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'Don't Worry, I Got You. You Can Do This': A Student-Centered Approach to Reimagining College Access

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A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH TO REIMAGINING COLLEGE ACCESS

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ABSTRACT

As high school college counselor caseloads increase, they have less time for consistent one-on-one counseling to support students with college planning. Thus, for many students – particularly those in large or under-resourced schools – the process is depersonalized, focused on simply distributing information. Drawing on narrative and ethnographic research, this paper explores a unique program that positions young people as paid college access professionals in their schools. Findings show that these students – Youth College Counselors (YCC) – make college planning a more student-centered, meaningful experience. Strategies YCCs engage with to support peers are examined to shine a light on how YCCs use their unique position inside schools to rethink college planning. YCCs resist a dominant narrative of young people, particularly those who live in marginalized communities, as objects onto which policy happens, and instead serve as school change actors. Findings suggest that high schools must create space in policy and practice to thoughtfully position students as agents of school change.

Keywords: *college access, youth leadership, peer education, K-12 education*

Introduction

Limited access to one-on-one counseling in high school can act as a significant barrier on the road to college (Avery, Howell, and Page, 2014; Woods & Domina, 2014). However, due to swelling counselor caseloads, many students – particularly those enrolled in large or under-resourced public high schools – are left with insufficient counseling support. To address this problem, researchers and policymakers often recommend things like decreased counselor caseloads or a distributed guidance model (Bryan et al., 2011; Nauer et al., 2013). Others advocate for the development of a college-going culture (McKillip et al., 2013).

A major problem with interventions along this vein is that they treat students as objects onto which policy happens. Change actors are school administrators, teachers, or outside organizations. Rarely are students included in school change conversations. Rarer, still, do schools position students as change agents toward reimagining college access.

Drawing on narrative, ethnographic, and survey research, this study explores one such re-imagination. Youth Leadership for College Access is a program that prepares cohorts of students to work as paid college access professionals in their high schools. After intensive summer training, Youth College Counselors (YCCs) work to support peers during the college application process through counseling and workshops. By examining this work from the perspective of YCCs and the peers with whom they serve, I will show how one cohort of YCCs rethink college planning in their schools as a student-centered, meaningful experience, using their unique position inside schools as an effective tool toward school change. Findings underscore how YCCs transform a barrier created by inefficient school policy (lack of sufficient college counseling) into an opportunity to support the college-going goals of their peers.

Framing the Problem

Public high schools in the U.S. traditionally rely on parents and college counselors to guide students during the college planning process (Lindsey & Gable, 2013; Venegas & Hallett, 2008). However, for many – like one-third of students enrolled in U.S. post-secondary institutions whose parents did not attend college – parents cannot always provide necessary technical support, because they do not have the firsthand experience (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018; Kirst & Venenzia, 2004; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). In these cases, an oftentimes-overworked counselor acts as the primary source of support during the college application process (Kimura-Walsh et. al., 2009).

As more first-time college freshman apply to college in the U.S. than ever before, the job of a high school college counselor has intensified in volume and responsibilities. Most public high schools do not staff a college access professional; someone whose sole job is college advising and enrollment (Clinedinst & Patel, 2018; McDonough, 2005). Instead, a school counselor is tasked this duty. While the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a counselor caseload of no more than 250, the U.S. Department of Education reports this average in public schools to be 470 (US Dept. of Education, 2016). In large high schools with over 2,000 students, caseloads only increase. Meanwhile, a recent National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) survey reveals that public high school counselors spend

a mere 21 percent of their professional time on college counseling (Clinedinst & Patel, 2018).

Tasks that take time away from college guidance work include activities like course scheduling, personal counseling, academic testing, and teaching. Counselors are expected to do more than college counseling, forced to juggle various other school-based roles. This constant juggling can make one-on-one college counseling particularly challenging (Gast, 2016; Perna & Kurban, 2013).

The value of one-on-one work within the context of effective college counseling and planning has been amply documented in research (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Perna et. al., 2008; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013; Woods & Domina, 2014). However, between student caseloads well over the 250 ASCA recommendation and other school-based responsibilities, many counselors have no choice but to triage, like an overwhelmed ER doctor. In this scenario, they are only able to wholly serve those high-performing students who are a shoe-in for college, or students at-risk of not graduating (Kimura-Walsh, et. al., 2009; Perna et. al., 2008). This leaves limited time for quality one-on-one counseling to address the unique needs of the rest of the junior and senior classes (Eliott et. al., 2015; Gast, 2016; Owens et. al., 2011).

In the absence of consistent one-on-one counseling, counselors often rely on tools like checklists, email announcements, or brochures rife with complex information to distribute college information and deadlines to students (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Gast, 2016; Hill, 2008). Gast (2016) refers to this as "mass outreach strategies" (p. 15). These strategies treat college planning as a one-size-fits-all process, rather than a meaningful

and student-centered experience. If a student does receive one-on-one time with a counselor, it is brief.This usually involves reviewing a checklist to generate a college list based on generic information about the student that the counselor gleans from a report card. And, perhaps a hurried chat before they move on to the next student in their caseload.

A substantial consequence of this approach is that it privileges information over the process of using it. College planning is reduced to information, treated as bankable currency, rather than a meaningful experience (Brown et al., 2016; Chajet & Stoneman-Bell, 2009; Hooker & Brand, 2010). Simply possessing college knowledge – like how to complete an application or generate a college list – is not enough. Students must use it within the context of their personal lives. This makes college planning a student-centered experience, rather than a one-size-fits-all checklist of generic steps. In most cases, neglecting this is not an intentional oversight by counselors, but rather the only option they have in the absence of necessary resources to support their work (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Holland, 2015).

When college planning does not hold meaning for students, they cannot strategically use dense information in order to make perceptive and savvy choices about their futures. And, this can have dire consequences. Lori Chajet and Sierra Stoneman-Bell (2008/2009) typify this:

> [many] students blindly follow a rote college application process rather than taking control of it themselves…many end up at colleges that do not meet their needs or expectations; others, after realizing that they never fully understood their financial aid packages, are unable to make their first payment and never begin;

and still others, despite their desire to attend, never complete the application process (p. 41). College admissions information is irrelevant if students are unable to contextualize and use it. When college planning is not meaningful, students can make ill-informed college decisions, or never attend at all.

Of course, students often look to other sources of college planning support. This may be especially true if a college counselor is not easily accessible. The role of peers and peer mentoring programs in college planning has been highlighted in research from a number of perspectives (Castleman & Page, 2013; Elliott et. al., 2015; Holland, 2011; Marciano, 2016; Perez, 2010; Tierney & Venegas, 2006; Weiss et. al., 2017), and is particularly relevant given the focus of this study. Most of this research finds that peers have a strong impact on college-going aspirations and decisions of young people, particularly those who are underrepresented in college like students whose parents did not attend college, students of color, low-income students, and immigrant or undocumented students.

For instance, Andrew Sokatach's (2006) study that uses the National Education Longitudinal Study database found, even when controlling for other variables, friend college-going plans were the single best predictor of 4-year college enrollment for low-income students of color. Additionally, through interviews of 49 predominately Black college students, Nicole E. Holland (2011) found that peers influenced student preparation for, and decisions about, college by way of themes like positive influence, knowledge development related to college planning, and academic and social support. Studies along the vein of Sokatach (2006) and Holland (2011) emphasize the influence peers can have on college planning and related activities.

However, this influence may not always be beneficial. Elliott et. al. (2015) took a qualitative approach to look at social networks and decision-making strategies of male students of color within the context of college planning. The authors focused on peers and family as college information sources. They found that family and peers did play a central role of encouragement for study participants when planning for college. They also found that, with the exception of a few cases, most of the college-related information participants received from peers was inconsistent and superficial. Thus, while peers can have an important impact on college planning and decisions, students do not always have access to peers who are well-informed and reliable. These findings point to the need for school practices, programs, or policies that thoughtfully and intentionally connect students with knowledgeable peers during the college application process.

Research Site: *Youth Leadership for College Access*

Youth Leadership for College Access is a program that prepares young people to engage their peers in college planning as paid college access professionals. They work in local schools or community-based organizations (CBO) across New York City. Through comprehensive training and support, Youth College Counselors (YCC) develop skills and knowledge that they use to not only improve their own educational outcomes, but also toward widening college options for peers. In order to become a YCC, students complete an application and are interviewed by school/CBO staff. In most cases, current YCCs are involved in the interview and decision-making process. While each site uses slightly different hiring criteria, there is not an ideal student "type".

Not all YCCs are "A", hyper-involved students. Some are. Others are what many YCCs refer to as "average students" – students who are not involved in many afterschool clubs or sports, and do not receive exceptional grades.

The bulk of their training happens during the summer. YCCs are required to attend a three-week, intensive Summer Institute. Topics covered are not only related to college planning, but also counseling and communication skills as well as data tracking. After Summer Institute, YCCs participate in a number of daylong professional development trainings throughout the year. All YCC training and support is provided by a not-for-profit organization that coordinates the program, among other college-related programming, in New York City. The program has existed, in some form, since 2011.

YCCs predominantly provide one-on-one and small group counseling for peers that covers a range of college planning activities, like: registering for the SATs, creating well-balanced college lists, completing a college application, personal counseling, and financial aid planning, among many other things. They also design and facilitate workshops, plan events and college trips, complete data tracking to monitor and document their work, and create and maintain a college office/space in their school. Alongside these tangible aspects of the job, YCCs serve as a leader in their schools, acting as credible sources of all things college-related.

Schools and CBOs adopt different strategies to help YCCs reach students (such as required workshops for Freshmen in some schools). However, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and program specifics are guided by the overall culture of the individual school or CBO.

YCCs receive minimum-wage for hours worked. Their schedules are collaboratively designed with adult supervisors who oversee the work they complete.

Twelve sites participated in the 2013-2014 Youth Leadership for College Access program. Given that some were multi-school campuses, YCCs were placed in a total of nineteen high schools, as well as three CBOs with a college access focus. Schools and CBOs were located in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens. 63 YCCs between the ages of 15 and 19 attended Summer Institute training. They were:

- 62% female and 38% male

- 58% living non-English only speaking households

- 28% Latino; 26% African-American; 15% Asian; 19% bi-racial; 12% other

- 36% non-U.S. born

- 75% had a father whose highest educational attainment was a GED/HS diploma or less (or unknown); 60% had a mother with similar educational attainment (or unknown)

Conceptual Framework: Adaptive Expertise

YCCs embrace an exceptional position in their schools. While they are students planning for college themselves, they are also trained college access specialists who serve as an essential source of guidance and support for peers. This unique position interrupts the traditionally well-defined line between staff and student in schools.

This interruption also plays out in the particularities of their work, as it requires that they bring together different discourses, skills, and experiences within the context of college planning. In order to support peers, YCCs use their expertise and knowledge about college planning

and counseling. They also rely on firsthand, personal experiences related to being a high school student, as well as the individualized relationships they forge with friends and peers. They bring all of this into their everyday work. This is a markedly different approach to college planning than the information-heavy standard in many under-resourced schools; one that relies on generic "mass outreach strategies" with an over-worked college counselor at the helm (Gast, 2016, p. 15). The unique space YCCs occupy, and the varied forms of expertise they bring to their work, is a useful framework to examine their work.

Research on knowledge and expertise differentiates between routine and adaptive (VanLehn, 1989). Routine expertise requires solving recognizable problems within a specific domain quickly and accurately, based on familiarity and a specific body of knowledge. It "reflects the ability to complete a familiar task efficiently" (Kirshner & Geil, 2010, p. 6). Expertise that moves beyond routine familiarity speaks to adaptive expertise. Adaptive expertise, in comparison, relies on "flexible, innovative, and creative competencies" toward solving a problem, and the ability to adapt to new situations or problems as they arise (Hatano & Oura, 2003, p. 28). Adaptive expertise often requires sampling from different domains or discourses toward finding a dynamic solution to a problem.

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

sample from different skills and sets of knowledge to create something novel and different.

The analytic lens of adaptive expertise can be used to examine YCC work, and the unusual position they assume in their schools. While they are high school students, they are also trained college planning experts. They move among these identities fluidly, usually occupying them simultaneously. Furthermore, YCCs make use of skills, knowledge, and expertise from these different vantage points, bringing them together within the unique context of their work. I will argue, and show, that this distinctive identity YCCs assume in their schools is where potential lives – potential to rethink college planning as a more meaningful experience than the one-size-fits-all approach that most adult counselors practice in their schools.

Methods and Analytic Approach

The goal of this study is to examine the role YCCs play in reimagining college planning as a meaningful, student-centered experience, specifically by examining the strategies they use when working with peers. To access a dynamic understanding of YCC work from their perspectives, YCCs from three sites (N=21) engaged in one written narrative activity

This invited them to write about a time they worked with a peer(s) to illustrate problems they face when college planning, as well as how YCCs support them. All twenty-one narratives were included in an NVivo database, entered as individual data. I additionally conducted: 3 YCC focus groups (N=21), 3 YCC peer focus groups (N=20), observation at 9 YCC sites, and a YCC exit survey (N=52) at the end of the academic year. Focus groups were transcribed, included in the NVivo database. Observation notes and exit survey results were also included in the

NVivo database. Data collection took place from September 2013 through June 2014.

The analytic process was grounded by YCC voices and experiences, by way of the narrative activity. Focusing on the "storied nature of discourse", I analyzed themes and structures in narratives using narrative inquiry, more specifically with plot analysis (Daiute, 2014, p. 11). People use narrative and storytelling in order to do things, thus it "mediates experience, knowledge, learning, and social change" (Daiute, 2014, p. 4). Narrative inquiry can engage participants to share and reflect on their experiences in relation to diverse circumstances and relationships in their lives and experiences.

Plot analysis examines plot as the guiding structure of a narrative, underscoring key elements like: characters, problem, complicating actions, high point, resolution strategies, coda, narrator stance (Daiute, 2014). To organize YCC narratives into a plot structure, I used a plot analysis template (Appendix A). Once each of the twenty-one narratives were organized into a plot analysis template, I looked for issues addressed in the plot high points, as well as other key structures of the plots, such as main characters, complicating actions, and resolution. From these analyses, master narratives and plots were identified to pull out themes YCCs value in their work, and how these themes were operationalized in this work.

Plot analysis of the narrative activity identified how YCCs understood their work and peers. This line of analysis also revealed what happened when YCCs worked with their peers, and what mattered to them during these interactions (Daiute, 2014). I was able to hone in on why the particular stories YCCs chose to tell held meaning to them. By examining the high points and resolutions in these stories, the strategies YCCs used to support peers surfaced.

After identifying plots and themes in YCC narrative activities, as well as resolutions strategies, I used them to code transcripts of focus groups, observation notes, and exit survey data. For instance, "relating to peers" emerged as a master narrative in YCC narratives related to strategies they used to support peers. I then revisited focus group transcripts, observation notes, and the exit survey to see if, and how, this resolution strategy emerged in these different data sources. Therefore, the other data sources worked to shine a light on dominant plots and themes that emerged from the YCC narrative activity, triangulating findings (Creswell, 2013).

Findings

The work YCCs did, and how they executed this work, looks different than the traditional college counseling that adults delivered in their schools. They valued the consistent one-on-one counseling they provided peers, and viewed this work as filling a gap in their schools. They also made use of a number of different strategies when working with peers.

Many of these strategies were unique to YCC work with peers, and they understood this work as providing something fundamentally different than adult counselors in their schools.

Value of One-on-One Counseling

The bulk of YCC everyday work with peers falls within three configurations: one-on-one counseling, small group counseling, and facilitating workshops. When YCCs were asked to write about an experience that exemplifies their work, all three configurations were represented. However, they overwhelmingly chose to feature one-on-one counseling. Table 1 illustrates YCC work configurations represented in

the narrative activity (N=21).

Table 1

Configuration of YCC work, presented in narrative activity

	Total # of narratives
Working on-on-one with a peer	14
Conducting or planning a workshop	5
Working with peers in a small group	2

During focus groups with YCCs, they frequently highlighted the one-on-one work they did with peers. In nearly all of their schools, adult counselors were limited in number and time. However, sustained one-on-one counseling is often the most effective approach to college counseling (Corwin et al., 2007; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Woods & Domina, 2014). This dilemma was directly addressed by YCCs. One YCC, Ferah, emphasized the value of one-on-one counseling she provided her peers:

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

Many YCC written narratives indicated that they spent multiple one-on-one counseling sessions with a particular peer. As Table 1 suggests, YCCs understood the one-on-one work that they did with students as particularly important and meaningful for their peers, given the overwhelming emphasis. One YCC, Rishi, underscored this when he explained,

Most students in this school, they're dependent on others in terms of getting help with college applications and other stuff. So, they really need [someone to] sit next to them and help them and ask them, "What's next, what's next". It's a lot of repetition, too. College or guidance counselors can't do that, and they'll just tell the students, "Go home and go to this website." But most of the students are reluctant to do that at home. They're the kind of students that you need to push and keep telling them to do that. So, [YCCs] do this repetition job a lot…

Rishi talked about YCC one-on-one counseling as an effective strategy toward helping students in his school. He explained that most students need one-on-one college counseling, because they are "the kind of students that you need to push". But, according to Rishi, counselors "can't do" this sustained one-on-one work, due to time constraints and workload that later came up in the focus group. YCCs were willing, and able, to "do this repetition job" with peers. Rishi connected a specific strategy (YCC one-on-one counseling) as a method toward successfully supporting the needs of his peers. In other words, he identified a college planning need in his school, and positioned YCC one-on-one counseling as a valuable strategy to address this need.

From Themes to Resolution Strategies

In an exit survey administered at the end of the school year, YCCs were asked to describe one thing of which they were most proud during their year of work. They most frequently reported that helping a peer(s) was what made them proud. Table

2 documents these responses by theme N=52).

In most cases, however, YCCs did not go into great detail about the nature of this help. Broad statements were used, like: "being able to help students with [the] college process"; "helping out

Table 2		
What makes YCCs most proud, exit survey		
Challenge	#	%
Helping peers	29	55.8
Other	11	21.2
Helping peers complete a college application	4	7.7
Planning workshops or school events	3	5.8
Personal growth or development	3	5.8
Helping peers with SAT registration	2	3.8

my peers when they need it the most"; or, "being able to help numerous students". YCCs did not describe how, exactly, they helped or supported their peers, or the strategies used.

Plot analysis of the twenty-one YCC written narratives moves beyond this general theme of "helping peers". With this method of analysis, I could focus on the resolution strategies YCCs made use of when working with peers. Table 3 documents these strategies, aggregated into six categories. Plot analysis helped to clarify how this dominant theme of "helping peers" was operationalized in YCC everyday work.

Nearly all narratives used technical college knowledge at least once (N=24). This makes sense given the college access context of YCC work. Examples in narratives were things like: "I helped her come up with a complete (college list"; or, "I

advised him about his post-secondary options". This type of resolution strategy was often signaled by verbs like "advise", "explain", or "describe".

However, YCCs relied on a number of complementary resolution strategies, all documented in Table 3. These complementary strategies functioned to make college planning personal and meaningful for peers. They also were identified during focus groups and in observation notes as strategies YCCs used that were different than a one-size-fits-all approach often implemented by adult counselors in their schools.

Table 3	
Resolution strategies enacted by YCCs, presented in narrative activity	
Resolution strategy	# of resolution strategies
Use technical or college knowledge	24
Engage in a personal conversation using communication or counseling skills	17
Provide comfort, emotional support, or assurance	12
Relate to the peer	10
Make a personal sacrifice	6
Ask for help from an adult or other YCC	2
TOTAL	**71**
Average number of resolution strategies per narrative	3.4

Resolution strategy: Engage in personal conversation.

Many YCCs made use of communication and counseling skills to engage peers in a personal conversation (N=17). YCC Pooja used this strategy in her narrative, explaining, "We had a nice conversation of what college looks at, and we talked

about how there's still time to change his path". This conversational strategy differs from using college knowledge, because it involves mutual engagement and interaction, rather than simply telling or giving their peers the answer to a question.

Personal conversation as a resolution strategy surfaced during focus groups frequently, particularly as a strategy that differs from the way adults often help students in their schools. YCC Malina underscored this difference during a focus group: "Students need someone to talk to… because they have some problem that they need to get over with before they even start the application. If there are no YCCs, the counselors are just going to tell them 'Oh, these are the schools you need to apply to' and that's it." Rather than just "telling" students the answer to college-related questions or problems, Malina emphasized that YCCs served as "someone to talk to" for their peers. This conversational element helped YCCs tackle different problems their peers experienced.

Often, YCCs made themselves available to peers for personal conversations outside of school, through Facebook, text messaging, and other virtual supports. During a focus group, YCC Genesis illustrated this idea, explaining, "Sometimes people would hit me up on Facebook…they had access to me." Another YCC, Ferah, jumped in, adding, "Yeah, late night text messages also at two o'clock in the morning." When I asked Ferah if she responded to these late-night texts, she noted, "Yeah, you have to. It's part of the job." Ferah saw it as her "job" to be available to peers, to talk with and provide support, even if it was after normal school hours. Personal conversations, in school and out of school, were used by YCCs as a distinct strategy toward helping peers work through issues or dilemmas while college planning. distinct strategy toward helping peers work through issues or dilemmas while college planning.

Resolution Strategy: Provide Emotional Support.
YCC narratives also revealed how they used comfort or emotional support as a resolution strategy when working with peers (N=12). This was signaled in narratives by phrases like: "I introduced myself to make the students feel comfortable"; "I smiled and made him comfortable"; "I sat down and I tried to calm him down a little"; or, "I looked [her] in the eye and sympathized [with her]".

Akosua's narrative typifies this strategy of emotional support and comfort. She wrote about a time she helped a peer who not only had concerns about college, but was also battling Lupus. She wrote (*italics* included for emphasis):

> Last school year, I had the opportunity to use my counseling skills with a Senior who was going through so much personally. As a YCC, *you are attentive to the student, look them in the eye, and sympathize with the student.* She had Lupus and felt like her SAT scores and GPA will not get her into college. My responsibility was to *revive her self-confidence, make her smile and see the positive side of her situation.* Because of my *cheerful, optimistic, and sensitive personality, I was able to make her happy, help her apply to colleges, and also be there for her whenever she needed someone to talk to.* The role of a YCC is to relate to student situations and try as much to be positive else it destroys the confidence and esteem of a student.

Akosua provided comfort to her peer in a number

of ways. She was "attentive" and "sympathize[d]", understanding it as her "responsibility to revive her self-confidence, make her smile" and make her "happy". Akosua was "there for her whenever she needed someone to talk to", acting as a source of support during this peer's time of need. She noted that ignoring these elements of comfort and emotional support for a peer while college planning can "destroy the confidence and esteem of a student".

When talking with YCC peers during focus groups, this strategy of emotional and moral support surfaced repeatedly. For instance, when I asked about her experiences with YCCs, one peer, Denise, explained:

> The moral support was huge…the college process was stressful, and sometimes when I get too stressed, I cry…It was safe to know that even though I was stressing out, they knew exactly what I was going through. It's easier for them to help me go through and offer me simpler ways to get around it and say, 'It's okay. Everything is going to work out…

For Denise, the "moral support" that YCCs provided functioned as a strategy to ease her "stressing out"; it made her feel "safe".

Resolution Strategy: Relating to Peers.

The excerpt from a peer focus group above, with Denise, hints at another resolution strategy that YCCs made use of when working with peers: relatability. Written narratives revealed how they used and fostered their peer-to-peer connection as an approach to help peers (N=10). As Denise put it, YCCs "knew exactly what I was going through". During another peer focus group, one student drove

this point home, explaining, "The YCCs are students at the school. They take the same exact classes that we do. They understand what we're going through a lot more than a teacher."

YCCs used phrases in their narratives like: "I put myself in his shoes"; "I tried to be a peer that understands his situation"; "I explained that I related to his situation"; or, "I share[d] my personal story with her". YCCs emphasized that they "relate", "understand", or "sympathize with" their peers, or a problem they were experiencing, in order to help them. They underscored commonality, and also enacted relatability in written narratives by using an inclusive "we" or "us" when talking with peers

Often, relating with a peer also meant connecting with them as friends. One manner in which YCCs did this was by bringing laughter and humor to the often-stressful college planning process. During a focus group, YCC Arielis located the importance of laughter and humor they brought to college planning, especially in contrast to adults. She explained that, "Adults are so serious sometimes. Whenever [peers] approach me and I'm explaining something, I kind of make it funny. You need to make it funny and engaging for the student". In their narratives, YCCs often called upon humor – joking or laughing with one another – as a strategy to connect with their peers on a friendly, personal level.

Language was one final way that YCCs related with peers. I observed one YCC, José, working with peers in his college office. He moved from speaking English with one peer, to quickly using Spanish in order to effectively communicate with another. In his school, over twenty percent of the study body were English Language Learners at the time. During a focus group, this idea surfaced, as YCC

Malina explained, "we are a very diverse group. We have Mandarin, Korean, we have Spanish. [Adult counselors] speak Korean and Chinese, but José right here he can speak Spanish. Those Spanish-speaking students, José can help them out".

Resolution strategy: Making a Personal Sacrifice

Lastly, YCCs sometimes made a personal sacrifice as a strategy to help. Personal sacrifices enacted in narratives included: paying for a peer's SAT registration out-of-pocket (N=1); skipping class to facilitate a college workshop (N=1); skipping a prior obligation after school (N=3); or, seeking out Spanish tutoring to better communicate with a peer (N=1). Six of the twenty-one YCC narratives enacted personal sacrifice as a strategy to help peers work through dilemmas at least once.

Sampling from Different Resolution Strategies

Plot analysis of the twenty-one written narratives revealed that, on average, YCCs used 3.4 resolution strategies per narrative (see Table 3). They sampled from different strategies when helping peers resolve a problem or dilemma faced while college planning. This sampling from different resolution strategies similarly surfaced during my observations of YCCs. Below is an excerpt from observation notes:

> José walks among the students, checking in and asking if they need help. He seems aware of each student's keystroke. One raises her hand and says she's "ready to submit" her application. José seems suspicious an asks, "Did you go over the application and review it"? Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head no, uncertainly. He shakes his head, but smiling, and walks over to her. He hovers over her seat to review the application with her. A sixth

student arrives at the college corner and says to José, in Spanish, that she has an appointment with him. He responds in Spanish, noting it's her first visit to the college office. He motions for her to take a seat at an empty computer. José continues to review the student's application. "You see, this why you have to go over the application". He points to the screen at a question that his peer forgot to answer. Both laugh. "You always have to go over this stuff. It's just like when you're in class – you never look over your homework and stuff before you turn it in. I know you". They laugh again. He shows her how to correct her mistake, then reviews the next steps in her process. He asks if she's clear on next steps…The student nods her head. She looks overwhelmed. José must feel it too, because before sending her to the counselor for an application fee waiver, he pats her shoulder. He says, "Don't worry, I got you. You can do this. You're almost there". Then he turns to the student waiting for her appointment, and begins speaking to her in Spanish (YCC observation notes).

YCC José literally moved between different peers in need of help, and sampled from different resolution strategies. In the scenario described above, José:

1. Used college knowledge and technical expertise to help his peer identify a mistake she made on her college application.
2. Used peer relatability and personal relationship, laughing with her and joking as friends do. He noted that he "knows her", reminding her to review things because, when they are in classes together, she frequently forgets to review her homework.
3. Used comfort and assurance to calm her

nerves, patting her shoulder and promises, "Don't worry, I got you. You can do this. You're almost there".

4. Used language flexibly, moving between speaking English and Spanish.

Nearly all narratives used college knowledge and technical information as a resolution strategy, just as José did in order to help his peer complete an application online. However, it was usually complimented by additional strategies. This suggests that in order to help their peers, YCCs did not simply tell them what to do, or provide a quick answer to a familiar problem or issue. Instead, they made use of a variety of strategies depending on the particular problem or issue their peer was experiencing.

Discussion

YCCs provided, and valued, consistent one-on-one counseling for peers, and during these sessions the strategies they made use of to support peers moved beyond simply providing college-related information. They made college planning a meaningful, student-centered experience for peers by using multiple resolution strategies to support them during interactions, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. The resolution strategies used were very much contingent on the particular peer with whom they were working, and the problem(s) they presented.

This sampling from various resolution strategies is adaptive expertise in action. YCCs flexibly and creatively navigated among different discourses, strategies, and skills to address an oftentimes evolving issue their peer was experiencing. YCCs and their peers indicated that adult counselors frequently relied on answering a question or giving them information. This signals routine expertise

– solving recognizable types of problems quickly and accurately based on familiarity or a specific body of knowledge. In contrast, YCCs drew on a variety of different resolution strategies. As one YCC wrote in his narrative, "being a YCC is more than just telling students what to do, because I had to make each experience personal". YCCs used adaptive expertise to make college planning for peers in their school "personal", pivoting among various strategies depending on their individual problems and needs.

Most resolution strategies, and the use of adaptive expertise, relied on the unique position that YCCs hold in their schools. This unique position afforded them the ability to sample from knowledge, information, and counseling skills they learned during formal college access training, while also making use of their insider peer expertise. They counseled peers on college-related matters as well as personal issues, talking and reaching out to them as they would with friends or family. While they almost always relied on technical college planning information, YCCs supplemented this with additional strategies that drew on their firsthand knowledge of being a high school student in their schools. This is what YCCs valued in their everyday interactions with peers. Strategies like relating to peers or engaging in personal conversations complemented the use of technical college information, and provided a more holistic college planning experience for peers that is fundamentally different than a traditional (adult-driven) counseling model in their schools.

YCCs live in the same communities as their peers, speak the same languages, and walk the same hallways. However, they received a level of training and deep understanding about college planning – as well as counseling and communication skills

– that their peers have not experienced. YCCs navigated practitioner knowledge and expertise related to college planningalongside an intimate understanding of their peers and the communities in which they live. This is an extraordinary position that no adult college counselor can ever fully replicate. During a peer focus group one student, Mario, underscored this unique position YCCs held in his school, and the value that came with it. He explained:

> YCCs are students at the school. They take the same exact classes that we do. They understand what we're going through a lot more than a teacher. Some teachers they just need to get this done. [Our college counselor] just needs us to hand in the applications so she has what we have done. The YCCs were that bridge between an adult, with all the information necessary to make sure we are successful in the process, but also making sure that, as students, we knew we had people that understood what we're going through; we had people that cared about us.

Implications for Practice and Policy

In May 2014, I was conducting an observation at a school. While most seniors had already made their post-secondary choices, YCCs were still hard at work with peers who were preparing to take the SAT the following morning. One YCC, Obi, was talking with a peer, giving him some final words of advice: "Be there at 7:30am! I'm gonna call and wake your ass up – I don't care if you don't like mornings". They both laughed, and Obi gave his peer a pat on the shoulder for encouragement before sending him on his way. He turned to me and said, "You know, we set a record this year. 90% of students took their SATs, and that's a record for

our school. It's never been that high. Never. And it's because of us. WE'RE ALL GONNA GO TO COLLEGE!" Obi put his hands over his head and shook his hips, doing a kind of celebratory dance.

Obi was excited. And, he was proud. He was a junior, returning for a second year of YCC work the following year, so he was not explicitly including himself in that "we" quite yet. What Obi was speaking to, though, is the idea that his work – the work of YCCs – was not just about helping themselves, or individual peers, with college planning. It was about getting them all to college, or to whatever post-secondary goal they envisioned. It is about transforming the fabric of their schools by rethinking college as a meaningful, viable option, and positioning students as change agents in this transformation.

Policymakers and researchers often recommend that schools create a college-going culture to foster a school environment that encourages the option of college for all (College Board, 2006; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McKillip et al., 2013). For instance, The College Board suggests a variety of small-scale and large-scale ideas to grow a college-going culture (College Board). These range from hanging college posters around the school, to curricular interventions like Advanced Placement courses or partnering with college-focused organizations (College Board, 2006, p. 8-11). Other researchers suggest forging partnerships with communities in which students live to promote college access and readiness (Bryan et al., 2013; Hines et al., 2014).

A fundamental problem with these common interventions, as I see it, is that they tend to treat young people as objects onto which change happens. The business of creating a college-going

culture – of rethinking how to support students with college planning – usually prompts schools to adopt different strategies, ideas, and services. Students are an output, or a growing number in a counselor caseload.

This study shines a light on an initiative that locates young people at the center of school change. YCCs live college planning alongside their peers. They have access to ways of working with peers that adults simply will never have, and bring together these strategies alongside formal college access information to provide a college planning experience that is unique and student-centered. A YCC may use text messages or Facebook to contact peers late at night when they are working on college applications, while another might relate to a peer who is having a tough time finding scholarships to fund college goals because they, too, are experiencing that very challenge. These are examples of strategies that YCCs believe are important in supporting their peers. They are strategies that adult counselors cannot make use of, sometimes due to school rules, and other times because of the simple fact that they are not students. By examining the work that YCCs do, from their own perspectives and experiences, we can learn how they are able to redefine college access work that happens in schools as a meaningful, student-centered experience, rather than a barrier or roadblock to young people's goals for the future. Instead of waiting for someone else to make school change, YCCs are taking matters into their own hands to create it.

Findings from this study suggest that schools must ensure that students are provided with college access professionals whose sole job is to support students with college planning. An overworked counselor juggling other school-based responsibilities cannot provide students with effective, ongoing one-on-one counseling. YCCs are one approach to achieving this, however it is not the only one. Additionally, schools and policymakers must intentionally carve out space and opportunity for young people to be heard – a space that values their experiences, their lives, and their capacity to be dynamic agents of change. Within the context of college access, I hope this research shows that when we do this purposefully and thoughtfully, we no longer need to worry about filling a gap in college access, because we disrupt it altogether.

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