope and opportunity to the students. Student started at Cristo Rey with very little opportunity to prove themselves or to succeed. The environment they lived in was poor and communicated a depressing state of existence. It was a hopeless environment. This environment changed for the students when they arrived at Cristo Rey.
Cristo Rey building looked beautiful in a neighborhood which was stricken with poverty. From my perspective, it was startling to look at it in comparison to the neighborhood. The students most likely were amazed at the cleanliness and beauty of the structure. Because it was so nice, it communicated hope and a great opportunity. Students felt a difference when they walked into the school. The building had air-conditioning, art, bold colors, natural light, and new furniture. It was a stark difference to the poverty stricken locations that the students were accustomed. The building was a part of the college-going culture. I felt a difference as I walked into the building. I understood that there was something special about Cristo Rey by just looking at the physical structure. Students realized when they walked into the facility that it represented an opportunity for a better future and hope.

Imagine living in poverty and then walking into a new school building. The front entrance was all windows, with a large mural painting of St. Ignatius and Colin Powel. St. Ignatius was the founder of the Jesuits and Colin Powell was a strong advocate for the Cristo Rey Twin Cities educational system. In the halls were pictures of art and artifacts relating to the Jesuit educational mission. The school was bright with different colors. Windows and glass were prevalent. Signs, pictures and art work all communicated that this school was focused on opportunities and hope.

Many of the faculty and staff communicated that students needed an opportunity to be successful. It was much more than teaching them the academics, they needed opportunities for success. The Assistant Principal stated that many of the Cristo Rey students come from an environment which limits their potential. They lack support, hope
and opportunity. Cristo Rey tried to change the students’ environment into one of hope. He stated:

A lot of students are coming from places where they’re used to more of a military state approach. An administrator is someone on the other team that you try to avoid. The whole idea is that we can support you and we love you and we can work with you. At the same time, we want to set expectations and boundaries so you can reach your dream. (Assistant to the Principal, personal communication, May 29, 2013)

Espoused value of instilling pride in one’s own culture and race through education.

Instilling student pride in the Latino and African-American culture was a part of building relationships with students and their families. It can be very easy to fall into the mindset that you, as a worker at Cristo Rey are there to save a culture. Most of the faculty and staff at Cristo Rey were white, yet all the students that they served were underrepresented as minorities. The Cristo Rey student population was 70% Latino and 30% African American. As a result, many of the staff and faculty tried to assimilate into the culture of the students and families they served. The Director of Activities and Athletics stated, “I try to instill in our students, not to look for cultural differences, but cultural similarities….You like family gatherings, so do we. You celebrate sweet 15, we celebrate sweet 16. Let’s talk about things that unify us. Not things which divide us” (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013). There was a lack of infusing pride in the Latino and African American culture at Cristo Rey. Many times, the faculty and staff were overcompensating for ways in which they were similar instead of celebrating the differences. This effort causes confusion for the
students they educate. There is a difference in race and culture and it is important for the students to understand the differences especially so that they can handle prejudices outside the Cristo Rey culture. In an interview with a teacher, a comment was made similarities in culture. “For me, just standing in-front of the class, honestly as much as people of color teaching people of color, I think people from working class families relate to people from working class families can influence other working class families. They can relate. There are a lot of similarities, even though I am a white male” (Teacher C, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

There are cultural differences that need to be celebrated and discussed within the classroom. Gloria Ladson-Billings writes that the idea of coming in and saving students can unintentionally perpetuate class differences and lead to lack of pride in one’s own culture and heritage. She contends, “well-intentioned young people who come into teaching every year hoping to do good for those ‘poor black children’ (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. viii).” Ladson-Billings went on to communicate that teaching should develop pride in the student’s ethnicity and culture. Otherwise, student self-esteem and self-worth will suffer. She (2009) further adds, “they [excellent teachers] believed it was important that the students were well grounded in their own culture as a prerequisite to becoming versed in what might be considered mainstream culture.” Cristo Rey is beginning to address the importance of developing pride in the student culture, but continual improvements are necessary. The Director of College Counseling, when discussing difficulties for students at Cristo Rey, remarked, “They [students] will tell you I go to school with different types of people that I've never met before. The African-American students will say that this is a Mexican school.” Cristo Rey had just begun to scratch the
surface of increasing pride in the African American and the Latino culture; however, it was a process at its early stages. I had anticipated a stronger showing of pride in culture and heritage in the educational process. There were some examples of staff and faculty who worked on instilling pride in the student’s race and heritage. The College Counselor discussed the college search process pertaining to race. “We go to colleges and do tours. I encourage colleges to get bilingual tour guides for the parents otherwise a few of us are doing all the translating. Some of the secret weapons for the campuses are professor or some other administrator who is Latino can get in front of them and can speak culturally of what it’s like at their campus and the challenges” (College Counselor, personal communication, May 29, 2013).

Another example of infusing cultural pride in one’s own race was from the Director of Athletics and Activities. He stated, “I have a deep passion for history. One of the things I do is on the first day of school I say can you look through this big book and say can you find an image in this book that defines who you are? Who your heritage is; find an image. Usually for African Americans is finding a picture of slaves or civil rights movements, MLK. If you are Hispanic, you find immigration in the border or Catholicism. Aztecs or Mayans People are usually limited to what they can find. I ask them, is that all your culture has brought to the table? Is there more to your story? They will always say there is more. Our goal is to find out what our culture is all about (Director of Activities and Athletics, personal communication, May 29, 2013).” Cristo Rey has had some successes in developing student pride in their own culture and race; although, more work needs to be done to infuse cultural pride.

**Conclusion**
In order to truly understand how to increase the college-going rate for an at-risk student, one must look further than strategies. There are many different strategies for increasing the college-going rate. Many of these strategies will be for not unless there are fundamental “truths” at the foundation. The purpose of this research is to understand a college-going culture for at-risk students. The research questions in this dissertation are:

1. How is a strong college-going culture for at-risk students shaped?
2. Why is this college-going culture shaped in such a way?

Based on field observations, interviews, and other research there were three basic underlying assumptions found at Cristo Rey. They are: 1.) the emphasis of a loving and caring culture for the individual student. 2.) a commitment by faculty, staff and administration to educate the poor and disadvantaged. 3.) a belief in building self-esteem and confidence.

Caring for the individual was communicated in different ways. One was through love for the students and the community. The espoused values of establishing trust and respect was a way to build a culture of care. Trust and respect was needed from the students, parents and the Cristo Rey staff. Also, trust and respect was required to develop a strong relationship. Another espoused value was a concern for the physical and mental health and safety for each student. A few examples of artifacts found to support a caring culture were found in the e-newsletters, programs and material.

The second basic underlying assumption was a commitment by faculty, staff and administration to educate the poor and disadvantaged. Faculty and staff believed that their work within the school was impactful and not questioned. This belief was communicated through the importance of role modeling and mentorship, the emphasis on
hard work, and strong academics. Spirituality and teaching life lessons were also part of the value system.

The third basic underlying assumption was a commitment toward building self-confidence, and self-esteem. Building and creating college knowledge for the students was seen as important to increase the college-going rate. Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ also emphasized setting life goals, creating an environment of hope and opportunity for the student body, and instilling student pride and understanding in the culture and heritage. These were regarded as important in creating a strong college-going culture.
Chapter 5

Conclusions

Within higher education, there is a large segment of our youth which is failing. Many of these young people are poor and marginalized, with little opportunity for a college degree. A disproportionately large number are first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students who face a future of low-income wage jobs and little hope for a better life than their parents. The U.S. educational system has identified that first-generation and low-income students have a low-college-going rate compared to their peers. Little progress has been made to successfully reduce these negative trends. There is a large amount of research within academia which demonstrates that low-income, first-generation, underrepresented students are at-risk. In addition, a variety of strategies have been designed to improve the college-going rate of these student populations. Examples of some of these strategies include internship programs, intense academic advising, and mentoring programs. However, little is known about the effectiveness of programs created to improve the college-going rates of at-risk students.

Much research has focused on strategies and programs at the expense of studies on developing and maintaining a college-going culture for at-risk students at the secondary level. It is important to understand how and why a strong college-going culture is shaped for at-risk students in order to make progress in addressing the higher education’s national problem of unequal access to college education. My research at Cristo Rey brings to light a college-going culture of one high school for at-risk students.

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How is a strong college-going culture for at-risk students shaped?

2. Why is this college-going culture shaped in such a way?
To address these research questions, I embarked on a qualitative case study which followed Schein’s theory of organizational culture and Ladson-Billings’ ideas of culturally relevant pedagogy. Cristo Rey was used as a site for my research because it is a school with exceptional college-going rates for at-risk students. For Schein (1985) “culture is unconscious and taken for granted by the insiders, it cannot be studied through obtrusive methods such as questionnaires. To get at the underlying assumptions, one must observe and interview and then work out the assumptions” (p. 312). Over a one week period, I conducted an extensive amount of interviews and observations at Cristo Rey Twin Cities. My research found that three basic underlying assumptions were at the core of Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ culture. These assumptions were non-negotiable and thought to be true by all within the organization. At the same time, my research identified only few synergies between the community/home culture and the school culture. This chapter discusses the main findings of the study and the way they align with or contribute to current academic research.

The main findings in my research included the identification of three basic underlying assumptions. These assumptions were care and love for the individual student, a commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged, and a commitment to building student self-esteem and hope. In addition, a set of espoused values related to the core assumptions; many artifacts helped me capture and understand Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ culture and how it was shaped.

Main Findings along the Research Questions

A strong college-going culture is shaped by building a culture of care for the individual, developing a team of faculty and staff who are committed to educating the
poor and disadvantaged, and maintaining a commitment toward developing self-efficacy and confidence for students. The college-going culture is shaped in such a way because changing beliefs and emotions will change human-behavior. Getting at-risk students to attend college will be effective on a significant scale if the educational culture changes the at-risk student’s feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. Creating a positive college-going rate for at-risk students must start at the fundamental core of human emotion and thought. Feeling loved, protected, and valued are human emotions which are essential for growth and improving the college-going rate.

How is this strong-going culture shaped? Based on the research at Cristo Rey Twin Cities, the culture was shaped by modifying certain hiring practices. Typically, employees had a value system which complemented Cristo Rey’s desired college-going culture. Many had a belief and were committed to educating and helping the poor before they were even at Cristo Rey. They felt joy and happiness in helping at-risk students. This was evident in many of the staff members’ feelings about their previous employment as well as comments during interviews. Observations by faculty and staff also supported this conclusion. The college-going culture was also shaped by policies and practices which emphasized the values of care and support, commitment to educating the at-risk students, and promoting student self-esteem and confidence. These value systems were communicated and believed at Cristo Rey Twin Cities. Artifacts, which promoted these values, were arranged throughout the building. The behavior of the faculty, staff, and administration were examples of how this college-going culture was shaped.

At the same time, the Cristo Rey college-going culture was a culture that did not necessarily align with the culture of the student population. My research found few
examples of strong synergies between the community/home culture of the Latino and African-American communities represented amongst the students, and the school culture.

**Main Findings**

*Figure 28: A diagram of Cristo Rey Twin Cities college-going culture.*

Figure 28 illustrates the different basic underlying assumptions and related espoused values. Also included on the outer-layer are artifacts. The graph shows Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ culture and identifies the value system. These values were identified through interviews, field observations and additional research.
My research found that a strong culture for increasing college-going rates for at-risk students was based on three basic underlying assumptions. These assumptions included care and love for the individual student, a commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged, and a belief in building self-esteem and confidence in the individual student.

**Caring and Loving Culture for the Individual Student**

During my field work at Cristo Rey Twin Cities and my interviews with faculty, staff and administration, the values of love, care, and support for the students describe the school culture. Faculty, administration, students, and staff felt that these terms communicated a deep compassion for the individual student. Love permeated the school culture, and those interviewed felt that support and care was required to create the culture that supports the achievement of a high college-going rate for at-risk students.

Love, support, and care were expressed and observed in a variety of ways. Many of the faculty and staff worked long-hours and sacrificed time from home and their personal lives to help the students. I observed many individual discussions, mentoring, and simple gestures which showed the care and compassion for each student. Much of the furniture within the school was arranged to cultivate small group discussion and individual attention. School culture was shaped through love and compassion for each student within the school and was reinforced during the interviews. Faculty and staff communicated that love was a key virtue of the school. The school was successful in increasing the college-going rate because they invested time and emotional resources to support each student. Cristo Rey was successful in building a culture which stressed love and care for individual students.
There were three espoused values related to a caring and loving culture. They included care for the community, trust and respect, and care for the emotional and physical health of the student. According to Schein (1985), espoused “values will predict much of the behavior that can be observed at the artifactual level. But those values are not based on prior cultural learning” (p. 17). These values were communicated through interviews and artifacts, and helped set policy. The espoused values specifically addressed students’ need for a caring and loving environment.

Care for the community. In interviews, the term community was also often coupled with the term love. Many of the participants interviewed felt they were part of something larger than themselves. Interviewees communicated a deep love for the students who made up the school community, and those that they helped. This love was not only isolated to the direct school community, but also included the local neighborhood and those who were poor and disadvantaged. Staff, faculty, and administration were committed to improving the lives of those they served through education. The idea of working toward a common mission and purpose developed the school as a team and a community.

Trust and Respect. Caring for the student was manifested through trust and respect. Trust and respect for the student was a vital part of a caring culture and emerged as espoused values at Cristo Rey Twin Cities. Many of the programs conducted at Cristo Rey were based on the espoused values of trust and respect. An example was the school’s discipline policy. Instead of administering a punishment for an infraction of the rules, administrators would use the incident as an opportunity for education. The discipline policy was based on the notion of respect and trust for the student.
Care for the emotional and physical health of the student. Another espoused value was care and support for the emotional and physical health of each student. The physical and emotional safety of the students was important. An example was Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ employment of licensed social workers to support and care for the students. Many of the students’ hardships could be traced to broken relationships and difficulties at home. Licensed social workers had an expertise in helping students’ emotional and physical needs.

Commitment to Educating the Poor and Disadvantaged

Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ faculty and staff had a commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged student. They believed that Cristo Rey’s educational process broke the cycle of poverty; many interviewed had personal experiences of being poor or had grown up disadvantaged themselves. They had a deep commitment toward social justice, all the faculty, staff and administration were committed to educating the poor and disadvantaged. In several interviews, many commented on the positive impact of Cristo Rey, and how the school’s value system matched their own value system. Faculty and staff felt that the work conducted at Cristo Rey was impactful and had a purpose.

A strong college-going culture for at-risk students was shaped by developing and maintaining a culture which valued the commitment to the education of the poor and disadvantaged. The commitment by the Cristo Rey Twin Cities school community fell under the category of basic underlying assumption in my research. Part of the commitment included the belief of the faculty and staff that a strong college-preparatory academic education was important in improving the college-going rate for at-risk students. Strong role models or mentors were also seen as important. Cristo Rey Twin
Cities’ culture emphasized spirituality, teaching students good life-lessons and the importance of hard work.

**Espoused Values related to a commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged.** My research showed that there were five espoused values related to a commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged. They were developing a strong academic preparation, using modeling and mentorship, spirituality, a development of teaching the necessity of hard work, and developing life lessons. All of these values were emphasized by Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ community and seen as an integral part of improving the college-going process.

**Strong Academic Preparation.** Strong academic preparation was a critical component in getting at-risk students ready for college. Students needed a strong college preparatory academic curriculum to be successful in higher education. At Cristo Rey Twin Cities, faculty and staff were committed to helping at risk students academically. Students were required to complete various academic standards to graduate. Proficiencies were provided to ensure that all receive a high quality academic education.

**Modeling and mentorship.** The importance of students having a mentor was a strategy used to increase the college-going rate. Modeling positive and good behavior was closely related. Many of the faculty and staff had a strong belief the effectiveness of mentorship and its critical role in the education at-risk students and as well as increasing the college-going rate for at-risk student. This was expressed specifically within the classroom and in the work program. In interviews, many commented that the work program provided students with an opportunity to navigate and experience the corporate world, but also to interact with working professionals. On the work-program site, the
Cristo Rey student would interact professionally with different corporate employees. Teachers, faculty and staff felt that they were mentors and served as role-models. Many of the faculty, staff, and administration came from poor or disadvantaged backgrounds themselves. This was part of the reason why many have chosen to work at Cristo Rey Twin Cities. As a college graduate, many of the Cristo Rey employees felt that they served students by being a role model or mentor.

Many of the faculty, staff, and administrators who work at Cristo Rey identified with the student hardships and barriers because several grew up poor, underrepresented, and were a first-generation student themselves. In several conversations, interviewees explained how they became affiliated with Cristo Rey. Often, their own barriers compelled them to give back and work at a place like Cristo Rey. Several commented how the value system of the school matched their own belief system. They felt that their work made a difference in the lives of those impoverished or at-risk. For many of those interviewed, seeing the students’ hardships was difficult.

**Spirituality.** All interviewed had a strong belief in the educational system. When asked about the culture and why Cristo Rey was successful, many interviewees commented on the importance of spirituality and the Jesuit ideology. Not all who worked at Cristo Rey considered themselves “religious” but many commented on a higher calling or a vocation. The Jesuit ideologies were present and communicated throughout the entire building through artifacts. Many who associated themselves with the Catholic faith felt that they served God by helping the disadvantaged. They worked at a place which served God and the poor. Several described Cristo Rey and the work that they did as something
bigger than themselves. In several interviews, the commitment toward social justice was communicated.

**Hard work.** Another value that fell under the umbrella of commitment toward educating the poor was the emphasis on hard work on part of the faculty and staff. Several staff interviewees indicated that Cristo Rey would not be successful if not for the dedication and the willingness of faculty and staff. Because of the individual attention to each student and the amount of care that was put into helping each at-risk student, the value of hard work was emphasized as part of the Cristo Rey culture. Some felt the students notice their hard work and saw the dedication as a sign of care and support.

**Developing life-lessons.** Part of the educational process at Cristo Rey included teaching students to make good life decisions. This may pertain to making good decisions about schooling, substance abuse, or developing good habits. Cristo Rey Twin Cities emphasized to the students that they were responsible for their own actions and decisions. This was implemented in the discipline policy and provided student guidance regarding life decisions.

**Building Self-Esteem and Confidence**

Building a school culture which emphasized self-esteem and confidence for at-risk students was the third basic underlying assumption. At Cristo Rey Twin Cities, all the at-risk students grew up in an impoverished environment with little or no resources. Many had been told all their lives that they could not achieve in school or were unable to attend college because of limited financial resources. At-risk students have barriers which inhibit them from attending college. Many of the barriers included their own self-doubts and issues of competency, and the lack of support and negativity in their home.
environment contributed to a low college-going rate. Instilling confidence, and self-esteem in students will change the way an at-risk student thinks and feels about himself or herself, therefore, increasing the likelihood of the student attending college. Confidence played a vital role in college-going rates for at-risk students.

**Espoused values related to building student self-esteem and confidence.** Four espoused values related to building student self-esteem and confidence, including developing an environment of hope and opportunity, building college knowledge with the student population, and building student pride in their own culture and heritage, and developing goals. Ladson-Billings (1995) wrote that students needed to “accept and affirm their cultural identity” (p. 469). Developing goals was different than developing life-lessons. Students needed to set goals and have a plan to meet those goals. All four were seen as important parts of developing strategies for increasing college-going rates.

**Developing an environment of hope and opportunity.** Cristo Rey Twin Cities developed a culture which emphasized the values of hope and opportunity. Students needed to believe that they could succeed. Many of the students at Cristo Rey grew up in an environment in which they were told that they couldn’t achieve a college degree for various reasons, Cristo Rey pushed the idea that they could achieve. They provided the students hope. Opportunities were available for the students as well. This was through the work program and other educational advantages.

**College knowledge.** Based on information during interviews and field observations, faculty, staff, and administrators were committed to teaching college knowledge to the poor and disadvantaged. Their commitment was not only expressed in interviews, but also supported by observed artifacts. Previous research concluded that first-generation,
low-income, at-risk students typically do not understand the college search process. Information about choosing the right college, college financial aid, campus environment, and the college application process were some examples of information pertaining to college knowledge. Cristo Rey Twin Cities’ staff and faculty were aware of the deficiencies and the lack of information. Programs were enacted to teach college knowledge at Cristo Rey Twin Cities.

**Developing life goals.** One of the most important aspects of going to college was allowing the students to set attending college as an important life-goal. The expectation from Cristo Rey was not that students would go to college, but which college they would attend. The students may attend and enroll in a two-year or four-year college, but the expectation for post-secondary education remained. Growth and development as a person is an important part of the college search and decision making process. The development as a person is a natural part of the high school experience; however, Cristo Rey developed students to increase their own expectations and to make sound life-goals. Shaping a strong college-going culture involved emphasizing a commitment to allowing students to make positive life-decision and setting-goals. Goal setting influenced behavior and provided a focus for students. The at-risk students were given an opportunity to see obtainable opportunities through the work program and returning Cristo Rey graduates who were enrolled in college.

**Developing pride in culture through the educational process.** There were a number of attempts to incorporate a pride in ones on culture and heritage in the educational system, but in many cases Cristo Rey Twin Cities fell short in this aspect. More needed to be accomplished to infuse a pride and understanding in the student culture through the
educational environment. Ladson-Billings (1995) communicated that a culturally relevant pedagogy needed to be in place for underrepresented students. By having this pedagogy in place, students would be infused with a pride and have the ability to critique areas in which racism would affect their feelings about themselves and affect their performance in college and life. Cristo Rey Twin Cities needed to develop this pedagogy further within their educational system. There were a few instances in which cultural values were emphasized, but more needed to be developed.

**Discussion and Findings**

![Figure 29: A diagram of Cristo Rey Twin Cities college-going culture.](image)
This study captured the core elements of a successful college-going culture for at-risk students, developed at Cristo Rey Twin Cities high school. In this respect, the study’s contributions to research in several important ways. First, my research was a unique study within the educational research community. There are many areas in which academic literature focuses on research that identify and analyze strategies and tactics for improving college-going rates for high school students. This was one of the few studies which explored the development of a school culture for at-risk students at the high school level. My study goes to the core of the emotional experience and identifies fundamental values needed to make a long-term change to the college-going rate for at-risk students.

My second contribution in this study is the identification of the basic underlying assumptions within an educational culture designed to increase the college-going rate for at-risk students. I was able to identify three basic underlying assumptions and communicate how these assumptions are developed and maintained. The basic underlying assumptions were care and love for the individual student, a commitment by the school community to educate the poor and disadvantaged, and the emphasis on developing student self-esteem and confidence. My third contribution entailed research which reinforced current assumptions regarding barriers for at-risk students and showed the importance of developing culture to make a positive change in the college-going rate. Research has shown that at-risk students face numerous challenges and difficulties. My research complemented those studies and provides elements which helps reduce these barriers to higher education for at-risk students.

The Discussion of Care, Love and Support for the Individual Student
Care and love for the student is needed in a culture for at-risk students. In my research, I found that there was an inherent theme within the culture of Cristo Rey. It was the simple notion that each student is significant, valued, and cared for. At the start of my research, I noticed programs, signs, and other artifacts within the school which pointed toward aspects of support and care. However, it was not until the interviews, that a common theme emerged in the discussion. Faculty, staff, and administration fully believed that in order to affect the college-going rate for at-risk students, they had to first address their perceived lack of support and love. This is not to say that family members or others did not provide support and love for the students, but maybe for the first time, these students were in a community in which everyone cared for them and they were supported. This love and support came from those outside their family and neighborhood. This was conveyed clearly in the interviews and within my field work observations. Examples of how the love and support were expressed were through simple one-on-one interaction with the faculty and students, celebrations when student were accepted to a certain college, or a simple sign of encouragement from a faculty member when a student made a mistake. I saw students who were in pain getting hugs from counselors and true signs of genuine support. These expressions of love and support go to the core of a human emotional need, the need to be loved. How can one who has grown up poor, poorly educated and disadvantaged overcome the societal barriers? Cristo Rey simply focused a message of love and care for each student. This was their fundamental basic underlying assumption of building a strong college-going rate for at-risk students.
My research findings at Cristo Rey Twin Cities align with academic literature. Terenzini (1996) discussed the need for support for at-risk students. His research focused on the perceived lack of support for at-risk students on behalf of teachers and administration. Because the students did not feel supported, they would not ask for help or assistance and were easily discouraged when problems surfaced. These students would not look for guidance or assistance in the college search process (Terenzini et al., 1996). My research found similar results: unless students feel valued and supported, they will not seek help, they will not overcome barriers, and they will not be able to have the fortitude to perceive and go to college.

Similar studies from Phinney and Haas (2003) and London (1989) identify difficulties for at-risk students because of the lack of support, love, and care. While searching for colleges, high school students who were at-risk students experienced cultural, social, and academic issues in the college decision-making process (London, 1989). Their focus was on the lack of parental support. Difficulties were common for at-risk student going into college; however, transitioning challenges were even greater for students without proper support, care, and love. Transition without proper support and care negatively impacted the college-going rate for at-risk students. Phinney and Hass (2003) suggested that at-risk students lacked the parental support needed in the college search and attendance process (Phinney & Haas, 2003). As a result of the lack of support, care, and love, at-risk students felt like outsiders and were unable to overcome barriers. They felt that they were prejudged on their race and not on their merit or accomplishments (Phinney & Haas, 2003). These negative feelings and perceptions were heightened without a loving and caring community. Phinney and Hass (2003) concluded that support was critical in
increasing the college-going rate for at-risk students. Brewer and Lander-McMahan (2005) found that a loving and caring school culture was needed because first-generation students did not receive the needed support at home. Brewer and Lander-McMahan (2005) focused on parents of first-generation students. They found that parents of first-generation college students were more pessimistic regarding their child’s ability to attend and graduate from a post-secondary institution (Brewer & Lander-McMahan, 2005). Through interviews with faculty, staff and administrators, they communicated that there is a lack of support within the neighborhood community regarding attending college. My study found conclusions of pessimism, negativity and lack of support surrounding at-risk students. Yet, the culture instilled at Cristo Rey advocated for support and love to counteract the negativity. The college-going culture at Cristo Rey was based on support and love. Cristo Rey’s developed a culture which valued individuals and supported the aspiration to attend college.

There is limited research on the topics of support and love in a school culture to help build a strong college-going culture for at-risk students. Examples include academic research on parental or peer support, or the lack of support within the community for at-risk students. My research goes to the root of the issue and specifically identifies care and love as necessary in a school culture for at-risk students to positively increase the college-going rate. Much of the literature attributes low-college-going rates of at-risk students to lack of programs, manpower, or proper strategies. Examples include programs that emphasize mentoring, intense academic tutoring, advising, or activities which develop college knowledge; my research indicates that in order to implement these strategies, a culture of care and love within the school community must be in place.
Developing a culture of care, support, and love for each at-risk student requires a great amount of time and effort from faculty and staff. My study found that in order to build a culture of support, love and respect, the faculty, staff and administration need to provide programs, activities, and individual attention to creating this culture. The needed time and emotional commitment for an adequate support system was substantial. This emotional commitment can be overbearing and cause compassion fatigue.

According to Balfanz (2010), lack of human resources was a major factor in the struggle of most schools to increase the college-going rate. Manpower builds support and care for the at-risk students and helps increase the college rate. Cristo Rey’s staff and administration dedicated to the provision of a loving and caring environment consisted of people committed to helping. The hiring practices of the school, which matched people with the school’s core mission, and the personnel structure of the institution made sure that committed individuals will be hired. The hiring practices were conducted by the direct supervisor. Because the organizational structure is flat, there was an opportunity to develop and communicate the mission to those hired. In interviews, specific questions addressed beliefs and value systems of the candidate. Crito Rey Twin Cities looked to hire those who had a similar value system as that of the institution. Cristo Rey Twin Cities actively sought those who were committed to educating the poor, valued care and love in the educational process, and sought those who believed in a college preparatory environment. At the same time, all staff was stretched thin, but believed that and signs of emotional heartache and difficulties associated with compassion fatigue were apparent

Hooker and Brand (2010) developed key strategies which increase the college-going rate for at-risk students. Some strategies included learning labs, intrusive advising,
tutorial programs, and a comprehensive academic support programs (Hooker & Brand, 2010). My research suggested that in order to provide effective tutoring, advising and support programs, care and support must be part of the educational culture. Without a culture of care and love for the individual students, effective strategies such as intrusive advising and tutorial programs would not reach their fullest effect. Students must understand that they are cared for and loved in order to be fully invested in college-going strategies.

The Discussion of a Commitment Toward Educating the Poor and Disadvantaged

My research conducted at Cristo Rey concludes that to shape a strong college-going culture for at-risk students, there needs to be a commitment by faculty, staff and administration to educate the poor and disadvantaged. The commitment at Cristo Rey Twin Cities was expressed in a variety of different ways. Some through a spiritual ideology, others in a commitment in academic preparation, some through modeling and mentorship, while others through teaching students life lessons and emphasizing hard work by the faculty and staff. Literature supported many of the espoused values that linked to this basic assumption; however, little was available regarding the importance of developing a culture of commitment toward educating the poor and disadvantaged. Much of the research emphasized the importance of academic preparation for at-risk youths; rarely did studies go deeper regarding the development of appropriate culture. Without question, faculty talent and the ability to properly teach an at-risk student is important, but to truly make a long-term and positive impact on the college-going rate for at-risk youths, the school culture must emphasize the commitment to educating at-risk the poor and disadvantaged. At Cristo Rey Twin Cities, the commitment to educating the
poor and disadvantaged was regarded as a strong factor in successfully getting at-risk students to college. My research stresses the development of school culture as a fundamental in positively changing the college-going rate for at-risk students.

Within higher education, academic institutions compete heavily for high achieving students, yet for those who grow up disadvantaged, access remains an issue. Our educational system is criticized for perpetuating poverty for at-risk students. Within Cristo Rey, they believed that education was the key to breaking the cycle. Because of this belief, there was a non-negotiable commitment to educating the poor. In one of my interviews, a faculty member commented that he believed that education was the key to transforming the local neighborhood. He also stated that Cristo Rey was not the only form of an effective education which helps at-risk students, but definitely believed that their work made a positive impact on the student lives.

Prior research has focused on the importance of academic preparation for the poor and disadvantaged. Hooker and Brand (2010) communicated the importance of academic preparation for at-risk students for college. Similarly, Gladieux and Swail (2000) asserted that in order to improve the college-going rate for at-risk traditional students, a rigorous college preparatory curriculum was essential. The commitment to educating the poor and the importance of a rigorous college preparatory curriculum are different in meaning, but there are similarities. My research at Cristo Rey suggests that it is critical for faculty, staff, and administration to believe that education is a primary key to helping the poor and disadvantaged. In doing so, they maintain a culture of love and support.

In my study, the importance of modeling and mentorship was emphasized. This was expressed in a variety of different ways. One of the most telling was the work site. The
original concept of the work program was to offset financial constraints to the education. However, what was found was that the work program turned out to be a great strategy for providing role models and mentors. Students were given opportunities to work side by side with professionals and view their work ethic and their interaction in the work-place. It also led to opportunities for informal discussion and to ask questions about how they got to this position or employment level. The importance of modeling and mentorship was communicated in academic literature. McPherson (2011) wrote that “they [at-risk students] don’t have adults to turn to who have the knowledge, experience, and confidence to guide them on successful paths” (p. 34). McPherson (2011) also felt that at-risk students were negatively affected by the lack of role models and mentors with experience in the college setting.

Another area related to the commitment to educating the poor and the at-risk was the notion that students needed role models and mentors to make good life decisions. A good example was the discussion regarding the importance of resiliency. The willingness to persevere and not give up on a difficult task was an example of a good life decision. Faculty and staff believed that students needed role models and mentor to show them the importance of making good life choices. My findings align well with prior research. For example, McKinney, Flenner, Frazier and Abrams (2006) wrote, “It is critical that teachers understand the concept of resiliency and those factors that foster resilience. Equally important, teachers need to model resiliency” (p. 5). Similar to concepts of resiliency, good study habits, living a healthy life style, staying away from drugs and alcohol are all examples of good life decisions for teenagers.

**The Discussion of Student Self-Esteem and Confidence**
Much of the academic research concludes that student confidence and self-esteem are important to improving the college-going rate. In my research, the commitment to developing at-risk students’ self-worth was a fundamental part of increasing college-going rates. Unless students truly believed and felt that they could achieve, they would not put in the effort or the commitment needed to go to college. Building self-esteem and confidence had to be engrained in a school’s culture because motivation and self-confidence were directly related. Academia recognizes the importance of self-confidence and self-esteem; however, little research exists related to building student self-esteem in school culture. College-going strategies will not be as effective unless there is a school culture which builds student self-esteem and confidence. My research supports the conclusion that a culture which builds student self-esteem and confidence is critical in improving college-going rates for at-risk students.

In order to understand why confidence and self-esteem is important in building a college-going culture for at-risk students, we must understand the definition of self-efficacy. Literature tells us that self-efficacy is a person’s belief in his/her ability to accomplish a goal or task (Multon, Brown, Lent, 1991). These beliefs fluctuate with experience and social interaction (Multon et al., 1991). Students’ self-efficacy develops and is influenced by environmental factors and personal interactions (Multon et al., 1991). Torres and Solberg (2001) define self-efficacy as “one’s judgments about one’s ability to organize thoughts, feelings, and actions to produce a desired outcome” (p. 53). My research demonstrated Cristo Rey’s faculty and staff’s committed to building student confidence and self-esteem. Many communicated in interviews that if the students did not believe that they could achieve college attendance, then all the academic preparation
and other programs that Cristo Rey provided would be ineffective. Students had to believe in themselves in order to achieve and be successful. My research discovered that this was a fundamental truth and a basic underlying assumption at Cristo Rey Twin Cities.

Research has shown the effect of low self-confidence on college-going rates for at-risk students. Hellman (1996) concluded that first-generation students have a lower sense of self-efficacy than traditional students (Hellman, 1996). The lower self-efficacy contributed to a lower college attendance and achievement rate. Unless a person believed that she/he could achieve something, the likelihood of meeting an objective decreased dramatically. Torres and Solberg wrote that at-risk students with a higher self-esteem perceived the college search process as a challenge rather than a barrier (Torres & Solberg, 2001). Another study related to self-esteem was Fischer’s (2009). He found that group stereotypes affected student self-esteem and individual performance. At-risk students’ identity was negatively affected by stereotypes. With lower self-esteem, student effort was decreased and motivation as lowered; as a result, academic outcomes were negatively impacted. At Cristo Rey Twin Cities, building self-esteem and confidence to improve the college-going rate was part of school’s culture and a basic underlying assumption. My findings on the importance of counseling and positive role models also aligned with prior research. For Gibbons and Shoffner (2004), for example, counseling and positive role models played important roles in developing self-confidence. College-going rates were directly affected by the belief that one could be successful in college (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004).
My findings on the centrality of college knowledge to Cristo Rey’s college-going culture also aligned well with prior research. Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2009) maintained that the development of college knowledge was a primary area for improving college readiness. Programs that focused on the college-going rates for high school students typically had strong academic curriculums and provided college knowledge. Faculty and staff played a critical role in imparting knowledge to students (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Tomatzky, Cutler and Lee (2002) also speaks of the importance of teaching college knowledge to at-risk students. York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) also asserted the lack of college-knowledge amongst at-risk students.

Similarly, my research found college-knowledge to be important for building a strong college-going culture for at-risk students. In one of my observations, I was able to view recent Cristo Rey Twin Cities alumni who came back from college to tell freshmen about the college experience and to provide information about their experience. Students were able to ask questions and gain an insight to the college search process that they normally would not have gotten at home. At Cristo Rey, faculty and staff emphasized the development of college-knowledge and considered it to be a significant role in a college-going culture. I was able to meet with recent alumni in the high school classroom and talk about college and the college lifestyle. Also, faculty and staff were commitment to teaching college knowledge through programs and information sessions. For example, college knowledge was taught through the college counseling office by offering information sessions to students and parents. Also, parents and students were part of a college tour program coordinated through the college counseling office. Another important part of the college-going culture at Cristo Rey was the understanding that
students needed to set goals. Having students set high educational aspirations was an important part of increasing the college-going rate for at-risk students. This finding was supported in research by Olive (2010). Olive (2010) maintained that goal setting and the belief that one could achieve that goal was a great motivator. However, college attendance was typically not a goal for at-risk students. First-generation, low-income students had lower educational aspirations (Olive, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996). Educational aspirations were very important in understanding deficiencies (Olive, 2010).

Another important part of increasing student self-confidence and esteem was the ability to build pride in the student’s own culture and race (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The term culturally relevant pedagogy is a “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspective that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Some signs of cultural relevance were visible throughout Cristo Rey’s college-going culture. Efforts to infuse pride in one’s culture and heritage into the educational curriculum face many challenges. Such efforts require a teaching staff to be adept at communicating the values of the student’s own cultural identity in the educational process. As the Director of Student Life and Activities shared, he asked students to find examples of their own culture and race in the history texts. As a result of this request, students found very little. He challenged the students by asking them if their culture has brought more to the table. He then communicated that they needed to find out more regarding their own culture and heritage.
Culturally relevant pedagogy infuses pride, respect, and appreciation in one’s own culture through the educational process. Only a few artifacts and references throughout the interviews related to efforts to bring in synergy the students’ community/home culture and the school culture. In addition, there were also only a few signs of a strong belief in the ability of at risk students to excel. While teachers and staff members worked to build students’ self-confidence that they can get ready for and perform in college, these beliefs reflected efforts to bring students up to performance levels of the dominant culture.

Establishing synergies between the community/home culture and the school culture are critical to a positive college-going culture, including the one of Cristo Rey. In order to increase student self-esteem and develop a strong self-confidence for going to college and succeeding, students need to be proud of their culture and their heritage. Many of the faculty and staff at Cristo Rey were from out of the neighborhood area and were White. Members of the neighborhood were rare amongst the staff and faculty ranks. According to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), “culturally relevant pedagogy must provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically (p. 476). I found that Cristo Rey made sporadic efforts to communicate a respect for the Latino and African American culture. Examples of artifacts and expressions which would increase cultural pride in the Latino and African American culture included some posters of Latinos and African Americans who had positively impacted social justice. Despite these signs, efforts in this direction fell short in developing a pride in their own culture and race. Students at Cristo Rey were succeeding academically, but more needed to be done for students to increase pride in the African American and Latino culture.

**Implications for Practice**
The findings of this research could offer helpful insights to practitioners who work with at-risk students. There are many centers, education institutions, and programs designed to get at-risk students to college. Without understanding the needs of the at-risk students, a culture of success cannot be built. Much of the literature focuses on strategies and practices for getting at-risk students to college. However, few go deeper to understand at-risk students’ fundamental needs to go to college. The values of support, commitment, and care can be lost in the quagmire of developing programs and strategies. In order for any method to be effective, as this research points, a set of fundamental values needs to be in place. Several of the faculty and staff interviewed stated they felt the Cristo Rey model was not the only effective program which gets at-risk students to college, but Cristo Rey was an effective model. Other models will work; however, they will not be successful unless the values of support, care, and commitment are part of the equations. Students must be in a school environment’s culture which stresses:

1.) Care and love for the individual students;

2.) A commitment to educating the poor and disadvantaged;

3.) A culture which focuses on building student self-esteem and confidence.

This research also complements current practices and strategies for at-risk students. If a positive college-going culture is in place as a foundation for at-risk students prior to entering higher education, the current strategies and programs will be more effective for retention and college graduation rates for the first-generation, poor and underrepresented student population.

Implications for Research
There is a large amount of research examining at-risk students and the barriers which limit them from going to college. However, little research exists for understanding how to shape and develop a college-going culture for at-risk students at the secondary level. My research was able to identify basic underlying assumptions for a school which had a strong college-going rate for at-risk students. Additional research at other institutions which are successful in getting at-risk students to college would further corroborate, or clarify, elements of the college-going culture identified in this study. In addition, further research can focus on the elements of a college-going culture for specific types of student populations. For example, is the basic underlying assumption for care and support as important for first-generation student or low-income students? Finally, further research on successful synergies between students’ home culture and a school’s culture will further contribute to understanding positive college-going culture.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, implementing a positive college-going culture for at-risk students would positively influence college-going rates. Within this chapter, I discussed my findings through my research with Cristo Rey Twin Cities. There were three basic underlying assumptions at Cristo Rey: care and love for the individual student, commitment to educating the poor and building student self-esteem and confidence. All the basic underlying assumptions were seen as critical in improving the college-going rates for the at-risk students. I encourage future practitioner to use this research to create and build a school culture which addresses many of the needs of the poor and disadvantaged. Cristo Rey has a proven track record for a strong college-going rate, but like any institution, no one is perfect. Improvements for instilling pride in one’s own
culture and race is necessary. However, despite some of the issues, a positive culture was established which increased college-going rates.
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Appendix A

Question Guide Area

In order to obtain information to answer the research questions, information from interviews with students, administrators, faculty, parents and employers will be grouped into the following subject areas.

Categories

- College knowledge related to what students and parents understand, and what administrators and faculty support
- Educational environment related to what the students perceive, what administrators and faculty believe is of importance
- Digital divide related to the student and parental perceptions and to the level of importance for the faculty, administrators, and employers
- Social class influences are perceived and understood by the administrators, faculty, employers, parents, and students
- Family influence as perceived by administrators, parents, students, faculty, and employers
- Peer and social support as acknowledged by the students and parents. Also, beliefs regarding peer and social support’s effects on students by faculty, administrators, and employers
- Self-efficacy and its influence on students and parents, as well as beliefs of its impact on college-going rates by administrators, faculty, and employers
- Educational aspirations of students and parents.