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## Moving Beyond Transactions: Understanding the Relationships between College Access Professionals and Underrepresented College-Bound Families

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# Moving Beyond Transactions: Understanding the Relationships between College Access Professionals and Underrepresented College-Bound Families



Authored by  
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## ABSTRACT

Framed by family engagement frameworks, this study presents four types of interactions college access professionals (CAPs) have with the families of underrepresented college-going students—inconsistent communication, transactional exchanges, student-family mediation, and trusting relationships—to explore the nature of family-educator partnerships for students’ college access. Drawing from in-depth qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of 20 CAPs, this study demonstrates that the nature of these interactions and their corresponding family engagement practices are influenced by CAPs’ job requirements and previous experiences working with families. This ultimately shapes their ability to invest in and develop strong, trusting partnerships with students’ families. By understanding these family-educator interactions, college access programming can work toward benefitting from family-educator partnerships, which can lead to successful college acceptance and matriculation for underrepresented, college-bound students.

**Keywords:** college access, family engagement, first-generation students, college counseling

Family engagement research has documented that when students, families, and educators partner with each other, students are more likely to apply to, be accepted by, and matriculate into institutions of higher education (Kalamkarian et al., 2020; Mapp et al., 2022; Tierney, 2002). Underrepresented college-bound students often depend on school-level “institutional agents,” such as teachers and

school counselors, to help them navigate their way into higher education spaces (Harris & Kiyama, 2015). Nevertheless, due to their role demands, teachers and school counselors may not have the time, capacity, or knowledge to serve as college-specific student resources (American School Counselor Association, 2022; Kalamkarian et al., 2020). Thus, college access professionals (CAPs) help fill this need: CAPs are educators who work closely with students, specifically in college-going and college-related aspects. College access professionals might include college advisors, professional/trained mentors, career advisors, and other college-going specialists (American School Counselor Association, 2022).

However, to date, there is a limited understanding of the relationships between CAPs and students’ families. Most family engagement research focuses on relationships between families and teachers or school counselors. Since CAPs are a central part of students’ college-going support ecosystem, especially for underrepresented students, it is essential to understand how they engage with students’ families for student success. Framed by the importance of family-school



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partnerships, this study explores the nature, effectiveness, and potential of college access professionals' (CAPs) family engagement practices. Specifically, it presents four different types of interactions CAPs have with the families of underrepresented students – inconsistent communication, transactional exchanges, student-family mediation, and trusting relationships – and analyzes the elements that influence them, including their job requirements and conditions. Findings suggest that these interactions, while promising, are limited in their relational nature. Since both CAPs and families play an essential role in student success, it is crucial to understand how to improve and support relationships between them.

This study defines underrepresented students as students traditionally underrepresented in colleges and universities, such as first-generation college students, students of color, students from lower socioeconomic households, and students with disabilities. Family engagement is broadly defined as “collaborative relationships and initiatives between school professionals, families, and community members...for the purpose of implementing programs that address students’ complex needs; increase their educational resilience and strengths; and foster their academic, social/emotional, and college-career development” (Bryan et al., 2018, p. 1). Here, educational resilience refers to students’ ability to succeed academically despite “risk factors” (such as poverty, discrimination, and adverse environments)

that make it difficult for them to do so (Bryan, 2005).

### Literature Review

#### Families as an “Untapped Resource” in College Access Work

There is overwhelming evidence about the importance of family engagement for students’ college access (Bryan et al., 2018; Cuevas, 2020; Hines et al., 2014). Research shows that the families of first-generation college-going students are critical players in students’ college-going even if they did not earn a college degree in the United States themselves and/or have limited college knowledge. Families support students by motivating them to pursue higher education, modeling a passion for lifelong learning, and monitoring their grades and extracurricular activities, for example (Auerbach, 2004; Cuevas, 2020; Fan et al., 2009; Hines et al., 2014). In short, families play different and essential roles in supporting students’ college-going goals.

This research has also documented family's frustration with their inability to better support students: Families of first-generation college-going students want to have the information necessary to help students directly with the college-going process; they want to have the knowledge and tools to help students successfully apply to colleges and universities (Cuevas, 2020; Tierney, 2002). For instance, college access programs often fail to share college knowledge information with families.

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To avoid stressing parents, these programs' staff take on the job of supporting students individually (Tierney, 2002). As Tierney (2002) concludes, there is a disconnect between "(a) research supporting the hypothesis that parent and family involvement increases the chances of low-income students' gaining entrance into college and (b) the practice of family participation in college outreach programs" (p. 588).

Similarly, Fann and colleagues (2009) note that families "remain an untapped resource with incredible potential for increasing the educational chances of historically underrepresented students" (p. 390). Thus, extant research notes a discrepancy between acknowledging the importance of family engagement in students' college access and acting on this information.

To benefit from families' "untapped resource" as a college-going tool for underrepresented students, research notes the importance of multilevel interventions involving multiple stakeholders (Militello et al., 2011).

Specifically, school counselors and other school-based staff can develop "targeted partnership interventions" that engage parents, families, and community members to work together for student success (Bryan et al., 2018; Perna et al., 2008). For example, Bryan and colleagues (2020) note that school counselors are uniquely positioned to promote equity-focused, school-family-community partnerships. Their work proposes a partnership model rooted in empowerment, democratic collaboration,

social justice, and strengths-based principles to foster resilience and embrace strengths-based, equity-focused, and culturally appropriate partnerships (for more, see Bryan et al., 2020). Additionally, extant research also notes that school-university partnerships, school-business partnerships, and school-family partnerships are essential partnership strategies that can effectively promote a college-going culture and college access (Gandara, 2002; Harris & Kiyama, 2015; Militello et al., 2011; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008; Walker et al., 2010). In sum, this research makes it clear: For underrepresented students, college-going is a collective effort that includes families, educators, community members, and students.

### Family Engagement in College Access Programs

Acknowledging the limitations of school counselors and teachers, college access programs (also called external college programs (ECPs)) are intended to support school-based staff in increasing the number of students attending colleges and universities (Kalamkarian et al., 2020). College access programs include federally funded TRIO programs, such as Upward Bound and Talent Search. Others are college or university-based outreach initiatives designed to share college knowledge with students from underrepresented communities. These initiatives are often part of institutions' public missions (Fann et al., 2009; Mariscal et al., 2019). Non-profit organizations and out-of-school programs that support students' college-

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going goals and aspirations also help students navigate college enrollment.

Extant research notes the different ways college access programs interact with families: the structure of the programs and program requirements shape how their staff members engage with families (Tierney, 2002). For example, some programs have components that invite parents to events once a year, such as parent nights, in which program staff explain the program's purpose to them, or end-of-the-year events, such as graduations. Other programs may have voluntary parent programs on weekends, where they share college knowledge and other school-related information with parents (Tierney, 2002). Furthermore, research also notes that college access programs differ in how intentional they are in centering the role of families in students' college-going goals (Grub et al., 2002; Tierney, 2002). For example, Grubb and colleagues (2002) found that counselors in the Puente Program, which was established to increase the number of Latinx students who enroll in four-year colleges, presented a series of college-related workshops to parents and families, ranging from topics such as financial aid and course requirements. They also held one-on-one meetings with parents and students who had questions. The researchers note that these counselors had consistent communication and interactions with parents and were able to develop strong relationships. Furthermore, Tierney (2002) notes that the Puente Program developed such strong relationships because family involvement is central to their values: the program believes

that "learning exists in concert with families" (p. 602). Hence, the Puente Program is an outstanding example of a program that successfully engages with families for student success.

The variation in family involvement and engagement in college access programs is not because programs do not value working with families. Tierney (2002) points out that college access programs are restricted in their ability to work closely with families because they are underfunded and short-staffed. Moreover, they are not evaluated in their work with families. Without the expectation to do so, overworked college access program staff do not prioritize working with students' families. Related, research also notes that educators must often be trained to work with families. While they are expected to work with families, they must be given the frameworks, tools, or examples of best practices (Mapp et al., 2022). While this research predominantly focuses on teachers and school counselors, it also applies to the work of CAPs. Educators need to be given the opportunity to develop the capacity to work with families to benefit from the potential of family-educator partnerships (Mapp et al., 2022).

### Theoretical Framework

In this study, I used Mapp and Bergman's (2019) Dual Capacity-Building Framework (DCBF) for Family-School Partnerships to explore CAPs' family engagement practices. Specifically, I use the "essential conditions" portion of the framework.

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K-12 research and practice has reconceptualized “family engagement” to signify a mindset, a set of cultural values and beliefs, about the role of families in students’ education – families are seen as assets in students’ lives, essential to their academic outcomes and overall well-being from birth through college and career (Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Mapp et al., 2022). Educational spaces should intentionally develop equitable partnerships with families to support students. Moreover, these relationships should be based on mutual trust and respect. These values – partnership, trust, and respect – are at the core of the DCBF. The DCBF outlines the “essential conditions” of successful family engagement practices, initiatives, and policies. The conditions include (1) process conditions, which are the day-to-day elements necessary for effective practice, and (2) organizational conditions, which are required to develop the infrastructure for the process conditions to sustain effective family engagement practices (Mapp & Bergman, 2019, p. 12). The process conditions note that family engagement practices must be relational and built on mutual trust, linked to students’ learning and development, asset-based, culturally responsive and respectful, collaborative, and interactive (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Additionally, they also note the importance of institutional factors, noting that family engagement must also be systemic, or embraced by leadership across organizations; integrated, meaning it is embedded in all strategies; and sustained with resources and infrastructure. These are the organizational

conditions (Mapp & Bergman, 2021).

Mapp and Bergman describe the DCBF as a “compass” that helps develop effective educator-family partnerships that support student academic and socioemotional well-being. Applied to the context of this study, the framework’s essential conditions help explore the nature, effectiveness, and potential of CAPs’ family engagement practices.

### Methodology

Data for this project stems from a larger, institutional IRB-approved phenomenology study on college access professionals (IRB-22-210). The larger study was motivated by the limited understanding of the experiences of these educators. Since they are not teachers or school counselors and are often employed by external organizations or programs, they are left out of existing literature. Since phenomenology focuses on how different individuals make sense of the same phenomenon and helps identify the commonalities of these experiences, this research approach is ideal (Patton, 2002). The phenomenon at the center of this study is CAPs’ work with underrepresented students and their families in their college-going aspirations. However, traditional phenomenology asks researchers to “bracket” their positionalities, or “become aware of personal bias, to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material...” (Patton, 2002, p. 484). I, like other scholars, particularly women of color, acknowledge that my positionality, further

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discussed below, is an asset to this study (Bernal, 1998; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Given, 2008). Additionally, the study also applied Morse and colleagues' (2002) verification strategies to ensure both reliability and validity of data, including what they call methodological coherence (i.e., considering how method and approach are appropriate for the research question), an appropriate sample, and concurrent collection and analysis of the data.

### Researcher's Positionality

I, the study's primary investigator, am a first-generation college graduate who identifies as a woman of color, daughter of Mexican immigrants. I attended a large public high school in an urban city and was part of a TRIO program. Additionally, I also have experience working as a college access professional in a large urban school district. As such, I share similarities both with study participants and the students they served. This "insider" perspective informed my study design and approach (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). For example, my positionality allowed me to build rapport with participants, as I shared both my personal and professional experiences with the subject matter. I also shared my motivation for conducting this study – the limited understanding of CAPs' experiences, especially about their work with families. Yet, throughout the study, I was also mindful of the ways that I am an "outsider" to the work: I have not worked as a CAP in over a decade, geographical locations and context shape experiences, and student needs have changed (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Thus,

throughout data collection and analysis, I constantly wrote reflexive memos (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Patton, 2002). In addition to summarizing interviews and identifying emerging themes, I also reflected on my own experiences, knowledge, and perspectives. These memos were used during data analysis to ensure appropriate data interpretation.

### Sample

This study focused on the perspectives of a diverse sample of 20 college access professionals (CAPs) who work with underrepresented students. To qualify for the study, participants must have had a job or position whose purpose is to support underrepresented students in their college-going aspirations. The sample is summarized in Table 1 and includes participants with job titles such as college advisors (n=9), college counselors (n=3), directors of college access programs (n=2), and other specialists trained to serve students in navigating their college and career pathways (n=6). All participants worked in urban school settings and predominantly worked with students from low-income families, families of color, immigrant families, and students who would be the first in their families to attend college. Over half the sample identified as female (n=11). Most respondents identified as people of color (n=18). The average number of years working in college access was seven years. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

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Table 1  
Study Participant Demographics.

Participant	Job Title	Years in Field	Age	Gender	Ethnicity/ Race	Highest Level of Education (Self)
Bernardo	Educational Advisor, TRIO Program	2.5	29	M	Latinx	BA
José	Campus Recruiter, Small Private College	10	37	M	Latinx	Masters
Marisol	Academic Coordinator, TRIO Program	10	32	F	Latinx	Masters
Juan	Assistant Director, TRIO Program	1.5	35	M	Latinx	Masters
Gabriel	Program Coordinator, TRIO Program	4	27	M	Latinx	Masters
Adrian	College Counselor, Private School	10	31	M	Latinx	BA
Levi	Associate Director, Non-Profit Organization	8	31	M	Latinx	Masters
Jessica	Founder, College Access Program	10	34	F	Black/ AA	Masters
Martha	College Access Manager, Non-Profit Organization	6	28	F	Latinx	Masters
Sara	College Access Coordinator, After-School Program	1.8	25	F	Latinx	Masters
Michelle	College Counselor, Private School	11	39	F	Asian/ Asian American	Doctoral
Luis	College & Career Advisor, University-Based Outreach Program	5	24	M	Latinx	Masters
Heather	College Affordability Advisor, Non-Profit Program	4	24	F	White	BA
Marco	Postsecondary Ambassador, Non-Profit Program	< 1	24	M	Latinx	BA
Christina	Program Director, TRIO Program	11	29	F	Latinx	Masters
Laura	Educational Advisor, TRIO Program	8	28	F	Latinx	Masters
Santiago	Academic Counselor, Public School	11	33	M	Latinx	Masters
Natalie	Success Coach, Non-Profit Program	13	35	F	White	Masters
Erica	College Advisor, University-Based Outreach Program	2	24	F	Asian/ Asian American	BA
Vanessa	Educational Advisor, TRIO Program	4	24	F	Latinx	BA

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### Data Collection and Analysis

Each participant was interviewed once via Zoom or phone. Interviews were audio-recorded, and all took place in English. Interview length ranged from 60 to 108 minutes. Participants were asked about the nature of their jobs, their experiences working with students' families, and their professional training. Participants were also asked about the role of families in students' college-going aspirations and about challenges in their interactions with families. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to the qualitative data analysis program NVivo. Data were analyzed using a flexible coding analytic procedure (Deterding & Waters, 2021), which postulates that empirical qualitative research is in dialogue with existing theory and findings from previous studies. First, index codes were applied, identifying every statement in which participants described how they interacted with students' families. The second stage consisted of applying analytic codes. Analytic codes were created using memos written during data collection and initial transcript review. Codes were also created based on existing literature such as "relational trust," "institutional agents," and "family-educator communication." The essential conditions described in the DCBF were also included. Open coding was also conducted to identify CAPS-family interactions not captured in the memos or those based on existing literature. Codes during this phase included "CAPS training" and "gendered family dynamics." Subsequently, codes were refined, and similar

codes were grouped and examined, moving beyond descriptive codes to codes that implied a relationship. For example, "limited communication" and "information-based programming" became "transactional interactions." These codes described CAPS-family interactions and the elements that shaped them and became the themes presented in the findings.

This multi-step coding strategy was an interactive and ongoing process throughout data analysis. The third stage of data analysis consisted of exploring validity and refining theory (Morse et al., 2002). Inter-coder reliability processes were conducted, and reflexive memos were reviewed. Data and codes were reexamined to ensure consistency in describing CAPS-family interactions of supportive behaviors.

### Study Limitations

As an interview-based, exploratory study, this study is not intended to be representative of the entire college access professional population. This study begins to understand the different interactions and relationships CAPs have with students' families. Thus, the sample comprises a range of CAP roles and is not bound to one specific state, school system, or program structure. While the findings are not generalizable, they serve to improve college access efforts for underrepresented students. Most importantly, this study helps fill the gap in the literature about families and family engagement concerning CAP-centered educational spaces.

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### Findings

#### CAP-Family Interactions

All college access professionals interviewed for this study interacted with their students' families to different extents. The following section details the different interactions that CAPs had with students' families. Interactions are divided into the following categories: inconsistent communication, transactional exchanges, student-family mediation, and trusting relationships.

#### Inconsistent Communication

Some CAPs believed they did not have good relationships with students' families because they did not interact often with them. Participants also described the limited ways they communicated with families, including generic emails, which often only introduced CAPs to families and the services they provided students. Erica, a college advisor for a university-based outreach program, described how emails were her primary communication method with families. She shared, "We would send out a lot of emails, but that was just one way. We didn't have a lot of parents responding back." Upon reflecting on this, she acknowledged that emails were one-directional. "Maybe that was not the best way to communicate with them." Furthermore, participants also noted that limited relationships with families could impact students' access to resources. This was especially true when it came to matters of financial aid. Families, participants explained, felt uncomfortable sharing personal financial information. Family members hesitated when

their children asked for tax forms. Students then relayed this information to their CAPs, who, in return, had to strategize how to communicate with families the importance of that paperwork for financial aid. Heather, a college affordability advisor for a non-profit organization, described this tension:

*I think if there isn't a great relationship [with families], it's tricky... some people just really don't want to give their information. I've also had some folks who were like, "We just don't at all want to apply for financial aid." And discourage their students from doing it.*

Heather explained that the stress and anxiety over sharing financial information could be alleviated if she communicated better with students' families and earned their trust.

#### Transactional Exchanges

CAPs also described transactional exchanges. These were "informative interactions" with families where they shared information about the college application process, college requirements, students' progress, and financial aid. However, they did not create the space or opportunity to develop relationships with them – as one participant put it, these interactions were "one-directional and impersonal."

Marisol, an academic coordinator for a TRIO program, explained that her organization did have some family-oriented programming, such as parent conferences, family night for their summer program, and parent workshops. Yet, she believed these did not

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help develop relationships with families. The parent workshops, for example, were the least successful of the programming:

*We give the parents information, but then that's that. There is no follow-up. And I think the follow-up is where we lose the opportunity to develop relationships... [The workshop] is a one-time thing, and that is it. I wish there were more follow-up workshops. But that's not what we do.*

Marisol believed the parent workshops had the potential to be spaces where family members developed a better understanding of the college-going process and where she, as a college access professional, could develop strong relationships with them. Instead, she often felt rushed to cover content. And, as the quote above shows, the workshops were a one-time interaction with no built-in infrastructure for follow-ups. Without these mechanisms in place, CAPs and family members only have opportunities for transactional exchanges.

### Student-Family Mediation

A third interaction CAPs described placed them as mediators between students and families. Due to their positions as counselors, advisors, and the like, participants found themselves in the middle of family and student disagreements or miscommunications.

Some college-related processes and applications require students to share

information about their parents. This is sometimes stressful and anxiety-producing for students who do not have good relationships with their parents. For example, Sara, a college access coordinator for an after-school program, shared how she had to communicate with a parent who was absent in a student's life. She had to do this because the CSS Profile requests parental information:

*The CSS Profile is very difficult because it can trigger a lot of trauma in a student, especially if they haven't talked to a parent or they don't know their whereabouts. And then I have to ask a parent that isn't in this child's life why aren't they there. Because I have to write a letter to explain to the university why they're not [present] and appeal why we can't send their credential in. That is really hard.*

Here, Sara describes how she mediated between her student and their absent parent and dealt with the emotional toll that took on the student and, presumably, the parent. Respondents also described facing gendered dynamics in their mediation interactions with families. Predominantly, CAPs discussed how their female-identifying students asked them to advocate on their behalf to their families. Specifically, they wanted them to convince their parents to allow them to leave home for college. Being in this mediator position was uncomfortable for Santiago, an academic counselor in a 6-12 public school. He disagreed with some families' gendered expectations; he did not think gender should determine students' college opportunities.

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However, he respected that families had a right to develop their ideas and beliefs. Santiago admitted that if he had a better relationship with students' families before engaging in such conversations, the stress of the misunderstandings could be minimized. In short, Santiago acknowledged that there was limited trust between him and some of his students' families.

### Trusting Relationships

While all respondents reported feeling like they had limited relationships with their students' families, some believed they had close relationships with a handful of their students' families. CAPs who reported having trusting relationships noted that they had known the families for more than one year and often worked with multiple siblings within the same family. For example, a TRIO program director, Christina, described working with three siblings from the same family and feeling very comfortable approaching the parents. She shared, "If Sam [student] is not responding to my emails, I can easily text her mom and tell her to remind her." When asked to reflect on how this kind of relationship shaped her perspectives about working with families, she said she is now more intentional about relationship-building with families:

*I talk to the parents and let them know, "We are a team. We are a process. For me to be able to help your child, I need your support." I have an open-door policy, "You could contact me if you have any questions. You want me to sit down with you and explain this with you? I will take the time to do that."*

Thus, Christina's experience shows how developing and experiencing trusting relationships with families benefits her work with that family and motivates her future family engagement practices.

### Elements that Shape CAPs-Family Interactions

Considering the DCBF, the ideal CAPs-family interactions are trusting relationships like the ones described by Christina. While the interactions described in the previous section are not linear, they do not build from one another, this study presents different ways these two important actors interact. To understand why and how these different interactions occur, it is also essential to understand what shapes how college access professionals interact with families. The elements identified in this study include barriers and challenges to family interactions, job requirements, and CAPs' family engagement experiences.

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### Barriers to Relationships

Like research on family engagement in K-12 classroom settings (Mapp et al., 2022), CAPs in this study described different challenges and barriers in developing relationships with their students' families. These include language barriers, limited time to invest in family meetings or programming due to multiple job requirements, and difficulty scheduling meetings with parents due to busy work schedules. Additionally, some CAPs described how families did not know who CAPs were. Thus, limited opportunities for communication with families prevent relationships from developing.

Some CAPs expressed frustration with their limited interactions with families. For Sara, it was disheartening when families did not attend events:

*It was really frustrating to have this whole curriculum, this whole lesson plan planned out and then we only had 20 people show up... I was just frustrated that I would plan something or set up a time and they weren't able to come.*

Sara explained that she understood that families had busy schedules; she believed she would be less frustrated if she had stronger relationships with families.

Michelle, a college counselor at a private school, noted that another challenge to her work with families was the growing number of families talking to multiple people about students' college-going plans, including

extended family and co-workers who referred to TikTok videos for information. She noted, "It definitely can create miscommunication between the various parties who might be involved." Thus, most of the issues respondents faced were related to communication with families. The impact of communication is an important finding to highlight because communication between educators and families is at the core of relational family engagement practices (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

### Job Requirements

While all participants had a job whose purpose was to support underrepresented students in navigating the college-going process, job requirements varied. Thus, job context impacts CAPs' interactions with families. CAPs who worked for federally funded TRIO programs were required to interact with families. However, the nature of these interactions varied. Some required parents to be part of the interview process. Others had parent information nights one or two times a school year. Others hosted parent workshops throughout the semester. As previously described, while these CAPs interacted with families, they believed they did not have meaningful and trusting relationships.

Participants with jobs within schools, such as college counselors, described their large student loads. Because they had to support many students, they did not have time to

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develop intentional relationships with families. Similarly, CAPs who worked for out-of-school organizations also felt the burden of large caseloads. They wished they had better relationships with other school individuals (i.e., school counselors). If they worked closely with their colleagues, the barrier that large caseloads presented could be alleviated, which could free up time to work more closely with students' families.

Most participants shared that their organizations, whether school-based or out-of-school, did not prioritize working with families. Instead, they framed their missions and programming around student needs.

Thus, family engagement was not systemic, integrated, or sustained. The only exceptions to this were Luis and Jessica – family partnerships were at the core, they described, of their programming. When asked why this was the case, Luis shared that a professor whose research included family engagement conceptualized the program he worked for; Luis was a college and career advisor for a university-based outreach program. Thus, the program's structure, events, and curriculum were intentionally research-based, including family engagement research. Similarly, Jessica also prioritized partnering with families due to her personal experiences. Before beginning her college access consulting business, she worked for college access programs that did not partner with families. She believed this was a missed opportunity. Thus, when she started her organization, she prioritized relationships with families. These two outliers show that prioritizing family engagement

within a college access context is possible – it needs to be intentionally embedded into program structures.

### Experience Working with Families

Related to the previous theme, respondents' experiences working with families also shaped the nature of their relationships with them. Participants with fewer years in their positions were more likely to report feeling unprepared to work with families and were anxious about reaching out to family members. Nevertheless, all participants desired professional development on how to work with families. Even participants with years of job experience wanted concrete and detailed best practices. As an educational advisor for a TRIO program, Vanessa, noted, "I can say I want parents to be more involved in the program, but I would not know what events we should have." Participants believed learning how to develop family-centered programming would lead to stronger family relationships. This is one of the most important findings of this study: CAPs wanted to develop their capacity to work with families. They understood that partnerships with students' families were at the core of their work with underrepresented college-going students. They wanted to improve their practices.

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### Discussion

Framed by the notion that family-educator partnerships are essential for student success (Mapp & Bergman, 2019), this study explores an understudied segment of college access efforts for underrepresented students: how college access professionals (CAPs) interact with students' families. Most, if not all, participants mentioned that they had inconsistent communication and transactional exchanges with families and often served as mediators between families and students.

Participants linked their limited relationships with students' families to their inconsistent communication. Since they did not interact with them often, participants believed they could not develop strong, trusting relationships with families. Thus, underlying the findings of this study is the importance of trust:

without trust, study participants could not develop the relational and collaborative family engagement practices the DCBF advocates for (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). Relatedly, participants also noted that when they communicated with families, it was to ask them for personal information (e.g., tax information for financial aid applications) or to update them that their child had, as one participant noted, "done something wrong."

This communication is different from what family engagement research notes is successful: in addition to being relational, collaborative, and interactive, family engagement practices should be linked to learning (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). By communicating with families only when CAPs need information or when their children have done something wrong, there is a failed opportunity to center students' college-going aspirations in meaningful ways (Mapp et al., 2022; Tierney, 2002).



**“underlying the findings of this study is the importance of trust: without trust, study participants could not develop the relational and collaborative family engagement practices the DCBF advocates for.”**

Furthermore, for CAPs whose programs or schools did have family-oriented programming, these were often once or twice per academic year and were information-based events. There were no opportunities for bidirectional information sharing and relationship-building with families, which are essential conditions for successful

family-educator partnerships (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). Without such partnerships, rooted in trust, CAPs may struggle to have difficult conversations with families, including conversations about sensitive topics such as absent parenting or gendered expectations. Nevertheless, some participants did have trusting relationships with some families. These CAPs had spent time developing those relationships: they may

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have known the families for years, over multiple sibling generations, and had intentionally invested time getting to know families. Moreover, they also shared that their relationships with families made their jobs easier. Thus, these examples prove that CAPS can develop relational, asset-based, and collaborative relationships with families linked to students' learning and development (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

The study also reveals that the CAPs in this study worked for organizations that did not have the institutional factors described in the DCBF. These include establishing family engagement as a systemic, integrated, and sustained value. For instance, CAPs' job requirements also influenced their relationships with families. Reflecting findings from previous studies, large caseloads, multiple roles within their job, and limited understanding of school dynamics took most of their time and attention (Tierney, 2002). Additionally, while most participants shared that their organizations or programs did think working with families was important, the majority noted that working with families was not a priority (Tierney, 2002). As a result, many cited their limited experience working with families and the need for more professional development as further limiting their relationships with families.

According to the DCBF, all educators must invest in developing partnerships with students' families (Mapp & Bergman, 2019).

Regardless of the job description and context, the framework postulates that all educators should be fluent in family engagement practices. Most study participants acknowledged this: working with families is essential. Nevertheless, they also shared that they did not have the tools or capacity necessary to develop these relationships and authentic connections. The following section proposes recommendations for practice, policy, and research based on these findings.

### Recommendations

CAP-family relationships are essential to consider as CAPs often do most of the one-on-one college-going work with underrepresented college-bound students. Therefore, the first recommendation is that college access programming needs to include students' families in the college-going process. This needs to be a program-wide or school-wide policy, which will help make family engagement systemic, integrated, and sustained. Findings suggest that CAPs' college access work needs to involve developing trusting relationships with students' families. To develop these, CAPs need to interact with families in meaningful ways. A policy requiring family engagement can instigate and motivate these efforts. In terms of practice, CAPs should design events and programming that allow them to get to know families personally, are linked to students' learning, and are culturally responsive and respectful. An example is a series of bi-monthly or monthly workshops focused on sharing college-related

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information with families in their home language and through interactive activities. Workshops should also intentionally carve out time for families and CAPs to get to know each other personally. Through such programming, CAPs and families interact more than once a semester or school year, get to know each other, and develop trusting relationships. Related to this, CAPs' job descriptions should be re-designed to include partnering with families as a job requirement. Through this, family engagement is designed into the nature of the role and, consequently, the school or organization's programming aligning with policy demands. This can address the organizational conditions necessary for successful family engagement practices.

The second recommendation is to train CAPs to work with families. Most respondents noted that they had not received any professional development on how to partner with students' families. They wanted this training. Leaders in high schools and college access programs must (1) acknowledge the importance of family engagement and (2) train their staff to partner with families effectively. By investing in professional development opportunities highlighting the importance of partnership work and presenting examples of best practices, schools and college access programs can make family engagement systemic, integrated, and sustained.

In terms of research, further investigation into the different interactions CAPs have with families is necessary. This is essential because these educators play an important role in students' college-going goals. While this study began to explore the nature of these relationships in urban settings, future research should consider how CAPs in different settings (e.g., in-school, out-of-school, rural schools) work with families. This can help identify context-specific needs. Furthermore, future studies should also consider and include the perspectives of students and families to understand how they conceive and experience these relationships. Finally, considering the DCBF framework, future research needs to more deeply explore how to improve the capacity of both CAPs and families to partner with each other.

## Conclusion

This study illustrates the often-nuanced relationships college access professionals (CAPs) have with underrepresented students' families. By applying family engagement frameworks that center the importance of family-educator partnerships, the study shows that, while CAPs have different interactions with students' families, they are often limited in their relational nature. Furthermore, the study also shows the importance of developing their capacity to partner with families: these educators understood the importance of working with families for student success. However, they did not feel like they knew how to do partnership work or had the time to do so.

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Thus, it is vital to understand the different relationships and interactions CAPs describe in this study and the elements that shape them to improve the college-going efforts of underrepresented students. Understanding these family-educator interactions and working toward benefitting from strong and trusting family-educator partnerships can lead to successful college acceptance and matriculation for underrepresented college-bound students. 

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