HOPE FOR THE HOPELESS: WHEN COLLEGE ISN'T THE ANSWER

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Hope has been correlated with positive outcomes in various areas of life (e.g., academics, physical health, psychological adjustment) and across diverse populations (Snyder, 2002). Hope theory postulates that for individuals to have hope, they must have a desired goal or outcome and a belief in a pathway to achieve the goal. Government and organizations have deemed "college as the way" to be the acceptable pathway to success in life. In the throes of a college-going culture, each student is given a predetermined goal of college readiness, but it is unclear if all students have a belief in a pathway to that goal. According to Hope Theory, if an individual loses belief in their ability to attain the goal or does not believe there is a pathway that will lead to success, they are likely to have lower hope (Snyder, 2002).

This study examined the relationship between students' perception of a college-going culture with hope and further compared this relationship between low- vs high-achieving students. Additionally, it provided an initial exploration of the effects of shifting away from the prescribed goal of college-readiness to a self-aware and self-prescribed goal. Both quantitative and qualitative data were used in this study. In a convenience sample of 840 students, data from a survey administered by the school district in the fall of their senior year were analyzed. A small, yet significant, positive

relationship between students' perception of a college-going culture and students' hope levels (r = .257) was found. Additionally, multiple regressions analysis showed hope levels of students with a high GPA had a stronger relationship between the perception of college-going culture at their school and hope whereas low GPA students did not.

Qualitative data were from a qualitative analysis of five students who completed a career assessment process (Greenwood Systems 45) with a graduation coach in three meetings over a period of six weeks. The results suggest that through the use of the GS45 system, low-achieving students were able to increase self-awareness and agency-thinking and make a connection to a career. Ultimately these students increased hope for their future. Implications for practice and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the hundreds of students who have taught me about the importance of hope. And to my wife Kristin, for supporting my dreams, always.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

Chapter Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

LIST OF TABLES

Table Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

The purpose of the American education system has evolved over time. Prior to 1900, education had two purposes: to teach academic skills, such as basic reading and fundamental math skills, and to impart values for a democratic society, generally defined as history and civics (Vollmer, 2010). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the goal of education shifted to include meeting the demands of changing communities and societies. Vollmer (2010) describes the transformation: politicians, professors, businessmen and clergy viewed the education system as a place to "assimilate[e] immigrants and [accomplish] the social engineering of citizens" into the changing economy (p. 56). Today, the United States' education system is the primary means of preparing individuals to become productive members of society.

Assimilating individuals into an ever-shifting job market is a complex and challenging task as people are unique in their strengths, interests, personalities, and values, and the job market fluctuates based on technological advancements and economic trends. In addition, the education system has been burdened with meeting all the basic needs and demands of students and families (e.g., health, social/emotional, vision). Prioritizing the best way to prepare students with these changing circumstances and the emerging skills required for jobs is difficult and necessary (Robinson, 2015).

In recent decades, education has adopted mantras such as "College for All" where communities and businesses promote the idea that "More Education Equals More Money" (Collegeboard, 2017). The culmination of this widespread cultural standard and belief guides all facets of schools so that when students enter the education system,

regardless of personality, strengths, talents, background, or capacities, they are assigned the goals of academic achievement and college matriculation, and set on a pathway to attain that goal.

College as the Goal

Historically, policy makers, legislators, and school system administrators have debated between college-level skills and technical skills as a goal for students' career preparation. Government funding in the United Stated education began when schools expanded from private to public and again from primary to secondary between 1910-1940 ("High School Movement"). In 1958, funding extended to support students pursuing higher education, providing financial aids such as loans and grants for students pursuing higher education (National Defense Education Act). Nearly twenty-five years later, in 1984, funding supports shifted to include quality career and technical education programs implemented to prepare students for the job market demands (Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education).

A decade later, in 1994, the U.S. government launched the Goals 2000 initiative, calling for a standards-based education, creating policies and resources in an effort to increase academic learning. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) solidified academic skills associated with college preparation as the primary goal of the education system, attaching funding to schools based on students' scores on standardized tests developed to assess college readiness (United States Department of Education [USDOE], n.d.). In 2015, while the Every Student Succeeds Act expanded financial provisions to support diverse populations in need, it also remained focused on a form of "college

readiness aims" by continuing to link funding for schools to students' achievement scores (USDOE, n.d.).

Since the major shift towards academic achievement in 2001, substantial time and resources have been invested to create a system that prepares students for their future by preparing them for college. States have developed standards-based assessments derived from college-level material to gauge students' academic preparation for college (i.e., implementation of Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium; Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills [OAKS]). Curricula were redesigned to include Common Core Standards to ensure students were prepared for standardized tests such as the one published by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). Evaluation procedures have been developed to measure teacher effectiveness in teaching students the required material (i.e., Oregon: Educator Effectiveness Toolkit). Funding has been provided for interventions to support students who are scoring below proficiency levels in core academic subjects (i.e., passing of Measure 98 Bond to support academic and career-readiness outcomes). All of these changes have been implemented with expectations of raising student test scores, preparing them to meet the goal of proficiency in academics and, ultimately, college-readiness.

This philosophy of success and goal-driven academic achievement propels many students toward college and into a career. However, students who continue to perform poorly on tests and fail classes may end up disengaging from school—the intended pathway to a successful life and a career. In Oregon, for example, graduation rates hover around 80% and only an average of 69% of high school graduates enroll in college (National Center for Higher Education, n.d.). Of those, only 51% of those students

graduate from college (Huie, Ryu, & Shapiro, 2020). This means only 28% of students graduate from college and nearly 70% are left uniformed and ill-prepared. In 2018, nearly half a million Oregon adolescents and young adults ages 16-24 were disengaged from education and the labor force (Bechtoldt, 2018). Additionally, only 33% of jobs required a college degree (BLS, 2021). Given the primary purpose of our current education system is to prepare students for an effective transition into the working economy, the focus on college as a goal of preparing students for lifelong success appears to be falling short.

Impact on Positive Youth Development

Students in "College for All" education systems who fail to achieve the prescribed goal of academic success can struggle with other important developmental aspects for positive well-being, including hope (Bryce, Alexander, Fraser, & Fabes, 2019). In a broad scope, Ryan and Deci (2000) found that extrinsic (prescribed) goal-setting and attainment was negatively related to well-being over time. Studies specifically analyzing academic success, including Van Ryzin (2011), identified a relationship between student levels of academic success and motivational, behavioral, and psychological difficulties (see also Adelabu, 2008; Dixson, Warrell, & Mello, 2017; Marques, Pais-Ribeiro, & Lopez, 2011). Possibly even more problematic, dropping out of school increases the likelihood of adult criminality, drug and alcohol abuse, marital problems, violence, and employment (Eastman, Cooney, O'Conner, & Small, 2007; Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010; Yeide & Kobrin, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

Given the significance of the outcomes of educational success, it is not surprising that some students' inability to find success in the education system has been heavily

researched. The current study draws upon Hope Theory, a psychological tenant from positive psychology, to investigate potential relationships between hope for students attending high school in a college-for-success system. Hope Theory (Snyder, 2002) provides a framework for understanding the relationship between students' experiences in the education system and their hope for the future. Major factors include students' opportunity to set and achieve goals, as well as promoting students' perceptions of abilities and defining goals and pathways based on those perceptions.

Hope Theory. This study was primarily based on the concepts of Hope Theory as defined by Charles R. Snyder (2002). Snyder found that when discussing hope, individuals naturally think in terms of *goals* and hypothesize how to find *pathways* to their goals. This understanding reformed hope theory to include cognition as a major tenant of hope. Hope was not just an emotion, but a cognitive process that initiated people to action, to develop a plan, and to work toward their goal. Snyder also expanded on the emotional aspect of hope, noting that when individuals talk about achieving their goals, they refer to their *motivation* as well. Motivation, he found, is highly correlated with people's ability to overcome barriers, allowing them to achieve their goals.

Goals differ from dreams or fantasies in that they refer to ideas that are concrete and believable to allow one to determine *pathways* and *motivation* to attain them, or in other words, "a way and a will". Snyder (2002) summarizes the two motivating factors that drive goal setting: (a) to pursue a positive outcome or (b) to remove a negative outcome. In the education system and the current economy, one can surmise the goal of college-for-success thus either leads students to pursue education or to avoid negative outcomes. The positive factors that motivate students to define college-for-success as a

goal are the above-mentioned rhetoric that college graduates statistically earn more money (Abel & Deitz, 2019) and additionally to increase chances for positive outcomes such as acceptance to college, improved social status, or more opportunities for job advancement (Tamborini, Kim, & Sakamoto, 2015). Conversely, students may adopt college-for-success as a goal to avoid negative outcomes such as negative stereotypes, poverty or blue-collar jobs (Wright & Horta, 2017).

Pathways are the means by which individuals can achieve their goals. As with goal-development, Snyder (2002) articulated that successful attainment of goals requires a belief in the plausibility of the proposed pathway as well as the ability to have flexible approaches and attitudes in order to produce alternative routes for goal attainment when needed. In education, the college-for-success goal pathway is academic achievement in school and high scores on standardized tests. As students receive passing grades and proficient test scores, they solidify education as the pathway to their college-to-success goal. Individuals who have gained confidence in the pathway will discover and utilize resources and supports to help them navigate the pathway when barriers arise. Equally, students who encounter repeated failure in classes and on test scores will not develop skills to access resources or alternative routes and ultimately will lose belief in academic achievement (school) as a viable pathway to college acceptance. They might also lose faith in college as their goal and overall hope for their future.

Motivation (*agency thinking*), according to Snyder (2002), is the individual's perceived ability to be successful on the pathway and to reach the desired goals (i.e., a sense of confidence in finding success). In relationship to the plausibility tenant of *pathways,* agency thinking is self-referential thoughts specifically related to their ability

to accomplish the goal (i.e., “I can do this” or “I am not going to be stopped”). It is the factor that carries individuals through failures and unexpected barriers (Snyder, 2002). In the education system, agency thinking for students is similar to their perceived ability to navigate the pathway. In fact, Snyder discovered a close relationship between pathways and agency thinking. Students who are finding success in school build on their self-belief, which cues motivation to attain the college-for-success goal. Correspondingly, students who are not finding success in school lose confidence in their abilities to follow the pathway to their college-to-success goal, potentially lose faith in the goal itself, and lose motivation in the pathway and goal attainment all together.

Summary: Hope Theory and the Education System. The current education system is designed to provide an education for all students with the intent of preparing them to be college-for-success ready. The realization of this strategy is dependent on students’ abilities to find academic success. Between two-thirds and three-fourths of students adopt this educational goal naturally and experience academic success early and often (National Center of Education Statistics, n.d.). They believe the education system is the best pathway to accomplish goals and with each experience of success along the way comes increased belief in self. Ultimately, these outcomes for successful students provide a positive feedback loop, increasing positive psychological development and hope, overall (see Figure 1).

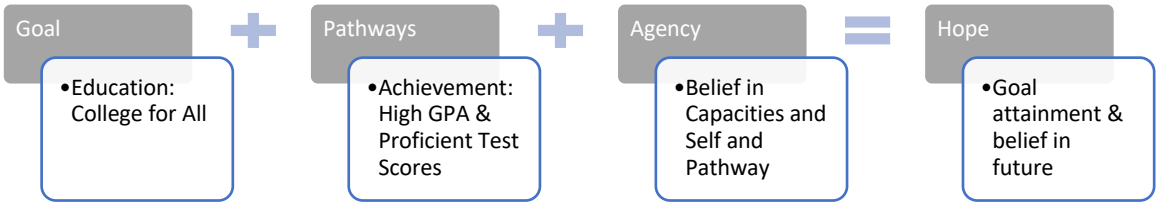


Figure 1. Hope Theory and Education: Successful students experiences in a college-for-success system.

Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. Students who experience repeated failure in the education system begin to lose hope about their future and suffer unhealthy psychological effects. Because school systems employ academic success as their primary focus, students obligatorily adopt the college-for-success goal. Compulsory laws require students to attend school, and students endure on the pathway toward the college-for career goal because while alternative pathways are mentioned, the overwhelming focus of the education system is on academic achievement subduing alternative pathways or goals. As students continue to experience failure, they continue to lose belief in themselves and their abilities. These effects create a negative feedback loop, leaving failing students lacking motivation and belief in their ability to attain goals, and dealing with hopelessness for their future (see Figure 2).

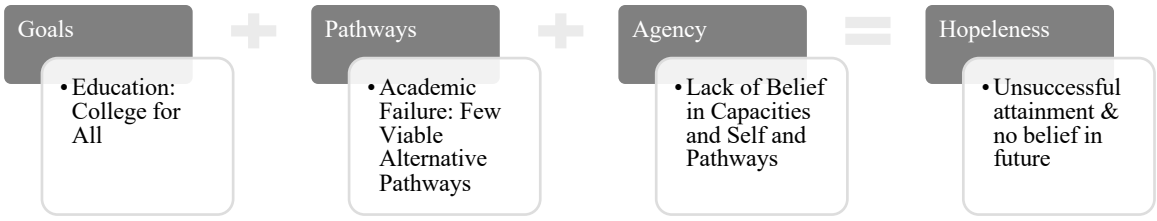


Figure 2. Hope Theory and Education: Unsuccessful students experiences in a college-for-success system.

School and Hope Factors (Goal, Pathway, Confidence)

Researchers have examined education factors that impact students' hope and positive youth development (Marques, Pais-Ribeiro, & Lopez, 2011). A majority of these studies (Alfassi, 2004; Brewer, 2004; Kenny, Walsh-Blair, Blustein, Bempechat, & Seltzer, 2010; Taylor et al., 2015) focus on a combination of students' autonomy regarding their future and educational goals as well as the pathways to attain them. Work-based learning programs (Kenny et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2015), Career and Technical Education programs (Brewer, 2004), and student-centered learning environments

(Alfassi, 2004) all were found to provide students with a sense of autonomy, where they were able to employ decision making for their education goals and pathways to attain their goals. For over a decade, these validations regarding autonomy have been found to be true across populations, including students from low-income and diverse backgrounds (Adelabu, 2008), students with learning disabilities (Lackaye & Margalit, 2008), and marginalized students (Riele, 2006).

Additional research directed at belief in self (i.e. abilities) has shown that students who are confident in their capabilities have more successes (Dinger, Dickhauser, Spinath, & Steinmayr, 2013). Adelabu (2008) found the importance of students' perception about their abilities to be especially true for marginalized students, those from diverse ethnic backgrounds and low socioeconomic status. Gehlbach (2006) found that when students were taught and encouraged to learn material as a way of mastering the content, motivation reengaged the learner and resulted in an increased belief about their level of competence. This finding demonstrates the usefulness of interventions that provide students an opportunity to feel successful through a shift in their perceptions and beliefs about their abilities.

Competence can also come from past experience of attaining goals or building students' belief in their ability to achieve them. Students who had opportunities in the past to achieve success, were able to translate this success into a belief in themselves. This belief, in turn, motivated them to set goals and work to achieve them (McDermott, Donlan, Zaff, & Prescott, 2016). Competence can also be developed when students understand their past history. Washington (2008) found that when students were afforded

an opportunity to rewrite and transform their past story into a story of resilience, they gained confidence and developed hope for their future.

Purpose of the Study

The education system is intended to be the pathway to a successful life. Significant investment of government funds and human capital have been made in an attempt to help individuals gain the necessary skills for a successful career and life. Many students experience enough success in the education system to graduate from high school yet nearly 49% of students fail to graduate from college, and approximately 25% of students fail to graduate from high school. Research provides evidence that implementing interventions that affect students' perception of autonomy and perception of abilities increases academic achievement and hope for their future (Eastman, Cooney, O'Conner, & Small, 2007). Students who have high levels of hope and high levels of agency and autonomy are the most adaptive (Dixson et al., 2017). Lastly, people who set and attain intrinsically motivated goals are positively associated with well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship of the college-for-success system with students' levels of hope. Additionally, I expect to gather information about the benefits of shifting students' perceptions of their abilities and providing opportunities to connect as well as create personalized career goals and pathways, specifically for low-achieving students.

CHAPTER II

METHODS

This mixed methods study investigated potential relationships between high school senior students' levels of hope (dependent variable) and their perceptions of their high school's college-going culture (independent variable). These relationships were further examined to determine if the relationship between these two variables differed significantly at varying levels of academic achievement, as measured by grade point average (GPA). The following questions were used to guide my study and the remaining pages will address these questions specifically.

- RQ1: Is there a relationship between students' perception of the school's college-going culture and students' levels of hope?
- RQ2: Is the relationship between student perception of school's college-going culture and the student's level of hope different for low- vs. high-achieving students?
- RQ3: Can use of the GS45 system (a process to expand perceptions of self through personalized characteristics assessments and connections to student-driven goal setting experience) increase the hope of low achieving students attending schools where they report high perceptions of college-going culture?

Research Design

Survey Data: RQ1 and RQ2. To determine students' levels of hope and their perceptions of a college-going culture at their school, quantitative data were collected by means of a regularly-scheduled survey administered to all students at the participating public-school district in the fall of their senior year. To determine if there was a

significantly different relationship for academically lower achieving students who had a strong college-going culture perspective, the grade point averages (GPA) were included in the data.

Qualitative Data: RQ3. As an initial exploration of the influence of a career-focused, person-centered future connection tool (GS45) on students' hope levels (specifically students with low academic achievement and a high perception of college-going culture), an analysis of five students experience was conducted. The data gathered and analyzed for this analysis included individual notes recorded by the graduation coach who administered the GS45 during the GS45 process and a semi-structured interview with the graduation coach.

Setting and Participants

This study used a convenience sample of nearly 1400 students in their senior year across four comprehensive high schools and one alternative school in a large suburban school district in the state of Oregon. The district's demographics are similar to the demographics of other large districts in the state, as well as the demographics of the state as a whole. Overall, 86% of the participating district's students graduate from high school and 69% go on to post-secondary education, with nearly 51% of those students graduating from college. State standardized test scores (from the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium) are lower than the state of Oregon average, with 12.4% of students not passing English, 35.9% falling short of having essential math skills, and 43.7% lacking foundations in Science. Of the district's grade 9-12 students, 47% are economically disadvantaged, 26% are Ever English Learners, 15% are students with disabilities, and nearly half are white (45% white, 38% Hispanic/Latino, 1% American

Indian/Alaska Native, 2% Black/African American, 7 % Asian, 5% mixed race). District staff demographics differ from the student population: 89% white, 6% Latino/Hispanic, and 2% or less other race/ethnicities (Oregon Department of Education, n.d.).

It should be noted that this study took place during the fall of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, a circumstance that likely impacted the results, specifically regarding hope. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) reported adolescents have been highly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in the following ways: changes in routine, break in continuity of learning, break in continuity of health care, missed significant life events and loss of security and safety. Students involved in this study were dismissed from physically attending school in March of their junior year and had observed the disappointment and frustration of many of their friends who graduated in June 2020 and had been deprived of the regular celebrations provided at the end of their high school experience. Additionally, these students were entering their senior year at a time when it was uncertain if or when they would be returning to school and what life would look like post-high school. It is important to remember these factors when interpreting the results of this study. This context will be addressed further in the Discussion chapter, but merits mention here as well, as it is an important part of the study's setting.

Measures

A variety of measures were used in this study, including a district-administered survey which included a standardized measure of hope with known technical adequacy and a published measure of students' perception of the college-going culture at their school, administrative data provided by the school district, and qualitative data analyzed

on a sub-sample of students who participated in the qualitative analysis portion of the research. These measures are described in greater detail below.

Survey. The school district collects data on their senior population each fall to identify the upcoming needs of seniors and to assist counselors in providing the necessary supports for successful high school completion and post-secondary planning. The school district deems this information pertinent for student success and requires all students in their senior year to complete this survey as a part of the .5 Career Development credit required for graduation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this requirement was waived for the graduation class of 2021, but counselors, teachers, and administrators strongly encouraged students to complete the survey. For this study, during the school year 2020-2021, the senior student survey included items from the *Children's Hope Scale* (Snyder, 2002) to measure students' levels of hope, and items from *The College-Going Culture Survey-Revised* (Willis, 2011) to assess students' perceptions of the school's college-going culture.

Children's Hope Scale. C. R. Snyder's seminal research on hope in the 80's and 90's culminated in the creation of assessments to measure the level of individuals' hope: Adult Hope Scale and Children's Hope Scale (CHS). The CHS measures goal-oriented thinking and consists of six items: three questions factor loadings (.64 to .85) to agency-thinking (students' belief about their opportunity to choose their goals) and three questions factor loadings (.52 to .85) to pathway-thinking (students' perception about the possible pathways to reach their goals). Reliability for the CHS has been shown across samples: Cronbach's α ranging from .72-.86 and test-retest reliability of .71, $p < .001$ (Snyder et al., 1997). Discriminant validity evidence has also been reported, with the

CHS demonstrating negative correlations with depression (R = -.48) and negative affect (R = -.52) (Snyder et al., 1997).

The CHS is administered via paper and pencil to children and adolescents. Each item uses a 6-point Likert scale response option, ranging from *none of the time* to *all of the time*, and all of the questions are positively worded. At least 85% of the questions need to be completed for the responses to be scored. The CHS score is the mean of the responses. Because the focus of this study was targeted at motivation and belief in self as related to college as a defined goal for students, the questions pertaining to motivation and belief in abilities (agency-thinking) were used to determine hope levels. Those three items are: (a) *I think I am doing pretty well;* (b) *I am doing just as well as others my age;* and (c) *I think the things I've done in the past will help me in the future.* The reliability of the scores in this sample is $\alpha = .71$.

The College-Going Culture Survey-Revised. There is currently only one measure that captures students' perception of the college-going culture in their schools. In 2006, The Collegeboard created a guide to assist schools in implementing college readiness throughout the K-12 system, *CollegeEd; Creating a College-Going Culture Guide* (Collegeboard, 2006). This guide was developed by multiple school and district personnel to help educators understand the existing school culture and identify areas of improvement for creating a college-going culture. Within this guide is a recommendation to distribute a college-readiness needs assessment, the College-Going Culture Survey (CGCS), to parents, students and staff. The College-Going Culture Survey Revised (CGCS-R) is the product of a validation and inter-item reliability study by Roderick Willis II (2011). The parallel analysis (EFA) identified two main subscales: *Verified*

College Potential and *College Capital Awareness*, that explained 40.1% of students' perceptions in his study. The results from this analysis improved the inter-item reliability coefficient from α = .46 (CGCS) to α = .71 (CGCS-R).

The CGCS-R is a 10-item survey with Likert-style responses and only two questions with reverse scoring (marked with *). Students, parents, teachers and community members take the CGCS-R via paper and pencil. The CGCS-R does not have a time limit, although most people complete it within ten minutes. For this study, only four items from the CGCS-R pertaining to college-talk, college expectations, and college preparedness in K-12 were used to calculate a level of college-going culture perspective. Those items include: (a) *I have not thought about college for myself,** (b) *My parents expect me to go to college,* (c) *I know about financial aid for college*, and (d) *I will be well prepared in high school for college*. The reliability of the scores in this sample is α = .72.

Administrative data. There are several indicators for academic achievement and college-readiness. Most colleges combine a grade point average (GPA) with standardized college entrance exams (e.g., SAT or ACT) to determine college-readiness and even acceptance into their programs. Because not all students take the ACT or SAT, the GPA academic record was used as an indicator of students' level of academic achievement and ultimately a measure of students' progress toward college as a goal. In education there are accepted unofficial standards for GPA commonly used to describe a student's academic success and potential. For example, according the GPAcalculator.net (https://gpacalculator.net/gpa-scale/2-0-gpa/) students with a 3.0 GPA are *average* and students at a 2.0 GPA are considered to be *below average*. With regard to college

admissions, students who have below a 2.0 GPA cannot expect acceptance into a 4-year university or college. Furthermore, states like Oregon have defined 2.5 GPA as a minimum requirement to qualify for two years of free college (Oregon Promise, https://oregonstudentaid.gov/oregon-promise.aspx).

Qualitative Data

In addition to the surveys described above, this study also included a qualitative component to explore the influence of an intervention designed to help high school students better understand their personality, career personality, grit scores, personal work values and educational goal attainment and connect this information with specific jobs they might find interesting and be well-suited for. The intervention uses an assessment, the GS45, combined with one-on-one coaching with someone trained to interpret the results of the assessment. The qualitative data were gathered through empirical evidence of students' experiences with the GS45, specifically focused on their hope levels. The design called for a staff member (a graduation coach) to identify five students who fit the *a priori* selection criteria (below average GPA, low hope scores on the Hope Scale, and the perception of a strong college-going culture at their school) from one of the comprehensive high schools and offer them an opportunity to participate in the GS45. The graduation coach was able to take notes on their interactions with the students, including specific thoughts and beliefs the students shared during the GS45 meetings. A semi-structured interview focused on hope-related factors was conducted with the graduation coach after the final meeting for the GS45 was completed.

The Greenwood Systems 45 (GS45). The GS45 is a shortened version of the GS90. The GS90 and GS45 were developed by Janet Greenwood. The GS 45 takes

approximately one hour to complete and consists of 45 items. The assessment is mathematically aligned with career results, producing a correlation-based match of an individual's personality, career personality, grit scores, personal work values and educational goal attainment with specific jobs.

In this assessment, students participate in an interview with a trained GS45 administrator, where information about the student's values, experiences, and interests is gathered. Then the individual completes the following online assessments (located within the GS45): Personality Assessment, Holland Code, GRIT, and Work Values. In a subsequent interview, the interviewer reviews the results with the individual student to explore each assessments' results, gain perspective on values, and guide the conversation on potential career matches. More meetings may occur based on student's motivation, self-awareness and interest in exploring more about the results of the GS45.

The graduation coach in this study was trained on the GS45 tool in September 2020 by the Greenwoods and was given access to the assessment site and training videos and offered continued support throughout the study. The graduation coach was encouraged to keep records throughout the process and observe and note language, attitudes, and beliefs each of the five students displayed over the course of the GS45 intervention. These notes were analyzed along with the audio-recording of the semi-structured interview with the graduation coach after she had completed the full series of GS45 interviews and assessments.

Data Collection and Clean Up

RQ 1 and RQ 2. The survey questions were finalized with the counselors from each school in August 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, students did not

return to school at the beginning of September as they had done in previous years, so the district dedicated the first week of school for teachers to connect with students and families about their needs for distance or online learning as well as set up expectations for participation. During this week, English Language Arts 12 teachers were advised to discuss the senior survey with parents and students and ask them to complete the survey. The following week, the Career and College Counselors emailed the online survey link to senior level students with an explanation about the uses of the results. In the subsequent two weeks, administration sent the survey link to parents and students in the weekly newsletter, prompting them to please complete the survey within those two weeks. Lastly, student leadership posted the online survey link to the social media accounts, encouraging seniors to complete the survey.

At the end of September, a district representative compiled survey results from all five schools into a single spreadsheet. In all, 890 seniors (or roughly 64% of the 1382 eligible to participate) completed the fall senior survey. The district representative then added academic achievement data (GPA) for the survey respondents. Forty-two of the respondents' GPAs were not found in the district database, so these respondents were removed from the study. The district indicated students with a GPA below 1.0 suggests student records are likely inaccurate due to transfers between schools and programs. An additional 8 students had inaccurate GPA records (below a 1.0 GPA) and were removed from the data set. A total of 840 de-identified student senior survey results (approximately 61% of eligible seniors in the district) were used for data analysis.

The dataset was checked for errors, the three hope items were scored, and a Hope score was calculated in the Excel spreadsheet for each survey respondent. The four

CGCS-R items were scored, including the reverse scoring for the question, "*I have not thought about college for myself*" and added to the Excel spreadsheet. Once the raw data files had been cleaned, they were imported to SPSS for statistical analysis.

RQ 3. A graduation coach is a district staff person who monitors and engages with students who are at-risk for not graduating, starting in 9th grade. The graduation coach who participated in this research had been working with some of the participants since their freshman year. In late September 2020 the graduation coach reviewed the senior survey results and compared them to their current list of students at-risk for not graduating. Five students who met the *a priori* selection criteria for the study were identified. The graduation coach contacted the five students the first week of October to explain the GS45 and invited them to utilize the GS45 assessment tool. Students who chose to participate received a $25 gift card to a popular coffee company.

The graduation coach began the initial interviews in October 2020, exploring each student's interests, values and experiences. Initial interviews lasted about an hour and were completed by mid-October 2020. All five students were sent the GS45 assessment link via email by the end of October 2020. The students were reminded the assessment may take approximately an hour or more to complete and were encouraged to pause and come back to it if they needed to take breaks.

The first student completed their assessment the last week of October 2020 and the final student completed their assessment in early December 2020. There were gaps and delays with students due to family obligations and commitments, but all results were reviewed and completed by January 2021. Once the assessment was complete, the graduation coach collaborated with the GS45 assessment developers to ensure accurate

interpretation of the results. The graduation coach met with the students individually and spent approximately an hour helping them connect the results to their personality and future careers. Students were asked to explore the career matches from the assessment before the final meeting. The graduation coach met individually with the students a third time for approximately one hour to discuss the students' plans for the future related to their experiences with the GS45.

Throughout the three meetings, the graduation coach recorded notes about each student's responses to the GS45 assessment results. In January, 2021, a semi-structured interview was audio-recorded to capture the graduation coach's observations and perspectives of the students' experiences with the GS45 process. A transcription of the audio of semi-structured interview was completed a week later.

Content analysis, based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) strategies for drawing meaning out of qualitative data, was used to categorize the meaning of words and phrases the graduation coach used to explain the students' experiences. From the case notes as well as the semi-structured interview transcription, I focused on *noting patterns* and *themes* through *clustering* to determine "what goes with what." In an attempt to look at the relationships more abstractly, I *noted relations between variables.* Lastly, I utilized *building a logical chain of evidence* and *making conceptual coherence* to systematically assemble the data into a meaningful representation. The results of this analysis were connected to the words and phrases identified by Snyder (2002) in his development of hope theory for potential alignment.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

In this chapter, I present the results of my study. I first report basic descriptive statistics for each of the measures. I used SPSS version 23.0 for Mac for all quantitative analyses. I organize the presentation of results based on my research questions, ending with the results of my qualitative analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

In all, 840 students completed the senior survey. Their hope scores ranged between 3 and 18 (M = 13.29, SD = 2.87). Based on the scoring determined by Snyder in his development of the CHS, 95 students in my sample (11%) were *low in hope* (scores 3-8), 319 students (38%) had *moderate hope* (scores 9-13), and 426 (51%) had *high hope* (scores 14-18). Students' college-going culture perspectives ranged between 4 and 17 (M = 12.11, SD = 2.7). Unlike the CHS, the CGCS-R does not have a formalized scoring guide, so to gain insight into the variations of the sample, the scores were mathematically split in tertials: 85 students in my sample (10%) had a *low perception of a college-going culture* (scores 4-7), 296 (35%) had a *moderate perception of college-going culture* (scores 8-12), and more than half of the students (n = 460, 55%) had a strong perception of a college-going culture (scores 13-17).

The GPA of students in my sample ranged between 4.0-1.0 (M = 3.1, SD = 0.9), with the average GPA of students in my sample mirroring the national average of 3.0. In all, 103 students in my sample (12%) had GPAs far below the national average, with GPAs in the 1.0 – 1.99 range; another 228 students (27%) were just below the national

average, with GPAs in the 2.0 – 2.99 range; and 509 students in my sample (61%) had GPAs at or above the national average, with GPAs in the 3.0 to 4.0 range.

Results of Correlation Analyses

I ran a Pearson correlation to address RQ1 (*Is there a relationship between students' perception of the school's college-going culture and students' levels of hope?*). Both hope and CGCP scores had a normal distribution, meeting the basic assumption for a Pearson correlation to be conducted. However, because the CGCP variable did not have a true zero value (range of 4-17), raw scores and means could not be used without some data manipulation. To avoid multicollinearity, I used SPSS to center the mean, creating a new variable for analysis, which I coded as "CGCPSc_C". This transformation shifted the scale of the measure but retained the units of analysis for correlations and regressions. I found a statistically significant positive, weak to moderate relationship between students' perception of their school's college-going culture and their levels of hope, $r(838) = .257$, $p < .000$.

Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

To address RQ2 (*Is the relationship between student perception of their school's college-going culture and the students' level of hope different for low- vs. high-achieving students?*), I performed a Multiple Regression Analysis to determine if GPA is a moderator of the relationship between CGCP and hope. Similar to the CGCP variable, GPA did not have a true zero value; it ranged from 4.0 - 1.0. I used SPSS to center GPA scores around the mean and create a new GPA variable "GPARaw_C" to avoid multicollinearity. A total of 24 students in my sample had both GPAs that were substantially below average (ranging from 1.0 – 1.99) and strong CGCP. These 24

students had a mean hope score of 12.29 (*SD* = 3.02). There were 26 students with at or above average GPA (ranging from 3.0 – 4.0) and high CGCP. These 26 students had a mean hope score of 14.1 (*SD*=2.45). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, organized by students' GPA levels.

Table 1

Hope Scores at Varying Levels of GPA and CGCP

Level of GPA	Level of CGCP	*M*	*SD*	*n*
	Low	14.00	3.41	6
1-1.99	Moderate	12.23	3.16	73
	Strong	12.29	3.07	24
	Low	12.59	2.95	46
2-2.99	Moderate	12.25	2.86	147
	Strong	11.54	3.01	35
	Low	14.57	2.31	243
3-4.0	Moderate	13.34	2.71	240
	Strong	14.10	2.45	26

As described, I centered the means of the two predictors (GPA and CGCP) to avoid issues related to multicollinearity and created the interaction predictor variable by multiplying them together. Then I ran all three variables in a regression analysis to predict hope. Results of the multiple linear regression indicated that the interaction effect of CGCP and GPA was statistically significant, (B = .115, SE = .045, β =.086, $t(836) = 2.58$, p = .010). Table 2 summarizes the multiple regression model with all three predictors accounting for some of the variance in the relationship.

Table 2

Summary of Variables in Multiple Regression Analysis on Hope

Variable	*t*	*Sig*	b	β
CGCP	4.422	.000	.170	.160
GPA	6.399	.000	.847	.237
CGCP_GPA	2.579	.010	.115	.086

Because the interaction effect was significant, I created predicted values for four protypes: low GPA and low CGCP; low GPA and strong CGCP; high GPA and low CGCP; and high GPA and strong CGCP. Our GPA and CGCP means were zero with standard deviations of +/-.8 and +/- 2.7 respectively. The mean hope scores based on these predictions are presented in Figure 3.

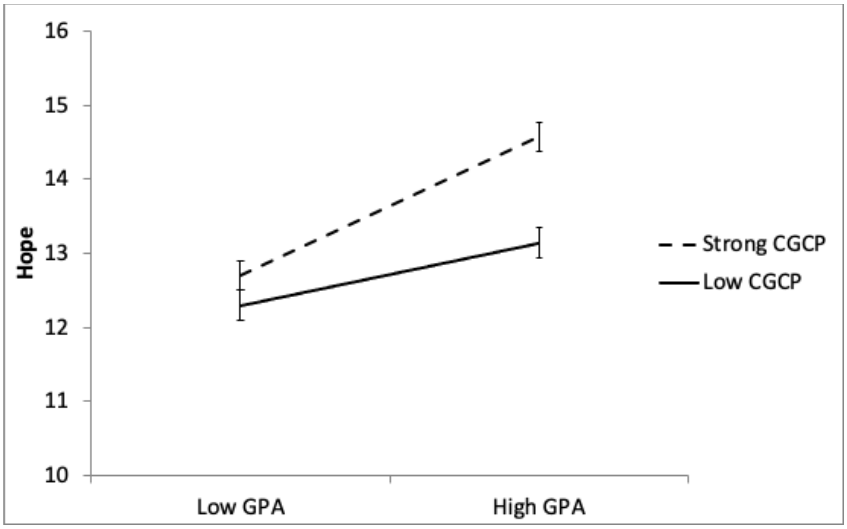


Figure 3. Interaction effect of GPA on the relationship between CGCP and hope.

To capture the differences in scores between the two groups at both low GPA and high GPA, I added confidence intervals, or standard error, to demonstrate whether the differences were significant. Results indicate that low GPA means for both strong and low

CGCP were within standard error range whereas high GPA means for both strong and low CGCP were statistically significantly different. The significance level and results indicate that CGCP has a stronger relationship with hope among students who have high GPAs.

Qualitative Data

Data from the graduation coach GS45 notes and semi-structured interview responses were used to address RQ3 (*Can use of the GS45 system increase the hope of low achieving students attending schools where they report high perceptions of college-going culture?*). Thematic analysis of the data collected by the graduation coach throughout the GS45 process identified three key areas in which use of the GS45 system was positively related to participating students' *Agency Thinking* (perception of self and confidence), *Connections to a Career*, *and Hope.*

Background. The graduation coach was asked to select five students who met the *a priori* criteria for the study (see Table 3) and had significant individual risk factors.

Table 3
GS45 Study Participant Data

Student	Gender	GPA	Hope	CGCP	GS45 Career
A	M	1.65	Low (7)	Strong (13)	Computer Programmer
B	F	1.59	Low (3)	Strong (13)	Construction Management
C	F	1.9	Low (8)	Strong (14)	Social Services
D	F	1.87	Low (8)	Strong (16)	Home Design
E	M	1.41	Low (8)	Strong (13)	Managerial

This resulted in the selection of two male students and three female students. Each of the five is briefly described: Student A-depression/low self-esteem; Student B-family problems/responsibilities; Student C-teen parent/emerging bilingual; Student D-trauma/mental health; and Student E-academic failure/little belief in self. When asked if she had considered any other factors in selecting the five students to participate, the graduation coach explained, "I know their futures are kind of confusing in what they want…because school has not always been their favorite."

Themes and Patterns. Results from the thematic analysis showed multiple consistent words and phrases used by the graduation coach to describe students' experiences throughout the GS45 process. Following guidelines from Miles and Huberman (1994), these phrases were combined and clustered accordingly. I identified five categories within the notes kept by the graduation coach: disbelief/hopelessness; connection to career; hopeful; affirming/self-awareness; and change in perception of self (see Figure 4).

Based on my innate ability to make meaning out of chaotic events (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and drawing upon my ten years of experience as a counselor finding meaning and making connections, I connected specific quotations and remarks from the observations and perspectives of the graduation coach during the semi-structured interview transcription and matched them to the patterns and themes found in the case notes. This resulted in the three key areas: *Agency Thinking* in the form of affirming/self-awareness and changes in perception of self; *Connections to a Career*; and *Hope,* which captured hopeless/disbelief and hope.

	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E
Disbelief/ Hopeless	Didn't think he… Lack of motivation…	Never thought… Because of the language barrier…	Intimidates her…	Confused…not consistent	Low because he doesn't know…
Connection to Career	Programmer… Interested in… Liked career choices… Prefer a job in factory…	Likes the idea of… One day hopes to become…	Likes the idea of becoming… Working in social services…intrigues her…	Loved that she saw… Likes the idea of working in…	Liked the idea of working…
Hopeful	He was excited…	Language barrier isn't… Wants to be… Hopes to… Will continue to…	Seeks goals and achieves them… Will always persevere…	Put everything on the line to move forward… High ambition…	Wants to persevere… Will continue to have ambition…
Affirming/ Awareness	Agreed with… Pointed out… Is exactly who he is… Was noticeable… Wasn't really a surprise… Found it interesting… Liked being… Made sense…	Made total sense She is very… Loves to… Agreed she does… No coincidence… In her family she is… In school setting she is…	Agreed to being… Loves to… Assertive… Likes… Doesn't like…	Made sense… Likes being… Loves… Prefers to… Is… Knows she…	Agreed he is… Loves to… Strong suit… Likes to be… Agrees…
Change in Perception	Didn't think…but after… Disagreed heavily…but noticed… He learned that he…	Doesn't know…but now hopes…	Was low but not sure why…	Doesn't believe…but does agree… Thought she was more…than…	Saw the similarities but can see… Although he…it's not as… Doesn't see himself…but possibly…

Figure 4. Qualitative Analysis: Themes and Clustering

Agency Thinking. The graduation coach explicitly articulated how the GS45 helped students understand varying aspects of themselves and even introduced them to new characteristics about their personality. When I interviewed her at the end of the study, after she had been working with the five students and their GS45 results for approximately 6 weeks, she reflected, "It's been cool to tell them they are [a certain way] and they didn't know it but it's there [in the assessment]," and they have "their own realizations on how they are and what they knew themselves to be." In other words, she found that the results of the GS45 helped the five students better understand themselves.

The case notes the graduation coach took after each of the meetings she had with the students also provided evidence of the students' growing *self-awareness.* In discussing one of the profile characteristics identified through the GS45, Student A realized he does better in unstructured settings where he can plan his own activities at his own pace. Student D redefined herself as a potential leader and began to redefine what it means to be a leader when her results pointed out that she possessed leadership characteristics such as norm-favoring and maintaining organization.

Other students became aware of how they were limiting their future based on misconceived perceptions of themselves. Student B became aware that she had been limiting her future plans because of what she perceived as a language barrier that she thought would prevent her from dreaming of the sort of future she ultimately decided she would like to work toward. Students' deepening self-awareness was not limited to finding positive characteristics of which they had not previously been aware. For example, Student C had believed she was resilient and motivated to achieve her goals, but when her assessment result for GRIT was low in the interest area, she realized she needed to

rely on more than her motivation as a mother in order to be successful in life. This increase in self-awareness led her to discuss specific career interests that she could pursue long-term. Lastly, Student E realized that desiring more freedom to do what he would like can be a valuable characteristic in adulthood even if it can cause problems for students in school settings.

Another area of *Agency Thinking* noted by the graduation coach was the students' change of perception of self, or belief in self. She talked about how all five of the students seemed to gain a greater sense of their ability to impact their own futures. She explained, "Watching the 'ah-ha' moment and the realization they are that ('I am a leader') …I've seen more confidence, I guess so to speak, in how they are or how they describe themselves." She related this increase in self-efficacy to an increase in the students' expressed hope for their futures.

The case notes provided triangulating evidence that supported the reflections the graduation coach shared during our interview. The case notes provide a variety of evidence that throughout the process, all of the students showed signs (at varying levels) that they started to believe they could be successful in a career based on their individual strengths and personal characteristics. Student A shifted the way he talked about his future. In his initial interactions with the graduation coach, his projections about his future were noted as "depressing." The graduation coach indicated that he reported that he planned to "just work after high school" during their initial discussion before he took the GS45. After discussing the GS45 results, though, Student A began connecting the value of his "hands-on" abilities as well as his identification as a "thinker" to a potential

career in programming robotics or airplanes. This transformation, noted the graduation coach, was dramatic.

Prior to participating in the GS45 intervention, Student B focused on her lack of proficiency in the English language as a nearly insurmountable barrier. In her initial interview with the graduation coach, Student B explained that she really did not think about what she wanted to do post-high school because she did not speak English well. However, as she started to believe in her abilities identified in the GS45 assessment, she shifted from being "intimidated" about pursuing a career, or even thinking about identifying one, to hoping to become manager of a business someday. Similarly, Student D began the assessment with no anticipation that she would continue education post-high school. She explained to the graduation coach that she did not believe she would need "a forever job" but just "something to help support the family." After the assessment, however, she shifted into exploring options that would utilize her creative talents in her future job.

Student C and Student E actually presented with some measure of self-efficacy regarding their current life situation even before taking the GS45, but neither one of them had been applying that self-efficacy to considering potential careers. Student C, a teen mother in high school, reported being motivated by her daughter. By the end of the assessment, however, she realized that more would be required for success in life. She connected her nurturing abilities to a future career in a daycare or social services and began discussing this path with the graduation coach with increasing confidence. Student E expressed confidence in his social skills, but the graduation coach noted that he seemed to be stunted when it came to school and interacting with adults. His shift occurred as the

assessment led him to believe he could be a politician ("someone famous and powerful," in his words), giving him confidence in his abilities to be outgoing and social around adults. Despite this shift, it is worth noting that he did not see himself enjoying being a politician.

Connection to a Career. By design, the data from five students were selected to participate in the GS45 study because they did not plan to pursue education post-high school and were "confused about their future." The GS45 experience guided the students through a self-discovery process that enabled them to connect to a future career. When asked if the GS45 assessment process was beneficial, the graduation coach replied, "Yes, I do believe it is very beneficial…the outcome of it, just…being able to see the types of jobs that are available, that they are willing to have, with the school setting they are willing to go to, has been very inspiring." She reflected on how the five students shared their surprise upon learning about jobs they might be able to pursue and enjoy – jobs for which a college education is not needed. She explained, "The students said things like 'I didn't even think of those kinds of jobs, I didn't even know I could get that job without that kind of education,'" referring to college.

The graduation coach indicated that all five of the students shifted from not wanting to plan for a future other than to just "get a job ASAP" to talking enthusiastically about a career or career field they were interested in pursuing. Table 5 depicts the selected career interest for each of the five students: Student A articulated an interest in computer programming; Student B thought she might want to become a manager or flight attendant. Student C decided that she was interested in a career in social services. Student

D thought she might enjoy working in construction, and Student E decided that a job in management might be a good fit.

Hope. The final statement by the graduation coach in the semi-structured interview used hope language to define the aspect that stood out as having changed the most, "the realization that they do have something to look forward to after high school. I think that was the biggest part…just having those further goals…to continue or having motivation (for)." The graduation coach also noted in the GS45 process that students also used more hopeful language in discussing their potential future careers. For example, Student A was "excited to see [programming] in the top five jobs" because he has been working on computers and believes he could progress in that area. Student B shifted from thinking she might accept any job in construction to "hopes of managing a construction site." Student C was able to see how she could magnify her "strengths as a mother" into a career in social services with other children. Student D began to see a purpose in pursuing a career that didn't just "help support the family" but that also included her "creative talents" such as designing homes. Student E was able to expand his perspective of his "social skills" into an "administrative setting" where he could be successful.

Building a Logical Chain. The results of patterns and themes and clustering created identifiable examples of the connection between use of the GS45 and students' levels of hope. The next strategy recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) was to *build a logical chain of evidence* and *make conceptual /theoretical coherence*, specifically related to Hope Theory. Agency Thinking is the motivational aspect of Hope Theory that is derived from an individual's belief in self and belief in their ability to reach their goals. According to the graduation coach, as indicated in their observation of GS45

process, students' perception of themselves and additionally students' confidence and belief in self was influenced. She reflected, "I've seen more confidence…in how they are or how they describe themselves." It makes sense that as students increase in their perception of self and further belief in self, that they would have an increase in hope levels. As indicated in the results, students did use more hope language and further connected to future goals and demonstrated increased motivation. Although this part of my research can best be categorized as a brief exploratory study, for the five students involved, hope appeared to be positively impacted by their participation in the GS45 process with the graduation coach.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I first summarize the findings for each of my research questions and the limitations of the study, including the threats to validity. Next, I discuss the implications of this study for K-12 education settings and provide recommendations for practice and future research.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1: *Is there a relationship between students' perception of the school's college-going culture and student's levels of hope?*

Hope theory postulates that for individuals to have hope they must have a desired goal or outcome and a belief in a pathway to achieve the goal (Snyder, 2002). Government and organizations have deemed "college as the way" the acceptable pathway to success in life. In the throes of a college-going culture, each student is given a predetermined goal of college readiness. This study's first question is aimed at determining whether there is a relationship between students' perception of a college-going culture and their level of hope.

Eight hundred and forty senior high school students' survey responses indicated a small, yet significant, positive relationship between students' perception of a college-going culture and students' hope levels (r = .257). This means that as students' perception of college-going culture rises, their levels of hope also rise. Although this finding was statistically significant in this sample, it does not tell us if this relationship exists for all students. I expected there to be a relationship between the two variables but believed the relationship between students' perceptions of a college-going culture at their schools and

their levels of hope would be different for students at varying levels of academic achievement.

Research Question 2: *Is the relationship between student perception of school's college-going culture and the student's level of hope different for low- vs. high-achieving students?*

My second research question was designed to determine if the relationship between students' perception of a college-going culture and their hope levels was moderated by academic achievement. In terms of Hope Theory, this question was aimed at determining whether the relationship between students who believe the goal of college-readiness (college-going culture perspective) and hope levels, was related to the students' ability to attain the goal (as measured by their academic achievement in school).

Results from the multiple linear regression indicated statistically significant interaction effects where GPA was found to moderate the relationship between college-going culture and hope. It was clear from the analysis that the relationship between hope and students' perceptions of a college-going culture at their school differed for students with a high GPA as compared to students with a low GPA. This result was surprising because I hypothesized that hope levels of students with a low GPA would be correlate negatively with a strong college-going culture perception. In hope theory, students who were not achieving in the education system, would ultimately not be making progress toward achieving their college-for-success goal. This inability to meet their goal, and their inability to manipulate their pathway to achieve the goal, in theory, should have correlated to their hope levels. In this study, that did not occur. One factor to consider in interpreting these results are the numbers of students at each level. In comparing the low

GPA students with regard to college-going culture levels, only 6 students had a low GPA and a low CGCP and only 24 had a low GPA and strong CGCP. The unbalanced nature of the groups, and the small number of students in the low GPA/low CGCP is important to keep in mind when interpreting significance and hope scores.

On the other hand, students with a high perception of college-going culture and a high GPA did have higher hope scores. This result might suggest that students who are achieving academically are in turn utilizing the pathway and finding success on their perceived goal of college-for-success. The culmination of these successes increases students' agency thinking (motivation), concurrently increasing their levels of hope. Several other possible explanations exist. Students who are high achieving may have had lower hope scores not because of the school's college-for-success goal, but because their families may not want them to attend college (e.g. CGCS-R "My parents expect me to go to college). In families where the children are expected to work to help provide financial support or to carry on a family business, for instance, the idea of going to college rather than entering the workforce after high school might not be viewed positively. Some other high-achieving students might not think that college is in their future because their family does not feel comfortable completing the FAFSA (e.g., the parents may not have legal citizenship and fear giving the government personal information). Students in this situation might not connect with CGCP, for reasons unrelated to their hope levels as the findings suggested. Thus, it is important to consider all factors before claiming that rather than harming the hope levels of low-achieving students, a college-going culture appeared to boost the hope levels of high achieving students.

Research Question 3: *Can use of the GS45 system increase the hope of low achieving students attending schools where they report high perceptions of college-going culture?*

A key goal of this study was to explore the possibility of interrupting the cognitive process of students who had a strong perception of college-for-success as the goal yet who were experiencing failure at college-readiness. It is logical to assume that individuals who are experiencing failure toward a goal and do not believe they will be successful on the pathway to the goal, can either change the goal or the pathway to the goal to increase their hope levels. Many researchers have found that altering the pathway to the goal and providing career-technical education-type programs (more aligned with student interests) has increased students' engagement in school (Alfassi, 2004; Brewer, 2004; Kenny et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2015). This question was designed to target students' conscious thoughts about their goal and provide students an opportunity to shift away from the prescribed goal of college-for-success to a self-driven and self-prescribed goal (Ryan & Deci, 2000) that might in-turn increase their levels of hope (Bryce, Alexander, Fraser, & Fabes, 2019).

The results of the qualitative analyses suggest that through use of the GS45 system, low-achieving students were able to abandon college-for-success as their goal and shift toward a more relevant and personal goal for their future. Three key themes emerged from the data collected by the graduation coach throughout the GS45 process: use of the GS45 promoted *Agency Thinking*, *Connection to a Career*, and *Hope.* This finding aligns with Hope Theory in that the GS45 system helped students increase in Agency Thinking, becoming aware of and gaining a belief in, their personality and strengths, independent of academic achievement, and provided them an opportunity to

create desired goals (Snyder, 20020). With the support of the resources in the GS45 results, all five students were able to identify a career that aligned with their personal characteristics on a pathway they believed they could pursue.

The culmination of these changes related to students being more hopeful about their future as shown through their language and tone in talking about the future (e.g., "excited", "hopes", "believes") as well as their thought processes in laying out a plan (pathway) to work toward their new-found career (goal). The resulting logical chain of influence as related to hope might suggest that the GS45 process increases student Agency Thinking (i.e., motivation) by influencing the perception of self and belief in self, which in turn allows them to make a meaningful connection to a career, which ultimately leads them to not only have hope for their future, but to use hope language in thinking and talking about their future.

Limitations

Like all studies, this dissertation has limitations. Three of the most important threats to validity include history, instrumentation, and researcher bias.

History: COVID-19 Pandemic

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this study created some limitations that are important to consider when interpreting the results. First, students were not attending school in-person for the last term of the 2019-2020 school year or the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year, and this had a significant impact on many students' mental health. Although hope is argued to be a cognitive process, emotions play a significant role in hope, and it is not possible to know how the emotional strain of the pandemic impacted students' responses to the survey. Additionally, higher education also

transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic, closing college campuses and interfering with students' opportunities and desires to attend college. These combined factors of mental health and changes to education could have, and likely did, effect hope scores and the correlations between hope and students' perceptions of college-going culture.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many students disengaged from school with the most significant drop in participation being students who were at-risk for not graduating. This disengagement from school effected this study in two ways: the size of the sample was smaller than anticipated (approximately 500 students did not take the survey who normally would have been expected to provide responses) and the representativeness of the sample may have been impacted. Because students with low achievement disproportionately opted out of the survey, the resulting sample likely included fewer students from the group specifically targeted for this study: students with low hope and low achievement and high college college-going culture perceptions.

Distance Learning also limited the sample selection for the GS45 process study. Students created irregular schedules, and those who fit the criteria for the qualitative analysis were less engaged in school in this form. This created some limitations in the selection of the students as well as the consistency with which the graduation coach could administer the GS45 system. Additionally, the interactions between the graduation coach and the participants were through an online platform that interfered with the graduation coach's ability to fully observe and capture students' responses to the GS45 results and discussions. Despite these threats, the qualitative analysis results provide promising initial evidence of the potential effects of the GS45 on students' hope.

Instrumentation

In addition to the threats associated with the sample itself and with the pandemic-impacted mental health of the students who participated in the study, instrumentation is another threat to the study's internal validity.

Hope Scores. Due to the limited in-person contact with students and families, multiple surveys were sent out to gather information around student needs. In an attempt to reduce survey fatigue, the district limited additional items that could be added to the fall senior survey. Thus, only three of the six questions from the CHS were used to assess levels of hope. Although the three questions used in this study had been validated as a subscale of hope, they were not validated independently as an accurate measure of hope. Other factors could impact students' responses to the hope scales, such as time of year, positive or negative interactions with family members, and changes in relationships with teachers. Despite my efforts to isolate factors, I recognize my limitation and the impact these other factors could have on the outcomes.

CGCS-R. Another limitation of this study was the lack of a validated measure for college-going culture perspective scores. The CGCS-R was validated by a doctoral student in 2011 (Willis II) who did not develop a scoring guide for the results of the CGCS-R. Under this limitation, I divided students' scores into terciles and assigned them descriptive labels to indicate low, moderate and strong perceptions of college-going culture. This scoring approach limits the uses of the scores for this purpose and identifying a more accurate correlation between hope and the perceptions of college-going culture (by limiting the possible range of scores).

Researcher Bias

All research is likely to have some amount of researcher bias. Many attempts are made to limit this effect on outcomes in a study, and in qualitative research it can still impact the design and the interpretation of the results. In the qualitative analysis component of this study, my passion for this subject and past experience with the GS45 could have impacted my perspective of the results. By following the strategies provided by Miles and Huberman (1994), I attempted to limit my bias in the analysis and findings.

Another area of researcher bias could have come from the graduation coach. The graduation coach is familiar with my work and was aware of my study on hope. This awareness could have potentially influenced what notes she recorded during her meetings with the students, and it may have skewed how she responded to the questions in the semi-structured interview. Bias might also have impacted the effectiveness of the graduation coach's work with the GS45 process. The students were familiar with the graduation coach prior to and following the GS45 process, and this relationship could have been a significant contributor to the students' experience, and ultimately it might have impacted their responses and hope.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

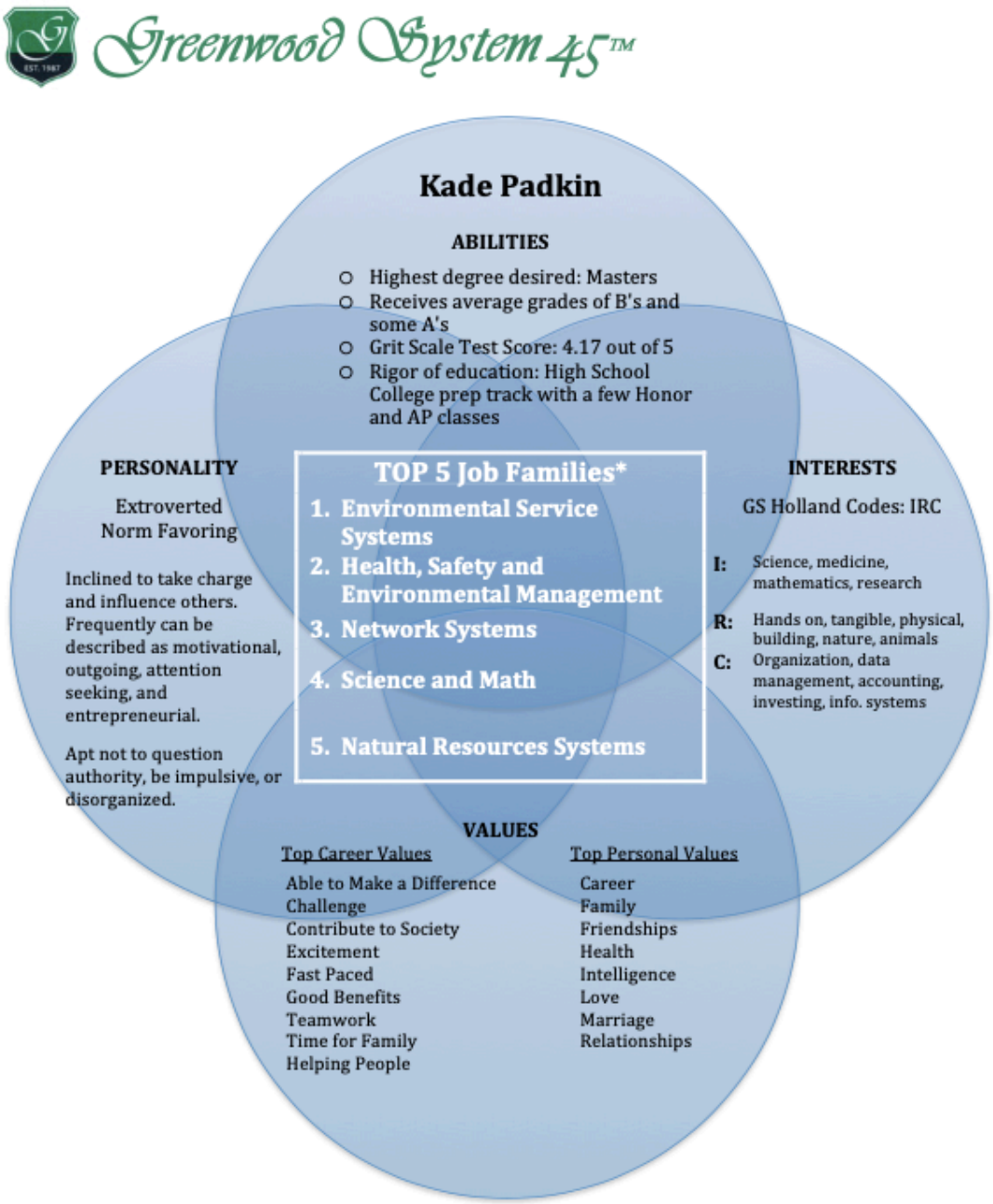
Research in the field of education continues to seek practices and policies (e.g., NCLB, ESSA, SSA) to ensure all students are successful in school so as to become productive members of society. Interventions and programs have been implemented to support student's autonomy (e.g., work-based learning, career-technical education program [Alfassi, 2004; Brewer, 2004; Kenny et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2015]) in an attempt to re-engage them in school. Additional research has shown that students who are

confident in their abilities have more successes (Adelabu, 2008; Dinger, Dickhauser, Spinath, & Steinmayr, 2013; Gehlbach, 2006; McDermott, Donlan, Zaff, & Prescott, 2016). I designed this study with the intent of removing academic skills and achievements as the outcome for research and focused instead on the change that happens for students when they become aware of their individual strengths and characteristics and align them with a future career and life. In short, shifting from school-directed *college-ready* to self-directed *career-ready.* The results suggest for students who have low hope and a high expectation that college is the goal, an assessment process that interrupts this thought pattern and is more aligned with their individuality may increase their hope and smooth their path to their future.

Future research could build upon this study at a time void of the strong influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and include a larger sample size with more of the target population. Additionally, future research could use more qualitative data collection approaches such as focus groups, to parse out some of the above-mentioned factors not accounted for in my study. Lastly, adding prolonged intervention and data collection would help identify if the change in hope demonstrated by the GS45 participants was long-lasting or short-lived.

APPENDIX A

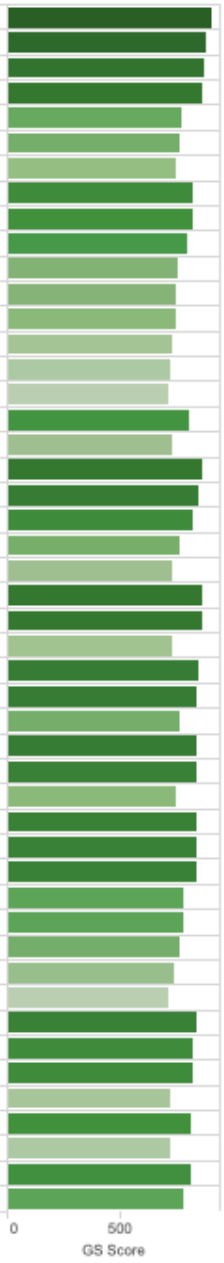
GREENWOOD SYSTEMS 45 SAMPLE RESULTS REPORT



Greenwood System 45™ Career Report "Top 100"

Kade Padkin (IRC)

Job Families	Education	Career Titles and Holland Codes	GS ..
Environmental Service S..	Bachelors Deg.	Environmental Science and Protection Technician (IRC)	904
Health, Safety and Envir..	Bachelors Deg.	Industrial Safety and Health Engineer (ICR)	885
Network Systems	Bachelors Deg.	Network and Computer Systems Administrator (IRC)	871
Science and Math	Masters/Doctorate	Microbiologist (IRC)	862
		Materials Scientist (IRE)	774
		Remote Sensing Scientist and Technologist (RIC)	765
		Environmental Restoration Planner (RIE)	741
	Bachelors Deg.	Geographic Information Systems Technician (IRC)	824
		Bioinformatics Technician (IRC)	818
		Geodetic Surveyor (ICR)	797
		Remote Sensing Technician (RIC)	753
		Geospatial Information Scientist and Technologist (IRC)	752
		Meteorologist (IRS)	748
		Biological Technician (RIC)	730
		Water Resource Specialist (IEC)	722
		Chemist (IRC)	713
	Associates Deg.	Chemical Technician (IRC)	811
		Quality Control Analyst (CIR)	733
Natural Resources Systems	Bachelors Deg.	Geological Sample Test Technician (RIC)	861
		Range Manager (RIE)	847
		Soil and Water Conservationist (RIE)	829
		Forester (RIE)	762
		Precision Agriculture Technician (RIC)	734
Project Engineering	Bachelors Deg.	Product Safety Engineer (IRC)	861
Electrical Engineering	Bachelors Deg.	Electrical Engineer (IRC)	859
		Electromechanical Engineering Technologist (RIC)	732
	Associates Deg.	Electronics Engineering Technologist (RIC)	850
		Electronics Engineering Technician (RIC)	846
		Electrical Engineering Technician (RIC)	765
Security and Protective S..	Bachelors Deg.	Security Management Specialist (RIC)	846
Civil Engineering	Bachelors Deg.	Transportation Engineer (RIC)	841
		Civil Engineer (RIC)	749
Chemical Engineering	Bachelors Deg.	Chemical Engineer (IRC)	840
Biotechnology Research ..	Masters/Doctorate	Biologist and Marine Biologist (IRC)	839
Emergency and Fire Man..	Associates Deg.	Fire Investigator (RIC)	839
Management Engineering	Bachelors Deg.	Industrial Engineer (IEC)	782
		Manufacturing Engineer (RIC)	781
		Manufacturing Engineering Technologist (RIC)	765
		Industrial Engineering Technologist (IRC)	738
		Validation Engineer (IRC)	712
	Associates Deg.	Industrial Engineering Technician (IRC)	839
Regulation	Associates Deg.	Coroner (IRC)	827
Geotechnical Engineering	Bachelors Deg.	Mining and Geological Engineer (IRE)	823
Computer Engineering	Masters/Doctorate	Microsystems Engineer (IRC)	727
	Bachelors Deg.	Computer Hardware Engineer (IRC)	817
Mechanical Engineering	Masters/Doctorate	Human Factors Engineer and Ergonomist (IRE)	723
	Bachelors Deg.	Marine Engineer (IRE)	815
		Mechanical Engineer (IRC)	783



APPENDIX B

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Can you tell me about the students you've been working with over the last 4 years?

What students did you choose to do the GS45 with? Why?

Can you tell me about your experiences working with students who have been at-risk of not graduating high school? Have you enjoyed it? Why?

What have you noticed about these students specifically?

What have been the hardest parts for you in doing this work?

What has been the hardest part for students in working toward graduation?

What things have you done that have helped?

What have you tried that hasn't worked (in general with students)

Describe your experience with using the GS45 with students?

What changes, if any, did you notice with the students?

Do you think using the GS45 would be helpful for other students? If so, why, what about it has worked, in your opinion?

Would you use the GS45 in the future? If so, why?

Did you notice any common changes in your students over the course of the sessions you had with them? Was there something that stood out more than others?

What were the things (behaviors, attitudes, skills, self-efficacy) you noticed in these students that indicated change?

What post high school plans did these students have prior to the GS45?

What types of goals did these students choose for their future after the GS45?

Were the students able to identify what they would need to do to achieve the new goal?

Could you identify if they believed they could achieve the new goal? If so, what made you believe that (probe for confidence, competence, abilities)?

How did they demonstrate hope?

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