

UNIVERSITY OF REDLANDS

Allocating Opportunity:

The Role and Impact of School Counselors in Promoting Access to AP Coursework

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Leadership for Educational Justice

By

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## ABSTRACT

Allocating Opportunity:  
The Role and Impact of School Counselors in Promoting Access to AP Coursework  
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In the K–12 education setting, professional school counselors are uniquely positioned to support high quality educational opportunities for all students. At the secondary level, student participation in Advanced Placement (AP) programming can be viewed as one such example of opportunity. School counselors serve as student advocates by channeling information and creating access to educational opportunity like AP. This important work takes place in the context of a bureaucratic policy environment that necessarily shapes the way AP opportunity is allocated in the local context. Charged with promoting equity and access to educational opportunity for all students, school counselors operate in a space of tension, and even conflict, when district policy, school site policy, and organizational norms related to AP participation signal less-than-open access. In this environment, school counselor advocacy and leadership become increasingly important determinants of opportunity and academic outcomes, particularly for students in the margins. The aim of this qualitative study was to examine the extent to which school counselors (a) are enabled and/or constrained in their ability to create student access to AP coursework, (b) use discretionary decision making as they navigate local AP course-taking policy, (c) consider efficiency and equity as values associated with policy and counseling practice, and (d) identify and perceive justice in their local context of professional work.

*Keywords:* school counselor, educational opportunity, Advanced Placement (AP), allocate, advocate, access, policy, leadership, discretionary decision making, efficiency, equity, justice

## Dedication

To [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] for your enduring encouragement, understanding, support, and love.

You have made this possible. BKBH.

To the school counselors who participated in this study. The daily work you do is immensely important in the lives of students. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and perceptions.

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## Chapter One School Counselor Role and Student Opportunity

In the PK–12 education setting, professional school counselors are uniquely positioned to support high quality educational opportunities for all students. Tasked with academic advising, school counselors serve as student advocates by channeling information and creating access to educational opportunity. School counselors support students in identifying short- and long-term educational goals, help students understand how academic performance relates to their educational and career futures, and assist students as they explore postsecondary education and training (American School Counselor Association, 2019). This advocacy work takes place in the context of a bureaucratic policy environment and is influenced by multiple factors including the abundance and/or scarcity of resources. A 2018 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2018) indicated high poverty and small public schools provide fewer academic offerings, like advanced science and math courses, to prepare students for college. Similarly, rural schools have lagged behind in providing college preparatory coursework such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programming (Handwerk, Tognatta, Coley, & Gitomer, 2008; Theokas & Saaris, 2013). School counselors must find ways to navigate these resource challenges to stake out educational opportunity for their students.

In his discussion of the importance of schools, Walzer (1983) described educational goods as filling an “intermediate space” that families and political economies do not. Schools, teachers, and ideas “provide a context, not the only one, but by far the most important one, for the development of critical understanding and for the production, as well as the reproduction, of social critics” (Walzer, 1983, p. 198). As such, Walzer suggested these unique educational goods require their own unique processes for distribution. Consistent with Walzer, Elster (1992) defined the allocative principles underlying the distribution of goods, considered the actors

responsible for allocation, and highlighted the significant potential impacts on justice in the local context. Multiple examples of these educational goods exist in PK–12 institutions.

In the sphere of education, one such good is student participation in AP programming. Advanced Placement coursework is advantageous and influential in terms of academic achievement and the college admission process (as a mark of distinction, college preparedness, or potential for success) and affords an opportunity to earn college credit, which may lead to advanced college standing and reduced college costs (Klopfenstein, 2004). By virtue of their professional role, school counselors play an integral part in the allocation of AP opportunity at the secondary level. This responsibility does not, however, come without concern.

The rapid rate of change in the demographics of our nation’s P–20 school population has presented unique challenges, with gaps in both educational achievement and opportunity for Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native student groups specifically noted in the literature (McFarland et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). While U.S. public school student populations have become increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, and language, it is significant that enrollment rates in postsecondary education for students of color and/or students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds remain lower than rates for their white, middle and high socioeconomic status classmates (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2017). Advanced Placement programming has not been immune from these disparities, with access and achievement gaps linked to factors such as geography, income, and race (Finn & Scanlon, 2020).

Charged with promoting equity and access to rigorous educational experiences for all students, school counselors operate in a space of tension, and even conflict, when district policy, school site policy, and organizational norms related to AP course-taking signal less-than-open

access. Through the individual advising process, school counselors support student growth by encouraging the selection of challenging coursework that aligns to student interests. This advising process can be complicated by course-taking policies that limit access through prerequisite requirements and/or criteria for participation. These policies may, at times, run counter to the professional beliefs that underpin school counseling practice and may constrain counselor behaviors. Professional discretion and decision making may be influenced and, in turn, may alter the academic course of the student. In this environment, school counselor advocacy and leadership become increasingly important determinants of student opportunity and academic outcomes, particularly for students in the margins.

My aim, through this study, was to examine the extent to which school counselors (a) are enabled and/or constrained in their ability to create student access to AP coursework, (b) use discretionary decision making as they navigate local AP course-taking policy, (c) consider efficiency and equity as values associated with policy and counseling practice, and (d) identify and perceive justice in their local context of professional work.

This first chapter provides an introduction to the central components of this study. First, the AP program is briefly examined as one example of educational opportunity. Second, the role of school counselors as influencers of student opportunity is presented, along with a model for school counselor leadership imbedded in the concept of inclusivity. Third, a theoretical framework for justice is put forth to support our understanding of the distribution of educational goods and the potential consequences of these allocative processes. Additionally, the broader purpose, specific research questions, and significance of the study are presented. These subsections serve to prime the reader for the subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

## **Advanced Placement Participation**

A critical component of the transition to postsecondary enrollment and successful educational outcomes is participation in rigorous high school coursework (Gao, 2016; Sadler, Sonnert, Tai, & Klopfenstein, 2010). Advanced Placement courses are considered by many to be one element of a “content-rich” (Dougherty & Mellor, 2010) school curriculum that prepares students for college and career and participation in the larger society. Initially conceived in the 1950s to enhance the scholarship of high achieving students, the College Board’s AP program has grown to encompass over 30 courses taught in high school settings with the possibility of college credit based on AP examination performance (Zarate & Pachon, 2006). Advanced Placement was designed as an opportunity to address the academic needs of students, develop the quality of secondary instruction, and deliver qualified students to higher education and, in turn, the workforce.

The rapid expansion of the AP program in the 1990s coincided with national and state education leaders and policymakers urging additional rigorous high school offerings and expanded access for a broader cross-section of students (Handwerk et al., 2008). Consequently, significant concern has arisen regarding equity of access for economically disadvantaged and minority students and students residing in rural communities, with some likening the disparities to a modern-day form of segregation (Kohli, 2014). This is important given that AP proponents believe AP participation (a) prepares students for college-level coursework, (b) influences the college admissions process, and (c) allows students to earn college credit while in high school, potentially reducing higher education tuition costs (Dounay, 2006).

Even when AP coursework is available, district and local high school policies have the potential to constrain or enable student access. High schools may impose prerequisites for



enrolling in AP or use screening processes based on previous course grades, writing samples, and required summer assignments as qualifiers for participation. Alternatively, AP course-taking policy can serve to promote and intentionally encourage open access for all students who are interested, show academic promise, and are motivated to enroll (Bavis, Arey, & Leibforth, 2015). Consequently, AP course-taking policy and implementation holds potential to reinforce or undermine justice in the local educational context. Additional attention will be given in Chapter 2 to AP program opportunity gaps.

### **School Counselor Role**

School counselors are professionally situated to influence student opportunity through individual advising and the development of organizational structures (McDonough, 1997; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, Lee, Bryan, & Young, 2011; Smith, 2011). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) provided a national model for school counseling programs promoting professional relationships with students, families, and colleagues to facilitate student productivity and academic success. These activities are strategically focused to insure student access to rigorous and relevant coursework, with cultural competence and equity at the forefront (ASCA, 2012, 2019).

School counselors have the potential to be highly influential in facilitating college preparation and enrollment in higher education. While not a focus of this study, it is important to note that large student caseloads, the requirement of non-counseling duties, pressures related to school accountability, and a myriad of other factors have considerable bearing on their performance and effectiveness (McDonough, 1997; McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012; Perna et al., 2008; Smith, 2011; Woods & Domina, 2014). These constraints impact all students and can have particularly significant implications for first-generation college-going students and students

of color (Corwin, Venegas, Paz, & Colyar, 2004; Martinez & Welton, 2014; Ohrt, Lambie, & Ieva, 2009; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004; Vela, Zamarripa, Balkin, Johnson, & Smith, 2013; Walker & Pearsall, 2012).

Two aspects of school counselor role are of particular importance to this study. One aspect is school counselors' functional roles and responsibilities coordinated in the daily life of the school environment. The second aspect is school counselors' leadership centered on larger organizational goals and objectives. With these two aspects of school counselor role in mind, it is important to consider what prior research has revealed about actors in similarly complex professional environments. Sociological and educational researchers have examined the roles, practices, and impacts of workers in the public sector, including counselors at the secondary and postsecondary level (Barberis & Buchowicz, 2015; Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Dowd, Pak, & Bensimon, 2013; Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; McDonough, 1997; Rehberg & Hotchkiss, 1972; Rojas, 2018; Rosenbaum, 2011; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996; Smith, 2011; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Over time, and influenced by multiple factors from within and outside the educational context, descriptions of counselor role and behavior have evolved from those empirical findings.

Table 1 offers a preview of five such depictions or metaphors (gatekeeper, impartial cultivator, street-level bureaucrat, intermediary, and institutional agent) that have been gleaned from the literature as particularly germane to the role of school counselors. These metaphors are worthy of consideration as they serve as a frame for the functional role of the school counselor and take into account counselor-student interactions, decision-making principles and discretion, policy values of efficiency and equity, and the allocation of educational resources, The specific

relevance of these metaphors will be further detailed in Chapter 2 and applied to this study’s findings in Chapters 4 and 5.

Table 1

*Key Metaphors for School Counselor Role*

	Gatekeeper	Impartial Cultivator	Street-Level Bureaucrat	Intermediary	Institutional Agent
Previous Research	Cicourel & Kitsuse (1963); Rehberg & Hotchkiss (1972); Erickson & Shultz (1982)	Rosenbaum et al. (1996); Rosenbaum (2011)	Lipsky (2010); Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2012); Barberis & Buchowicz (2015)	McDonough (1997); Smith (2011)	Stanton-Salazar (2011); Dowd et al. (2013); Rojas (2018)
Considerations	Counselor-Student Interaction Efficiency vs. Equity Discretionary Decision Making Allocation of Educational Opportunity				

**School Counselors as Leaders**

While an exhaustive examination of school counselor leadership is beyond the scope of this dissertation, a discussion of school counselor role framed by social justice requires the consideration of educational leadership. According to the ASCA (2019), the notion of leadership is foundational to the professional role of school counselor. The ASCA’s (2019) national model supports the idea that school counselors “act as a systems change agent to create an environment promoting and supporting student success” (p. 10). Using both formal and informal leadership capacities, school counselors implement programming to uphold institutional goals while, at the same time, promoting and supporting success for all students.

As leadership and student access to educational opportunity are considered, it is important to incorporate ideas related to inclusivity. Cobb’s (2015) analysis of how elementary and secondary principals “envision and act in ways that foster inclusion within a school

community” (p. 213) is especially helpful in this regard, offering a vocabulary for the principal role that can be applied to school counselors as organizational leaders in the local context. Drawing from multiple leadership perspectives, seven key roles (*visionary, partner, coach, conflict resolver, advocate, interpreter, and organizer*) for fostering an inclusive environment were identified and described (Cobb, 2015). Cobb (2015) found these roles were revealed in the three domains of program delivery, staff collaboration, and parental engagement.

More specifically, the roles of visionary, conflict resolver, interpreter, organizer, and advocate seem to align with the role of the school counselor. Cobb (2015) described the visionary role as descriptive of one who communicates and encourages a school-wide belief in, and expectations for, inclusive programs. As conflict resolvers, principals facilitate problem solving and compromise when tensions occur related to processes and procedures (Cobb, 2015). Principals act as interpreters of research and policy to build programs, inform practices, and promote parental engagement (Cobb, 2015). In their response to the logistical needs of families and staff, principals may enact the role of organizer to formulate scheduled and calendars, create collaborative structures, and acquire and allocate resources (Cobb, 2015). As advocates, principals promote equitable and inclusive practices and seek out resources to advance educational opportunity (Cobb, 2015).

Like principals, school counselors work on the front lines of the three domains of program delivery, staff collaboration, and parental engagement. School counselors interact with multiple stakeholders to set the tone for equity, access, and inclusion in the school site environment. Additionally, school counselor practice includes the interpretation of policy and conflict resolution, along with organizational and advocacy work to manage, structure, and promote educational opportunity for all students.

Essential elements of both ASCA's (2019) and Cobb's (2015) models identify equity as a key value and suggest behavioral components of a professional role include (a) envisioning whole school expectations, (b) communicating and modeling equity beliefs, (c) interpretation of policy, and (d) critical advocacy responses to resource needs. These common elements provide a vocabulary to talk about, not only school counselor behavior, but also the potential opportunities to lead toward more socially and educationally just outcomes. School counselor leadership in light of Cobb's and ASCA's models will be further examined in combination with findings from this study in Chapter 5.

### **Purpose of the Study**

It is important to recognize that AP programming operates in an ever-changing political, social, and economic environment coupled with an increasing push for accessibility to higher education (College Board, 2001). The work of school counselors takes place in these same environments and is complicated by their direct interface with individual students and policy. In this study, I sought to investigate this complex intersection from the perspective of the professional school counselor. Previous researchers have made a distinction between the influence of school-level processes versus individual-level processes in AP course-taking (Klugman, 2013). School-level processes focus on course availability and access in districts and high schools and on policy and practices that regulate AP enrollment. Studies emphasizing individual-level processes consider student perceptions, decision making, and social influences related to course selection (Klugman, 2013).

School counselor behaviors (the ways they interpret and implement policy, and the ways they interact with and advise students) cross over and may simultaneously influence these two

processes. Though it is important to consider the impact of both processes and understand that overlap exists, in this study, I was primarily concerned with the former.

My intent, through this study, was to examine the extent to which school counselors (a) are enabled and/or constrained in their ability to provide student access to AP coursework, (b) use discretionary decision making as they navigate local AP course-taking policy, (c) consider efficiency and equity as values associated with policy and counseling practice, and (d) identify and perceive justice in their local context of professional work.

### **Specific Research Questions**

The following specific questions were explored:

1. To what extent are school counselors enabled and/or constrained in their ability to create student access to AP coursework?
2. To what extent do school counselors use discretionary decision making as they navigate local AP course-taking policy?
3. To what extent do school counselors consider efficiency and equity as values associated with policy and counseling practice?
4. To what extent do school counselors identify and perceive justice in their local context of professional work?

### **Significance of the Study**

While much has been written about professional expectations for school counselors as academic advisors (what should be done), there is far less research related to the *how* and *why* behind the interface of policy and practice and the expression of discretionary decision making in the allocation of educational opportunity. This study is significant in two ways.

First, I sought to differentiate from past research in an attempt to reveal school counselor perceptions and behaviors at the intersection of professional role, decision making, and local AP policy. Previous literature has examined the student-counselor relationship in the domain of academic advising and the influence of this process on student outcomes (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Holland, 2015; Martinez & Welton, 2014). Specific attention has been given to student perceptions of counselor efficacy in this regard (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2010; Vela-Gude et al., 2009). Much research has been devoted to examination of the AP program as a beneficial course of high school study and indicator of college readiness (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2006; Sadler et al., 2010; Warne, 2017; Warne, Larsen, Anderson, & Odasso, 2015). Additionally, the effects of policy implementation on AP access and equity have been investigated (Dounay, 2006; Handwerk et al., 2008; Jeong, 2009; Klugman, 2013). In this study, I explored the interconnections between professional role, decision making, and AP policy from the distinct viewpoint and unique experience of the school counselor.

Second, in this study, I expand upon past and current notions of the school counselor role with particular attention to leadership and educational justice. Professional standards have evolved to include leadership as a key role and function of the school counselor (ASCA, 2019). Previous literature has described the formal and informal ways school counselors can enact leadership to address both opportunity and achievement gaps and promote social justice (Dahir & Stone; 2013; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2011). I examined educational justice through the lens of allocation of AP opportunity with intentional focus on the potential for school counselor inclusive leadership.

## Definition of Terms

The following list includes the definitions for central concepts and terms that are used throughout this dissertation:

- *Access* refers to the ways in which educational institutions and policies ensure students have equal and equitable opportunities to take full advantage of their education. To uphold access, schools may provide additional services or remove actual/potential barriers that impede student participation in courses or academic programs.
- *Advanced Placement (AP)* refers to the program of 38 courses and corresponding end-of-course exams administered by the College Board and the Educational Testing Service. Advanced Placement courses are offered in the areas of art, English, history/social science, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), and world languages and culture. Advanced Placement courses offer rigorous, college-level coursework to high school students and the possibility of earning college credit based on qualifying AP exam scores.
- *American School Counselor Association (ASCA)* is a division of the American Counseling Association. The mission of ASCA is to represent school counselors and to promote professionalism and ethical practices through professional development, publications and resources, research, and advocacy.
- *Efficiency*, in basic technical terms refers to the ratio of work completed to the energy expended. In relation to education policy values, efficiency can take on an economic form: enhancing program performance by decreasing costs and increasing gains; and an accountability form: institutional procedures that provide systemic oversight of



professional activities (Wirt, Mitchell, & Marshall, 1988). As in other public sectors, efficiency in education is often viewed as both a goal and a process (Wirt et al., 1988).

- *Equity* in policy, according to Wirt et al. (1988), recognizes the “basic value of the individual's worth and society's responsibility” (p. 274) and attempts to address disparities and/or gaps through redistribution of public resources. In education, equity refers to the allocation of educational resources and opportunities to learn, recognizing that some students require more and/or different support than others.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Elster (1992) provided a framework for understanding and evaluating justice as it applies to the professional behavior of individuals in segments of society such as public service, health care, and education. Elster's (1992) thinking subsumes the fields of both economics and politics when contemplating the allocation of resources and burdens as well as decision making related to “who gets what, when, and how” (p. 1). More specifically, Elster (1992) used the term justice “in a broad sense that includes the allocation of scarce goods for the purpose of maximizing some aggregate of features of the recipients or, more generally, of all citizens” (p. 6). For further clarity, Elster distinguished local from global justice, indicating principles of local justice are enacted by generally self-governing entities and institutions (as opposed to nations) concerned with the allocation of goods and burdens as opposed to money. This concept of local justice provides an evaluative framework within which to interpret how school counselors understand and carry out their role as allocators of scarce AP enrollment opportunities for students.

The behavior of school counselors, like other education professionals, is bounded by rules and procedures specific to the bureaucracy in which they work. Because school counselors

are public-facing actors responsible for deciding how to inform their clients about the available resources over which they have discretion, Lipsky's (2010) notion of the street-level bureaucrat can be employed to provide a full set of concepts for observing and explaining school counselor behavior. Lipsky's conceptualization of the street-level bureaucrat dovetails with Elster's (1992) account of how professionals understand the justness of their decision-making processes and how others may come to evaluate their decisions.

Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucrats take on the full weight of discretionary decision making and allocation as a function of their professional role. Working in the arenas of health, education, and public services, street-level bureaucrats interact with and evaluate the attributes of potential recipients to distribute resources that are in short supply (Lipsky, 2010). While institutional policies may provide some constraints on allocation, street-level bureaucrats must exercise discretion and flexibility to respond to individual human needs, access resources, and offer opportunity (Lipsky, 2010). Lipsky suggested this dual role of advocate for the individual and agent for the organization can be fraught with tension. Elster (1992) concurred and described local justice as complex and even problematic in terms of the "compromises, exceptions, and idiosyncratic features" (p. 15) present in the local institutional setting.

Elster (1992) suggested the complexity of allocation is initially influenced by three factors: (a) the magnitude of scarcity of a good, (b) whether that good can be divided and/or shared, and (c) whether units of the good are identical. Elster identified the procedures by which the allocative process can take place as: (a) selection (a comparison of one individual's attributes to another's and creating a rank order), (b) admission (comparing individuals against a prescribed level) and, when goods are not scarce, (c) placement (each individual receives some unit of good; Elster, 1992).

Elster (1992) described principles as “any general conception of how the scarce good is to be allocated” (p. 62) and suggested two categories exist. The first category of principles, termed criteria, take into consideration the “substantive properties” (p. 62) of the individual. The second category, termed mechanisms, “do not require individualized knowledge about the potential recipients” (p. 63). According to Elster (1992), procedures that stipulate the distribution of goods also fall into two categories—those that use explicit criteria and those that require “discretionary interpretation” (p. 63) of a principle. Elster (1992) outlined several specialized principles and noted a combination or “mixed system” of allocative mechanisms may also be employed or, in some circumstances, no system at all.

As allocators apply principles and procedures to make decisions and distribute scarce goods, Elster (1992) submitted that main and ancillary consequences will arise that render or impede local justice. He elaborated on these “secondary effects” as having potential for producing “disparate impact” and, taken further, may at times be driven by “disparate intent” (Elster, 1992). Elster provided additional guidance about justice, specifically addressing the principles of welfare, rights, and fairness. In particular, Elster (1992) reflected on individuals’ rights “to develop and deploy their skills and talents, that is, their right to self-realization” (p. 242). Elster (1992) summed up the aggregate consequence of problems of allocation by shifting the focus from the institution to the individual context, stating, “From childhood to old age, he encounters a succession of institutions, each of which has the power to give or deny him some scarce good. In some cases, the cumulative impact of these decisions may be grossly unfair” (p. 133).

To cope with this tension, street-level bureaucrats may fall into routines of practice (in terms of interactions with, and judgment of, clients) to “deal with the complexities of work

tasks” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 83). Lipsky (2010) noted these discretionary routines have potential for significant bias and may become the next evolution of policy. At the same time, Lipsky acknowledged responsiveness and flexibility in the form of “appropriate exceptions” may be important for the individual and for society as a whole.

In the professional sphere of human service workers, school counselors in local educational contexts are charged with enacting policy by allocating public goods and, at the same time, promoting educational justice. Viewed as one such good, the apportionment of AP opportunity is necessarily influenced by the local bureaucratic policy environment. Lipsky (2010) alerted us to the ability of street-level bureaucrats to cater to their own predilections and routinized, idiosyncratic practices as they allocate scarce resources. Elster (1992) provided the means by which to see the range of ways in which allocation can occur and to assess the justness of any allocative strategy and its outcome. Taken together, their ideas provide a framework to understand the complex “motives and constraints” (Elster, 1992) school counselors face as they navigate the intricacies of their allocative role and professional mandate for justice.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations of this study were determined by my desire to gain a better understating of the intersection of AP course-taking policies and practices, the school counselor role as allocators and decision makers, and justice. Participants were limited to school counselors rather than AP coordinators, AP teachers, and/or school administrators. Additionally, the use of a public high school in this study precludes me from gaining perspectives from school counselors in charter and private school settings.

In this study, I considered AP participation at the high school level as only one form of educational opportunity. Other examples of high-quality academic programs of study exist such

as IB programs, dual-enrollment college partnerships, honors-level courses, and other accelerated programs geared toward the provision of advanced, college-preparatory, learning opportunities and outcomes.

### **Organization of the Study**

This research study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, definition of terms, theoretical framework, research questions, and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature relevant to the history and context of the school counselor role, the history and position of the AP program, educational opportunity gaps relevant to this study, and the scope of the problems associated with AP access for all students. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology of the study including (a) a rationale for case study research, (b) the instrumentation used for data collection, (c) the selection of participants, and (d) a description of data collection and analysis procedures. The study's findings are presented in Chapter 4 including the results of the qualitative data analysis. In Chapter 5, I provide a discussion of the findings in light of the literature, implications for educational practice, recommendations for future research, and conclusions.

## Chapter Two Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the literature associated with the history and evolution of school counseling as a specialized field in educational. Given the theoretical framework for this study, I examined prior research specific to professional roles with special attention given to school counselors as decision makers and allocators of educational opportunity in a local context. From the literature, I identified five emergent metaphors to help conceptualize both the role and behaviors of school counselors. A review of the history of the AP program is presented along with federal, state, and local standpoints related to the provision of rigorous educational opportunities for all students. Finally, the intersection of school counselor role, academic advising, and AP course participation is reviewed with particular attention to challenges to opportunity, inclusivity, and student outcomes, and school counselor leadership and educational justice.

### **The Role of School Counselors**

It is worthwhile to consider the historical context of school counseling as a profession given the diverse origins of the field and the ever-changing nature of education. Dahir and Stone (2013) described contemporary school counselors as highly influential to school improvement while also acknowledging the significance of past influences on the field that continue to cause school counselors to “grapple with issues regarding professional title, scope of practice, and role and responsibilities” (p. 12). Being knowledgeable of the evolution of the field provides us with a better understanding of how present-day school counselors envision their professional roles and, in turn, navigate issues of access, equity, and school policy implementation.

## **Historical Context of School Counseling**

At its inception as a profession in the early 1900s, school counseling was an extension of the industrial revolution with significant focus on social welfare and vocational guidance (Dahir & Stone, 2013; Gladding, 2012; Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Gladding (2012) described the early and influential work of Frank Parsons in the area of individual growth and career decision making and credited Jesse B. Davis as the first to initiate guidance programming in a school setting. During the 1920s and 1930s, the influence of John Dewey's notions of stages of human cognitive development, along with E. G. Williamson's trait and factor theory, broadened the focus of counseling in schools. These advances in developmental theory coincided with a movement toward formalizing the education and training of counselors (Gladding, 2012). School counselors were expected to promote student development and "generate desired student behavior with minimal student input or contextual influence" (Lambie & Williamson, 2004, p. 125).

According to Lambie and Williamson (2004), the influence of Carl Rogers in the 1940s cannot be overstated. His psychological humanism movement validated the experience of the individual, proposed empathy as an essential element of the counseling relationship, and urged counselors to facilitate the individual's growth process rather than direct it. Concurrently, the influence of World War II reinforced the role of counselors in vocational evaluation and selection. Though support for school counselors as a specialization in the field of counseling was strengthened in the 1950s with the formation of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), counseling duties remained quite varied across educational settings (Lambie & Williamson, 2004).

During the two decades to follow, the profession of school counseling was influenced by multiple significant events including the passing of the National Defense Education Act and Educational Act for All Handicapped Children of 1975, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement and the women's movement. Additionally, state licensure requirements for counselors were instituted (Gladding, 2012). As counseling theory expanded, Gilbert Wrenn's study and vision of the school counselor role proposed "counselors incorporate multiple approaches to address the comprehensive developmental needs of students" (Lambie & Williamson, 2004, p. 126). Consequently, practice was broadened to serve students at elementary and secondary levels, incorporating personal/social counseling, career and vocational guidance and placement, support of disadvantaged and students with disabilities, along with a multitude of administrative and management tasks. This role expansion was further influenced by school reform and accountability efforts through the end of the 20th century.

Now, in the 21st century, the evolution of the counselor role continues. Gladding (2012) described the more recent trends in the general counseling profession as centering on the areas of the promotion of wellness, advocacy for social justice, leadership, and use of technology. Likewise, the specialty of school counseling continues to transform, positioning its actors as critical to "contemporary school improvement with the expressed purpose to eliminate the barriers to educational opportunity to every student" (Dahir & Stone, 2013, p. 12).

### **Influences of Professional School Counseling Standards**

School counseling practice has the potential to be influenced by national and state organizations. Three such entities and their standards for professional conduct will be discussed here. Local influences, such as district and school-site mission and vision, counselor role expectations, and policy, may be harder to conceptualize but are no less



significant in terms of impact on professional behavior. It is important to note that individual school counselors and PreK–12 school counseling programs are not required to adopt and adhere to the national framework and standards from the ASCA.

In response to the disparate understandings of the purpose and role of school counselors, the ASCA published the first ASCA national model in 2003, with subsequent editions published in 2005, 2012, and 2019 (ASCA, 2019). In doing so, ASCA sought to provide a common, yet adaptable, framework, encourage a shift from responsive services to proactive programming meant for all students, and solidify the role of school counselor as a critical contributor to school leadership and positive student outcomes (ASCA, 2019). Through the delivery of a comprehensive school counseling program, school counselors seek to have a “significant positive impact on student achievement, attendance, and discipline” (ASCA, 2019, p. xii). The four model components—define, manage, deliver, and assess—are interlaced with the concepts of leadership, advocacy, and collaboration (ASCA, 2019). These components, along with ASCA ethical standards encompass the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors that guide school counselor practice (ASCA, 2016).

According to ASCA (2012), professional school counselors are guided in their social justice and advocacy efforts by their “Equity for All” position statement, which put forth:

School counselors promote equitable treatment of all students by: promoting the development of school policies leading to equitable treatment of all students and opposing school policies hindering equitable treatment of any student; promoting access to rigorous standards-based curriculum, academic courses and learning paths for college and career for all students; developing plans to address over- or underrepresentation of specific groups in programs such as special education, honors, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate. (p. 1)

Moreover, ASCA has published position statements describing the functions of “Academic Development” (ASCA, 2017a) and “Individual Student Planning for Post-Secondary Preparation” (ASCA, 2017b). Both these position statements highlighted and reinforced the

active role of the school counselor in providing access and opportunity for students to participate in rigorous and academically challenging coursework.

Other professional organizations have shaped and influenced the school counselor's role and activities. The California Association of School Counselors (CASC, 2009) proposed professional standards to further characterize and delineate practice. Guiding principles of these standards stipulated "a strong focus on student achievement" and the empowerment of school counselors "to provide equity and access, opportunity, and empowerment for students" (CASC, 2009, p. 14). Likewise, the College Board's National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (2011) supported the goal to "advance students' planning, preparation, participation and performance in rigorous a rigorous academic program" (p. 3) while emphasizing equity and rejecting gatekeeping.

### **Metaphors for School Counselor Role**

The historical context of the counseling profession, along with the influences of professional standards, helps us better understand the evolution of the role and activities of school counselors in light of institutional environments and local contexts. Beginning in the 1960s, critical research began to focus attention on the activities of counselors in educational settings, specifically examining their interactions with students and the impact on educational outcomes. As noted in Chapter 1, what is revealed through the literature is a patchwork of descriptions, or metaphors, for counselor roles and behaviors that serve to inform this study.

#### **Gatekeeper**

In *The Educational Decision-Makers*, Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) conceptualized the differentiation of student outcomes related to college-going behavior and occupational choice as a function of the routine decisions made by high school guidance and counseling personnel.

Their study examined how school personnel operate in the organization to identify talent based on subjective opinion and appraisal and the subsequent increase or decrease in access to opportunity for individuals or groups of students. Cicourel and Kitsuse suggested, over time and through bureaucratic processes, high schools influence educational mobility by channeling students into college and non-college preparatory course work. More specifically, their research supported the notion that

the student's progress in this sequence of transitions is contingent upon the interpretations, judgements, and actions of school personnel vis-à-vis the student's biography, social and personal adjustment, appearance and demeanor, social class, and social type, and his demonstrated ability and performance. (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963, p. 136)

As evaluative criteria and decision making among counselors varies and is driven by efficiency, student mobility is no longer an equitable contest.

Rehberg and Hotchkiss (1972) elaborated further on school counselor influence related to the formation of educational goals among high school students. While evidence indicated higher frequency of contact between counselors and students less disposed toward college, the content and level of educational advice was found to be influenced by status, parental encouragement, intelligence, and the students' own expectations for attainment. Additionally, their findings suggested much counselor advice served to confirm the student's expectations rather than inform or elicit novel prospects, and counselors were only minimally successful in increasing students' academic and social mobility (Rehberg & Hotchkiss, 1972).

Erickson and Schultz (1982) described an inherent tension in the college counselor role and submitted that the context of the counseling interview (both the students' and counselors' identities, ways of speaking and listening, and sociocultural backgrounds) influenced the advice and academic programming options considered. Depending on this counselor-student interaction,

and the purpose and policies of the institution, access to particular educational pathways may be granted or withheld. Erickson and Shultz (1982) stated, although some counselors may behave as student advocates, the judgments and routines associated with practice may also have the potential to place “constraints on the social mobility of the people who are least similar to the gatekeeping interviewers” (p. 193). These researchers indicated organizational routines can be disrupted to increase student opportunity by (a) ensuring the composition of the counseling departments reflect the social and cultural diversity of the student population, (b) providing students with regular access to counselors and allowing students to choose their counselor, and (c) ongoing counselor professional development focused on the student-counselor exchange (Erikson & Shultz, 1982).

As described by Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963), Rehberg and Hotchkiss (1972), and Erickson and Schultz (1982), the metaphor of *gatekeeper* as one way to describe school counselor role is relevant as it provides a language and context for perceptions and behaviors related to the counselor-student interactions that may be revealed in findings from this study.

### **Impartial Cultivator**

Rosenbaum et al. (1996) proposed that the role of the high school counselor was significantly changed during the 1990s by multiple intervening factors. The rapid expansion of the community college system with open admission practices significantly increased opportunities for postsecondary access, and criticisms of gatekeeping markedly changed the attitudes and behaviors of counselors in educational settings (Rosenbaum et al., 1996). Through their interviews with high school counselors, Rosenbaum et al. found, unlike the views of counselors of the past (who saw themselves as highly influential in student outcomes), counselors in the 1990s downplayed their influence, promoted a college-for-all mindset, and

stressed personal counseling over academic advising as intentional strategies to avoid gatekeeping. Rather than confront parental authority or damage student self-esteem by providing objective information related to college advising and admission prospects, school counselors sought to “remove themselves from providing disappointing news by simply not giving it and by waiting for an outside force to do the job” (Rosenbaum et al., 1996, p. 23). This shift to non-advice may do no less harm than gatekeeping, particularly for disadvantaged students who are less likely to get information from home or other sources, leaving them unknowing and unprepared as they move toward postsecondary pursuits (Ndura, Robinson, & Ochs, 2003; Rosenbaum, 2011; Rosenbaum et al., 1996).

As described by Rosenbaum et al. (1996) and Rosenbaum (2001), the *impartial cultivator* provides a descriptive metaphor for the role and behavior of school counselors characterized by a strategic shift from inequitable distribution and differentiation to vague advice and critical omission (Smith, 2011).

### **Street-Level Bureaucrat**

Sociological research provides an additional metaphor, the *street-level bureaucrat*, with which to conceptualize school counselor role and behavior (Lipsky, 2010). This depiction concerns itself with both efficiency and equity in discretionary decision making and policy implementation. Lipsky (2010) explored the common responsibilities and actions of public service workers as they interface with a public clientele to deliver services. School employees are subsumed under this umbrella and include teachers, social workers, librarians, psychologists, and school counselors. Lipsky proposed the work of these street-level bureaucrats is significantly influenced by high degrees of discretion in decision making, a consistent lack of adequate resources to meet the needs of large caseloads, role expectations that are ambiguous and difficult

to measure, and a requirement of regular interaction with a diverse array of unchosen clients (Lipsky, 2010). Decision making by street-level bureaucrats is distinguished by situations that are complicated by a necessary response to “human dimensions,” requiring “compassion for special circumstances and flexibility in dealing with them” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 15). The role and responsibilities of school counselors align with this description.

Lipsky (2010) explained it is the discretionary (and sometimes biased) nature of the decision-making process that impacts the delivery of policy. Furthermore, in controlling and regulating access to government services, the collective routines and actions of street-level bureaucrats influence and shape de facto policy for the organization. Lipsky indicated, while street-level bureaucrats generally attempt to do the best job possible, they may be apt to engage in screening, rubber-stamping, and inconsistent actions to defend against or deny discretion and bias. In a school policy environment, school counselors must grapple with discretionary decision making as one component of individual student advising and the allocation of educational opportunities.

Along these lines, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2012) stated street-level workers, with different views of justice, use discretion to decide who gets treated routinely, who receives minimal or harsh treatment, and who receives extra benefit. They submitted that a specific tension exists between institutional “rules and norms and the situations that arise on the front lines” (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012, p. 18) and that the street-level workers may invoke these rules to protect themselves and validate their actions. Barberis and Buchowicz (2015) suggested street-level bureaucrats in educational sectors consider the formal and informal expectations of their institutions in using discretion to open or narrow accessibility to educational opportunity. Applied to professional practice, Barberis and Buchowicz (2015) indicated

“discretion can be seen as a resource to deal with professional dilemmas, rising from the interplay of implementation problems and individual values, needs, and interests” (p. 63); they warned discrimination can occur when different solutions are applied to different groups.

### **Intermediary**

In her empirical study of college choice processes, McDonough (1997) examined the contributing factors that influenced students’ leanings toward certain types of postsecondary options. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1977), McDonough suggested the notion of habitus can be applied to organizations and specifically to the broader school context. As such, she deemed the school environment as the “mediator of collective social class consciousness in regard to the processes and outcomes of college choice” (McDonough, 1997, p. 10). As actors in the school context, McDonough described school counselors as both constructing and transmitting college-going expectations to students and the larger school community by way of individual advising and the creation of school structures and resources. Specifically, McDonough depicted the ways in which counselors assess their students’ individual and collective likelihoods for college admission and success, adjust advice, counsel, and programming according to this assessment, and then funnel students’ decision-making process toward particular postsecondary options. This pattern of the creation and reinforcement of organizational contextual norms suggested the possibility for the reproduction of injustices and inequity (McDonough, 1997).

Along these lines, Smith (2011) stated, “Neither the discriminating gatekeeper model nor the indiscriminate cultivator model capture the reality or the import of high school counselor’s work today” (p. 795). In a review of the school counseling literature, Smith (2011) suggested factors such as widespread accessibility to college-going information, comprehensive review of applications by college admission offices, and the strengthening of professional school counselor

training to include multicultural practices, social justice, and accountability have produced a new and distinct vision of the role of school counselors. This iteration of role presents the school counselor as an active school agent possessing the “capacity to design organizational structures, build academic cultures, and create transitional bridges that connect students to critical knowledge and resources” (Smith, 2011, p. 798), first by “building counseling infrastructure and secondarily through individual advising” (p. 798). Referencing the work of McDonough (1997) and others, Smith (2011) elaborated on the nature of counseling infrastructures and portrayed school counselors as “actors in the mobility business” (p. 802). These infrastructures allow counselors to work beyond the one-on-one counseling interaction to link students to opportunity through a broad range of programs and resources. Smith described these mediating activities as bridging relationships (between students, parents, school personnel, and community partners), creating physical spaces and resources (documents, handbooks, and other informational materials), and developing school cultures focused on high expectations for students. As a metaphor for school counselor role, the *intermediary* acknowledges efficiency and places high value on equity.

### **Institutional Agent**

In the final metaphor, high value is placed on equity, and the conceptualization of school counselor role and behavior is extended. Research by Stanton-Salazar (2011) provided a structure for understanding the role of school counselors as *institutional agents*. Framed through a lens of social capital, Stanton-Salazar defined these actors as adults outside the student’s family who interact in the youth’s social environment during the important transition to adulthood. These institutional agents are distinguished by their status and authority and their ability to rally organizational support in the form of “resources, opportunities, privileges and services which are



highly valued, yet differentially allocated” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075). As institutional agents, school counselors take on multiple roles to pass along essential information related to educational opportunity, provide guidance and training specific to college preparedness, and even leverage their own reputation to encourage positive outcomes. These exchanges provide the youth with a window into the dominant discourses and bureaucratic systems embedded in the educational sphere (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). With this information, students have greater prospects of “decoding the system” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1093) and navigating school structures to acquire status, resources, and opportunity necessary for academic success. Alternatively, institutional agents who seek to maintain privilege become gatekeepers for opportunity (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Dowd et al. (2013) extended the understanding the institutional agent in their examination of low-income, first generation students transferring from the community college to a selective university setting. Participants in their study described positive adult figures in the college environment as setting high expectations, providing guidance for academic success, and leveraging their professional power to access resources and assist them in navigating postsecondary education (Dowd et al., 2013). Findings revealed the important role of these adults, with students attributing “their successful personal transformations and transfer experiences to teachers, counselors, and other authority figures who were able to validate their sense of belonging and act as bridges to provide entrée into new academic and social settings” (Dowd et al., 2013, p. 21).

Stanton-Salazar (2011) further proposed institutional agents like school counselors cross over to the realm of *empowerment agent* when they critically and intentionally work to counter the dominant discourse, support student consciousness, break down stratification and injustice in

the school context, and create broader “change in the world” (p. 1090). In doing so, empowerment agents take on professional risk as they choose “not to act on established rules of social structure that serve the purpose of consolidating resources within the upper levels of the hierarchy” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1089). In the postsecondary setting, Dowd et al. (2013) did not find evidence of a shift from institutional agent to empowerment agent in terms of an explicit conveyance of critical awareness of social structures and conditions from agent to student. Dowd et al. acknowledged the possibility that the actions of empowerment agents may occur outside the knowledge of students and suggested further study would be necessary and important to determine if and how institutional agents in postsecondary settings act as empowerment agents.

Using Stanton-Salazar’s (2011) construct for empowerment agent, Rojas (2018) examined the role self-identified Chicana/o and Latina/o teachers played in working with Latina/o high school students. Participants perceived themselves as challenging “dominant deficit narratives” that serve to limit student opportunity in educational settings and helping students “develop critical consciousness and thinking” (Rojas, 2018, pp. 39–40) as an essential academic skill. Rojas’s (2018) empowerment agents viewed themselves as committed to social justice and “redefining narratives of academic rigor and college-readiness” (p. 43). Rojas (2018), like Dowd et al. (2013) and Stanton-Salazar (2011), acknowledged personal and professional challenges may arise for the empowerment agent as they navigate the political realities of their institution.

The five metaphors reflected in the literature and presented here provide a vocabulary with which to characterize school counselor role. More specifically, these metaphors can be applied to the ways in which school counselors use discretionary decision making in practice and are enabled or constrained in their ability to provide student access to rigorous educational

opportunities. One such opportunity, Advanced Placement (AP) coursework, will be the focus of the next section of this literature review.

### **The Advanced Placement Program**

During the early 1950s, two efforts came together to spur on the creation of what is now known as the College Board and AP. In 1951, the Ford Foundation commissioned a study of three prestigious high schools to examine the college-preparedness of late high school students. At that same time, Kenyon College provided leadership for the School and College Study of Admissions and Advanced Standing, which developed 11 courses to be implemented at the high school level for college credit (Zarate & Pachon, 2006). Interestingly, both initiatives were funded by the Ford Foundation's Fund for the Advancement of Education (Zarate & Pachon, 2006). With the Cold War as a backdrop, there was much interest in strengthening the scientific and political talent pool in the United States and to particularly focus on and promote students identified as high-achieving and/or gifted and talented (Schneider, 2009). In 1954, the College Board (later partnering with the Educational Testing Service) took on oversight of the program and the first AP examinations were administered (Schneider, 2009).

The AP program experienced exponential growth during the 1990s. In *Access to Excellence: A Report of the Commission of the Future of the Advanced Placement Program*, the College Board attributed this growth to (a) external agents, such as “policymakers and supporters of education reform who view AP as a way to improve the quality of American Education” (p. 3) and (b) the subsequent federal and state funding initiatives to enact AP (College Board, 2001). Support at that time was primarily targeted toward low-income students in the form of subsidies for exam fees and professional development for teachers from low-income districts, providing \$2.7 million in federal funding for the 1998-1999 year alone (Klopfenstein, 2004). Zarate and

Pachon (2006) cited statistics indicating in four decades the AP program had grown substantially, with 60% high school participation and a half-million students taking over 1 million AP examinations. Despite the striking and seemingly positive growth of AP, the College Board itself acknowledged, it “exposes significant challenges for the future, particularly in the key areas of equity and quality” (College Board, 2001, p. 3).

### **Advanced Placement Access Problems: Between and Within School Disparities**

At a national level, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014) pointed to the following disparities in AP participation as a broader examination of college for career readiness:

Black and Latino students make up 37% of students in high schools, 27% of students enrolled in at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course, and 18% of students receiving a qualifying score of 3 or above on an AP exam; English learners represent 5% of high school students, 2% of the students enrolled in at least one AP course, and 1% of the students receiving a qualifying score of 3 or above on an AP exam; Students with disabilities served by IDEA represent 12% of high school students, 2% of students enrolled in an AP course, and 1% of the students receiving a qualifying score of 3 or above on an AP exam. (p. 1)

These disparities were echoed by National Center for Education Statistics (2016) data revealing the percentage of Asian (72%) and White (40%) students earning any AP or IB credit were higher than the percentages in all other ethnic/racial groups. Additionally, among all students enrolled in AP and IB coursework, the average number of AP and IB credits earned in all subject areas by Asian students (4.5 credits) exceeded all other groups (Two-or more races – 3.2 credits; Hispanic – 3.2 credits; White – 3.1 credits; Black – 2.7 credits; NCES, 2016).

Statewide analyses revealed similar statistics. Zarate and Pachon (2006) examined student access to AP coursework in California public schools between 1997 and 2003, observing that, without the availability of AP coursework, there is no decision to be made about participation. Their findings suggested (a) statewide increases in AP courses have not impacted

larger schools with larger concentrations of low-income students; (b) as the percentage of students receiving the free/reduced lunch increases, the number of AP offerings in that school generally decrease; and (c) schools with high numbers of minority students offer an average of five AP courses, while schools with low minority numbers offer eight courses (Zarate & Pachon, 2006). As schools with fewer resources continue to play catch-up, the abundance of AP in more affluent schools has become almost commonplace. In the pursuit of even higher standing for their students, some elite high schools have sought out new indicators of distinction, rejecting AP altogether and creating unique, local, college-level courses (Klugman, 2013). In this way, inequities are perpetuated by privileged groups.

Similar findings were echoed by Handwerk et al. (2008) who found suburban public schools, comprised of primarily nonminority students, were most likely to have AP programming available, while small, rural school districts were least likely to have such availability. Significant racial and ethnic differences in AP course and examination participation were found with 10.3% of Asian Americans, 5.3% of White, 2.4% of Hispanic, and 0.5% of African American students taking AP exams (Handwerk et al., 2008). When AP programming was available, a median of only 5% of all students participated.

Theokas and Saaris (2013) determined, while AP course offerings do differ between schools (with schools in low socioeconomic status areas and serving students of color having fewer options), the within school disparities in enrollment were more significant as far as systemic opportunity gaps. Zarate and Pachon (2006) stated AP continues to be an “inequitable sorting mechanism that limits some groups’ college preparation opportunities” (p. 1). At its worst, AP (as an extension of tracking and ability-grouping) contributes to within-school segregation and predetermined paths for certain student groups (Kohli, 2014).

## The College Board's Stance on Access and Equity

The College Board (2016) positioned itself regarding the issues and problems surrounding program equity and access as follows:

The College Board strongly encourages educators to make equitable access a guiding principle for their AP programs by giving all willing and academically prepared students the opportunity to participate in AP. We encourage educators to: eliminate barriers that restrict access to AP for students from ethnic, racial and socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally underserved; make every effort to ensure that their AP classes reflect the diversity of their student population; provide all students with access to academically challenging coursework before they enroll in AP classes. (para. 1)

In its *Access to Excellence* report, the College Board (2001) elaborated on its equity stance and pointed to a number of troubling issues and possible remedies. Of primary concern are the “competing pressures” between the provision of access to all students and the maintenance of quality of programming.

In their analysis of the literature surrounding AP access and program quality, Kolluri (2018) found, despite significant gains in AP access, the AP program continues to struggle with issues related to equity and effectiveness. Kolluri described three possible interpretations from the literature for these AP Program challenges: (a) under-preparation for rigorous coursework of underrepresented students, (b) inadequacies in AP instruction, and (c) the AP program serving to reproduce social stratification. While the first and second interpretations can be improved by means of more adequate student preparation prior to AP and improved pedagogy particularly for marginalized students, the third interpretation may prove more intractable (Kolluri, 2018). Kolluri indicated additional research is needed to better understand how these interpretations and other factors at the school site and classroom levels influence the balance of AP access and effectiveness.

College Board (2001) leaders have advocated for adequate student preparation, resources, and support to ensure students have the knowledge and skills to succeed in AP and have provided examples of local educational approaches as templates for success with regard to access and equity (College Board, 2013). While the College Board has put forth clear policy statements addressing these issues, much of the onus for follow through rests with local educational leaders to monitor opportunity gaps and align policy and practice.

### **The Federal Stance on Educational Opportunity**

The U.S. Department of Education and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) directly addresses the federal government's stance on the area of equity in public schools. In a Dear Colleague letter to the states dated October 1, 2014, Assistant Secretary Lhamon referenced, "Legal obligations under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin, in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance" (p. 1). The letter further defined equal educational opportunity as requiring students to have comparable access to a diverse range of courses and programs and specifically cited AP as one such specialized program. Lhamon (2014) exhorted, "Students who have access to, and enroll in, rigorous courses are more likely to go on to complete postsecondary education" (p. 11), and further noted activities "shown to support college and career readiness and high academic rigor, must be offered on a nondiscriminatory basis" (p. 12). Although OCR did not dictate an explicit approach to ensuring equitable access to resources, it specified lack of funds does not preclude an educational entity from enacting federal Title VI requirements (Lhamon, 2014).

### **State Responses to AP Access**

The bulk of the policy efforts to address AP equity and access has taken place at the state level. Several states, including California, have used financial inducements to increase AP

programming and participation in resource-challenged districts. In 2000, on the heels of the *Daniel v. State of California* (1999) decision, which found inequitable AP course access among schools, the California legislature enacted AP challenge grants to financially support student and teacher resources for schools with limited AP offerings (Klugman, 2013). Research findings by Klugman (2013) suggested this effort, along with other initiatives in California, proved to be short lived (with AP challenge grants funding removed within 3 years) and did little to expand AP course offerings for disadvantaged populations relative to their affluent counterparts.

Research has been critical of AP exam fee subsidies as an effective incentive for equitable access to AP coursework. Jeong (2009) investigated the impact of state-sponsored incentives on student participation and performance on AP exams. Findings indicated exemption from AP examination fees for economically disadvantaged students does significantly increase the likelihood of participation in AP exams, but other forms of financial inducements, like scholarships and cash bonuses for students and teachers, do little to increase enrollment in AP coursework (Jeong, 2009). Although AP fee subsidies may be a valid policy instrument specifically for AP exam participation, it may not effectively address inequities in course access and enrollment.

States have used other policy mechanisms to encourage AP participation and readiness for postsecondary education. California has supported K–12 and higher education alignment by mandating the awarding of college credit through the University of California and California State University systems for scores of 3 or higher on AP examinations (California State University, n.d.; Education Commission of the States, n.d.). While this guarantee of college credit is valuable, it is unclear as to whether it impacts enrollment in AP by underrepresented groups. In an Education Commission of the States policy brief, Dounay (2006) advocated for the



inception of a state policy framework that would standardize AP opportunities and enhance student outcomes. As Dounay outlined, this comprehensive AP policy relies upon a variety of policy instruments to enact change including mandates, inducements, and investments. Holstead, Spradlin, McGillivray, and Burroughs (2010) summarized the efficacy and impact of AP incentive programs, stating:

AP trends indicate that the combined efforts of federal, state and local AP incentive programs nationwide have only been partially successful in delivering results; although participation is up, success rates are down, and the equity and excellence gap for African American students nationwide, and for Latino and Native American students in many states, has yet to be eliminated. (p. 5)

The authors went on to caution that successful AP policies and practices must address funding needs by using current budget resources, or by exploring private support, and must also align with district and school capacity so as to avoid reproducing inequities (Holstead et al., 2010).

### **Local Responses to Advanced Placement Access**

Although federal and state policy mechanisms have positively influenced national AP participation rates for low-income and underrepresented minority student groups, it is important to consider the impact of local initiatives (Handwerk, 2008). Even when a robust AP program of courses is available, high school policies may limit opportunity. District and school-site level policies and practices related to AP course-taking hold the potential to enable or constrain access to AP coursework. In addition to prerequisite requirements, schools may establish processes that involve the screening of students based on previous course grades, writing samples, teacher/counselor recommendation, and/or required summer assignments as a precondition for participation. In examining prerequisite requirements for AP course participation, Howell (2019) found students meeting historical prerequisite requirements for AP participation (grade of A or B for preceding course) did not achieve at higher levels on AP exams when compared to students

provided open (no grade requirement for preceding courses) access to AP. Results suggested PSAT scores and overall GPA were better predictors of student success on AP exams than course grades. In addition to course prerequisite requirements, AP course-taking may also be limited by course and program tracking and structural constraints of a school's master schedule (Rosenbaum, 1976).

Conversely, high school sites may promote open AP access to any student who is interested and motivated to enroll. Local districts and schools can guide positive changes in equity and access through their own fee-reduction policies, student and teacher incentives, and by creating an atmosphere of high academic performance for all students (Roegman & Hatch, 2016). Additional activities for consideration include (a) implementing an open access policy for AP participation, (b) K–12 course alignment that provides rigor and preparation for AP coursework, (c) parent programming focused on the benefits of AP, (d) access to online AP classes, and (e) academic and social support networks for students considering AP enrollment such as summer seminars and school-year tutoring (College Board, n.d.; Handwerk, 2008; Roegman & Hatch, 2016).

### **Student Opportunity and Complexities of Professional Practice**

Research provides us with an understanding of the nature and scope of the issues surrounding participation in AP coursework. By virtue of their professional role, and faced with policies and practices in the local context, school counselors are situated in a complex dynamic whereby they shape and allocate opportunity for the students they serve. School counselors face significant concerns related to an ever-increasing scope of professional duties and responsibilities coupled with limitations of time, resources, and support. Systemic structures can

hamper counselor efforts to unlock educational opportunities for students. In the following section, these challenges are highlighted.

### **Tracking**

While an exhaustive examination of the research related to the nature and impact of educational tracking is beyond the scope of this literature review, a brief discussion is warranted here, as systemic practices have the potential to influence counselor behavior. In a seminal work, Rosenbaum (1976) defined tracking as “any school selection system that attempts to homogenize classroom placements in terms of students’ personal qualities, performance, or aspirations” (p. 6). In selecting students for particular curricular tracks, both objective and subjective indicators may be used as criteria for student selection, thus creating an opportunity for inequity (Rosenbaum, 1976). Rosenbaum found these track placements to be as predictive of college attendance as measures of student ability and effort. In a later study, Rosenbaum (1980) found students themselves have the propensity to misperceive their track placements and underestimate the impact on future educational attainment.

DeLany (1991) examined the process of high school course selection and suggested schools contribute to stratification of students largely through a combination of “constraints and organizational choices” (p. 185) related to the scheduling process. School counselors are an integral part of this process as they support multiple tasks, including (a) disseminating curricular information, (b) advising students and, in some cases, (c) creation of the master schedule (DeLany, 1991). DeLany suggested constructs related to time and resources, along with external demands also influence the master scheduling and, in many cases, require decisions to be made that are unrelated to student needs and necessarily limit student opportunity.

Through their research, Oakes and Guiton (1995) submitted that curricular and master schedule decisions most often favored the most advantaged students, providing them with greater input, choice and stability of instruction based on a “social and economic sorting process filled with contradictions” (p. 29). Some research has indicated curricular tracking can prove advantageous. Jean (2016) found high-achieving students may benefit from the customized preparation of stratified learning environments, such as AP, but also acknowledged their report did not consider impact on students at the lower end of the achievement scale and that tracking may overall do more educational harm than good.

By virtue of professional role, school counselors are situated between the interests of the school and the students and therefore play a pivotal role in maintaining or disrupting institutional structures and mechanisms of educational tracking (DeLany, 1991; Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Rosenbaum, 1976).

### **School Counselor-Student Interactions**

According to Stanton-Salazar (2011), “The reality is that child and adolescent development occur in the context of interlocking subsystems of social stratification—principally, the societal hierarchies of class, race, and gender” (p. 1074). The review of literature for this study revealed race and culture as salient issues related to college preparation, with multiple findings converging on the role of the school counselor.

Rigorous academic preparation for college and career is of critical importance to minority students as processes and outcomes strengthen future economic opportunity and stability (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). Students of color have expressed mixed perceptions about the quality and amount of college-related services provided by counselors. In a case-study analysis of high minority, high poverty public school graduates, counselors were acknowledged as critical

to first-generation college goers in terms of setting high expectations and educational goals (Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn, & Platt, 2011). Fitzpatrick and Schneider (2016) suggested, while general academic advising may have positive impacts, more concrete school counselor activities, such as creating educational course plans, frequent individual meetings, and assistance with financial aid application completion and submission, were critical to disadvantaged students' college readiness. Students of color and poor, rural students profited from explicit information and knowledge conveyed by the school counselor related to the benefits of AP participation as facilitating college readiness (Cross & Burney, 2005; Welton & Martinez, 2014).

In a large-scale study of secondary source data, Muhammad (2008) confirmed African American students are influenced to begin the college search process by supportive school counselors, and high expectations for postsecondary education, as evidenced by the dispositions and actions of school staff, positively impact student college-going behaviors. Research has supported the notion that school counselors can debunk myths that persist in African American communities related to the college application and financial aid processes thus stemming talent loss (Muhammad, 2008). Research conducted via analysis of a mixed method case study by Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) found Black students were better prepared for the college-going process when provided with individualized and ongoing support from school counselors.

The availability of school resources and support—in terms of material and social networks—have been found to be highly influential for African American, Hispanic, and immigrant students as they attempt to successfully prepare for college (Kim, 2012; Ohrt et al., 2009; Perna & Titus, 2005). Qualitative studies of Latino student perceptions have shown school counselors provided inconsistent support for students' college aspirations as demonstrated by

lack of or inadequate college advising and differential treatment and expectations (Vela et al., 2013; Vela-Gude et al., 2009).

Plank and Jordan (2001) described “talent loss” whereby otherwise academically qualified students fail to matriculate to postsecondary education, as particularly pervasive among low socioeconomic status students. Research suggests counselors can provide critical information and guidance to this group, increasing the likelihood of college enrollment as an outcome (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Research by Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) supports the need for counselors to go beyond simple dissemination of information in working with socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

School counselors are urged to use a holistic approach that encourages and supports three critical student tasks: (a) the acquisition of minimal college academic qualification, (b) graduation from high school, and (c) application to a 4-year college or university to increase the likelihood of postsecondary outcomes for students (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) suggested school counselors are responsible for “creating new norms of college access” (p. 113) and persuading students, through formal and informal strategies and communications, that the goal of college matriculation was attainable.

Research findings related to college preparation and access have consistently found early student-counselor interaction, coupled with accurate information and appropriate guidance, is a positive predictor for applying to college (Bryan et al., 2011; Corwin et al., 2004; Reddick et al., 2011). Earlier, in all contexts of college readiness, is better. Research by Corwin et al. (2004) highlighted the impact of elementary and middle school decisions related to student course work and, specifically, the effect of non-college tracking, which can often preclude postsecondary options even before a student enters high school thereby making appropriate college counseling

inconsequential by the junior or senior year. Studies have suggested college planning, including parental involvement, should begin no later than eighth grade to ensure students have ample time to meet minimum college entry requirements prior to graduation (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001).

### **Challenges to School Counselor Practice**

As previously noted, the professional work of school counselors is influenced by factors within and outside the local school context—such as large student caseloads, the requirement of non-counseling duties, pressures related to school accountability, and a myriad of other factors having considerable bearing on their performance and effectiveness (McDonough, 1997; McKillip et al., 2012; Perna et al., 2008; Smith, 2011; Woods & Domina, 2014). These constraints impact all students and can have particularly significant implications for first-generation college-going students of color (Corwin et al., 2004; Martinez & Welton, 2014; Ohrt et al., 2009; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004; Vela et al., 2013; Walker & Pearsall, 2012). The literature is replete with examples of the multiple challenges facing school counselors.

While many would argue school counselors should be integral to the educational mission of a school, role ambiguity and misunderstandings about counselor responsibilities are common (Dahir & Stone, 2013; Hines & Lemons, 2011; Perna et al., 2008). The ASCA (2019) provided guidance on the role of school counselors at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Through both direct (instruction, group activities, appraisal, advisement, counseling and crisis response) and indirect services (consultation, collaboration, and referrals), ASCA asserted the role of professional school counselors includes being leaders, advocates, collaborators, and social change agents. No fewer than 40 ASCA position statements exist which stipulate, in multiple ways, the roles and behaviors of school counselors in relation to particular topics of professional practice (ASCA, n.d.). Attempting to clarify professional responsibilities, ASCA (2019) formally

outlined legitimate uses of school counselor time by designating certain activities as appropriate and inappropriate. Documents from ASCA (2019) suggest it is a primary responsibility of the school counselors themselves to help administrators, teachers, student, parents, and the community at large understand their professional role. Hines and Lemons (2011) suggested school administrators, who often dictate and oversee counselor responsibilities,

don't see counselors as central to the academic mission of schools, so they weigh them down with mundane tasks: spending huge amounts of time coordinating the many tests given in high schools and performing more than their fair share of lunch, bus, or hall supervision. (p. 3)

In turn, school counselors themselves may “diminish their scope of influence” (p. 6) through their own assumptions, adaptations, choices, and even personal preferences related to professional priorities, activities, and behaviors (Hines & Lemons, 2011).

Given the multiple role expectations of school counselors, it is important to note the influence of student-to-counselor ratios in the delivery of counseling services. The recommendation of ASCA (2015) is a student-to-counselor ratio of 250 to 1, while the national average is 482 to 1, and the California average is 760 to 1. In their study of counselor caseloads, Woods and Domina (2014) revealed a direct impact on services and noted, as school counselor caseloads decreased, student access to key college preparatory information and opportunities increased. The researchers found students who were already disadvantaged, such as low socioeconomic status and first-generation college-goers, are often concentrated in schools with higher counselor caseloads (Woods & Domina, 2014).

Along with large caseloads, school counselors may also face limited resources as they attempt to implement a comprehensive school counseling program (McDonough, 1997; Perna et al., 2008). Perna et al. (2008) suggested budget and time-related constraints require counselors to focus activities on the average student rather than more focused, one-on-one advising. Students



and parents who take initiative may receive more attention than those who do not (Perna et al., 2008). Engberg and Gilbert (2013) echoed findings related to student-to-counselor caseload and suggested 4-year, college-going rates can be positively influenced when school counselors have the opportunity and resources available to create counseling infrastructures that support college preparation.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented a review of literature pertaining to the history and evolution of the school counseling profession. Five metaphors for school counselor role drawn from the literature were presented. The history and evolution of the AP Program as an exemplar of educational opportunity was described, along with a review of federal, state, and local efforts to increase AP access and participation. Challenges at the intersection of school counselor practice and AP opportunity were also explored. In Chapter 3, I will describe the methodology used in this study in detail.

## Chapter Three Methodology

The focus of this research study was the intersection of school counselor role and influence, local course-taking policy and practices, and student access to educational opportunity as a point of potential tension. More specifically, my aim in this study was to examine the extent to which school counselors (a) are enabled and/or constrained in their ability to create student access to AP coursework, (b) use discretionary decision making as they navigate local AP course-taking policy, (c) consider efficiency and equity as values associated with policy and counseling practice, and (d) identify and perceive justice in their local context of professional work. In this chapter, I describe the methodology I employed in this study.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Given the nature of the research questions of this study, I selected a qualitative case study methodology. Qualitative research is appropriate when seeking a thorough and detailed understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). Applied to the educational sector, qualitative research can provide a “rich source of knowledge that educators draw on to identify, explore, and solve their problems of practice” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010, p. 340). As a specific approach to qualitative inquiry, case study research involves the examination of an entity or process in a setting or context circumscribed by time and space (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) suggested case studies are especially advantageous when investigating questions of “how and why” in a “real-life” setting when the researcher is unable to predict, manage, or manipulate the circumstances of the environment. Qualitative case study methodology was an appropriate choice for this study given its focus on the perceptions and behaviors of school counselors in the local professional context and the desire to illuminate understanding through substantive and detailed description from participants’ perspectives.

## **Selection and Recruitment of Participants**

Given the focus on the perceptions and behaviors of school counselors related to AP advising, the targeted population for participation in this study was school counselors currently employed at the secondary level. A public school district in Southern California and a single high school site were identified based on the following criteria: (a) robust AP programs (minimum of 8 AP courses offered annually on the high school campus), (b) socioeconomic and cultural diversity of the student body, (c) defined AP course-taking policy per the high school course catalog and/or other documents, and (d) the presence of a school counseling department comprised of full-time, certificated counselors.

A purposive sample of three participants from the single high school site was used. All participants had a minimum of two years professional experience as a school counselor and at least one year of employment in a school counselor role at the selected high school.

Potential participants were contacted in writing to solicit participation in the study. The participant recruitment letter included an overview of the study, requirements for participation, the time commitment and timeline for their participation, and an inducement for participation. Follow-up contact, in writing and/or by phone, was made as necessary to participants who did not respond to the initial invitation. Informed consent was obtained in writing from each participant prior to the scheduling of interviews.

## **Instrumentation**

The original, and not previously published, instrument for this study was comprised of a protocol of three semi-structured interviews. This choice of instrumentation was selected as it affords flexibility and “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging

world view of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90) while also providing aspects of standardization.

I constructed a preliminary set of interview prompts based on the primary research questions while keeping in mind the theoretical frame of the study. This preliminary set was reviewed by a team of doctoral candidates enrolled in a university educational leadership program who had knowledge of the purpose, overarching research questions, and framework of the study. Based on this review and feedback, the prompt set was further refined to reduce potential bias, eliminate redundancy, and increase the accessibility of the prompts (using common vocabulary and terms) for participants (Creswell, 2013). An anticipatory set of possible follow-up prompts was also developed. Merriam (2009) suggested these follow-up questions, or probes, can provide an opportunity for participants to think, clarify responses and provide examples.

### **Data Collection**

Data to be collected included any available documents pertaining to AP courses and programming at the school site and from the district and audio-recorded personal interviews with participants. Before data collection began, I obtained written approval from the appropriate school district gatekeeper(s) and from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Redlands.

### **Documents**

I collected documents related to AP programming and participation at the district and high school site level in coordination with the district gatekeeper(s). These documents included district school board policy and promotional materials, high school policy documents related to AP participation, high school course catalogs, student course registration forms, and other

relevant written and electronic information used to disseminate AP program information to staff, students, parents, and the general public.

## **Interviews**

Seidman (2013) advocates for a protocol structure that includes a series of three distinct interviews so “each interview provides a foundation of detail that helps illuminate the next” (p. 23). The three-interview structure was employed for this study. Each interview was accomplished using a 60- to 90-minute timeframe, with subsequent interviews spaced 3 days to 1 week apart to allow adequate opportunity for participants “to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 25). The primary focus of the first interview session was to explore participants’ perceptions, behaviors, and experiences in professional context as related to student advising. The primary focus of the second interview was to delve into greater detail about student advising and AP course participation policies and practices. The purpose of the third interview was to explore more explicitly school counselor role in AP course participation and access, allow participants to reflect on and bring meaning to their experience, and provide an opportunity for participants to revisit and clarify previous responses. The interview prompts were as follows:

### **Interview 1 Prompts:**

1. Tell me, in detail, about your role as a school counselor in advising students about AP course-participation?
2. What factors do you take into consideration when advising students about AP course participation?
3. What makes a student a good candidate for AP?

4. How might you advise a student who is a strong potential candidate for AP participation?
5. How might you advise a student who is not a strong candidate for AP participation?
6. How much input do school counselors have in AP advising and participation?
7. What are the challenges in advising students about AP course participation?
8. What else would you like to share about AP course advising?

Interview 2 Prompts:

1. What is your understanding of the policies and practices related to AP course-participation at your high school?
2. Is there an application process for AP? How many AP courses can a student take?
3. How do AP course-participation policies and practices influence and/or impact your ability to advise students about AP classes?
4. Is there flexibility in your high school's AP course-participation policies and practices?
5. How do other, non-student factors impact AP advising and participation?
6. Suppose there were not enough seats in an AP course to accommodate all student requests. How would this situation be addressed?
7. What are the challenges in providing access to AP coursework?
8. What else would you like to share about factors that influence AP course participation?

Interview 3 Prompts:

1. Please look at the transcript from the first interview. Is everything accurate? Is there anything you want to change? Is there anything you want to add?

2. Please look at the transcript from the second interview. Is everything accurate? Is there anything you want to change? Is there anything you want to add?
3. Are there unspoken rules about AP course participation and access? If so, are you comfortable talking about them with me?
4. There is research that points to differences in who has access to, and participates in, AP courses. Have you or your colleagues had occasion to address these differences? If so, how? OR Is it possible to elaborate on why you say no?
5. Beyond individual student advising, how do you or others facilitate AP participation for students?
6. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your professional practice?

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. I also made written notes during the interviews and created written memos as appropriate to document emerging ideas and themes

During all phases of data collection, participants' identities were kept confidential. Arbitrary numerical identifiers were used throughout the data collection phase. Participants' information was secured separately from these numerical identifiers in an effort to eliminate any connection between participants' identities and responses. Participants were also assured they could opt out to the research study at any point in time.

### **Data Analysis**

Merriam (2009) asserted qualitative data collection and analysis takes place simultaneously as a "recursive and dynamic process" (p. 169). The qualitative data analyzed for this study included transcripts from all participant interviews, documents collected per the study focus, and all researcher notes and memos. Interview transcripts, document content, and

researcher notes/memos were loaded into the NVivo computer software program to facilitate the storage and organization of data and for preliminary data analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Merriam (2009) asserted the process of data analysis commences with the identification of “segments in your data set that are responsive to your research questions” (p. 176). Creswell (2013) suggested these segments or codes can represent expected or unexpected findings and information that is interesting or unusual. This process was used to establish initial codes, understanding that through further analysis additional codes could potentially emerge. Through recursive comparison, these segments were then assembled into themes derived from the data. Creswell suggested this interpretive process serves to describe the case and its context and to make sense of the meaning of the data. My own range of professional training and counseling experience in three states and in secondary, postsecondary, and community settings (including 18 years as a licensed school counselor with 4 years as lead counselor) served to bolster and lend credibility to the analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Yin (2009) asserted high quality analysis must (a) encompass all the evidence, (b) examine alternative explanations, (c) attend to the main objectives of the case study, and (d) integrate the researcher’s professional knowledge. To safeguard the trustworthiness of the findings, interview data, document data, and researcher memos served as multiple sources of evidence. The use of a case study interview guide and electronic database served to help ensure reliability (Yin, 2009). Additionally, interview transcripts were reviewed with another doctoral candidate and a professor to identify data segments responsive to the research questions and to label unique themes and subthemes through intercoder agreement (Creswell, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> BA Psychology; MS Counseling Psychology/CAS School Counseling; CA Pupil Personnel Services Credential, PK–12 School Counseling; VA Pupil Personnel Services License, PK–12 School Counseling.



A summary of the key words, phrases, and concepts (collectively, key terms) driving the analysis of the data is presented in Table 2. These key terms are organized by the three themes and their subthemes that emerged from the analysis (A full presentation of the results for each theme and subtheme is presented in Chapter 4).

Table 2

*Summary of Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes	Key terms
1: Creating AP Access	1a: Enabled 1b: Constrained	<i>open, exceptions, put them in, options, change pull kids out, kids sitting out, no room, running out of space, gatekeeper, kid doesn't belong, scares kids off, pressure to pass the test</i>
2: Advocacy	2a: Awareness 2b: Inclusion	<i>push, encourage, potential, challenge, plant a seed a chance, listened to, explain, override, best for the kid, advocate, battle</i>
3: Justice	3a: Access  3b: Opportunity for all	<i>gatekeeper, fair/unfair, disadvantage, difference in demographic, implicit bias, doesn't belong, right to try challenge, reaching to a different group, right to try, cultural bias, diversity, systemic problem</i>

**Limitations**

The scope of findings for this study was limited by my ability to gain access from district gatekeepers to public high school sites and their school counseling staffs. Once site access was granted, subject consent to participate was difficult to secure in part due to the time commitment for three interviews. Three counselors from a single high school site were ultimately interviewed. Though all three participants had several years of professional experience in the field, the study did not specifically examine professional philosophies and affiliations, past and continued professional training, and/or degree of specific knowledge about the College Board's AP program and related research. While an attempt was made to select a school site(s) with robust AP programs and diverse student demographics, the participating site, with its unique

programmatic and policy environment, is likely not representative of all high schools. Given this limited scope, findings may not be generalizable to all school counselors and all school sites.

### **Assumptions**

In this study, I made the following assumptions: (a) the instrumentation and data collected measured the perceptions and behaviors of school counselors; (b) the school counselor participants understood the vocabulary and concepts associated with the interview prompts and largely (if not wholly) responded in a forthright and honest fashion; (c) the data collected are a fair representation of school counselor perceptions and behavior; and d) the analysis and interpretation of the data faithfully reflects participants' perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described the purpose of this study and a rationale for the specific case study methodology. Gaining initial gatekeeper approval proceeded at the school site as planned as did document collection. Initial contacts in writing to solicit school counselor participation required follow-up in all cases. Three school counselors from the single school site consented to participate and completed the entirety of the three-interview series.

The interview sessions proceeded according to the established protocol. All questions from Interviews 1 and 2 were readily answered. Occasionally, participants requested rereading and/or minimal clarification of a prompt. At no point did any participant elect not to respond to a prompt. On occasion, when responses were brief, I requested elaboration by using open-ended probes (see Appendix A for complete interview guide). When given an opportunity in Interview 3 to review the previous transcripts for accuracy and make clarifications and/or additions, all participants indicated the transcripts were accurate and indicated there was nothing to clarify and/or add. At the close of Interview 3, all participants were provided with a debriefing letter.

The analysis of data proceeded as planned. Interview transcripts, document content, and researcher notes/memos were analyzed through recursive comparison to identify segments that responded to the research questions and establish initial themes. Intercoder agreement was used in the identification and naming of the final three themes and their corresponding subthemes. Findings from the analysis of data are presented in Chapter 4.

## Chapter Four Research Findings

In this fourth chapter, I present the three themes and their subthemes that emerged from the data analysis described in the previous chapter. I conducted this analysis of multiple personal interview transcripts to explore the extent to which there is an intersection among three conditions: school counselor role and influence, local course-taking policy, and student access to educational opportunity. My focus was on the perceptions and behaviors of the school counselors interviewed. My specific aim in this study was to examine the extent to which school counselors (a) are enabled and/or constrained in their ability to create student access to Advanced Placement (AP) coursework, (b) use discretionary decision making as they navigate local AP course-taking policy, (c) consider efficiency and equity as values associated with policy and counseling practice, and (d) identify and perceive justice in their local context of professional work.

I begin this report of my findings with the results of my review of district and school site documents related to the AP programming and course taking, which was conducted to ascertain the local policy environment and practices. I then follow with the results from the semi-structured interviews conducted with three school counselors from a single high school site. Finally, I present additional findings observed separately from the themes related to the specific research questions of this study.

### **Overview of District and School Site Documents Related to Advanced Placement**

To provide context for the emergent themes from the counselor interviews, I first describe the policy environment of the district and school site and examine how it is understood by the counselor participants. School board policy in the participating district endorses elementary and secondary instruction that prepares students to meet state diploma requirements and calls for instruction at the high school level to prepare students for adulthood in the form of

career and technical training, employability skills, and prerequisite coursework for college admissions. California State Education Code 49600 speaks to educational counseling, specifically referencing school counselors as providing academic counseling services to students in the following areas:

Development and implementation, with parental involvement, of the pupil's immediate and long-range educational plans; completion of the required curriculum in accordance with the pupil's needs, abilities, interests, and aptitudes; and academic planning for access and success in higher education programs, including advisement on courses needed for admission to public colleges and universities, standardized admissions tests, and financial aid. (California Education Code, n.d., Section 49600)

The participating district's school board policy reflects the Education Code and requires counseling services be nondiscriminatory. District-level electronic and print documents promote educational opportunity and college and career readiness for all students through multiple programs including AP coursework. District documents highlight a commitment to providing equitable access to curricular, instructional, and other educational resources for all students.

High school site documents state AP coursework is geared toward students who have demonstrated the academic interests and skills to pursue challenging coursework and align with the College Board's AP Program description as providing college-level curriculum along with an opportunity for earning college credit via examination (College Board, 2001). The high school course catalog specifies prerequisite courses, grade level requirements, and/or recommends a total academic grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher for certain AP courses. Student and parent signatures are required on the course registration form specifically acknowledging the request for honors-level and AP coursework.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, electronic posts on the school website outline mandatory summer assignments for certain AP courses and procedures for

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<sup>2</sup> Course registration forms require signatures in two cases: (a) student and parent signature to acknowledge the request for honors-level and AP coursework, and (b) parent signature to acknowledge the request for a reduced class load (12th grade year only).

accessing needed texts/resources through the school or online. Summer assignment documents communicate the expectation that work is to be completed prior to the first day of class and, in some instances, will be factored into students' grade for the course.

Though not explicitly stated in school site documents, participants in this study asserted AP coursework is, by policy, open to all students. Structural constraints of the high school master schedule can potentially impact access to AP coursework. In situations where student requests for a specific AP course exceed available seats delineated by the master schedule, participants indicated school site practice is to remove students based on overall GPA, with students with the lowest GPA removed first, until the predetermined maximum cap on seats is reached. These features of district and site-level policy and practice provide important information and context for this study. Participants' understanding of the policy environment and how they operate in it can promote a deeper understanding of the emergent themes.

### **Themes That Emerged From the Data**

Three main themes emerged from the data analysis. The first theme was *Creating AP Access*. Collectively, participants perceived themselves as being both enabled and constrained in their ability to create access to AP coursework for students. The second, and most predominant theme conveyed by all participants, was *Advocacy*. Participants' statements suggest significant agreement regarding the school counselor's role as an advocate for awareness of, and inclusion in, AP as central to the student advising and placement process. The third theme was *Justice*. While certain commonalities were found to exist, participants were somewhat distinctive in their identification, perceptions, and expression of justice and injustice.

## Theme 1: Creating Advanced Placement Access

Theme 1 links directly to this study's first research question and helps us understand the extent to which school counselors are enabled and/or constrained in their ability to create student access to AP coursework. Findings suggest participants perceive themselves as being concurrently *enabled* and *constrained* in the local context. Participant responses identified enabling and constraining factors associated with district and school site policy and its implementation. Opportunities for discretionary decision making, master schedule structures and practices, and other dynamics were acknowledged by participants as influential. The following passages provide evidence of the ways school counselors perceive themselves to be enabled and constrained in their ability to create access to AP.

Statements from participants (interview excerpts) upon which I depended in the identification of Theme 1a (Enabled) include the following:

We have open enrollment, so anyone can sign up for it. But there is a recommendation that a student have a 3.0 GPA prior to taking this on. Now, there's exceptions of course. (C3)

Um, but there are exceptions made to that. There's no set guideline that you have to have any set GPA. It's pretty much open, but . . . . In theory it's open, in theory it's open and anyone can join. (C1)

These two short passages from interviews with Counselors 3 and 1 describe their uniquely explicit perceptions that AP participation as "open" to all students. The school site recommendation for an overall 3.0 GPA for AP participation is specifically acknowledged by both counselors as a recommendation subject to "exceptions" rather than a requirement. These statements support the notion that AP courses are, at least initially, accessible.

A subtle, but important, difference is seen in Counselor 2's perception about the ability to make exceptions to the recommended GPA policy, "Um, I will tell you I probably, I don't always

hold true to our policy of a kid has to have a 3.0 to get into AP classes. . . . Because, if a counselor feels that a student should be in an AP class, we put them in.” These statements indicate it is through a school counselor’s exercise of professional judgment and discretion that they may work around the school site GPA recommendation to provide access and initial placement in an AP course. This counselor does not perceive participation is open to all; it is made open by the counselor.

Counselor 2 found justification in making exceptions through interpretation of district policy. Actions are justified by taking up the spirit of the policy. As Counselor 2 said, “Well I think that that's the district’s . . . with the dual enrollment and AP classes they're pushing more kids to take advanced classes.” I interpret this statement to mean school counselor efforts to create student access to AP opportunities are bolstered by overarching institutional philosophies that promote college-level course-taking. Regardless of whether enrollment is open, it should be encouraged. More students should be “pushed” into AP classes to take advantage of the opportunities created by the district.

Counselor 1 highlighted the increased offering of AP courses includes not just more seats but a greater diversity of courses: “I think growing the AP courses that are offered, the number of them and the different subjects. Offering more of an array of options for students has been kind of helpful in trying to increase participation.” The consequence of increased options in AP course offerings (number of courses offered and subject/content matter) has the potential to enable access to a larger pool of students. School counselors were thereby enabled in their ability to create access to AP for students with diverse interests, aptitudes, and talents.



The structural change created by more course sections and more course offerings included school personnel changes. This created openness to counselors' efforts to increase student participation. As Counselor 2 said:

And I think we've got new teachers teaching a lot of AP classes than what we've seen. There's been a little bit of a change over. So, there's been a little bit more . . . I don't know just, just letting kids be in there. (C2)

School counselors are better enabled to create access to AP coursework when AP teachers also support open access for students. Counselor 2 described how recent shifts in both teaching assignments and teacher attitudes has advanced inclusivity at the school site.

Statements (interview excerpts) upon which I depended in the identification of Theme 1b (Constrained) include the following:

I think it's, when we highly recommend like that 3.0, um, that practice has its positives and negatives. So, I think that is a practice that impacts us as counselors because it's a blanket statement that we use, um, guided from people above us I should say. Knowing that but, it makes it tough. I think overall as counselors we're at, looking at the whole student and not just saying it. But I think we need to be careful of what we say in our presentations to make kids think that way. (C1)

In describing the school site recommendation of an overall 3.0 GPA for AP participation as having both "positives and negatives," Counselor 1 suggested this practice has potential constraining effects for school counselors and students. Counselor 1 explicitly stated the practice of recommending a 3.0 GPA was decided upon by "people above" the counselor level, indicating a misalignment between school counselor and leadership philosophies. Counselor 1's response suggests, while school counselors' adopt and employ a holistic view of students, policy and associated practices can constrain the provision of AP access and influence students in unforeseen ways. In this case, Counselor 1 cautioned there is potential for students to limit themselves prior to the advising process in their course selections based on a single, recommended factor like GPA. The recommendation signals the need for mental adaptation by

the students, that they take satisfaction in less than they might otherwise be capable of attaining (Robeyns, 2017).

The recommended GPA is not only a psychological constraint. It is also a structural constraint, as described by Counselor 2:

So, if the board, the scheduling board, whatever you want to call it, allows for three sections of an AP class, if we have enough kids for three and a half, or three and a quarter, then we might start looking at GPA's and the past performance of kids, and pull kids out that may be borderline qualified, or borderline did not qualify, and put them into regular. (C2)

Counselor 2's response speaks not only to the structural constraint perceived, but the manner in which it is enacted. That is, strict preservation of the parameters of the master schedule by school site administration has the potential to impact the school counselors' ability to provide AP access.

In the following excerpt, Counselor 2 suggested additional, broad-based, factors beyond the master schedule potentially impact the provision on AP access.

I mean challenges as far as school wide goes, I think it would be staffing and availability of sections. I think that . . . just when stuff gets to be full there might be kids sitting out there that really should be in a class and there's no room to put them in. So that's a challenge. (C2)

In this response, Counselor 2 speaks to resource limitations (such as teacher staffing levels) school counselors encounter, in their efforts to create access to AP coursework, and the potential for some students to be excluded from educational opportunity.

Programmatic choices and decision making at the school site can further complicate the permutations of student scheduling. As Counselor 3 stated:

Running out of space when students want that, scheduling wise. That bothers me. Or, like my students that are in the [XYZ] Program they can only take the [XYZ] classes for certain periods, and if courses were offered in conflicting times then it's not even an option. (C3)

Counselor 3 echoed concerns related to constraints on AP access imposed by the school's master schedule and specifically noted the challenges associated with specialized student programming that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for some students to access AP coursework.

Notably, additional forms of constraint were identified that shift from the school counselor to the students themselves. With this shift, a contest of sorts is revealed between school counselors, teachers, and administrators. Two of the counselors said this:

Um, I think the policies, we have summer homework. Pretty much every AP class, so that practice I'm not, I feel like it's a kind of a gatekeeper in that sense. It keeps some kids out from it. (C1)

So, they also have to do summer work for most of the courses which they are on their own to go and get, and get the textbooks, downloaded off the Internet. Supposed to be due on the first day and most teachers are pretty hardcore about that. But some are a little more lax, and the word gets out about that too. (C3)

These responses speak to the potential impact of required summer assignments tied to AP participation. The school site practice of required summer assignments for certain courses was established by teachers with administrative approval but without input from counselors.

Counselor 1 specifically identifies these assignments as a "gatekeeper" that potentially discourages and/or precludes some students from AP participation. Both excerpts suggest school counselors view summer assignments as a student burden and potential constraint on access.

As student advocates (Theme 2, presented later in this chapter), school counselors may pursue their professional goals differently than teachers and administrators, setting up a contest over how to best regulate student participation in AP. Through this contest, the school counselor role may, in turn, be constrained. Despite the perception by participants that summer assignments are a constraint to AP access, school counselors are expected to inform students of, and thereby promote, this requirement.

School counselors may take other factors into account during the academic advising process, based on their own real or perceived understanding of teacher practices. As Counselor 1 said, “There are certain classes with certain teachers that I will think twice about with students when I know they’re, they already struggle to a certain degree, and um, I know a teacher isn’t as supportive as another one.” This response indicates school counselors may take teacher attitudes and instructional practices into consideration when advising students about AP course selection and participation, which, in turn, may constrain access to certain courses. School counselors must confront active attempts by other education professionals to constrain access and their own perceptions and/or misperceptions of teacher-related factors. Counselor 2 described it this way:

I think the challenge is the administration and teachers sometimes. Teachers aren't always willing to give kids the opportunity to try their AP classes because they will go in ahead of time and look at the class list and go in and see what the kid has done in the past and come up and tell us you know “this kid doesn't belong in my class, get him out” that kind of stuff. (C2)

This response provides a description of instances where administrators and/or AP teachers have actively sought out the school counselor to discourage course participation for certain students. Counselor 2 acknowledged this “challenge,” suggesting the ultimate outcome of these counselor-administrator/counselor-teacher interactions has the potential to enable or constrain student access to AP coursework regardless of the actual policies in place.

Real or perceived expectations on the part of the students, staff, and the educational institution may also exert constraining effects. As Counselor 3 said:

I think it scares kids off when they [the teacher] get a reputation in class that it's really, really hard. Whereas others have a reputation of not being so hard. And you suddenly up and change the teacher, it might be a totally different thing. So that's frustrating. (C3)

School counselors may have to grapple with teacher reputation (real or imagined by students and/or parents) and shifting teacher assignments as factors that influence AP participation. As

Counselor 1 put it, “I feel like more kids would take it if there wasn’t so much pressure to have to pass this test.” Counselor 2 added, “I worry that districts get so caught up in numbers.” Institutional and/or school site-specific expectations for high AP national exam scores (as a measure of both individual student achievement and teacher/school accountability) may inadvertently serve to discourage some students from participation. The degree to which this may be the case is unknown and could be more a concern of the school counselors than the students themselves.

## **Theme 2: Advocacy**

The theme of school counselor as student advocate was strongly and clearly evidenced across participants and throughout the interview data. The following excerpt from Counselor 2 serves to establish this principal theme and highlights the notion that school counselor advocacy is perceived as a central professional responsibility that extends to all students:

And I think as counselors we are advocates for our kids. For the kids that have parents that are advocates as well as the kids that don't have anybody supporting them. That's our job. And that's what, that's what we're there for. (C2)

Findings from this study suggest advocacy efforts can be considered in two distinct ways. Participants explained how they advocate for student opportunity by (a) expanding *awareness* of AP and (b) sponsoring *AP inclusion*. In the scope of this study, school counselors clearly perceived their professional role and responsibilities to include providing students with essential awareness of educational opportunity like AP. Through individual student advising, participants assisted students in reflecting on their interests, knowledge, skills, and abilities as they consider AP participation. Beyond initial AP awareness, participants described (a) encouraging students toward a challenging academic course of study, (b) boosting student self-confidence, and (c) facilitating student decision making by taking a host of considerations into account. In the

following passages, I provide evidence of the ways school counselors perceive their professional role as advocate for AP awareness and AP inclusion.

School counselors perceived their professional role and function as an academic advisor to be multifaceted and having an initial focus on awareness. As Counselor 1 said, “I think as counselors our role is to, I think we have multiple roles actually, so the big part is just more in making sure they are aware of what’s available to them and which options they have.” Counselor 3 added, “Well yeah, I think because first of all a lot of them might not even consider taking it if I didn’t bring it up.” These statements suggest students may have little or no knowledge of the existence, and potential benefits, of AP coursework, and that a primary function of the school counselor role is to bring opportunities to light. Counselor 3’s statements suggests even when students are aware of AP coursework, they may not consider the opportunity for themselves without explicit guidance.

Another facet of the school counselor advocacy role involves building upon basic awareness to support students’ academic development and self-realization. As Counselor 2 said:

I really, based on students’ performances if I see a kid not taking AP classes or honors classes, or whatever it is the advanced classes, I really try to encourage them, and really try to push them toward that. And try to push them into the most academic classes I can get them in. (C2)

This response illustrates the shared perception by all three participants that academic advising includes encouraging students toward a more academically challenging course of study. School counselors consider a student’s prior course taking patterns and academic performance to support recommendations for AP opportunity. The specific subject area interests of students are also taken into account in by counselors as they bring about awareness as shown in the excerpts that follow. Counselor 3 described it this way:

A lot of times when they'll come in and they'll talk to me about something that they're particularly interested in, like say they really love U.S. History, and they're a fairly strong student... maybe they've never even taken an AP class I might suggest, "oh because you really like history, and because you're doing well in your other classes, then perhaps you might want to consider giving it a go and take an AP class, challenge yourself a little bit with that. I think you might be up for the task." And we'll talk about it again at registration, so plant a seed so to speak. (C3)

Counselor 1 added this, "Having a few different arts now, I think that's really helpful because you're reaching to a different group of kid now and your explaining to them that their strength in that is important."

Counselors 3 and 1 described how school counselors explore students' interests, knowledge, skills, and abilities as part of the advising process and may encourage increased challenge in the subject area(s) where the student demonstrates curiosity and engagement. In doing so, the school counselor validates the student's individual strengths. Counselor 3's statements not only make the student aware of AP opportunity but also reveal an opportunity for the student to realize their best self through a robust academic experience. School counselors may revisit opportunities on multiple occasions with students, "planting seeds" over time.

Fostering student awareness through the advising process also involves bolstering a students' belief in themselves. All three counselors spoke about this. Counselor 1 said, "And, a lot of times, it's just somebody pushing them, somebody telling them they can do this. Counselor 2 explained it this way:

I mean there's always those the few that we know that we encourage them. And we see potential in them that they may not see in themselves. Um, and I think that we all encourage those kids to perform and to try even though they're apprehensive. (C2)

Added Counselor 3, "Let them know that I feel like I am confident in their abilities to be able to handle it." School counselors may be the first person to clearly signal to a student they are believed to be capable of successful participation in AP coursework. School counselors use the

individual advising process to boost student self-confidence and inspire participation in educational opportunity. At the same time, there is a recognition not all students will gravitate toward AP participation. As Counselor 2 said:

I think as counselors we need to make it OK that they take regular college prep classes because those are good classes too. And it's okay to be in those classes. It doesn't mean that you're less of a person, it doesn't mean that you can't handle necessarily the workload. It just means maybe you're just not ready right now, but it's OK because that's where you're at. (C2)

These statements suggest school counselors urge students to not only reflect on their current scholarship but also imagine possibilities. Participants acknowledged students are at times reluctant to consider AP participation and may need school counselor support to address the affective dimension of course planning. Counselor 2 validated the importance of student choice in the course selection process by acknowledging AP may or may not be the appropriate option for a student at a given point in time. The student's overall academic load also becomes a consideration, particularly for first-time AP participants. According to Counselor 2:

You know if a kid has never taken an AP class, I'm not going to give him six, but maybe, you know, one or two to let them try the waters. You know, I just, we don't know what we're capable of doing. And that teacher might excite that kid, they might go for it. They may be able to accomplish things that they never thought they could. (C2)

Counselor 2 conceded not all can be known about a student's interests, knowledge, skills, and abilities through the initial advising process. As such, school counselors may encourage and support AP course taking, even in those instances where students have no previous AP experience and/or do not meet the GPA recommendation for participation.

These findings uniquely support the notion that school counselors focus their advocacy efforts on increasing student awareness and "planting seeds" for course-taking opportunities. Based on multiple student factors, including but not limited to interests and/or aptitudes, school counselors explore AP options with students who may not initially see themselves as inclined



toward AP participation or may even preclude themselves based on real or perceived factors. School counselors acknowledged they cannot fully know the potential of their students, and, therefore, they lean toward encouraging consideration for, rather than against, AP participation. As advocates, school counselors responsibly encourage challenging course-taking, attempt to boost individual student self-confidence, and provide an informed and supportive “push” toward AP opportunity.

With AP awareness achieved, school counselors may be required to shift their advocacy efforts toward sponsoring inclusion in AP for their students. Depending on local policies and practices related to the allocation of AP seats, school counselors may have a greater or lesser role to play in advocating for access and inclusion. In the scope of this study, participants expressed a common professional ethic to do what’s best for students. Participants provided descriptions of advocacy efforts for AP inclusion for individual students and the lengths they may go to in this endeavor.

Statements (interview excerpts) upon which I depended in the identification of Theme 2b (Inclusion) include the following from Counselor 2: “[The] bottom line is I think as counselors we always try to do what's best for the kid and we always put the kid first. And if it means disagreeing with the teachers, it means disagreeing with the teacher.” This response serves as an exemplar for a common participant assertion that, above all other considerations, the impetus for direct advocacy by the school counselor is the educational welfare of the student. Counselor 2 indicated these advocacy efforts may, at times, generate tension related to policy and practice surrounding student inclusion and opportunity. The interactions between school counselors and other school staff may vary in tenor and outcome. As Counselor 1 said:

I think we are able to advocate for our students and that there is flexibility there. If there is space available, and our student may not meet the, the requirements, we’re able to say,

know, this, he should have this chance, or she. And overall, I think we're more heard and more listened to. (C1)

Usually I'll go to the teacher first and explain why I think that kid would be a good fit, or why I'm pushing that. And overall, our teachers are really understanding and helpful and, um, they're good about that. But usually it's having the admin and the one in charge of AP because [they are] the one who has to override things. So, if the student didn't meet the requirement that was given (though like I said we don't have a lot of like it has to be this anymore because it's kind of a parent driven focus) but we are able to go to admin and say this is what I think is best for the kid. And overall, I think we're listened to and trusted in that manner. (C1)

In these excerpts, Counselor 1 spoke to the role of school counselors as direct advocates for student inclusion in AP coursework. In navigating school site policy surrounding AP participation (in this case a recommendation for a minimum 3.0 grade point average), school counselors are at times compelled to voice appeals for student inclusion. School counselors interact with AP teachers and/or school administrators to advocate for individual student participation and provide "a chance" for opportunity based on the particular attributes of the student. Counselor 1's response suggests when seats in AP classes are available, school counselors are largely successful in these efforts. Success in achieving inclusivity, however, is not always a given. As Counselor 2 stated:

Sometimes I win the [inclusion] battle, sometimes I lose the [inclusion] battle you know. And I'm honest with the kids. I will tell them this is what I'm going to do. I don't know what's going to happen, but we're going to try it. (C2)

Counselor 2's words liken direct advocacy efforts at times to a court conflict, with the school counselor and student having a shared understanding of the uncertainty of the outcome. In this case, "it" refers to taking on the contest for inclusion in opportunity, and the "battle" is the interaction between the counselor and administrator who makes the ultimate decision related to AP seat allocation.

These findings support the assertion that school counselors not only act as advocates for advancing AP awareness but also focus their efforts on sponsoring inclusion for students. School counselors must navigate school practices and policies while meeting their professional mandate to provide educational opportunity for all students and open doors that may at times seem closed. This may require direct appeals to AP teachers and/or administrators to do “what’s best for the kid,” to potentially “override” practice or policy, and even “battle” for inclusion. The possibility for tension among school site staff as a result of these advocacy efforts is clearly acknowledged. This intersection of advocacy, inclusivity, policy, and gatekeeping will be further explored in the next chapter of this dissertation. The theme of justice that follows sheds additional light on this tension.

### **Theme 3: Justice**

As advocates for AP awareness and inclusion, school counselors may encounter justice problems requiring attention. School site policies and practices can intentionally, or unintentionally, contribute to justice problems. In the scope of this study, findings suggest school counselors contend with justice concerns related to their professional work in advancing AP participation in the context of local course-taking policy. Participants were distinctive in their identification, perceptions, and expression of justice and injustice. More specifically, school counselors identified and perceived justice (and injustice) related to *access* and educational *opportunity for all* students.

Statements (interview excerpts) upon which I depended in the identification of Theme 3a (Access) include the following:

Um, I think just the, the policy of 3.0 itself, um, that makes it tough because we can, especially one’s where we know the classes kind of fill up and there’s only one or two sections. They’re picked by GPA, so the lowest GPA are the ones that are taken out. So, um, that makes it hard. It happened to one of my students in biology, AP Bio a couple years

ago. Where there was only one section and that was the only AP class they wanted to take before going to college. But because they had the 2.8 GPA, they were taken out. And, um, that was really frustrating because you know I encouraged that student to take the challenge, to do it because that's what they wanted to study when they went to college. And then the policy of, if its full we take out by lowest GPA, um, made it difficult. (C1)

Counselors 1's response identifies a justice concern shared by all three participants. Counselor 1 specifically points to the frustration encountered when students with little to no AP experience are at times denied access without regard to factors like student grade level, subject area interest, and future academic plans. In this instance, the individual advising process (including responsible encouragement of academically challenging course-taking) is usurped by the school site practice for allocating AP seats. Structural constraints of the master schedule may exacerbate justice problems related to access. As Counselor 3 expressed it, "Running out of space when students want that, scheduling wise. That bothers me." Counselor 2 added, "I think that . . . just when stuff gets to be full there might be kids sitting out there that really should be in a class and there's no room to put them in. So that's a challenge."

These responses suggest unease with school site practices related to the allocation of AP seats. The terms "difficult," "bothers me," and "challenge" reveal a conflict between the school counselors' professional mandate to provide educational access for all students and a local procedure for allocation of AP seats that could be considered unjust. Counselor 2's response suggests school site procedures for allocation may be faulty, with capable students "sitting out."

In addition to initial allocation of AP seats, participants described justice concerns related to the required summer assignments for certain AP courses. The following excerpt from Counselor 1 provides elaboration of the problem:

I feel like it's a gatekeeper in one way because not every kid has that parent support at home where they're able to get the support, the help, the guidance that they need when they are working on these rigorous AP courses. Um, they don't have someone to really talk to and speak to about it. And then especially when there's a test on the material that

first day or two back and they haven't had time to ask questions of anyone. There isn't a teacher there, there isn't a parent there, so I feel like it, it's unfair for some of our kids because it puts them at a disadvantage compared to others. (C1)

Counselor 1's response focused on the notion of fairness in relation to required summer assignments for AP participation. Counselor 1 points out this requirement serves to disadvantage students (particularly those with limited academic supports) even before the school year and course begins. In the first week of class, students may be assessed on the summer material without any direct instruction. This holds potential to (a) influence a student's frame of mind about the course, (b) impact their initial grade, and (c) conceivably push some students out of the course altogether.

Additional factors, like teacher attitudes may impact access as a justice concern.

Counselor 1 expressed it this way:

Um, but they'll [teachers] come to the counselor and say the student doesn't belong there, the student shouldn't be in there. And, even if they're passing, they'll have a C and they're pass, and they're saying the student isn't an AP student. That's what I hate hearing – the student isn't an AP student. So that definitely limits access and that's not, I don't think that's fair. (C1)

Again, it's kind of defining what is successful to each person, and that unspoken rule of when a teacher at the beginning, even based off summer homework, says this student isn't going to pass this test and they kind of go around and try and get them out, and they tell them that they think they should get out. (C1)

In these responses, Counselor 1 described how teacher attitudes regarding perceived appropriateness of certain students for AP coursework can unjustly impact initial access to the course or potentially coerce students out of the class who may not feel supported in their participation. The school counselor's response to these interactions becomes critical to a just or unjust outcome.

The theme of justice was also revealed in school counselor statements evoking a broader conceptualization of educational opportunity for all students. Although participants were distinct

in their perceptions of how justice concerns impact specific segments of the student population, there was significant consensus that all students should be afforded educational opportunity regardless of GPA, race/ethnicity/culture, socioeconomic status, English learner status, and/or special education status.

Several statements (interview excerpts) led to the identification of Theme 3b

(Opportunity for All). As Counselor 1 said:

So, if they're, um, if they really struggle in one subject and they get their C's in a couple, if they're really go in another one, not having that 3.0 shouldn't deter them from taking that course and that challenge. I think it's a good challenge for a lot of our students to take, um, even if they're not 3.0 or higher students. (C1)

Counselor 2 added, "But he, to me, he had the right to try. And that's just how I feel. Not everybody feels that way, but I do." Counselor 2 was forceful in the assertion that all students should be provided an opportunity, and have a "right," to AP participation. Likewise, Counselor 1's response supports the idea of maximizing student opportunity and self-realization and questions the legitimacy of current school site policy recommending a 3.0 GPA for AP participation.

Counselor 1 also identified student demographics and diversity of class makeup as a justice-related concern:

I think there's definitely a, a difference in demographic if you look at the kids taking AP courses. But I don't think that's based off of an unspoken rule. I think that's just an unfortunate, I don't know how to, maybe it's just an implicit bias in everything going along with it. And, as I said like the, the quick determination of whether a kid is going to be successful and having the success be measured only by passing the test. I think that, that um, impacts having a diverse group of students take the class. (C1)

While all participants acknowledged the importance of access and inclusivity in AP participation, Counselor 1 acknowledged how the demographics of student AP participation does not align with the overall demographics of the school site. Counselor 1 was explicit in

referencing implicit bias and the possibility it may exist and conceivably influence which students are granted access to AP participation.

Similarly, Counselor 3 pointed to two specific student groups when considering AP opportunity for all students:

Maybe, I think sometimes our EL population is not necessarily expected to take an AP class unless they're taking, say, AP Spanish. Because of their language struggles. I don't think that necessarily means that they couldn't handle it. You do get that, that would be, a little bit of an actual barrier because of the language. I don't think those kids are discouraged necessarily from taking an AP class. I just don't know that they're necessarily encouraged to do it either. Definitely not special ed students. Although I've had as a special ed student who took AP Art and did great. He struggled but the teacher was really willing to modify things and stretch out assignments too. We may have had more cultural bias in the past, but I don't really see that as a problem anymore. I think because of the diversity of the school, there is a lot of diversity in those AP classes. Well we do have a greater percentage of white kids, that's a little contradictory to what I said. But I think that's changing. I think it's improving. I think some of that is not necessarily a systemic within the school problem. (C3)

Counselor 3 acknowledged English learners and students receiving special education services, may not be as strongly encouraged to consider AP participation due to their different learning needs. Counselor 3's response indicated AP student participation was becoming increasingly diverse and reflective of the demographics of the student body as a whole, and that systemic biases have lessened over time.

Interviews revealed socioeconomic status was an indicator of AP opportunity for all students. Counselor 1 said, "We are 52% free and reduced lunch; we have a very different demographic now than we did before, and are we keeping out students who should have this opportunity just because of the pass rate?" Counselor 1 questioned whether AP participation rates reflect the socioeconomic diversity of the school site as a justice-related concern worthy of further exploration. At the same time, Counselor 1 also suggested open access to AP may be discouraged given institutional desires for high test scores as measure of school accountability.

School site policies and practices surrounding AP participation significantly impact access to AP participation and, in turn, can exacerbate or alleviate justice problems. As

Counselor 3 said:

When we went to allowing kids to sign up on their own we had a huge increase in the number of kids taking AP classes. Which was great. We should be able to offer classes for anyone who wants to be able to do it. (C3)

In this response, Counselor 3 highlighted the importance of student choice and self-realization related to educational opportunity. Counselor 3 proposed school site practices related to course selection should better prioritize access for all students.

While none of the school counselor participants specifically used the word “justice,” each in their own way commented on the ideas of fairness, rights, and the opportunity for inclusion in AP coursework for all students. These findings suggest school counselors identified and perceived justice (and injustice) related to AP access and educational opportunity for all students.

### **Findings in Relation to the Research Questions**

Charged with promoting equity and access to rigorous educational experiences for all students, school counselors operate in a potential space of tension when district and school policy and organizational norms related to AP course-taking signal less-than-open access. In this environment, school counselor role and behavior in the context of academic advising become an increasingly important determinant of student opportunity. In this section, each research question and related finding will be reviewed to make known how well each question was answered.

Table 3 represents a summary of the research questions as answered by the themes.



Table 3

*Research Questions as Answered by Themes*

	Themes <sup>a</sup>		
	Creating AP Access	Themes Advocacy	Justice
Research Question 1	●		
Research Question 2	○	○	
Research Question 3		○	○
Research Question 4			○

<sup>a</sup> ● answered by theme; ○ partially answered by theme

**Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 asks: To what extent are school counselors enabled and/or constrained in their ability to create student access to AP coursework? An answer to this question is obtained by reviewing findings that led to the identification of Theme 1. Findings clearly suggest school counselors perceive themselves to be both enabled and constrained in their ability to create student access to AP coursework. All three participants indicated the advising and initial course selection processes provide for some level of discretion and freedom to enable access to AP participation. The school site recommendation for a 3.0 GPA was seen by counselors as just that (a recommendation) during the initial student advising process. Participants described the advising process as opening conversations (awareness) with students who might not otherwise be considering AP participation and who may need encouragement and/or a “push.” Participants labeled themselves as “advocates” for student opportunity and saw themselves as empowered to seek out and even “battle” for AP access for students who might not meet the recommended GPA. Participants described institutional shifts in both structures and philosophy that have bolstered school counselors’ ability to enable access to AP, such as increased number and type of AP courses offered, and changes in AP teacher staffing and attitudes that support increased inclusivity.

Participants described being constrained in their ability to provide access to AP participation by scarcity—the point at which student requests exceed the available seats for a particular course. Participants viewed themselves as constrained by the limitations on available seats and indicated, at times, they anticipated the consequences of the policy enforcement during the advising process. Participants described school site practices, such as required summer assignments and teacher philosophies and attitudes that endorse limited access to AP coursework, and a school site culture, that emphasizes performance on the national exam, as factors that operate to constrain school counselors’ ability to provide access to AP coursework.

### **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asks: To what extent do school counselors use discretionary decision making as they navigate local AP course-taking policy? In seeking to answer this question, the data analysis resulted in the emergence of Theme 2: Advocacy. In a school policy environment, school counselors must grapple with discretionary decision making, as a component of academic advising, and in initial course selection and placement for students. This discretion has two forms.

The first type of discretion is the simple interpretative discretion identified in Theme 1a. The school-site recommended GPA for AP participation was viewed by participants as subject to professional discretion. School counselors were able to exercise professional judgment. Theme 1b findings from this study indicate, however, that school counselor discretion in AP placement can be affected by the scarcity of AP seats. As seats become limited, school counselors relinquish their discretion to administrative decision making. These findings parallel Lipsky’s (2010) description of the challenges faced by street-level bureaucrats and will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Secondly, school counselors also possess the discretionary power to create student awareness (or not) of particular educational opportunities. Theme 2 findings from this study clearly suggest school counselors perceive their professional advocacy role to include making all students aware of opportunities like AP. In this way, school counselor participants used discretionary decision making to open opportunity rather than create barriers. All participants described using a holistic view of the student with multiple measures (e.g., subject area interests, aptitudes, prior academic performance, and so forth) to guide counselor-student conversations rather than a policy mandate or prescribed formula for determining AP suitability.

Despite strong consensus by the school counselor participants related to their advocacy role, indirect signals suggest department members are somewhat siloed in their work and decision-making processes with a focus on their individual student caseloads in contrast to their collective service to the general student population. This silence with regard to collective decision-making principles (either as a counseling department or a school-site) is notable and allows for only a partial answer to Research Question 2.

### **Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 asks: To what extent do school counselors consider efficiency and equity as values associated with policy and counseling practice? This question is partially answered by Theme 2 (Advocacy) and Theme 3 (Justice). In their examination of policy values, Wirt et al. (1988) provided a frame for defining efficiency and equity as applied to education in the public sector. In the most basic terms, efficiency refers to the ratio of work completed to the energy expended. School counselor participants alluded to this ratio in terms of their specific role in AP advising and the professional responsibility to take multiple student-related factors into account. Participants described the nature of individual student advising as necessarily time-

consuming, devoid of a “formula,” and dependent on the circumstance of the student. Data analysis did not, however, reveal a collective vision for use of time and efficiency for the counseling department as a whole. Although few examples of advising efforts beyond individual student-counselor interactions were revealed in participant responses, it is possible to imagine the “work” of advising can occur in other ways to influence efficiency.

Beyond the simple definition, Wirt et al. (1988) connected efficiency in education to an economic form: enhancing program performance by decreasing costs and increasing gains. In relation to school counselor functions, increasing gains can be considered at the level of the individual student and at the programmatic level. Participant responses support the notion that school counselors view their role as supporting students in achieving their greatest educational potential. This includes developing student self-confidence and providing access to robust academic opportunities like AP coursework. At the programmatic level, participants acknowledged the part they play in the larger institutional goal of increasing collective student gains as measured by AP enrollment and AP exam score data at the school and district levels. However, no specific data were offered by participants to show evidence in support of this claim, either as individuals or as a department.

Wirt et al. (1988) stated equity in policy promotes the “basic value of the individual's worth and society's responsibility” (p. 274) and attempts to address disparities and gaps through redistribution of public resources. In education, equity refers to the allocation of educational resources and opportunities to learn, recognizing some students require more and/or different support than others (Wirt et al., 1988). Findings from this study indicate participants were attuned to equity as related to counseling practice. Specifically, participants encouraged self-

realization and addressed gaps and disparities for students and parents with little or no AP experience. Several participant responses provide support for this assertion. Counselor 1 said:

I feel like that's where, we as counselors and teachers and educators need to be the ones that push that and guide them to say like, "hey you would be great, you should take this challenge," instead of putting up a barrier for them.

Counselor 2 shared, "I don't believe a kid should take an easy junior year or easy senior year. I really believe kids should be up to their potential." Counselor 3 added:

We have parent meetings, like at our eighth into ninth grade parent meeting we talk about AP classes then. I think sometimes parents don't fully understand what AP means and to explain that to kids to at an early age. And how that can benefit them.

Participants described school site practices that have advanced equity such as offering a wider array of AP options, more inclusive recruiting efforts on the part of AP teachers, and AP exam fees paid for by the district.

Participants expressed concern about inequities that exist outside school counselor influence. Participants questioned the practice of required summer assignments for certain AP courses and expressed concern for students who might lack adequate support to meet this requirement and those who might forego AP altogether faced with a summer obligation. Likewise, participants suggested a lack of structured academic supports for newcomers (pre-AP and/or concurrent tutorials) might negatively impact enrollment for certain segments of the student body. Participants acknowledged, while recruiting efforts for AP have become more inclusive than in the past, there is still room for improvement in terms of AP participation for underrepresented groups such as English learners and students with disabilities. While structures and/or initiatives may exist, data analysis did not reveal evidence of a collective and intentional effort on the part of the school counseling department to enhance AP equity across the school site. This silence in the data would seem to warrant further investigation.

Interestingly, and consistent with the view of Wirt et al. (1988), two of three participants questioned the compatibility of equity and efficiency as policy values, suggesting a tension exists between increasing student access to AP coursework and institutional expectations to maintain high pass rates on AP national exams. Kolluri (2018) examined this push-pull nature of AP access and program effectiveness found in the literature and suggested future research on the barriers to AP participation should focus less on large-scale data and more on a theoretically grounded examination of “attitudes and idiosyncrasies of actual schools and classroom” (p. 703).

#### **Research Question 4**

Research Question 4 asks: To what extent do school counselors identify and perceive justice within their local context of professional work? According to Elster (1992), central to the processes surrounding justice are the individuals responsible for allocations that influence the opportunities and potential of recipients. As previously described in Theme 3 (Justice), this study’s findings clearly suggest school counselors identify and perceive justice as it relates to access to AP participation and educational opportunity for all students. Interestingly, none of the participants used the specific term justice, nor did they reference a professional, guiding philosophy related to justice. All three participants did, however, use language evoking and referencing concepts of fairness, rights, and desert. An in-depth discussion of justice in the local context will be presented in Chapter 5.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I reported findings from a school- and district-level document review and semi-structured interviews with three high school counselor participants. Three main themes emerged. The first theme was Creating AP Access. Participants perceived themselves as being

both enabled and constrained in their ability to create access to AP coursework for students. The second and most predominant theme conveyed by all respondents was school counselor Advocacy. Participants' responses pointed to significant agreement regarding the school counselor role as an advocate for awareness and inclusion. The third theme was Justice. Participants were distinctive in their identification, perceptions, and expression of justice related to access and opportunity for all students.

In the limited scope of this study, it is possible to provide partial answers to each of the four research questions. The first theme allows us to better understand the extent to which counselors are enabled and/or constrained in their ability to create AP access. The second theme provides a narrow understanding of the extent to which school counselors use discretionary decision making as they navigate local AP course-taking policy. Themes 2 and 3 contribute to a partial, but incomplete, understanding of the extent to which school counselors consider efficiency and equity as values associated with policy and counseling practice. Finally, the third theme provides an understanding of the extent to which school counselors identify and perceive justice in their local context of professional work related to AP participation.

Given the nature of this small case study, it is important to keep in mind the sense and understanding of the findings, and the forthcoming discussion, is bounded by limitations. This study was limited by the nature of the qualitative methodology and focus on school counselor role, perceptions, and behavior in relation to AP participation as one type of educational opportunity, though many forms exist. Three school counselors from a single high school site participated in this study. As such, findings should be considered in the scope of the specific context and policy environment and may not be generalizable to other educational settings. My own inexperience with qualitative research methodology, along with personal and professional

biases, may have had a limiting influence in the analysis of data and interpretation of the findings.

In the next chapter, I provide a discussion of this study's findings in connection with the literature and frameworks presented in Chapters 1 and 2. School counselor role and the notion of justice will be revisited and further examined. Implications for school counselor practice and leadership will be discussed, and recommendations for future research will be presented.



## Chapter Five Discussion

Chapter 5 consists of a discussion of this study's findings as connected to the literature. I begin by revisiting the five metaphors for the school counselor role and explore the notion of justice as it applies to the daily work of school counselors as they advocate for opportunity and allocate resources. Next, I consider implications for school counselor practice with special focus on leadership. Lastly, I discuss recommendations for future research. While this discussion will largely adhere to this study's findings, I make some extrapolations beyond the bounds of this specific case to provide a conceptual bridge for further discourse.

### **School Counselor Role – Connecting the Literature to Practice**

From the inception of the profession in the early 1900s, the role and function of school counselors has undergone a significant metamorphosis (Dahir & Stone, 2013; Gladding, 2012). Likewise, national and state standards for school counseling programs continue to evolve. Recent updates to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019) national model shift the language of its four components to action words—define, manage, deliver, assess—to better denote the activities school counselors undertake to benefit their school community. The concepts of leadership, advocacy, and collaboration continue to permeate ASCA's national model and help anchor the role of school counselors in today's educational environment. The review of the literature for this study provided five metaphors for counselor role and behavior—gatekeeper, impartial cultivator, street-level bureaucrat, intermediary, and institutional agent—which I examine in light of this study's findings.

### **Rejecting Gatekeepers and Impartial Cultivators**

Within the scope of the school counselors interviewed for this study, it was evident all three participants soundly rejected the model of gatekeeper. The gatekeeper model presented by

Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963), as one who efficiently directs opportunity through judgments and interpretations based on the student's biography, social status, and class, stands in opposition to the school counselor role put forth by this study's participants. Gatekeepers are marked by their use of discretionary decision making to sort, select, and influence the mobility of students as a function of the bureaucracy of the organization (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963). Gatekeepers encourage students to adjust, modify, or ignore possibilities, channeling students toward and away from certain educational paths based on social status and class. In doing so, gatekeepers maintain the institutional status quo for current and future student opportunity (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963).

Rather than keeping the gate, all three school counselors defined their primary function as being an advocate for the student. They described the academic advising process as a two-way conversation initially focused on making the student aware of the existence of opportunities like Advanced Placement (AP) and providing information about the academic expectations of AP participation. Counselors described the advising process as gathering and exchanging information with students about interests, strengths and needs, commitments, and future aspirations to assist them in weighing the pros and cons for AP participation. Counselors indicated reaching out to encourage and guide students who may not be considering AP is an essential piece of their advocacy effort as opposed to "putting up barriers." Rehberg and Hotchkiss (1972) suggested this type of counselor-student interaction oftentimes serves only to confirm the expectations of the student. Yet, school counselors in this study reported their role is to challenge the expectations students hold for themselves, to "push," "plant seeds," and imagine a new vision of themselves.

Beyond initial awareness of AP, findings suggest school counselor participants took action to open access to AP coursework. Erickson and Schultz (1982) described an inherent tension in the college counselor role in terms of both the counselor-student interaction (when the counselor and student have dissimilar backgrounds) and when the purpose and policies of the institution close off certain educational pathways. School counselors in this study acknowledged they cannot fully know the potential of their students and feel a strong responsibility to support access to opportunity, especially for underrepresented student groups. Participants rejected the notion that it was their role to grant or withhold permission for a course of study and indicated the choice of course selection should be left to the student and parent. Participants also described having occasion to take action to challenge institutional policy to secure inclusion in AP coursework for individual students.

Findings from this study suggest gatekeeping does exist outside student academic advising. While the counseling office does require the burden of student and parent signatures on the course registration form to acknowledge the request for AP coursework, significant barriers have been erected beyond the control of school counselors. The creation of the high school course catalog and the structure of the master schedule provide opportunities for gatekeeping that chiefly exist within the control of site administrators. Likewise, AP teachers act as gatekeepers by burdening students with summer assignments. Though school counselors may not be keeping the gates, it is evident that within the scope of this study school counselors must navigate gates and barriers to opportunity in their daily work with students.

In response to widespread criticism of educational gatekeeping, counselors in the 1990s began to downplay their influence, promote college going for all, and stress personal counseling over academic advising as intentional strategies to avoid accountability (Rosenbaum et al.,

1996). Counselors were concerned about damaging student self-esteem and angering parents and suggested they could not “make” students listen to their advice (Rosenbaum et al., 1996).

Through these acts of omission, counselors leave students unprepared for present and future opportunity, particularly those needing the most support and guidance (Ndura et al., 2003; Rosenbaum, 2011).

School counselor participants in this study described having candid conversations with their students, questioning their reasons for and against AP participation, and tailoring advice to the individual student. School counselors felt comfortable sharing their opinions and recommendations with students and asserted their respect for student choice to opt in or out of AP. Participant statements stressed the importance of “balance” and best fit for students thinking about AP participation, and the advising process was described as highly personalized, time-consuming, and having “no formula.” Unlike the impartial cultivator model, participants believed their academic advice was taken into account by students and reported a strong sense of responsibility to provide additional supports (beyond generic information) for under-resourced and marginalized student groups. These findings contrast with the metaphor of school counselor as impartial cultivator.

### **Parallels to Street-Level Bureaucrat**

Lipsky’s (2010) description of the work of street-level bureaucrats (as influenced by high degrees of discretionary decision making, a consistent lack of adequate resources to meet the needs of large caseloads and diverse clients, and ambiguous role expectations) aligns with the role of contemporary school counselors and is supported by findings from this study. All three participants discussed the challenges posed by sizable student caseloads, competing job duties and tasks, and the complexities of responding to the academic and personal-social needs of

students. Participants described working with a diverse student body to consider complex situations and decisions that require compassion and flexibility.

Findings from this study also support the notion that school counselor's use of discretionary decision making in the AP placement process is influenced by formal and informal expectations of the institution. Participants in this study asserted AP coursework is, by policy, open to all students. Likewise, they affirmed their ability to use discretion in the initial student placement in AP coursework by enrolling any student who meets the prerequisite course and grade level requirements and has the desire to participate. In situations where student requests for a specific AP class exceeded (or were anticipated to exceed) available seats, participants indicated professional discretion was limited or even quashed.

Counselors acknowledged the potential for bias in the allocation of AP seats, echoing the particular tension described by Barberis and Buchowicz (2015) that arises for frontline workers as they apply discretion to deal with problems of implementation that open or narrow access to opportunity. One participant explicitly highlighted the influence of local policy and school site expectations (drawing a comparison between previous and current school sites) in shaping their ability to use discretion when advising and placing students in AP coursework. In several significant ways, the metaphor of street-level bureaucrat parallels the working environment and professional experiences of the school counselors in this study.

### **Intermediary—More Advising, Less Building**

McDonough (1997) and Smith (2011) depicted a metaphor for school counselor as an intermediary who negotiates, brokers, and acts on behalf of students, parents, and the larger school community. Intermediaries fulfill this role in two ways—through individual student advising and by building counseling infrastructures (Smith, 2011). Findings previously presented

in Chapter 4 support the school counselor function of advocacy, with individual student advising as an approach to creating awareness of, and inclusion in, AP opportunity. In the sample of three counselors in this study, responses only minimally tapped into creating a network of larger supports to advance student opportunity.

Participants expressed concern about the lack of organizational structures to encourage and support students on the pathway to AP participation. Aside from the annual counselor presentations to parents of incoming freshman, very few methods were identified for creating a school-wide culture focused on educational opportunity. One counselor described a vision for an afterschool support program for first-time AP students, consisting of adult and peer tutoring for academic content and general study skills. Another counselor suggested promoting AP opportunity by having current AP students present information and share experiences with students in earlier grades and their parents. Participants lamented the current deficiencies in infrastructure and expressed frustration due to a perceived lack of time to devote to such endeavors.

Clearly, the school counselors in this study perceived their current role as primarily building relationships with the creation of programs and infrastructure, at that time, external to their function. Thus, the role of school counselor as intermediary is only partially supported.

### **Institutional Agent Through Advising**

Stanton-Salazar (2011) described institutional agents as adults outside the student's family who interact in the youth's social environment during the important transition to adulthood. Distinguished by their status and authority, these agents seek to provide high value resources and opportunities to students who otherwise might not have access. As institutional agents, school counselors pass along essential information related to academic options like AP,

provide guidance and training specific to college preparedness, and even leverage their own reputation to encourage positive outcomes. In turn, students are better able to navigate institutional structures and acquire the necessary resources for academic success and educational mobility (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Findings from this study support the notion that school counselors transmit essential knowledge to students regarding educational opportunity.

Participants described reaching out to students who may not have awareness of and access to AP and intentionally targeting underserved student groups to provide direct and indirect resources and supports. These student-counselor connections play an important role in the social development and educational attainment of young people. Like institutional agents, the school counselors in this study described leveraging their reputations to secure inclusion in AP opportunity in the form of professional appeals to administrators and teachers for student inclusion. Participants also recognized urging students to take on greater academic challenges could potentially stretch a student too much. In these cases, advocacy efforts included insuring an “out” to a general level course if necessary.

Stanton-Salazar (2011) proposed institutional agents cross over to the realm of empowerment agent when they critically and intentionally work to counter the dominant discourse, support student consciousness, break down stratification and injustice in the school context, and create broader “change in the world” (p. 1090). Although findings in this study suggest school counselors perceive and identify justice in the context of their work, participants largely referenced their activities on behalf of individual students in contrast to broader professional philosophies and actions meant to create a more just and inclusive community. While the importance of individual student-counselor connections should not be understated, the absence of student empowerment in a broader context is notable.

## **Bridging the Metaphors**

In the scope of this study, findings suggest present-day school counselors have moved beyond the role metaphors of gatekeeper and impartial cultivator. This aligns with Smith's (2011) assertion that these models no longer capture the complex nature of school counseling, in part due to advancements in professional school counselor training that includes multicultural responsiveness and socially just practices. In the small sample of school participants from this study, findings support the notion that school counselor role and behavior is reflected to greater and lesser degrees in the three metaphors of street-level bureaucrat, intermediary, and institutional agent. As previously noted, Lipsky's (2010) description of the street-level bureaucrat strongly parallels participant responses. Counselors described the challenges posed as they serve the very human needs of large student caseloads under the auspices of the district and school policy environment. Participants asserted they had the ability to use discretionary decision making in allocating resources (AP seats). Their use of discretion was based on general professional beliefs and principles related to inclusive practice and strongly influenced by the individual student case.

Findings from this study support the notion that school counselors at this particular school site identify with the role of intermediary, predominantly through the component of individual student advising and with a brief mention of proactive infrastructure building. As institutional agents, the school counselors in this study transmitted essential AP opportunity information to their students with special focus on certain underserved subgroups. All three participants identified justice concerns related to AP access with corrective efforts focused on the individual student case rather than the broader efforts one would associate with an empowerment agent. In sum, these findings contribute to the literature by bridging the metaphors and



highlighting the complexity of modern school counseling in terms of role, function, and behavior in one specific educational policy environment.

### **Allocating Opportunity – Justice in Practice**

In Chapter 4 of this dissertation, I presented findings related to a central theme of justice. I explored the extent to which school counselors identify and perceive justice in their local context of professional work (Research Question 4) in relation to AP opportunity. Elster's (1992) framework provides a starting point for exploring the complexities of allocation school counselors face as they navigate their professional mandate for justice in the context of educational policy and practice.

Rather than examining the global justice policies of allocation at the national government level, in this study I focused specifically on local justice in the arena of education and the allocation of goods (AP seats) and burdens (rather than money). When goods are plentiful, allocation is a relatively simple process with all individuals receiving their desired quantity. When not enough of the good is available to satisfy individuals, the good is considered scarce. It is in these cases of scarcity that allocation becomes increasingly complex and concerns related to justice may arise.

Elster (1992) suggested the complexity of allocation is initially influenced by three factors: (a) the magnitude of scarcity of a good, (b) whether that good can be divided and/or shared, and (c) whether units of the good are identical. The nature of AP seats as being both indivisible and identical, and variability in the number of student requests for a particular AP course, necessarily leads to greater complexity. In relation to this study's findings, the point at which AP course requests exceed AP seats forces allocative principals and procedures into play by way of school policy.

Elster (1992) described allocative principles as falling into two major categories—those that do not take into consideration the attributes and actions of the recipient and those that do. Egalitarian principles such as absolute equality, lotteries, and rotation, along with time-related principles such as queuing, waitlists, and seniority, fall into this first category and require no discretion by the allocator. Elster suggested principles tied to the attributes/actions of the recipient can be used to require greater or lesser degrees of discretionary assessment. In this category, principles defined by status (e.g., age, gender, civil and or residential status) require little discretion, while principles of need, welfare, contribution, and character require significantly greater levels of discretion by the institution and/or individual charged with the allocative task. In relation to this study, the ways in which school sites and individual actors (school counselors and administrators) consider attributes of recipients and use discretion in the allocation of goods like AP seats becomes essential to educational justice.

Elster (1992) further elaborated on the procedures by which the allocative process can take place. Elster described three such procedures: (a) admission (comparing individuals against a prescribed level); (b) selection (a comparison of one individual's attributes to another's and creating a rank order), and, (c) when goods are not scarce, placement (each individual receives some unit of good). In the case of this study's specific school site policy, allocation is set up as a procedure of admission with grade level requirements, prerequisite course requirements, and a recommended overall 3.0 GPA being the prescribed criteria for receiving an AP seat (see Appendix B for additional information). When the demand for AP seats is less than the supply, a placement procedure is used. In this circumstance, school counselors may exercise the most discretion in allocation when all students receive an AP seat. When the AP seats are perceived to be or become scarce, the process of allocation shifts from admission to selection with students

compared to one another by overall GPA. Once the master schedule is finalized and the maximum number of seats is established, a rank order for queuing based on overall GPA is employed.<sup>3</sup> Students with the lowest overall GPAs are removed (denied the scarce good) until remaining requests equal the number of seats available. Where scarcity exists, school site practice clearly uses a principle dependent on recipient attributes, and school counselor discretion related to allocation is limited or eliminated.

School counselor participants clearly perceived this allocative procedure to be problematic in terms of access to educational opportunity for all students. Though none of the school counselor participants specifically used the term “justice,” they did reference concepts of fairness, rights, and desert, and articulated a significant sense of tension related to schools site policy and practice. While all three participants described taking actions to correct perceived injustice on a case-by-case basis, it is unclear as to whether a well-defined, shared vision for educational justice exists in the school counseling department or the school site environment as a whole.

Given this silence, it seems important to further explore how policies related to AP participation hold the potential for justice and injustice. The choice of allocative principal and procedures is important in determining how students are permitted to “develop and deploy their skills and talents, that is, their right to self-realization” (Elster, 1992, p. 242). We see in the case of this study’s school site policy that AP begets AP. Participation in AP coursework provides a significant boost to student GPA by way of weighted grading, which in turn places that student in a better position in the queue for subsequent AP participation. In effect, AP becomes an elite privilege nearing de facto tracking. Without AP, the harder it is to be the recipient of the next AP

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<sup>3</sup> As students exit and enter the queue, enrollment instability become a possibility.

good. The cumulative impact of these allocative decisions may unfairly leave some students out altogether.

It, therefore, seems critical for school leaders, including school counselors, to expand the understanding and conversations around justice and AP participation. Although an AP seat is an indivisible good, there may be creative ways to think about and allocate AP programming that provides some increment of goods to all the students who wish to participate. Beyond the basic principles of allocation, Elster (1992) described more complex, mixed systems (e.g., point systems, weighted lotteries, trade-offs) that rely on a combination of criteria and mechanisms. Though decidedly more complicated, a mixed system for allocating AP seats could enhance equity and justice. If AP programming is viewed as a bundle rather than an isolated item of value, perhaps there are ways to ensure that students receive more equally valued bundles (for opportunity, challenge, and self-realization).

These critical conversations surrounding AP participation must also include a clear-eyed examination of the structural constraints of the school site master schedule and other AP-related practices that influence educational opportunity for all students. Keeping in mind the concepts from Elster (1992), the allocation of resources and burdens in educational settings present potential justice problems and the possibility for creative and just solutions that extend well beyond the scope of this study.

### **Implications for School Counselor Practice**

In this study, I offer a description of how school counselors envision and navigate their professional role in the local context of policy and practice. The historical literature paints a picture of school counselor role that has shifted and moved over time and has not always been

flattering. Despite ongoing professional challenges, more recent literature points to the key role school counselors can play in improving student success and outcomes.

In the same way the role of the school counselor can be likened to the street-level bureaucrat, so too can the role of the school principal. As school counselors interpret policy and use discretionary decision making to provide resources and supports to both students and parents in the counseling realm, principals do the same through their administrative activities at the larger school-site level. These similarities allow us to imagine a model of leadership for school counselors that focuses on inclusivity and opportunity.

### **Leadership**

In relation to this study, it seems important to consider how school counselor leadership efforts might influence access to AP opportunity in the school site environment. If we think about AP opportunity as a form of educational inclusion, Cobb's (2015) meta-analysis, examining how elementary and secondary principals in the special education setting foster inclusion in the school community, is quite helpful. Cobb (2015) asserted principals "function as front line interpreters and implementers of policy" (p. 214) and are "fundamental in setting the tone and expectations of a school's approach to curriculum, equity, and inclusion" (p. 214).

Findings from this study confirm the idea that school counselors perform some of these same functions in support of inclusion, equity, and access to educational opportunity for all students. Cobb (2015) identified three central domains (inclusive program delivery, staff collaboration, and parental engagement) along with seven key roles (visionary, partner, coach, conflict resolver, advocate, interpreter, and organizer) employed by principals in fostering an inclusive environment. Of these seven key roles, five seem to resonate regarding school counselor role and in light of findings from this study (see Table 4).

Like principals, school counselors may take on the role of visionary in the realm of inclusive delivery of AP programming. Findings from this study suggest participants were highly attuned to issues surrounding AP inclusivity and held a common vision that AP participation should be available to all students. Although school counselors do not hold the same formal authority of principals, participants in this study described opportunities to communicate their vision for inclusion with administrators and teachers. Participants supported inclusive placement of students in AP coursework and used discretionary decision making to navigate the school site policy environment. Findings from this study suggest that participants perceived themselves to be both enabled and constrained in their efforts to create access to AP and that their vision and actions to support inclusion were, at times, thwarted. According to ASCA (2019), modeling equity beliefs and visionary leadership are central to the work of professional school counselors, yet findings from this study suggest there may be more work to do to fully embrace school counselors as visionary leaders in the educational environment.

With “boots on the ground,” school counselors can gather data, assess potential barriers to access in real time, and offer solutions that increase inclusivity and opportunity. Along these lines, and in support of staff collaboration, school counselors may take on Cobb’s (2015) role of conflict resolver in the professional learning community. Findings from this study suggest school counselors may encounter tension with other educators in their effort to provide access to AP opportunity for students. School counselors can help reduce tensions by promoting the “establishment of collaborative norms and procedures” (Cobb, 2015, p. 226) that support inclusive policy and practices around AP programming.

Cobb’s (2015) role of principal as advocate differs from the role described by participants in this study. While principals press district-level authorities for resources such as materials,

training, and personnel to foster inclusion, school counselors in this study viewed their role as advocate as tied directly to students. Specifically, findings from this study support a central theme of school counselor advocacy for awareness of, and inclusion in, AP opportunity. While participants described their efforts on behalf of students, their role in the acquisition of resources to foster AP inclusion was limited to urging administrators to advocate for additional resources.

Findings from this study support school counselors as taking on the role of interpreter. Cobb (2015) indicated there are two facets to interpreting for principals—interpreting innovative research that guides practice and interpreting educational policy to foster inclusion. Although participants from this study made no mention of research guiding practice, their work to foster AP opportunity is influenced heavily by local educational policy and by state and federal law. While participants in this study were not asked to provide a detailed interpretation of local policy related to AP participation, findings support the notion that school counselors interpreted AP policy for themselves and for students and parents. Despite their unique position in the implementation of AP policy, it is unclear what, if any, role school counselors in this study play(ed) in the development of school-site AP policy.

Cobb's (2015) role of organizer depicts the principal as central to building capacity, gathering resources (including funding and professional development), creating schedules, outlining tasks, and creating teams to support inclusion. Findings from this study suggest participants' ability to provide AP opportunity was affected by these organizational decisions, particularly the creation of the school's master schedule. In this case, school counselor responses suggest they had some influence on the master schedule, providing general input/suggestions to the administrator in charge. Responses also suggest school counselors acted as organizers through the student scheduling and course placement process, and in responding to the logistical

needs of parents during the scheduling process. Findings to support the role of school counselor as partner or coach in the domains of staff collaboration and parent engagement were not observed.

Table 4

*Roles and Domains of School Counselor Inclusive Leadership*

Domain	School Counselor Role <sup>a</sup>						
	Visionary	Partner	Coach	Conflict Resolver	Advocate	Interpreter	Organizer
Inclusive Program Delivery	○				○	●	○
Staff Collaboration	○			●			○
Parental Engagement						●	○

*Note.* Adapted from “Principles Play Many Parts: A Review of the Research on School Principals as Special Education Leaders 2000–2011,” by C. Cobb, 2015, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19, Table 6. doi:10.1080/13603116.2014.916354

<sup>a</sup> ○ role features somewhat present for counselors; ● role features clearly present for counselors

School counselors, like Cobb’s (2015) principals, “play many parts” (p. 214), and, like principals, school counselors are inspired to contribute to the individual and collective success of their students. Findings from this study support the complexity of the school counselor role and suggest an opportunity for professionals in the field to transmit their unique knowledge and skills through informal and formal leadership, whether it be at the departmental or school site level. In doing so, school counselors can help ensure the just allocation of educational opportunity and that inclusion, access, and equity are part of the school’s philosophy and visible in daily practice.

**Additional Implications for Practice**

My aim, through this study, was to examine the intersection of school counselor role and influence, local course-taking policy, and student access to educational opportunity in the form of AP coursework. Findings from this study, in combination with the research literature, provide



an opportunity to examine implications for school counselor practice and broader educational policy and practice.

Despite efforts by national and state-level professional organizations to better define school counselor role and practice, district and school sites would be well served by conducting a formal assessment of their school counseling program. This assessment should include a detailed analysis of counselor use of time to provide baseline data related to current school counselor activities. District and school site mission and vision statements for the school counseling program should be developed to clearly communicate program goals, and school counselor role and responsibilities should be delineated to reflect these priorities. Explicit attention should be given to the professional beliefs that underpin the work of school counselors specific to educational equity and access. Districts may wish to consider alignment with some or all components of the ASCA national model (ASCA, 2019).

With a clear mission and vision established, key leadership positions should be established at both district and school site levels to oversee and manage school counseling program development. In doing so, capacity would be created to build school counseling infrastructures to advance student, parent, and community awareness of, and access to, educational opportunities like AP. Specific infrastructures could include academic supports for first-time AP participants such as study/time management skills, writing workshops, peer tutoring and study groups, and parent networks.

To further support school counselors in their work, opportunities for ongoing professional development in the areas of student advocacy, program management, and leadership should be encouraged and financially supported by the district. Adequate time should be set aside for departmental collaboration and K–12 school counseling program development to ensure that

complex issues such as equity, inclusion, and justice can be thoroughly addressed. Given their unique training, school counselors should be represented in district and school site leadership teams, instructional teams, and other key decision-making groups on campus.

As members of these key decision-making groups, school counselors can encourage alignment of school site AP course-taking policy and practices with district, state, and federal policy. District and school site AP participation data should be examined to determine the degree to which opportunity gaps exist based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and so forth. Professional work groups should be established to evaluate school site policies and practices related to AP course prerequisites, GPA requirements/recommendations, summer assignments, and so forth, with a focus on equity and justice concerns and removing barriers to AP awareness and access.

Theokas and Saaris (2013) suggested district and high school educators can take the following concrete steps to decrease the AP opportunity gap: (a) examine local data and ask questions about the reality and scope of enrollment disparities; (b) audit entry AP enrollment requirements and prerequisites; (c) examine what students, parents, and teachers know about AP to address information gaps; (d) consider the ways AP participation is promoted to determine if expectations and perceptions may act to deter some students; and (e) set short-term goals for adjusting school site structures and supports related to AP participation. Administrative leadership should support the work of these groups as one way to promote a whole-school philosophy of inclusivity.

School counselors and administrators should work cooperatively to analyze data and consider creative ways to address AP enrollment disparities, the availability of AP, and student supports. Makan (2019) suggested, through improved collaboration, administrators and school

counselors can work together to avoid gatekeeping and proactively promote AP participation specifically among underrepresented African and Hispanic American students. Using leadership skills to partner and organize, school counselors can establish agreements with administrators to establish student outcome goals related to AP opportunity that align with the school improvement plan. Concurrently, school counselors can advocate for the appropriate use of counselor time and request additional resources to expand upon infrastructures that support student, parent, and community awareness of AP.

School site leaders should consider increasing the pool of qualified AP teaching staff by funding professional development opportunities. Alternative means of offering AP opportunities, such as video conferencing and online AP course-taking, should be considered when staffing is insufficient to accommodate student requests. Creative master scheduling options, such as “sharing” qualified teachers between school sites and before and after-school options for both teacher-led and virtual AP classes, could be considered. All instructional options should be closely scrutinized to ensure equity, access, and inclusivity for all students. Understanding that not all educational options are the best fit for every student, alternative career and college preparatory programs should be considered to provide an array of opportunities for students to realize their best selves (e.g., dual enrollment, career and technical pathways, internships).

### **Further Considerations and Future Research**

Given the significant expansion of AP both nationally and internationally, school counselors are familiar with the general structure and components of the College Board’s AP program. It seems important, however, to acknowledge that AP as a form of educational opportunity may hold different meaning for individual school counselors. Is it possible, through personal and professional experience, participants in this study have different understandings of

what AP is and what AP participation means for their students? Do school counselors see AP as a set of discrete courses that offer academic rigor and culminate in a national exam in May, or is the opportunity for AP participation something more?

For the purposes of this study, I did not define or pre-establish the meaning of AP for participants. Each school counselor uniquely defined AP participation and formulated their responses in their own way. In thinking about this study and future research, it would seem important to consider whether an explicit definition of AP should be put forth and/or if school counselors should be asked to describe their own definition of, and associations with, AP coursework and participation.

The review of literature presented in this dissertation, along with findings from this study, support the need for further investigation of the role of the school counselor. This study presented five possible metaphors for school counselor role from the literature, none of which provided a sufficient representation of all that is encompassed in the work of today's school counselors. Despite the existence of a national model for school counseling programs, the professional role, function, and behavior of school counselors varies significantly depending on the local context of the educational environment (ASCA, 2019). School counselors can easily point to *what* they do but are not often asked *why* and *how* they perform their professional work. Future research should focus on these how and why questions, providing a voice for school counselors to explore and explain their professional philosophies and guiding principles.

This study highlights the constraints on AP access, specifically those created by the structure of the school site's master schedule. Given the importance and complexity of the master schedule, future research should focus on the philosophies and considerations that are taken into account by the individual(s) responsible for building the master schedule. Special

attention should be given to what, if any, principles of resource allocation are used and the underlying rationale for said principles. Considerations regarding access, equity, and inclusion should be investigated in light of the potential impact on educational gaps and student outcomes.

In depth study of both the informal and formal ways school counselor leadership is enacted at the both the school-site and district levels would be helpful. The ASCA (2019) indicated leadership is an essential function of school counselors, and oftentimes school counseling departments have a lead counselor who represents the department as part of a larger school leadership team. What this lead counselor role entails likely varies widely depending on the school site. Is this individual a representative of the department for informational and logistical purposes? Or, is this individual truly empowered to lead in the whole school environment? Beyond the role of the lead counselor, the opportunities for leadership among all members of the school counseling department should be explored to maximize capacity and better serves students and families.

### **Conclusion**

The role of the school counselor is extraordinarily complex and necessarily influenced by the established policies and practices of the local educational environment. School counselors must balance the very real personal/social, academic, and career/college needs of large student caseloads with the realities of limited time and limited resources. To do so, school counselors may use discretionary decision making to navigate course-taking policies and practices that enable and constrain the allocation of information and resources. As advocates for student awareness of educational opportunity, school counselors use the individual advising process to support students in course selection and move students toward academic challenge and self-

realization. School counselors may also directly advocate for inclusion in educational opportunities when justice problems arise.

The importance of the work of school counselors is underscored in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Barnard (2020) recently described how disparities in educational resources and supports will have a significant impact on the ability of our nation to rebound economically from the current health crisis. Barnard asserted student achievement is now a national imperative and elaborated on the importance of student access to highly trained school counselors as an opportunity to address social-emotional needs and support students as they navigate their educational and career futures. Barnard (2020) also advocated for thoughtful support of our educational institutions and ample funding for school counseling to “protect the very individuals we will rely on to guide tomorrow’s leaders and workers” (para. 14).

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Appendix A  
Interview Guide



## Interview Guide

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### Interview 1

Good (morning/afternoon). Thank you for consenting to participate in my study on the school counselor's role in academic advising specific to Advanced Placement (AP) course participation. Here is the letter of informed consent. Please take a moment to review it and let me know if you have any questions.

This is the first of three interviews. At the completion of the third interview, you will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card.

This interview will last approximately 60–90 minutes. I will be audio recording the interview. Your name and the name of your high school will not be used on the audio tape, nor will this information appear on any other document. Instead, an arbitrary numerical identifier will be used to keep your identity secure and confidential. When I write my findings your name as well as the name of this high school will not be used.

Participation in this interview is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions that I ask, and at any time you may stop the interview. During the third interview, you will have an opportunity to look over the transcripts from the first two interviews for accuracy.

The work of school counselors is quite complex. The reason for my questions today is to learn more about the factors that influence and impact how you advise students about AP course-taking and participation. I am interested in your perceptions and experiences at your high school.

Do you have any questions?

Is it alright to begin the audio recording now?

Interview Prompts:

1. Tell me, in detail, about your role as a school counselor in advising students about AP course-participation?
2. What factors do you take into consideration when advising students about AP course participation?
3. What makes a student a good candidate for AP?
4. How might you advise a student who is a strong potential candidate for AP participation?
5. How might you advise a student who is not a strong candidate for AP participation?
6. How much input do school counselors have in AP advising and participation?
7. What are the challenges in advising students about AP course participation?
8. What else would you like to share about AP course advising?

Follow-up questions/probes: What do you mean by...?; Can you tell me more about...?; Can you walk me through...?; Would you explain...?; When you say\_\_\_, what is that like?

## **Interview 2**

Good (morning/afternoon). Thank you for continuing to participate in this study of role of school counselors in AP advising and student course participation. Today, I'm going to ask you more questions about your perceptions and experiences at your high school. At our next meeting you'll have an opportunity to review the transcripts from our first two interviews for accuracy.

Remember that you may choose not to answer any questions, and that you may stop the interview at any time. Participation is completely voluntary. Your name and the name of your high school will not be used on the audio tape, nor will this information appear on any other document. Instead, an arbitrary numerical identifier will be used to keep your identity secure and confidential. When I write my findings your name as well as the name of this high school will not be used.

Do you have any questions?  
Is it alright to begin the audio recording now?

Interview Prompts:

1. What is your understanding of the policies and practices related to AP course-participation at your high school?
2. Is there an application process for AP? How many AP courses can a student take?
3. How do AP course-participation policies and practices influence and/or impact your ability to advise students about AP classes?
4. Is there flexibility in your high school's AP course-participation policies and practices?
5. How do other, nonstudent factors impact AP advising and participation?
6. Suppose there were not enough seats in an AP course to accommodate all student requests. How would this situation be addressed?
7. What are the challenges in providing access to AP coursework?
8. What else would you like to share about factors that influence course participation?

Follow-up questions/probes: What do you mean by...?; Can you tell me more about...?; Can you walk me through...?; Would you explain...?; When you say\_\_\_, what is that like?

## **Interview 3**

Good (morning/afternoon). Thank you again for your time. Today is the final interview and at the end of this session you will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card. You will have an opportunity to review the transcripts from the first two interviews for accuracy. I will also be asking you a few more questions.

Like before, you may choose not to answer any questions, and you may stop the interview at any time. Participation is completely voluntary. Your name and the name of your high school will not be used on the audio tape, nor will this information appear on any other document. Instead, an arbitrary numerical identifier will be used to keep your identity secure and confidential. When I write my findings your name as well as the name of this high school will not be used.

Do you have any questions?  
Is it alright to begin the audio recording now?

Interview Prompts:

1. Please look at the transcript from the first interview. Is everything accurate? Is there anything you want to change? Is there anything you want to add?
2. Please look at the transcript from the second interview. Is everything accurate? Is there anything you want to change? Is there anything you want to add?
3. Are there unspoken rules about AP course participation and access? If so, are you comfortable talking about them with me?
4. There is research that points to differences in who has access to, and participates in, AP courses. Have you or your colleagues had occasion to address these differences? If so, how? OR Is it possible to elaborate on why you say no?
5. Beyond individual student advising, how do you or others facilitate AP participation for students?
6. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your professional practice?

Follow-up questions/probes: What do you mean by...?; Can you tell me more about...?; Can you walk me through...?; Would you explain...?; When you say \_\_\_\_, what is that like?

Thank you very much for participating in this study. I appreciate you taking the time to share your professional perspectives and experiences as a school counselor with me. This is a debrief letter. You are welcome to contact me should you have any questions about the study, or if you would like a copy of the findings. Thank you again, and I appreciate your contribution to this study.

Note: Depending on participant responses and questions during the interview process, prompts for subsequent interviews may vary or be reordered. Follow-up questions for clarification (from the researcher or the participant) may also necessitate modification of the above protocol.

## Appendix B

### School-Site Structure and AP Seat Allocation

## School-Site Structure and AP Seat Allocation

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Through incidental learning and conversations outside of the interview context there is more to be understood beyond the interview responses as far as the school-site structure of AP programming and the allocation of AP seats. Over 20 AP courses are available at the participating site with content covering the core academic areas, foreign language, and art. The schools course catalog provides a description of the content of each course, along with grade level and prerequisite requirements. A careful review of the AP course description reveals inconsistencies across subject areas regarding what, if any, prerequisites are to be in force. In general, core content area courses are more restricted, with prerequisite courses and/or the recommendation for an overall 3.0 GPA. A handful of courses in foreign language and art require prerequisite courses and/or instructor approval. Just over half of the courses directly or indirectly put forth this GPA recommendation. Additionally, required summer assignments are stipulated for over half of the AP courses. While a rationale for these restrictions may exist, prerequisites, recommendations for GPA, and required summer assignments serve an institutional gatekeeping function.

The structure and organization of the school site master schedule also impacts the availability and allocation of AP courses and seats. Control of the master schedule is under the auspices of site administration. The total number of student requests for each AP course drives the number of sections needed. For example, if 150 students request AP English Language and Composition, and the student class maximum is 30 students, then five sections of the class would be needed to fulfill all requests. Prior history of student course requests initially informs the master schedule build, and AP sections may be created or removed depending on the real number

of student requests. The ability to create additional sections is dependent on the existence of qualified teachers, “room” in the master schedule given other non-AP scheduling needs, and teacher contractual limitations. In instances where the total student course requests meet or nearly meet the allotted seats, all requests can be fulfilled. However, when total student course requests exceed the allotted seats, scarcity becomes an issue and decisions related to allocation must be made. Additional sections can be created, students may be removed, or other possible options like online AP courses can be considered to deal with scarcity.

This push and pull to provide students with what may be a scarce good (an AP seat) and maximize instructional resources in the master schedule (i.e., teachers and teaching schedules, instructional spaces, and physical resources like actual seats/desks) can pose significant challenges. Elster (1992) suggests the allocation of scarce resources can happen in several ways, based on defined principles (or no principles), and that justice problems may arise as result. Framed by Elster’s work, the allocation of AP seats as a potential justice problem is discussed in Chapter 5.