THE DUAL COMMITMENT OF ACADEMIC RIGOR AND COMMUNITY SERVICE
AT AN URBAN, CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

This research study sought to explore and understand more deeply how educators and stakeholders at a particular urban, independent Catholic high school view the phenomenon of a dual commitment to academic rigor and community service as part of the Catholic identity and mission of the school. Participants in the study agreed the standards of academic rigor, especially in the Advanced Placement (AP) program, should be maintained, but they also valued the school’s community service program for its contribution to the development of the whole student. Participation in community service in this school occurs in place of attending classes two days out of the school week, during a critical period of approximately eight weeks in the final semester prior to the administration of the May AP exams and graduation. This dual commitment has created a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources, producing some tension and struggle, and leading to a cultural mismatch among subgroups of AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators. One challenge faced by the researcher was to understand how the study’s participants perceive the dual commitment, and how they make meaning of it in light of their roles as educators and stakeholders. The hope of the researcher is that the perceptions captured across educators and stakeholders in the school can help recommend ideas and solutions that allow the AP program and the community service program to coexist in more harmonious ways.

Keywords: academic rigor, community service, Catholic identity, school mission, dual commitment, advanced placement, culture theory, critical theory, cultural mismatch
Dedication

With love and gratitude, this dissertation is dedicated to my husband, our son and daughter-in-law, and my mom, for their unconditional love and encouragement. Most especially, I would like to thank my husband, who helped me fulfill this doctoral journey on so many levels, for his unfailing support, from guiding me throughout the writing process, to cooking many dinners, and to just always being there. To my family and friends who cheered me on to completion and never lost faith. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my dad who had always supported me in my education and instilled strong values throughout my life. He passed away suddenly a few months after I began this doctoral journey, but I will always remember his words when he first heard of my decision to apply: “I am very proud of you.” Love and miss you, Dad.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Academic rigor and community service are two features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission (Weitzel-O’Neill & Scheopner Torres, 2011). The focus of this research study at one urban, Catholic, college-preparatory high school is to understand more deeply the phenomenon of a dual commitment of these features. The phenomenon will be explored through the beliefs, expectations, and experiences of individuals who represent the educators and stakeholders in this school.

Despite best efforts to provide competitive academic course offerings, the problem of declining enrollment has forced some Catholic school closures (Miller, 2012), while others survive by promoting and distinguishing themselves in unique ways in order to preserve enrollment and be competitive with their public school counterparts (Cook & Simonds, 2013). Distinctions include the offering of challenging courses such as AP Science and Math, innovative programs such as STEM and Robotics, and community service programs (Miller, 2012). The community service model for the high school in this study is a mandatory program, and takes place during school hours in the final semester prior to AP exams and graduation in an effort to provide students with a convenient way to complete service hours.

Statement of the Problem

Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission. The intertwining of the Catholic identity and school mission are the fabric of a Catholic school. This is marked by a culture of academic rigor, college readiness, and emphasis on humanistic values. The Catholic identity and school mission are conceptually difficult to discern, as there are multiple meanings and interpretations (Fuller & Johnson, 2014). Features of the Catholic identity can be as explicit as a focus on academic rigor, the education of the whole person, faith formation, and community
service, and as implicit as spirituality and personal faith (Fuller & Johnson, 2014). According to Groome (1996), “being Catholic can vary across many cultural expressions, theological positions, and with different degrees and styles of participation in the institutional expression of Catholicism” (p. 107).

Humanism, morality, ethical values, and social justice are basic tenets of the Catholic identity (Boland, 2013; Fusco, 2013), and as such, a Catholic high school’s campus ministry program often takes on a prominent role in the education of the whole student. Academic support, in the form of assistance from teachers, counselors and administrators, helps guide students throughout their high school career, and more significantly during the college application process, in an effort to promote college readiness and ensure the best college fit possible.

**Academic rigor.** It is commonly held that the Catholic high schools foster college readiness and a college-going culture through technology integration and curricular reform such as Common Core, STEM, and AP programs, in order to further distinguish their course offerings and increase academic rigor (Fuller & Johnson, 2014). Although the College Board does not store data on the number of Catholic schools offering Advanced Placement (AP) courses, AP participation in Catholic schools appears to be in similar proportion to that of public schools (Schinzel, 2000). The type and quality of academic programs offered by Catholic schools suggest that students in Catholic high schools are more likely overall to enroll in an academic track, to have college ambitions, and achieve greater success in college (Schinzel, 2000).

**Community service.** There has been some debate as to whether community service ought to be voluntary or mandatory in high schools (Henderson et al., 2007). Some schools employ a “service learning” (Webster & Worrell, 2008, p. 170) approach where community
service is part of the curriculum, and “where the goals or lessons of service are reinforced by course curriculum” (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 850). The widely accepted definition of this type of community service is “a blend of academic content with meaningful service in a community” (Webster & Worrell, 2008, p. 171), and may serve to emphasize civic duty and learning outcomes at the same time. This would likewise support studies that tout the benefits of experiential learning through community service activities and its positive impact on a student’s behavior and attitude; the rationale being if voluntary community service fosters good citizenship and pro-social attitudes in students, then mandatory community service could be an extension of that, or perhaps, it can reach students who would otherwise not engage in voluntary acts of service (Henderson et al., 2007).

The history of community service at the school in this study dates back to the early 1970s. Since that time, there have been some adjustments to the length of the program, however, by and large, the program has remained unchanged. It is unclear as to how the community service model was developed, but what is known is the school’s founding religious order desired for students to experience spiritual growth in the hope of inspiring them to lifelong voluntary service. Unlike other Catholic high schools that do not mandate community service participation (Aldana, 2016), in order to meet the criteria of a set number of hours, participation in community service in the school of this research study replaces attendance in class. The model requires students in their final semester before graduation to volunteer at an approved site for two days a week, for approximately eight weeks.

Types of community service sites include elementary/middle schools; hospitals, nursing homes and local parishes; and selected students may be encouraged to serve as student leaders within the school’s campus ministry program. The high school enforces a fairly strict check of
attendance that involves teachers contacting site supervisors two times a week to monitor students and be informed of any issues or concerns. At the conclusion of the program, students return to school full-time for several weeks prior to the start of AP exams.

**Research Problem**

In this case study, two features of the Catholic identity and school mission – academic rigor and service to others – are being explored through the experiences of AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators. At one urban, Catholic, college-preparatory high school in the Northeast, these features have gradually evolved into a dual commitment of the advanced placement (AP) program and the school’s community service program. This research study attempts to explore the beliefs, expectations, and experiences of AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators, the school culture from which they function as educators and stakeholders, and how they make meaning of the dual commitment in light of their perspective on the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission.

The existence of the AP program and a community service program may be relatively unremarkable in most Catholic high schools, given that community service is either performed outside of school hours voluntarily, or as a single school activity on one day during holiday or summer break. In contrast, the high school in this research study allows students in the final semester of the graduating year to perform community service during the school day; thus these students are excused from classes two days a week for a period of six to eight weeks, in order to fulfill a graduation requirement of community service.

Given the dearth of academic reform that has taken place over the past several decades, the school’s community service model, originally developed in the early 1970’s, may no longer be applicable in the current environment. It is acknowledged that both academic rigor and the
call to serve others are two features of the Catholic identity and the school’s mission. Therefore, the problem of practice that underlies this research study is that the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service has evolved in a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources, which has resulted in a cultural mismatch of conflicting beliefs and expectations among educators and stakeholders within the organization.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences and perspectives of individuals who are Catholic school educators and stakeholders, and who may be impacted by the problem of practice, the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service. These individuals are AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and school administrators. I seek to explore their role in Catholic school education, their perspective on academic rigor through AP achievement, and their beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and experiences regarding the school’s community service model.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

The significance of the problem of practice is the dual commitment of academic rigor and service to others may have led to a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources, and further contributed to a cultural mismatch among AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators who clearly support academic rigor as well as the spiritual development and growth of the whole student. AP achievement and exam score performance are key factors in decision-making for the parents of prospective students who must consider the tuition cost of a Catholic education.

Securing the future of this high school is paramount, and if AP achievement and AP exam score performance were competitive with their public counterparts, then the school could
afford to be more selective in its admissions process. It is generally held that the U.S. ranks poorly worldwide with respect to science and math achievement. Overall improvements in AP achievement and exam score performance would help to improve U.S. rankings globally. Alternatively, many parents who have educated their children in a Catholic school environment from the beginning of their child’s academic career often wish to continue in that path because of religious education.

**College Readiness**

College readiness and the college-going culture of a Catholic high school are aspects of the Catholic identity and school mission by way of academic rigor. Studies have demonstrated that early college success may be linked to a college-going culture through the offering of Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate (AP/IB) programs and subsequent achievement (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009; Leonard, 2013; Santoli, 2002; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). One ethnographic study’s hypothesis stated that variations in academic achievement are not a matter of distinguished school cultures, but more of an interaction between the contextual factors and the attitudes and experiences of students (Mok & Flynn, 1998). The study examined more specifically the effect of the Catholic school culture on academic achievement, assessed externally using a model that “expressed the interrelationship among home background, student characteristics, academic motivation, and expectations” (Mok & Flynn, 1998, p. 409). The model was tested using a multilevel path analysis based on five dimensions of Catholic school culture: “(1) Motivational, (2) Expectational, (3) Affective, (4) Religious, and (5) Educational” (Mok & Flynn, 1998, p. 412). Findings revealed the components of motivation and teacher expectations were viewed as having a greater influence over the other three dimensions (Mok & Flynn, 1998).
In Mok and Flynn’s (1998) findings, the relationship between motivation and contextual factors became predictors of exam performance, in that “students who had a more favorable school culture and background scored higher, and students with more positive attitudes enjoyed school better and did better academically” (Mok & Flynn, 1998, p. 430). The significance of these findings regarding the problem of practice is the dual commitment may be reinforced by a change in the motivation of even high-achieving students. Thus, to explore if the problem of practice directly influences student motivation, or is a factor of collective change in school culture during the final semester of the graduating year, may be a worthwhile endeavor.

Another study proposed a theme of “perceived preparation for the future” (Park, Caine, & Wimmer, 2014, p. 145) as it applies to students’ perceptions of future work in postsecondary studies and the importance of enrolling in AP or IB courses in preparation for that work. The findings in this study suggested the focus was more on future rewards and not on learning material for a deeper understanding. Similar to a study by Hertberg-Davis & Callahan (2008) which found that college-bound high school students were more interested in enrolling in AP/IB courses for “future payoffs” (p. 207) and for building resumes, likewise AP/IB program participation for some students is more about preparing for the future and not necessarily learning for the moment. This theme is important to my problem of practice, as my own experience has been that some high-achieving students often place heavy emphasis on the college admissions process, and that once applications are completed, decisions rendered, and scholarships earned, the level of attention to AP coursework begins to wane, evident in poor attendance and neglecting studies.
Positionality Statement

My positionality on the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor and community service is one that has been shaped by my veteran status as an AP teacher in the high school of this study. I want to conduct this study because I truly value the rigor of the AP program and the need for exam preparation, evident in my self-planned schedule of after-school review sessions to help prepare students for the AP exam. Long term, I hope that my students’ experience and achievement in the class, and on the AP exam itself will promote college readiness and provide them with a head start in undergraduate work.

Over the years, I have become increasingly concerned with the struggle to complete the AP Biology curriculum in the allotted time, and have learned of similar struggles from other AP teachers. In light of the graduation requirement that all students in the final semester must perform community service two school days per week in place of attending classes, the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor and service to others has further evolved into a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources. Alternatively, I will need to explore not just the experiences of AP colleagues, but also the experiences of the campus ministry personnel, whose duties include the implementation of the community service program, and administrators who are clearly committed to both the AP program and the school’s community service program.

In my positionality as an AP teacher, I support AP coursework as an integral component of college readiness (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015). Although the salary scale for teachers in Catholic schools is generally not commensurate with that of public schools, voluntarily providing extra classes in light of lost contact time is the path I have chosen to help my students succeed in the course and on the AP exam. Moreover, I have considered some aspects of my
own teaching career to be somewhat vocational and voluntary in nature (Grace, 2012). Thus, instead of rethinking the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, my own actions are an attempt to navigate around the issue of the dual commitment. It can be said that through my positionality, I too am a community service participant within the school through my voluntary efforts of providing extra review sessions beyond school hours. I feel justified in providing extra time and resources, even though work practice issues have occasionally surfaced and have been problematic in this regard.

As my positionality reflects the value of academic rigor in a college-preparatory high school, it is for this reason I will need to be conscious of my biases as both an AP teacher and the researcher in this study. I will need to put my own personal beliefs aside and strive to conduct this study in an objective and unbiased manner when seeking to explore the phenomenon of my problem of practice.

I will need to give voice to participants who are an integral part of the dual commitment – administrators, campus ministry personnel, and AP teachers – so that I may come to understand more deeply the phenomenon of the problem of practice. Through a series of open-ended, semi-structured interviews, I will strive to understand the beliefs, expectations, and experiences of these participants and thereafter, understand more deeply what meaning they make of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service. In order to accomplish this, I will need to first shed light on various aspects of the dual commitment, the participants’ roles as both educators and stakeholders within the school, and how these roles have also shaped my own positionality as both an AP teacher and the researcher in the study. Upon deep reflection, I will discuss the following areas with regards to my positionality: (1) time and resources, (2) the
Advanced Placement program, (3) AP teachers, (4) teacher-student interactions, (5) campus ministry personnel, and (6) administrators.

**Particular Features of the School I will be Attentive To**

**Time and resources.** My research study will consider course contact time and resources as constructs in the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service. The construct of time in this high school is considered because time is critical to the inclusion of myriad school programs and events, often through a fast-paced schedule of forty-minute periods within a rotational cycle. In addition, there are zero periods (beyond normal school hours) for certain subjects, along with a robust extra-curricular and sports programs. For example, the music program, once considered an extra-curricular activity, is now an integral part of the school curriculum and consists of ensembles that utilize both zero periods and scheduled classes throughout the school day, with the occasional block schedule enforced for concert practice. The campus ministry program may utilize class time for religious events such as retreats, volunteer work, prayer services, and Masses. The sports program typically involves practice and games outside of school hours, but occasionally requires students to be excused from the last period of the day for travel time. As a result, resources associated with classroom instruction and learning are often impacted by the aforementioned construct of time.

The school in this study encourages all students to get involved early in their high school career in extra-curricular activities so as to encourage good citizenship behavior, develop time management skills, and to build resumes for college admissions (Hart et al., 2007). To help develop the spirituality of each student in the Catholic high school in this study, students in the ninth, tenth and eleventh grades are encouraged to perform community service through volunteer
work at a local soup kitchen during a given school day, and performing a mandated number of hours of community service on their own time as part of their religion class requirements.

In the final semester of the graduating year, the community service requirement increases to two school days per week, for a period of six to eight weeks. Thus, a number of educators and stakeholders perceive a dual commitment of academic rigor and community service as juxtaposition as well as a dilemma of competing priorities (Fuller & Johnson, 2014). In this regard, from my positionality as an AP teacher, I have become increasingly frustrated with decreased course contact time as a result of participation in the community service program in the final semester prior to AP exams and graduation.

**Advanced Placement Program.** There is general agreement that no greater benchmark of academic rigor exists at the high school level than the AP program, and top-tiered colleges and universities still regard AP achievement as an important factor in the admissions process. The quality of the AP program for individual high schools may be perceived through a school’s contextual factors (Barnard-Brak, McGaha-Garnett, & Burley, 2011; Burney, 2010). In the school in this study, there is often a perception by students enrolled in AP courses that AP exam preparation and score performance outcomes are trivial since exam results are only realized well after college acceptances, and that many top-tiered colleges often do not give credit for qualifying scores.

In light of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, the perceived value of the AP exam may have created an environment where teachers of AP courses must work not only against time and resource constraints to complete the curriculum, but must also combat indifference and decreased motivation even on the part of students who are typically high achievers. My positionality as the AP teacher is that since students tend to place little value on
the AP exam, much of the noticeable change in behavior is exacerbated by time and resource constraints that occur during community service participation.

**Teachers.** Regarding classroom culture, the role of teachers in this study is significant as teachers impact the AP classroom environment in myriad ways. There appears to be a culture of general acceptance of the issues stemming from the dual commitment, and the perspective that AP achievement outcomes will not change unless administrators promote and support a change in how the AP program and the community service program coexist. Some teachers perceive that given the lack of adequate time and resources to complete AP coursework, the issues surrounding AP achievement become a fait accompli, and that any attempt to push through the AP curriculum and provide enough test preparation would be futile. Eventually, these beliefs impact school culture and teacher-student interactions. According to Shane (2009), “teachers play a major role in shaping the culture of the classroom…teachers need to be aware of how cultural identity influences the entire educational process…” (p. 35).

An argument can be made for AP teachers utilizing class time in more creative ways so as to mitigate decreased contact time and maximize learning outcomes. Aspects of student engagement, such as participation, time on task, and effort, have consistently been linked to positive outcomes in student achievement (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Student engagement can be looked upon as a way to boost motivation through innovative approaches to instruction and help promote better utilization of time, for example, as observed in the flipped classroom model and project-based activities.

Teacher-student interaction is a critical factor in AP learning outcomes. In a case study related to twelfth-graders’ perspectives on their high school experience, the authors focused on an area of research that has been sparse, namely, “how students themselves feel about the rigor
and value of their educational experiences” (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015, p. 429). The case study involved a limited number of high school seniors who were categorized as gifted and who were enrolled in the AP Language and Composition course (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015). Findings revealed these students had varying levels of satisfaction with their schools and their teachers, with a specific correlation between “enjoyment in their classes and the teachers who taught them” (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015, p. 437). Such findings support the construct of teacher-student interactions on a social level, in that teacher personality may be an influential component in learning; other influential components included teacher professionalism and teacher efficacy (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015).

Another key finding in the study was that students indicated an appreciation for inquiry-based activities, but also expressed a need for the school to do “more to challenge and engage its high-ability students” (Schmitt & Goebel, 2015, p. 441). As an AP teacher, I agree with these findings in that teachers should also consider their role as facilitators who can affect positive learning outcomes through various innovative methods of instruction. As is the case, planning is critical and ample time and resources are needed to implement them. From my positionality, and in light of the problem of practice, time and resource constraints often hinder the ability of AP teachers to be more creative and innovative in their instructional approach.

**Campus ministry personnel.** As part of the graduation requirement for the Catholic high school in this study, students are enrolled in religion classes for all four years. An offshoot of the religion department, the Campus Ministry program consists of a director, an assistant director, and student and teacher participants. Students are encouraged to be part of the campus ministry leadership team by working on a variety of events, including school-wide prayer, special masses, retreats, and charity work. The director and assistant director for campus
ministry often seek the support and assistance of teachers as facilitators for retreats to help promote interdisciplinary connections between curriculum, Catholic identity, and the school mission.

Students in their senior year can also fulfill their community service requirement by acting as team leaders on retreats. In addition, student leaders are also asked to assist campus ministry personnel during certain periods throughout the school day. The relationship among campus ministry personnel, teacher participants, and student participants is perceived to be highly positive. This collaboration supports the goals and objectives of the campus ministry program; that is, to develop the spiritual growth and development of the whole student along with an unwavering commitment to serve others as part of the Catholic identity and the school’s mission (Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education, 2008).

My positionality regarding the importance of spiritual development aligns with the work of the campus ministry program. However, I am also of the belief that spiritual growth and development can take on many forms and occur in myriad ways that may help minimize the impact on course contact time.

Administrators. The high school in this study employs a number of administrators, including President, Principal, Assistant Principals, Deans, Program Directors, and Faculty Advisors. The president of the high school in this study is the school leader who oversees all programs and is responsible for the financial stability of the school. The president plays an active role in the daily operations of the school, works closely with the school principal and administrative cabinet, and answers to the Board of Trustees, which includes members of the clergy sponsorship. The president is an alum of the school and has worn many hats throughout his teaching career. He has a strong affiliation and loyalty to the school. The principal of the
high school in this study oversees the daily operations of the school and answers directly to the school’s president. The principal strives to maintain academic rigor and is a strong advocate of technology that promotes teaching and learning of challenging coursework through inquiry-based activities and through the integration of educational software (Weitzel-O’Neill & Scheopner Torres, 2011). As an ordained minister of the Catholic Church, the principal also supports a community service model that promotes good citizen behavior while developing the spirituality of each student (Convey, 2012).

Understanding that as a Catholic school we must be concerned with the spiritual growth and development of the whole student, while at the same time providing quality education, my positionality on the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service is that it may have led to a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources. It becomes difficult for AP teachers to prevent their students, some of who participate as student leaders in campus ministry, from assisting in the planning of events during class time, as high-ranking educators and stakeholders typically make decisions regarding student participation in activities during class time.

**Research Questions**

This descriptive case study will be guided by three research questions:

1. What is the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor and community service at an urban Catholic, college-preparatory high school, which are two features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission?

2. What are the beliefs of individuals who are educators and stakeholders at this high school, namely, administrators, campus ministry personnel, and teachers in the Advanced Placement (AP) program?
3. What are the expectations of these individuals, and how do they make meaning of their experiences in light of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service?

**Theoretical Framework**

This qualitative research study was reflective of the theoretical framework of culture theory (Goodenough, 1981; Gallant, 2007; Rodriguez, 2008; Eren, 2010; Louis & Wahlstrom 2011), with a focus on cultural mismatch relative to school culture and critical theory (Bourdieu, 1993). For data collection, a qualitative, descriptive, single case study methodology was utilized (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Boblin et al., 2013; Eisenhardt, 1989; Noor, 2008; Yazan, 2015) and described in the methodology section of Chapter III of this research study.

**Culture theory.** The theoretical framework of culture theory (Goodenough, 1981) guided the research and was appropriate in light of the multiple subgroups of participants (AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators) within the larger culture of the school. According to Goodenough (1981), culture within subgroups is comprised of values, traditions, and beliefs that are common to individuals within that subgroup and unique to the larger culture of the organization. Goodenough’s (1981) model of culture states that change in the organizational culture is possible as new ideas, innovations, and fresh perspectives on the day-to-day operations of the school, as well as long-term planning, come into the fold.

School culture is a factor that may influence the problem of practice. Furthermore, if a cultural mismatch exists, it may influence the perceptions of the school’s educators and stakeholders. In fact, there is a potential for a cultural mismatch between values held by teachers regarding academic rigor, by campus ministry personnel regarding community service, and the
values held by the administrators regarding the dual commitment of academic rigor and community as features of the Catholic identity and the school’s mission.

A general view of organizational culture offered by Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) is that “school culture matters” as “organizations with strong cultures are more adaptable, have higher member organization and commitment, and are better able to resolve conflicts” (p. 52). A number of studies and theoretical constructs in education regarding organizational culture, particularly school culture, have been put forth to help explain behaviors, motivation, and attitudes of members of the organization. According to Rodriguez (2008), “school culture is defined as a set of processes informed by the intersection of school structures, cultures, and individual agency” (p. 761).

Others have described school culture as “the frame of reference that creates boundaries, categories, and rules in which meaning is negotiated” (Lipka, 1998, p. 23). Patterson, Purkey, and Parker (1986), in Rodriguez (2008), identified school culture as “partially responsible for explaining student behavior and achievement, something that is manufactured, unique in each school, and one factor that serves as the glue between practice and purpose in the school” (p. 761).

If there is agreement among the previous authors who identify school culture as a construct, then it is reasonable to believe that school culture can be transformed. Positive school culture can be cultivated even during a specific time frame or event, which can bring about long-term benefits. Aspects of positive school culture, including maintaining a strong work ethic, motivation, and goal-oriented behavior, are most in need at a time when the high school in this study experiences decreased attendance among graduating seniors in the final semester during
their community service participation, as well as a noticeable decline in effort and motivation within the same period following college acceptances (Hartnett, 2008).

Although the concept of culture in education remains unclear and, at times, controversial (Van Houtte, 2005; Schoen & Teddlie, 2008), school culture, whether positive or negative, may impact school factors such as student achievement, motivation, coordination, and integration for all school constituencies (Berkemeyer et al., 2015). The intensity and/or type of school culture can be measured based on Cameron and Quinn’s (2006) Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI), a questionnaire consisting of “four value quadrants of orientation”: (1) adhocracy-oriented, (2) clan-oriented, (3) hierarchically-oriented, and (4) market-oriented” (p. 91). In their study conducted in schools in Germany, Cameron and Quinn (2006) found most of the schools exhibited “clan-oriented cultures with a strong focus on internal processes”, yet were still “open to organizational flexibility” (Berkemeyer et al., 2015, p. 98). They also found these schools demonstrated cultural stability, especially for schools that had selected a cultural mindset that included strong cultural values, and concluded that “the stronger the cultural values were, the harder it was to change them” (Berkeymeyer, et al., 2015, p. 98)

Some effective, high-performing schools have established cultures of learning, or COL communities (Goldring et al., 2009), that include elements leading to positive learning outcomes and academic achievement. Key factors in a COL environment include encouraging frequent collaboration among teachers, staff, and administrators, participation in promoting a supportive, positive school climate characterized by high expectations and strong efficacy beliefs, and encompassing the student body with a high degree of academic focus (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016). In COL communities, leadership is often shared and participatory, and there is frequent collaboration among adults in an effort to engage and support students. Shared or distributed
leadership can empower teachers and staff, thus increasing self-efficacy and promoting a greater commitment to improving students’ learning outcomes.

Schein (1992) is one of the earlier proponents of the theory of organizational culture, describing the construct as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration” (p. 12). In Gulsen and Gulenay (2014), Eren (2010) described organizational culture as one that “holds beliefs and values that are common within it” (p. 93). This set of beliefs and values are tied to the Catholic school mission, but in order for the mission to have meaning for each educator and stakeholder, it must be made known to all constituencies.

**Critical theory.** Critical theory is an aspect of culture theory where, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), “knowledge does not accumulate in an absolute sense; rather, it grows and changes through historical revision that continuously erodes ignorance and misapprehension” (p. 114). Criteria that determine whether critical theory is appropriate in a qualitative study include the historical relevance of the problem of practice, and takes into account the cultural antecedent of the situation and the degree to which the problem of practice attempts to breakdown ignorance and misapprehension, while providing the means to transform the situation into something positive (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In my research study, I will seek a deeper understanding of the culture of the school in this study, and the problem of practice, so that knowledge is gained in an unbiased and objective way.

The subcultures within the high school may seek to gain power, as critical theory proposes, through academic programs such as AP, SAT, and STEM, and have sought to implement these programs for the purpose of providing opportunities for students to excel academically, and for the school to become more competitive with public schools. The school
has also increased measures to improve its campus ministry program with a focus on the school mission of spiritual development through added retreats, service learning, and community service. As a result, the dual commitment of academic rigor and service to others may have evolved into a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources and the potential for a cultural mismatch among the subgroups.

As the school’s founding religious order, the board of trustees, and the administration continue to redefine the Catholic identity and school’s mission through myriad religious activities, the campus ministry personnel respond in kind by providing more opportunities for the spiritual development of every student. This, in turn, places time and resource constraints on AP teachers, as many of the religious activities take place during the school day.

Critical theory, as it relates to a cultural mismatch within the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, may be applicable to this research study, in the way that critical theory deals with the concern of “empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender” (Creswell, 2013, p. 30). This empowerment to transcend applies to the dilemma of priorities of class contact time and resources for AP teachers in light of the dual commitment imposed by higher-level stakeholders. Critical theory relates to school culture, in that the researcher can critique findings in an effort to expose existing ideologies and cultural perspectives in education.

Conclusion

The essence of a Catholic, college-preparatory high school consists of two features of the Catholic identity and the school mission: academic rigor and community service. In the high school in this study, there exists a dual commitment of these features by way of the Advanced Placement program and a mandatory community service program. As a result, this dual
commitment may have led to a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources for the school’s educators and stakeholders. This descriptive case study aims to explore and understand more deeply the phenomenon of this dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, the evolution of a dilemma of competing priorities, and the overall impact of the problem of practice on the school environment. The hope is to gain a new, fresh perspective that may bring about a solution that allows for both programs to coexist in more harmonious and meaningful ways.

As both the researcher and an AP teacher, to be aware of my own positionality and biases in the design of my study, and more specifically, how I collect and analyze data from artifacts, from open-ended, semi-structured interviews, from classroom observations, and from field notes, is paramount. As data analysis begins to take shape and themes emerge, it would also be important to honor the voices and opinions of the study’s participants through their “values, beliefs, feelings, and assumptions” (Creswell., 2012, p. 429).
Chapter II: Literature Review

Academic rigor and service to others are two features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission (Miller, 2012). The coexistence of programs in Catholic high schools representative of these features, namely, the Advanced Placement (AP) program and a school’s community service program, is, for most Catholic schools, uncomplicated in nature, as service is voluntary and typically performed outside of the school day. In one urban, Catholic high school, community service is a requirement for graduation, fulfilled during school hours, two days a week, for a period of approximately eight weeks in the final semester of the graduating year.

For the Catholic high school in this study, the coexistence of both the AP program and community service program has evolved into a dual commitment; that is, the objective to maintain high academic standards as a college preparatory school, and the objective to promote the spiritual development of every student. The school’s educators and stakeholders - teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators - view this dual commitment in different ways. The significance of this problem is a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources, and an impact on school culture by way of a cultural mismatch among subgroups. School culture, comprised of values, attitudes, and behaviors of members of the school organization, may have been influenced by the problem of practice.

This literature review will focus on the following topics areas related to the problem of practice: (1) Catholic education, (2) Student engagement, (3) College readiness, (4) School culture, and (5) Community service. In searching the literature, I relied mainly on ProQuest (www.proquest.com) to search for peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters acquired from basic and advanced searches of multiple databases.
Catholic Education

This section is devoted to the examination of Catholic education with regards to the problem of practice in which the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service results in competing priorities for time and resources. Since the problem of practice is centered on an urban Catholic high school, it is appropriate to explore Catholic education from the standpoint of academic rigor and communal structure.

Academic rigor. Studies have compared the curricular offerings of public and Catholic schools to determine if Catholic schools were keeping up with National and State standards of curriculum, and the offering of unique programs to justify tuition costs (Ognibene, 2015). As the AP program has a long history in both public and private high schools, and as the STEM program continues to gain ground in middle schools and high schools nationwide, some Catholic high schools have implemented both the AP and STEM programs in order to remain relevant, to be competitive with public schools, to prepare students for undergraduate work, and to meet post-college career demands in a global economy.

In a comparative study of public and Catholic schools, Ognibene (2015) examined the uniqueness of Catholic schools – their Catholic identity and school mission - but also stated that Catholic schools’ “instructional practices have evolved in ways similar to that of public schools” (Ognibene, 2015, p. 27). The common features of both schools became less emphasized when Catholic schools began to implement discipline-centered curriculum reform and humanistic education, which was derived from the 1940’s public school program known as “life adjustment education” (Ognibene, 2015, p. 27). This change initiated a breaking away from public school education by mandating classes within the Catholic faith, i.e., religion/theology, as a graduation requirement, and providing opportunities for high school students to perform community service.
A study by Schinzel (2000) examined the AP science curriculum in Catholic high schools and how implementation could be used as a model for other Catholic schools. The study centered on the relationship between rigorous AP science coursework and several criteria that help maintain academic rigor in Catholic schools: (1) availability of AP science courses in Catholic high schools, (2) rate of AP science course enrollment, (3) rate of AP exam success, and (4) teacher competence and workload (Schinzel, 2000). The availability of AP science courses in general was contingent upon budgetary concerns such as lab equipment and lab materials. The study found that Catholic schools sought experienced science teachers who had at least an undergraduate degree in science and had earned a Master’s degree, and that professional development was critical in honing teacher skills in ways that could best serve students and provide opportunities for academic achievement and exam success (Schinzel, 2000).

In the school within my research study, the science department is comprised of teachers who meet or exceed these criteria where all teachers must earn a Master’s degree within five years of employment. Regarding the long-term development of teaching skills, the school schedule is abbreviated one day, twice a month, for professional development, regardless of the teacher’s level of experience, as well as for general faculty meetings.

**Communal structure.** Communal structure is evident in Catholic education and reflected in the coexistence of programs of academic rigor and community service (Aldana, 2014). In an ethnographic study, the author explored two Catholic high schools’ approach to preparing students for college. The study revealed that one school engaged in college-going discourse, practices, and interactions, while the other was less engaged; however, both schools maintained academic rigor. In another study, new national standards for improving academic rigor in Catholic elementary schools and high schools were implemented to provide
opportunities for Catholic education leaders to unite Common Core standards with tenets of the Catholic identity, i.e., Catholic values, service to others, social justice, church teachings, and encyclicals (Ozar, 2012). This collaboration culminated in a project that engaged the entire school community in curriculum reform (Ozar, 2012).

As there are high expectations for academic achievement and commitment to service for Catholic high school students, there are also multiple demands placed on teachers to offer quality instruction in light of their competency, time, workload, shared vision, and support of the Catholic identity (Miller, 2012). However, mostly due to financial constraints, quality instruction in Catholic schools in the twenty-first century has suffered, as more parish elementary schools and high schools shut down, and parcels of property are sold to agencies in charge of public school governmental programs such as Universal pre-K in an effort to maintain Church costs due to declining parishioner participation. A study by Convey (2014) sought to relate motivation and job satisfaction among teachers in Catholic schools, and found a link between the academic environment and a teacher’s satisfaction with work. The findings suggested that motivation to teach was correlated with the Catholic identity of the school, which further implied that the religious environment was a strong predictor of job satisfaction among Catholic school teachers (Miller, 2012). Thus, it seems the essence of a teaching career in a Catholic school is more vocational in nature, rather than compensatory. For example, in any given day, teachers can often be found assisting and tutoring students voluntarily in the mornings before and after the school day voluntarily, within the school in my research study. Such vocational effort of time and resources demonstrates teacher dedication and commitment, the extent to which may be rare even in other Catholic high schools.
Regarding academic rigor and community service as features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission, Cho (2013) explored the relationship between teacher’s personal faith and commitment to teaching. The author’s findings revealed four dimensions of the Catholic teacher’s faith in relation to this commitment: “belief, intimacy with God, action, and a living faith”, and four dimensions of the Catholic teacher’s commitment in relation to the teacher’s personal faith: a commitment to “mission, school, teaching, and students” (Cho, 2013, p. 117). Through survey findings, and as these dimensions are intertwined, the dimension of living faith stood out as the most influential among all four dimensions of the commitment to teaching; and the dimension of commitment to the mission was strongly related to all four dimensions of personal faith. These findings suggested that a Catholic teacher’s living faith was a strong predictor of commitment to the mission, to the school, to teaching, and to students (Cho, 2013). The findings are important to the problem of practice as personal faith, intrinsic motivation, and a deep commitment to teaching are appropriate in regard to navigating around issues of time and resource constraints in light of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service.

**Conclusion.** Stakeholders in Catholic education must closely examine the basis for competitiveness of tuition-free public school education, and suggest plans for unique programs of distinction, as well as promote the tenets and features of the Catholic identity and mission, that is, academic rigor, humanistic values and attitudes, all in an effort to provide quality education that justifies tuition costs. Academic rigor - as in the offering of the AP program, and communal structure - as in the implementation of a community service program – are two features of the Catholic identity and the school’s mission. However, as the two programs coexist in the final semester of the graduating year at the Catholic high school in my research study, competing
priorities of time and resources have impacted both programs in significant ways. In comparison to public education, where faith-based instruction and spiritual development are non-issues, course contact time is uncompromised across disciplines.

**Student Engagement**

There is general consensus the main objective of high schools in the U.S. is to prepare students for college, followed by secondary objectives such as “workforce preparation, socialization, and community building” (Balfanz, 2009, p. 23). Surveys of student engagement have found that students’ response to the question of why they attend high school was the desire to earn a diploma and attend college (Balfanz, 2009). In light of this goal, the American high school has seen a significant increase of course offerings and enrollment among its students, specifically participation in the AP program. This, coupled with AP exam score performance, on some level, may be reflective of student engagement and college readiness.

**Elementary and middle school.** It can be stated that some students approach the learning of science with a degree of trepidation, as the general consensus is that learning science can be challenging. It is for this reason that engaging students at a young age in helping to allay their fears and instill confidence can go a long way in enriching the learning experience of young students in science. In that regard, one study sought to examine verbal prompts used to induce elementary and middle school students to reflect on science material they have learned (Wilson et al., 2011). The process of reflection in this study was defined as both metacognitive and sense making in nature.

Processes such as reflection, the authors posited, may enable young students to overcome the difficulties faced in the science subject matter being taught, and help foster a deeper understanding of scientific principles. They measured reflection by the relationship between
prompt and response. High-level prompts were often associated with high-level responses, indicating that students were reflecting on their knowledge. According to the authors, reflection could lead to a deeper understanding by an integration of knowledge of scientific principles, as well as improve learning outcomes. Prompts to elicit reflection during science learning can be accomplished in two ways: (1) “reflection-on-action, where the student is reflecting on prior events, and (2) reflection-in-action, where reflection takes place as learning transpires” (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 21).

The authors’ findings revealed the importance of “fluidity” (Wilson et al., p. 41) on the part of the teacher in encouraging and eliciting students to reflect on their knowledge of scientific principles. These findings are significant to my problem of practice with regards to achievement in AP science, in that engaging students at a young age to reflect on what they know and what they don’t know is an important aspect of scientific inquiry, and transcends all school ages. If we, as teachers, seek to engage our students by prompting them to reflect on scientific principles for deeper understanding and making connections, then the process can help young students overcome challenges faced when learning science that may lead to improved learning outcomes.

The science classroom environment has become a critical factor in determining learning outcomes and the ranking of schools in the U.S. and other industrialized countries. School effectiveness research has been used to increase a school’s potential and improve its educational achievement, and more recently, to impact students’ academic achievement. Thus, examining factors that improve effectiveness of schools, particularly in the area of instructional practices, is a significant endeavor.
One study investigated the differences between low- and high-ranking schools in sixty-seven countries worldwide, based on instructional practices implemented among fourth and eighth grade students in science classrooms (Ceylan & Akerson, 2013). Lawson, Abraham, and Renner (1989) in Ceylan and Akerson (2013) discussed two types of knowledge that could impact school effectiveness: “(1) declarative, and (2) procedural” (p. 5). In essence, declarative knowledge is described as “knowing that” and procedural knowledge as “knowing how.”

The two types of knowledge are correlated, in that declarative knowledge is gained through a constructive process that utilizes procedural knowledge (Ceylan & Akerson, 2013). The constructive process relies on the ability of the teacher to engage students so that declarative knowledge becomes more meaningful and applicable. However, without procedural knowledge, declarative knowledge cannot be acquired. Thus, it becomes imperative that procedural knowledge is necessary for gaining declarative knowledge, but also necessary “to meet some requirements” of education in a global society (Ceylan & Akerson, 2013, p. 5). The science classroom setting can become an important venue for acquiring procedural knowledge, inherent in myriad lab and classroom activities, which are used to promote scientific inquiry.

Data collected through student questionnaires and analysis of science achievement tests revealed diversity in instructional practices in the science classroom between high-performing and low-performing schools. In high-performing schools, inquiry-oriented activities were implemented more often and “positively contributed to students’ science reasoning scores” (Ceylan & Akerson, 2013). For example, students were engaged more often in activities that related to conducting experiments and investigations. Lessons reflecting this form of inquiry must be well-designed, facilitated, and monitored closely by the teacher, as poor instructional methods could potentially widen the achievement gap among students and schools. The adage of
“learning by doing” is applicable and reinforces the nature of active engagement in the science classroom in an effort to improve student attitudes toward science and science achievement.

**High school.** The topic of literacy across disciplines has been a major focus in the field of educational research. Schools have adopted literacy programs that are cross-disciplinary in response to low standardized test scores in reading. A current focus is the integration of science literacy on the high school level in an effort to reinforce the language process in learning science, to engage high school students, and ultimately improve achievement in comprehensive testing such as AP science exams.

One study explored the impact of a literacy-based approach to teaching science on the engagement of high school students in Chemistry (Guzzetti & Bang, 2011). The study focused on determining any effect on female students who tend to be marginalized in science classroom settings. Data collection included measuring students’ attitudes toward science through a questionnaire in a quasi-quantitative approach involving control and experimental groups (Guzzetti & Bang, 2011). The experimental teachers’ approach to instruction reflected one important feature of scientific inquiry, that is, “engaging with scientific questions” (Guzzetti & Bang, 2011, p. 50).

The findings revealed no significant difference in attitudes toward science for female students in the experimental group versus the control group. Overall, the study demonstrated that high school students benefit from literacy practices that provide outlets for interacting and collaborating with other students, supporting the idea that “students learn better when teachers build social interaction around texts” (Guzzetti & Bang, 2011, p. 55). In presenting alternative text material relevant to students’ lives, teachers can engage students in a deeper understanding
of scientific principles and may even promote intrinsic motivation in students through a literacy-based approach.

Science education has focused on students’ attitudes toward the natural sciences, as it has been observed that students lose interest in high school science classes and consequently choose non-science majors in college. In measuring attitudes toward science, there is a high correlation between student interest and engagement. One study examined variables of science interest - gender, grades, and the educational background of parents – that influence students’ attitudes toward science in higher secondary schools in Turkey (Akarsu & Kariper, 2013). The researchers conducted the study using a quantitative survey that measured these variables based on a numeric description (Akarsu & Kariper, 2013).

The findings in this study demonstrated that students in high school displayed a “relatively high interest level in all disciplines of science” (Akarsu & Kariper, 2013, p. 85), but were “minimally interested” (p. 85) in general science and biology. It may be possible these two subject areas may be considered the least difficult, or how they are introduced and the type of instructional technique utilized may affect the interest level of students. As students’ attitudes are often related to interest and engagement, the factor of instructional technique brings back full circle the idea of student engagement as a critical factor in developing, sustaining student interest, and improving attitudes toward science.

Few studies have focused on evidence pertinent to students’ view of science specifically between high school students and undergraduate students. One such study used qualitative methods to explore how the perspective of high school and first-year college students may be influenced by factors including motivation, interest, and career aspirations (Hassan, 2011). According to the author, there has been a steady decline in enrollment in undergraduate courses
in the physical and natural sciences in various countries including Australia. Other Australian studies have demonstrated a general decline in students’ interest and enjoyment of science in the early secondary school years, as well as a significant drop in interest going from primary to secondary school.

Programs such as STEM have not driven enrollment numbers upward, despite the fact that more students are attending college in Australia. This decreased interest in science has had an alarming effect on scientific literacy, as well as on the number of qualified scientists and science teachers. The shortage in these professions can also be seen in other industrialized countries such as the UK and the US (Hassan, 2011, p. 55).

The decline in student interest in science may be a manifestation of a general lack of understanding of scientific concepts, the challenges students face in a science classroom, and the negative image portrayed of science (Hassan, 2011). The study focused on students’ views of science, defined as, “the personal attitudes students possess toward science subjects and their proclivity to respond positively or negatively towards science and careers in science” (Hassan, 2011, p. 56).

Through the use of an opened-ended questionnaire of participants from an Australian secondary school and an urban university, one key finding in the author’s study was that students’ perspective on science classes was generally positive, and the majority of students in both the secondary school and the university viewed science favorably. Contrary to this finding was the “negative image of science as one of the most common factors contributing to student avoidance of science” (Hassan, 2011, p. 56). Among university students, one finding revealed that female students generally viewed science more favorably, possibly “indicating early enjoyment of science”, or that “a lack of motivation can shape a student’s experience” (Hassan,
Students also perceived a loss of self-confidence and negativity toward science as factors contributing to negative views of science and poor motivation to study science as a career.

Overall, the findings indicated that secondary school students generally perceived science less positively than university students, and the difference may lie in the individual experience. Given this assumption, engaging students in scientific inquiry through varied instructional techniques, project-based activities, and cooperative learning methods may serve well to promote more positive views of science as a subject that, although challenging, may have merit and application in daily living and in career aspirations.

**Post-secondary education.** Aspects of student engagement, such as participation, time on task, and effort, have consistently been linked to positive outcomes in student achievement (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Though studies have often focused on efforts to engage students on the secondary school level, engagement on the undergraduate level has also been observed in seven practices in undergraduate instruction: (1) student-staff contact, (2) active learning, (3) prompt feedback, (4) time on task, (5) high expectations, (6) respect for diversity in learning, and (7) cooperation among students (Trowler & Trowler, 2010).

In analyzing the features of the practices of student engagement, the salient point that academic challenge most directly impacts student engagement may be based on the discipline itself. Thus, as disciplines such as science and math are perceived as more challenging than others, the degree of challenge may be indirectly related to the level of student engagement. Therefore, it is imperative that practices to promote and increase engagement are exercised or made available in order to positively impact student learning outcomes.
The value of engagement on any academic level seems obvious, as there are studies that consistently demonstrate a direct correlation between student engagement and desirable student outcomes (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Some of the outcomes include “skills transferability, self-esteem, student satisfaction, and persistence” (Trowler & Trowler, 2010, p. 9). However, past practices, such student engagement at the secondary school level, are by no means a determinant of student engagement at the undergraduate level.

Consistency in successful student engagement may be achieved if the transition from high school to undergraduate school is a smooth one, as students begin to develop an identity and a sense of belonging to the new academic community. In this regard, students who are homeschooled or have experienced a radically different academic environment may find it somewhat challenging to transition and become engaged as a result. They may perceive engagement as a negative construct, whereby the new environment seems unfriendly (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). However, the initial perception of negative engagement can be transformed into a positive one that benefits students in higher education, more so than students who experienced positive engagement from the start.

Transformation of engagement can be directly tied to the quality of undergraduate education (Hu & Wolniak, 2013). Strategies such as purposeful activities in an undergraduate classroom setting have centered on student engagement, and studies have indicated that “what matters most in student learning and personal development” is what they actually “do in college” (Hu & Wolniak, 2013, p. 212). As in all levels of education, there is a high correlation between student engagement and successful college outcomes. However, beyond graduation, the authors also found “significant relationships between measures of student engagement and labor market earnings” (p. 212).
In one study, Hu and Wolniak (2013) set out to focus on engagement in sub-populations in order to explore differences in postsecondary outcomes. This is paramount to the notion that although the number of students attending college in recent years has significantly increased, student engagement and the college experience may have diverse outcomes based on “background characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, and academic achievement” (Hu & Wolniak, 2013, p. 214). The findings revealed that, in terms of race/ethnicity, there were “statistically significant differences in average levels of academic and social engagement” (p. 222), but there was no statistical difference in annual income among racial/ethnic groups. Furthermore, “Hispanics reported the highest levels of engagement in academic activities, while African Americans reported the highest levels of social engagement” (Hu & Wolniak, 2013, p. 222).

The authors concluded the “effects of student engagement on earnings” in the period following college graduation “depend on the nature or type of engagement in which students participate” (Hu & Wolniak, 2013, p. 227). The findings also suggested the effect of academic engagement and social engagement varied according to background characteristics such as student “gender, race/ethnicity, and academic preparation” (p. 227). Interestingly, students whose background reflected lower levels of academic preparation and who experienced low engagement during college had no significant difference on early career earnings. However, earning effects of engagement appeared to be conditional on gender, where men benefited more from academic engagement and women benefited more from social engagement during college (Hu & Wolniak, 2013). It would be interesting to observe if there are long-term, sustainable benefits of student engagement on post-college earnings.
**Conclusion.** Student engagement has been linked to student interest, attitudes, and motivation to learn science. Promoting scientific inquiry and project-based learning through varied instructional techniques could positively benefit students who are learning science and have the potential to change perspectives on science as an undergraduate pursuit and career choice. Reflecting on scientific knowledge gained in coursework through retro-engaging students may promote a deeper understanding of scientific principles and college readiness, as students take responsibility for their own learning.

**College Readiness**

Clearly, the transition from high school to college can be daunting for many students, particularly students who are considered underachievers and those ranked in the middle to lower quartiles. In this regard, college readiness skills remain a national problem (Leonard, 2013). This section will attempt to explain criteria for college readiness and examine a variety of proactive steps taken by high schools for improvement. The purpose of this section is the issue is relative to the commitment of academic rigor in Catholic high schools, one aspect of the problem of practice. In other words, participation and achievement in the AP program may serve as a strong predictor of college readiness Catholic high school students.

**College readiness defined.** College readiness is defined by Conley (2007) in Leonard (2013) as, “the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed – without remediation – in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree” (p. 5). Furthermore, four categories of college readiness skills were suggested by Conley (2008): (1) content knowledge, (2) cognitive strategies, (3) academic behavior, and (4) contextual skills and knowledge. College readiness is also significant to
students’ future careers due to the changing workforce where there is an increase in the number of jobs requiring post-secondary degrees (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015).

**Who is college ready?** The Common Core is a set of objectives and expectations in the subject areas of English and Math, and may be forthcoming in other subject areas such as science, because it is considered one of the main standards used for improving college and career readiness. Though the majority of students already plan to move onto undergraduate work immediately after high school, not all students are prepared for college. Much of the lack of preparation can be attributed to academic issues such as alignment between high schools and college, as well as differences in instructional practices between high school teachers and college instructors. There may be other contextual factors such as negative peer influence and a lack of parental involvement (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). The current influx of students attending college may appear positive at first; however, at second glance, a significant percentage of students are not college ready, resulting in those who don’t persist or aren’t retained into the second year of post-secondary work, leading to failure in degree completion.

High school administrators, faculty, and staff may demonstrate less concern over the college readiness of high-ranked students who apply to top-tiered colleges and universities and who are often accepted to the institution of their choice. These students are afforded opportunities to prepare for college through myriad programs in high school, but the same may not be said for students in the middle to lower quartiles, and those who are underserved. The college readiness skills of these students can be improved if there is acknowledgement of the impact of non-academic factors on college readiness such as peer influence and family life, specifically parental support (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).
**Parental support.** It has been observed that parents who are college graduates have children who attend post-secondary schools (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015). The influence of parents and families can be strong, and if parents are committed to supporting college readiness for their children, then college readiness skills may develop appropriately (Leonard, 2013). The academic trap parents often fall into is one where they allow their child a great degree of academic independence and thus, no longer feel the need to monitor academic progress, study habits, or grades throughout their child’s high school career. This may be perceived as the wrong approach, since many students may not have the maturity to be in total control of their own education. There also needs to be a distinction between helicopter parents and those who are supportive and have high expectations of their children. Hovering has the potential to negatively influence college readiness, whereas emotional support may yield long-term benefits. In most high schools, college readiness skills are typically assessed in the upper grades. Alternatively, it may never be too early to promote the development and assessment of the same skills in the early high school years in order to instill a college-readiness mindset. This approach, however, should not take away from the importance of the high school experience for students in their general development.

**Improving college readiness.** According to Martinez and Klopot (2005) in Leonard (2013), many studies point to factors considered the strongest predictors of college readiness: “(1) academic preparation, (2) social support, (3) access to information, (4) parental involvement, and (5) knowledge about college and financial aid” (p. 187). Thus, improving college readiness may not only fall on a student’s grade point average, but also on the student’s social environment, including peers, counselors, and parents.
To increase college readiness skills, many high schools are engaged in preparing students for campus life. Yet, at times, this preparation falls short, especially for underachieving or middle quartile students. According to Conley’s (2008) category of contextual skills and knowledge, exposure to the basics of the college experience through SAT/ACT prep, college fairs, site visits, and guest speakers, may be a worthwhile approach in helping recruit and enroll those students who are undecided about post-secondary education.

Another approach to increasing college readiness is to target subject matter taught at high school in a way that aligns well with material taught at college (Leonard, 2013). This alignment reflects the aforementioned categories of content knowledge and cognitive strategies. Additionally, one approach is to blend or overlap the distinction between high school and college, such that students can be engaged in early college within the high school in an effort to “gain academic momentum” (Leonard, 2013, p. 186) and increase the chance that students will enroll in college soon after graduation.

Highlighted in Leonard’s (2013) study are four types of early college programs: (1) Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate (AP/IB), (2) school-based credit, (3) college-based credit, and (4) virtual (p. 186). These programs are appropriate for students in all achievement levels, including those at risk of “slipping through the cracks.” These students stand to benefit from earning college credit while at high school because of the many options available, including programs with less stringent prerequisites. Enrollment in these programs may prove helpful for students who are classified as “underachievers” and for who remediation in college seems inevitable, to realize or confirm their interest in certain subjects, and to help them concentrate on those areas of study in college.
Helping students find the right institutional fit is a variable in college readiness. Under-matching, a concept described by Venezia and Jaeger (2013), refers to “a tendency for some students to attend colleges that are less selective than those they are qualified to attend” (p. 121). These otherwise high-achieving students settle for their safety schools, or a less selective college or university, for various reasons, none the least of which are their socioeconomic background and opportunities for full scholarships. Alternatively, there are students who are over-matched, a concept that also lends toward issues in college readiness, as they may have earned a place in a highly selective institution, but are not necessarily prepared to face the rigors of challenging coursework. College counselors, parents, and teachers can place students on the right path to selecting the proper institutional fit and thus mitigate the effects of under-matching or over-matching relative to college readiness.

**AP program.** Many studies have demonstrated that early college success may be linked to AP/IB achievement (Leonard, 2013; Santoli, 2002; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). However, as data measuring college readiness have shown little improvement over the past two decades, the same can be said for AP achievement as measured by AP exam performance, especially in AP science courses. According to Venezia and Jaeger (2013), the College Board, the agency that administers the AP program, “reported only 30 percent of public high school students in 2011 participated in AP courses, and only 18.1 percent succeeded in scoring 3 or higher on at least one AP exam” (p. 119). Thus, in order to improve college readiness skills, parallel improvements in the AP program are for consideration.

The critical component of time has a strong influence on college readiness with regard to AP achievement, as some schools have built into their schedules double periods for AP courses in order to align the syllabus with college-level work, to complete the curriculum, and to allow
time for exam preparation. Contrary to the findings of other studies, Klopfenstein and Thomas (2009) found in their study that, due to the expansion of the AP program to increase inclusion, “AP experience does not reliably predict first semester college grades or retention to the second year” (p. 873) for the middle quartile student. Thus, it may be a positive step for high school administrators to structure AP courses in a way that offers more time for teachers and students to engage more deeply in the material, and for students to experience differentiated instruction by way of inquiry-based learning.

**College-going culture.** One qualitative study offers a distinction between high schools that are college-preparatory and those that have established a “college-going culture” (Aldana, 2014, p. 131), in which the author demonstrated the influence of a school culture that is college-going on academic outcomes, particularly for underrepresented students. The study was conducted in two urban Catholic high schools and findings revealed that when a school was engaged in college-going discourse, the college prep environment became secondary to maintaining a college-going culture (Aldana, 2014). College-going discourse consists of language used by teachers and guidance counselors that emphasizes the value of post-secondary education in career readiness, college readiness, and the belief that all students can attend college (Aldana, 2014). The study is significant for students who are under-represented, in that it can potentially change mindsets, as reflected in Venezia & Jaeger (2013), who described college and career readiness standards as “habits of mind” (p. 117). The findings of this study revealed that when a school exhibited a strong college-going culture, academic outcomes improved.

Given the national trends of a lack of college readiness skills among U.S. high school graduates, and the necessary focus on raising the percentage of graduates persisting and completing college, one qualitative study revealed that the peak of college-readiness, or the
chance that a student will be on course to enroll and persist in college after the first year, occurs in the eighth grade (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015). This realization supports the notion that timing in college readiness is integral to early college success, and that the sooner students are exposed to activities that promote preparation for college such as college fairs, college counseling, and AP coursework, as well as strong parental support, the more likely they will persist in college after the first year to complete a college degree.

**Conclusion.** Although the number of U.S. high school students enrolled in college has increased in the last two decades, the rate at which students actually complete a baccalaureate degree has remained the same (Royster, Gross, & Hochbein, 2015). This finding may be linked to poor college readiness skills among high school students, and the need to prepare students for college, particularly those students in the middle to lower quartiles.

College readiness takes time and is a worthwhile endeavor, given that it correlates well with academic success and career readiness. If schools and parents encourage students to challenge themselves with college-based coursework, dual programs, and AP/IB courses, then these efforts may go a long way in improving college readiness skills needed for college-bound students to persist beyond the first year of college, and complete a college degree.

**School Culture**

This section of the literature review is focused on the topic of school culture as it relates to the dual commitment of academic rigor and mandatory community service among students in the final semester prior to the administration of AP exams and graduation at an urban, Catholic, college-preparatory high school. The topic of school culture is explored for the purpose of determining if it positively influences the mindset of high achieving students, and alternatively, if it is negatively impacted by the dual commitment.
School culture defined. Research has examined school culture in myriad ways. Many studies begin with defining culture first, which is then broken down into categories. A reasonable definition of school culture varies in focus and components. There seems to be no single definition that is all encompassing for the concept of school culture. Sailes, Cleveland, and Tyler (2014) refer to the work of Plata and Robertson (1998) in defining school culture as a variable that determines students’ level of “confidence, aspiration, and motivation in how they approach life events” (p. 34).

According to Mok & Flynn (1998), school culture is defined as a “configuration of core beliefs, values, symbols, traditions and patterns of behavior in the life of a school” (p. 411). School culture is often synonymous with school climate, since few studies make specific distinctions. In Mok & Flynn (1998), Deal (1993) stated that school culture includes “ethos, climate and saga”, but acknowledged that school culture is also “multifaceted and difficult to quantify” (p. 411).

According to Rodriguez (2008), school culture refers to a set of processes that reflects the “intersection of school structures, culture, and individual agency” (p. 761). The intersection is based on tradition, rituals and norms that invariably regulate “actions, behaviors, and decisions” (Rodriguez, 2008, p. 761) of teachers, students, and administrators. The author further points out that school culture is essentially what schools do as an institution, and that there is a dynamic component to school culture that reflects society (Rodriguez, 2008). This dynamic fluidity of the essence of school culture has the capacity to either promote or inhibit change, and to some degree, may influence students’ behavior and achievement. Patterson, Purkey, & Parker (1986) in Rodriguez (2008) emphasized that school culture is something that can be created, is different for each school, and binds together school practice and objectives.
**Organizational culture**

Organizational culture is defined by Eren (2010) in Gulsen & Gulenay (2014) as an entity that “holds beliefs and values that are common within it” (p. 93). This definition is similar to that of school culture, and the authors go on to state that if the culture of an organization is strong, then its members’ confidence level increases (Gulsen & Gulenay, 2014). The second statement is pertinent to school organizations where the strength of the culture can be a predictor of multiple outcomes, including teacher buy-in, but may not be sufficient enough to drive the goals and objectives of the school.

To arrive at a practical, all-purpose definition of school culture may be difficult, as it is a multi-faceted construct. Nonetheless, an appropriate understanding of organizational culture is necessary to gauge its influence on AP achievement among high school students in their final semester who are required to do community service. By examining school culture as a factor in my problem of practice, I may arrive at a deeper understanding of the values and norms that are often deep-seated and capable of influencing learning outcomes.

**School culture vs. school climate**

Some of the literature makes no distinction between school culture and school climate. Other studies have led to theories that provide fuzzy distinctions, resulting in overlap. Schoen & Teddlie (2008) in Aldridge & Fraser (2015) define school climate as a level of school culture that includes components of life qualities such as norms, values, and expectations that are promoted by the school. These components are capable of influencing positive change and thus, may serve to improve schools (Aldridge and Fraser, 2015).

Gulsen and Gulenay (2014) also touched upon organizational climate as a measurable quality whose characteristics separate the organization from others and which is capable of
influencing behaviors among its members. The authors emphasized that school climate refers to the way teachers perceive the school environment in which they work and their perspective on the leadership of the school, and that school climate is considered a subset of school culture (Gulsen & Gulenay, 2014).

Peer culture. Peer groups have been observed to be effective in promoting positive school-related behaviors such as student engagement and academic success. A study by Lynch, Lerner, and Leventhal (2013) examined the role of school-wide peer culture in reinforcing positive outcomes in academic achievement. The authors defined peer culture as students who accept certain academic behaviors that determine how they interact and how they establish relationships with others. They divided peer culture into two components – “relational and behavioral” (Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013, p. 6), where the relational component refers to students’ perception of the significance of peer interactions in school and the behavioral component deals with students’ actual behavior relative to academics.

As a general observation, students tend to select peers who demonstrate similar academic success and school engagement. This may be due to an underlying competitive nature that induces students to align with peers of similar intellectual promise and potential. The authors note that peers are not always defined as friendships but may include larger groups of students, i.e., class or grade level (Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013).

Lynch, Lerner & Leventhal (2013) cited Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969) as a contributor to relational and behavioral peer culture. They noted that in relational peer culture, social bonds within communities often prevent members (including students within the community) from engaging in negative behavior, as social bonds foster “attachment,
commitment, involvement and belief” (p. 8). In behavioral peer culture, individuals within the community monitor each other’s attitudes in order to gauge what is acceptable behavior.

The same conditions may apply to the school community, where bridging the behavioral and relational components of peer culture can strengthen peer relationships and may help assess correlations between peer culture and individual academic success. Based on a longitudinal study of middle school students (Lynch, Lerner & Leventhal, 2013), the authors’ findings suggest that perceptions of the school environment are related to student attitudes and behavior.

The findings may imply a correlation between peer relationships and individual academic behaviors, and that both relational and behavioral peer culture are linked to school engagement (Lynch, Lerner & Leventhal, 2013). The study also found that behavioral and relational components of peer culture may operate independently, and that beyond friendships, larger peer groups can exert an influence on individual behavior despite a lack of personal contact. Peer culture can essentially be observed within any school environment, and a deeper understanding of peer culture may serve to explore some aspects of my problem of practice relative to learning outcomes.

In another study, peer group identity was viewed in light of a school’s culture of “unintentional encouragement of teen absenteeism” (Hartnett, 2007, p. 35). The author focused on the organizational structure of a school and how it is set up to influence how students experience school. She focused on the concept of peer identity in relation to values, attitudes, and beliefs of a peer group, and how members of the group are predisposed to either endorsing or rejecting the mission of the school. The author lays claim to some peer groups being endorsed by school culture such as jocks, academics, preppies, and those peer groups who are rejected by school culture (Hartnett, 2007).
In her study, Hartnett (2007) determined that attendance policies often reflect rejection of some peer groups as school culture allows excused absences for sports team members, yet unexcused absences for other students. When students believe the system works counter to them and they feel unsupported, they begin to disconnect (Hartnett, 2007). This often leads to perceptions of favoritism, which only serve to further promote absenteeism and truancy. To change the culture of non-attendance, Hartnett (2007) believes the school environment “needs to get personal” (p. 38) with each student in order to promote a sense of belonging, improve attendance rates, and ultimately influence positive change in school culture.

**Academic achievement.** Academic achievement can be viewed through the lens of school culture. A sociological approach examines contextual factors, such as the academic climate of the school, in discerning the influence of school culture on academic achievement. Creating a positive school culture in a new urban high school was a study aimed at examining STEM education for African-American students, low-income students, and special needs students, and the role of the school’s teachers and the principal as a planning team (Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2011). In this study, school culture was envisioned to include relational trust, a strong sense of community, and participatory leadership between principal and teachers (Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2011). To foster this positive culture, support structures were created, as in planning teams, professional development, student orientation, and informal gathering locations within the school (Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2011).

From the standpoint of planning for a new urban school, school participants in this study agreed that in order to promote a positive school culture, factors such as strong principal and teacher leadership, building a sense of community, and relational trust, were critical. In terms of relational trust, there needed to be a reciprocal relationship and demonstration of good
citizenship behaviors between principal and teachers, among teachers, and between teachers and students (Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2011).

Of further critical importance was the idea of having a student disciplinary policy in place as a structural component in promoting values of positive school culture. The study’s findings also recommended that strong parental support was important, that teachers needed to learn school culture language, that the school had to be competitive with its admissions process, and that common staff time for collaboration had to be conveniently factored into the teaching schedule (Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2011).

An ethnographic study postulated that variations in academic achievement are not a matter of distinct school cultures but more of an interaction between contextual factors and the attitudes and experiences of students (Mok & Flynn, 1998). The study examined more specifically the effect of Catholic school culture on academic achievement, as measured by an external assessment that utilized a model that “expressed the interrelationship among home background, student characteristics, academic motivation, and expectations” (Mok & Flynn, 1998, p. 409). The model was tested using a multilevel path analysis based on five dimensions of Catholic school culture: “motivational, expectation, affective, religious, and educational” (Mok & Flynn, 1998, p. 412).

The findings of this study revealed the dimensions of motivation and expectation were viewed as having a greater influence over the remaining three dimensions (Mok & Flynn, 1998). The model also identified a direct influence on students’ motivation from the contextual factors of quality of school life, religious attitude, and the level of parent education. The relationship between motivation and these contextual factors became predictors of exam performance, in that “students who had more favorable school culture and background variables scored higher, and
students with more positive attitudes enjoyed school better and did better academically” (Mok & Flynn, 1998, p. 430). Two layers of academic outcomes emerged from these findings – the individual level and the collective level, with the latter reinforcing school culture in terms of values and expectations as defined by the school in order to promote academic achievement.

Another case study pointed to a “culture of learning” (Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison, & Cohen-Vogel, 2016, p. 602) as a key component in fostering academic achievement. The authors sought to determine specific elements of a culture of learning that sets certain school apart from other schools. Using qualitative methods of interviews and focus groups, the researchers found that effective high schools tended to have stronger cultures of learning and included components such as frequent collaboration among colleagues, shared goals based on high expectations, participatory leadership or co-collegiality between the principal and teachers, and support structures for students and teachers (Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison, & Cohen-Vogel, 2016).

In general, findings in this case study revealed the culture of learning included elements of school culture that led to positive academic outcomes. Of all the components, the most significant were a shared commitment to learning, high expectations, and support for students and teachers (Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison, & Cohen-Vogel, 2016). The authors cited one challenge for the culture of learning in high schools is the need to overcome departmental divisions. In response to this challenge, “learning houses” (Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison, & Cohen-Vogel, 2016, p. 608) could offer opportunities for better communication across departments to promote interdisciplinary cohesiveness regarding goals and objectives. This approach is not often taken in my school, as departments separate us, and we are compartmentalized according to subject areas and disciplines. Furthermore, members within the
same department don’t necessarily collaborate on a consistent level, even if the subject area is the same; this only serves to further isolate individual teachers and reduce opportunities for informal collaboration.

Culture audits have demonstrated their usefulness in designing school improvement plans to address issues of academic performance, marginalization, and equitable learning (Sailes, Cleveland, & Tyler, 2014). In a qualitative study on culture audits, key findings from documents, surveys, and classroom observations revealed that teachers and parents contribute most significantly to a school’s positive culture. The researchers designated the “six P’s as critical factors in any school organization: (1) policies, (2) practices, (3) personnel, (4) program, (5) processes, and (6) parental” (Sailes, Cleveland, & Tyler, 2014, p. 29). These factors may help shape school organizations and facilitate a positive school culture. This is significant to my problem of practice, as we need to encourage parents to monitor their child’s progress throughout all four years of high school, including the graduating year. Issues regarding student autonomy and accountability invariably come up and raise the question as to how involved a parent should be when their child is a graduating senior.

Teachers. Some educational reformers have emphasized restructuring large, urban schools into smaller school settings based on literature that concludes that small, autonomous schools have shown promise in boosting academic achievement. Few studies have focused on how the nature of adult-student relationships is connected to school culture. A case study by Rodriguez (2008) on urban high schools explored the nature of these relationships, identified by students to be most significant in promoting academic success. The importance of “personal relationships, the role of respect, and the power of encouragement” (Rodriquez, 2008, p. 759) all serve to deepen ties between teachers and students. The author points out that restructuring a
school into more personalized smaller settings doesn’t necessarily mean re-culturing the school environment, and educators need to challenge existing values, practices, and policies that are often taken for granted in order to promote relationships that foster respect and reciprocal behavior where “power is challenged, shared, and understood” (Rodriquez, 2008, p. 760).

The findings in Rodriguez’s (2008) study suggest there are three dimensions of personalization: personal feel of relationships, the role of reciprocal respect, and balance between encouragement and support. School size was a central factor in influencing opportunities to build these adult-student relationships and included a “push factor” (Rodriquez, 2008, p. 771) where teachers challenged students, thus demonstrating a sincere investment in their students’ future. This helped to strengthen adult-student relationships in an effort to promote academic success.

The purpose of another qualitative study on the role of teachers in promoting positive school culture was to confirm school climate factors that were essential in improving schools (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). Six factors were assessed and labeled: “(1) work pressure, (2) resource adequacy, (3) principal support, and (4) affiliation” (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016, p. 295), each of which affected, (5) “staff freedom”, and (6) “goal consensus” (p. 295) among teachers. The constructs of staff freedom and goal consensus were viewed in relationship to teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction. As self-efficacy and job satisfaction are multi-level constructs themselves, findings revealed that the construct of teacher self-efficacy was directly related to job satisfaction only to the extent to which school principals were approachable, and that the construct of affiliation (assistance from colleagues) indirectly influenced job satisfaction (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). Alternatively, findings suggested that learning communities within
schools may be beneficial for job satisfaction and academic success, similarly revealed in the study by Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison, & Cohen-Vogel (2016) on cultures of learning.

**The Principal.** In a qualitative study conducted to identify the effect of the behavior and attitude of the school principal on school climate (Gulsen & Gulenay, 2014), the authors identified several dimensions in a healthy, organizational climate. One dimension, known as the administrative dimension, was comprised of four characteristics: “(a) impact of principal, (b) sense of caring, (c) initiator effect, and (d) support for resources” (Gulsen & Gulenay, 2014, p. 95). The administrative dimension also took on an aspect of the administrative process of responsibility of the principal to motivate the faculty. An interesting component of this dimension is the initiator effect whereby the principal presents clear expectations to the faculty, identifies standards, and allows teachers to take ownership of academic outcomes. This is a far cry from top-down administrative mandates that often hinder teachers by limiting their ability to be innovative and creative, and may well produce a stressful environment that leads to negative school culture.

In their descriptive model, the authors cited the crucial role the principal plays in the formation of the school climate, which, in turn, has a positive effect on school efficacy and culture. The findings suggested, “a consistent administration is required for the formation of a healthy school climate” (Gulsen & Gulenay, 2014, p. 100) and that in order to boost academic achievement, teachers must also convey high expectations and school efficacy for their students (Gulsen & Gulenay, 2014).

**Conclusion.** The role of school culture in promoting academic success among high school students is not a novel idea, but the characteristics that significantly influence academic achievement, along with the discovery of interrelationships between school culture, school
contextual factors, and student achievement are worth exploring for their relevance to my problem of practice, that is, the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service. This portion of the literature review reveals that positive school culture alone is not sufficient to promote academic success. There are, however, levels of contextual factors, including relationships and participatory leadership among school participants that may serve to dynamically cultivate student success, along with other contextual factors such as resource availability and parental involvement.

**Community Service**

Service to others is an integral part of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission, and often distinguishes Catholic education from public and other private school institutions. Community service is a unique educational experience reflective of the charism of the Catholic identity (Cook & Simmonds, 2011) and is based on the constructs of centrality and balance of relationships. In the school of my research study, community service and academic rigor have evolved into a dual commitment, resulting in competing priorities for time and resources.

**Catholic identity.** Some studies have laid claim to an identity crisis in Catholic schools (Fusco, 2005) where a drifting away from the school mission, religious priorities and indoctrination has taken place, and where academic preparation has become the sole focus in certain Catholic high schools. According to the author, the school environment and a sense of community are important in order for a Catholic school to be effective long term (Fusco, 2005). The author divides the concept of community into two categories: functional community and value community (Fusco, 2005). A functional community exists when students share values within the school and forge relationships outside of school by having attended the same parish
school, and a value community occurs when students select a particular school because it represents what they value in a school, e.g. academic excellence (Fusco, 2005).

Fusco (2005) further explores two dimensions of faith that help promote community building for all school constituencies. One dimension called the vertical dimension of faith describes the relationship with God, and the other dimension, the horizontal dimension of faith, focuses on the need to care about others in order to promote social justice. Teachers are considered the prime orchestrators for instilling both dimensions of faith in students attending Catholic schools. However, conflicts exist between academic objectives and the faith-based formation and the spiritual development of the whole person, and the author relates this tension to the three-fold purpose of Catholic education: mission, community, and service (Fusco, 2005). The author’s findings suggest the importance of maintaining a balance between high academic rigor and expectations, while promoting a sense of community, including service to others, among students in Catholic high schools (Fusco, 2005).

Boland (2000) presented Andrew Greeley’s (1970) historical study of the impact of Catholic education, which highlighted increased social activism among Catholics who have attended Catholic school. Based on Greeley’s study, in his own work, Boland (2000) found the purpose of Catholic schools is to reflect “faith, commitment, and social values that improve society” (p. 510) with emphasis on “service to others” (p. 513). The author’s research focused on the importance of social commitment in Catholic education, where academic success was due in part to the emphasis on shared values and helping others, and that involvement in service programs “raises social conscience” for students in Catholic school (Boland, 2000, p. 514). He found that mandatory community service requirements occur on a regular basis for over fifty-percent of all Catholic high schools (Boland, 2000). This finding substantiated mandatory
community service as a relatively common feature of Catholic education, and the author further argues that service was linked to positive outcomes of academic success (Boland, 2000).

A study by Cook and Simonds (2011) examined the crisis of Catholic schools regarding low enrollment, and the necessity to reinvent themselves in order to survive and remain relevant and competitive with other schools. Their study focused on Catholic schools’ distinct identities in the offering of new and innovative academic programs, such as STEM, and dedication to “inclusive hospitality and global solidarity” (Cook & Simonds, 2011, p. 320). The study suggested the Catholic charism and identity includes service to others, and that through service opportunities, students may grow spiritually and mature in their understanding of the outside world. Furthermore, Catholic schools need to integrate this social consciousness within their curricular offerings (Cook & Simonds, 2011). The study concluded that an absence of a well-developed community service program might cause Catholic schools to lose a component of their identity (Cook & Simonds, 2011). This implication is significant to the problem of practice, as the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service coexists as two features of the Catholic identity and school mission; in turn, this dual commitment may have further evolved into a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources. It is a dilemma because, according to the findings of Cook and Simonds (2011), the Catholic identity does not prioritize one feature over the other. This finding is very significant with regards to the school in my research study, which attempts to treat both academic rigor and service to others as equal tenets, but ultimately sacrifices time and resources that are necessary in order to prepare students properly for challenging end of year exams such as the AP exam.

**Mandatory vs. voluntary community service.** A study by Henderson et al. (2007) compared two cohorts of students in their final year of high school to determine if there was a
difference in attitudes of students with respect to the presence or absence of a mandatory community service program. One cohort was comprised of students on a five-year plan, but had no requirement for community service, and the other cohort was comprised of students on a four-year plan, but had a graduation requirement of mandatory community service (Henderson et al., 2007).

The findings by Henderson et al. (2007) demonstrated no difference in attitudes between the two cohorts, as the proponents of mandatory community service focused on benefits and positive outcomes. The study also revealed the degree of benefit varies with the type of service, and presented a condition where benefits are maximized when the performance of community service is regular and sustained (Henderson et al., 2007). Alternatively, the authors found that mandatory service may be seen as “poisoning the well” by decreasing students’ intrinsic motivation and promoting negativity and low enthusiasm when community service is forced (Henderson et al., 2011). Thus, the type of service seems intrinsically related to the value of service relative to students’ attitudes, growth, and emotional development.

In a study that explored participation in mandatory or voluntary community service programs in high school (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kacker, 2007), the authors focused on criteria of personal attributes, academic outcomes, and the impact of the type of service, whether community based or service-learning. Findings revealed that participation in any service activity among high school students is high, however mostly voluntary in nature (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kacker, 2007). Although voluntary service was high, it was also found to be short-lived, with participation occurring only once or twice a year for most students (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kacker, 2007).
The study also suggested that in general, benefits and outcomes of participating in service programs for high school students included higher grades, fewer behavioral issues, increased knowledge of society, and positive adolescent development (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kacker, 2007). Furthermore, students who performed mandated community service seemed to reap the same benefits as those who performed voluntarily (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kacker, 2007). The study implied that any service is better than none at all, but no findings implied that long-term sustained service showed greater gains relative to those who served infrequently (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kacker, 2007). The findings are relevant to the school in my research study with regards to the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, because it questions the need for a sustained mandatory community service program for high school seniors in the final semester during a critical junction when AP classes are preparing students to take their AP exams.

Students’ perceptions. In a study by Jones and Hill (2003), the authors set out to uncover meaning making of students’ perceptions of their participation and motivation to do community service. Their findings revealed that required service was in essence a mixed blessing, in that although it appeared to be beneficial for some high school students, others perceived mandated service requirements in a negative light (Jones & Hill, 2003). The goal of some students was to simply complete the requirement and move on; their view was that if service is mandated, then it is not service in a true sense (Jones & Hill, 2003). The authors found that in order for students to value the commitment of mandated community service, there had to be internal variables of motivation in place, such as student background, responsibilities, and a willingness to improve the lives of others on an altruistic level (Jones & Hill, 2003).
In a similar study, Kacker-Cam and Schmidt (2014) examined experiences of students who participated in community service and their perceptions of autonomy and the ability to make a difference for others. The findings revealed that participation in community service helps students promote their identity development and helps them to manage stress in high school, as mandated community service “can be associated with feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness” (Kacker-Cam & Schmidt, 2014, p. 85). According to the authors, service opportunities may occur in three ways: (1) community service, which does not follow school curriculum and can be required or voluntary, (2) service learning, which is organized to follow curricula, and (3) community-based service learning, which is not integrated into the school curriculum, but organized by community organizations (Kacker-Cam & Schmidt, 2014).

In the same study, other findings by Kacker-Cam and Schmidt (2014) suggested that service to people in need can promote desirable outcomes for students, such as greater self-efficacy and social concern, however, time spent on service shows no direct relationship between the amount of time spent performing the service and desirable outcomes. The study also noted the amount of time was not necessarily a good predictor of future service participation (Kacker-Cam & Schmidt, 2014).

The authors’ findings also revealed that short-term intensive community service provided the best opportunity for the development of student autonomy, competence, and relatedness, all of which can aid in adolescent development, and promote self-determination and identity (Kacker-Cam & Schmidt, 2014). The findings on the volume of time spent performing community service is significant to the problem of practice, as community service in the school is sustained over a significant period of time, similar to the findings by Schmidt, Shumow, and Kacker (2007).
Conclusion. Overall, the outcomes of community service for participating students appear to be positive from the students’ perspective, and beneficial in promoting the Catholic identity and school mission. However, the length of time spent in community service does not necessarily equate with the degree of benefit from the service experience or the extent to which a student participates in future community service activities. The implication here is that it may be acceptable to reduce the time commitment of a community service program relative to the problem of practice, and still make strides in the development of the whole student who stands to benefit from the community service experience, while fulfilling the Catholic identity and school mission of service to others.
Chapter III: Methodology

In this qualitative case study, two features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission, namely academic rigor and community service, were explored through the beliefs, expectations, and experiences of AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators, at an urban, Catholic, college-preparatory high school. Over the past forty plus years, these features have evolved into a dual commitment of the advanced placement (AP) program and a mandatory community service program. Therefore, this research study attempted to understand the experiences of these participants, the school culture from which they function as educators and stakeholders, and how they made meaning of the dual commitment in light of their perspectives on Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission.

Academic rigor is an essential feature of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission, that is, dedication to the development of the person through academic excellence. As such, academic excellence has been critically observed in studies conducted by secondary and higher education professionals to ensure that curricula and standards in Catholic schools are consistently maintained, while simultaneously providing students opportunities to develop their faith and spirituality (Weitzel-O’Neill & Scheopner Torres, 2011).

The benefits of community service programs for students in secondary and higher education have long been studied (Webster & Worrell, 2008). Some researchers have explored Catholic high schools that have historically placed more emphasis on academic rigor and less on service to others, yet sought to improve community service efforts to better reflect the Catholic identity (Fuller & Johnson, 2014). Thus far, no study has explored the interplay or dual commitment of academic rigor and community service at the secondary school level from a standpoint of a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources, due in part to the reality
that community service programs for high school students are typically voluntary in nature and participation often takes place outside of the school day.

The rationale behind the Catholic high school in this study having a mandatory community service program in place of school days in the final semester prior to the administration of AP exams is to establish a consistency of participation in order for the service experience to be meaningful, effective, “regular, and sustained” (Henderson et al., 2007, p. 850).

In the high school of this study, in grades nine through eleven, a service-learning component is integrated in all religion classes, intended to engage younger students to participate in community service autonomously, as well as promote the development of the whole student. Students are required to perform a set number of community service hours on their own time per marking period in order to meet the criteria of their religion classes.

**Research Questions**

This qualitative case study will be guided by three research questions:

1. What is the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor and community service at an urban Catholic, college-preparatory high school, which are two features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission?

2. What are the beliefs of individuals who are educators and stakeholders at this high school, namely, administrators, campus ministry personnel, and teachers in the Advanced Placement (AP) program?

3. What are the expectations of these individuals, and how do they make meaning of their experiences in light of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service?
Research Design

The research study was conducted using Stake’s (1995) qualitative approach of descriptive case study (Yazan, 2015) within the theoretical framework of culture theory (Goodenough, 1981). Purposeful sampling was represented in the participants, namely, AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators. Recruitment was on-site, and one on one, semi-structured interviews took place in an effort to gather rich data. Other data collection methods included handwritten note taking of classroom observations, artifacts related to the organization, and documents related to the problem of practice.

**Descriptive case study.** The descriptive case study method was used in this research in part because the method aimed to explore the experiences of individuals in order to best capture their own perceptions of the reality of the school within context (Moustakas, 1994). The experiences of the study’s participants provided first-hand information that was personal, and yielded descriptive data, which was beneficial in understanding phenomena (Patton, 2002). The method was applicable as it is “anchored in real-life situations” or events that resulted in “a rich account” of a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). According to Yin (2009a), the definition of case study is “an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (case), set within real-world context – especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p.18).

Noor (2008) stated that case study methodology allows the researcher to gain a new perspective on a phenomenon existing within an organization. Case study is not generally used to research an entire organization; instead it is “intended to focus on a particular issue” (Noor, 2008, p. 1602). Thus, case study design was appropriate to my own study, as the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service did not impact all teachers or all grade
levels; instead, it was specific to AP teachers of students in the final semester of the twelfth grade.

The size of my study was a single case study, “in which the focus is on the case itself because the case presents an unusual or unique situation” (Creswell, 2013, p. 100). This allowed the researcher to explore an issue or event more deeply as it existed in real-world context in a single setting (the high school of this study), which affected subgroups (AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators) within the organization.

The descriptive single case study method applies to three features of a research protocol: (1) the relevance of the research question, (2) the collection of data in natural settings, and (3) the conducting of an evaluation (Yin, 2006). First, the relevance of the inquiry was applicable, as descriptive case study addressed the explanatory nature of the central question in this study. Second, data collection occurred in a natural setting through open-ended, semi-structured interviews and field observations. Lastly, an evaluation of the findings through data analysis provided an explanation of the phenomenon, along with limitations of the study and implications for future research. It was the hope of the researcher that a descriptive case study approach would yield a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants in certain situations and how they made meaning of their experiences, which is the “essence…of a phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p.23).

**Sampling.** The sampling strategy used was stratified purposeful sampling because “it illustrates subgroups and facilitates comparisons” (Creswell, 2013, p.158). The participants in this study were three subgroups within the school organization who were impacted by the problem of practice, specifically, (1) AP teachers, (2) campus ministry personnel, and (3) administrators.
**AP teachers.** The AP teachers included those from two subject areas with varying degrees of experience and accreditation. Little was known about the type of instruction utilized on a shared, collegial level, however, most AP teachers will require students to take the AP exam as their final exam, and data from score performance were made available in shared AP instructional reports provided to the faculty at the start of the new school year.

**Campus ministry personnel.** The campus ministry personnel consisted of the director and assistant director. These individuals, in collaboration with the Religion department, are responsible for the spiritual development of each student, regardless of religious affiliation. The director and assistant director answer directly to the school principal, who has authority over the school’s religious activities such as class retreats and community service programs. The campus ministry department generally consists of a fairly large group of student leaders, student participants and teacher participants, but historically not so, as the department used to function only on an occasional basis and with minimal student and teacher participation.

**Administrators.** The president of the high school in this study is the school leader who oversees all aspects of the school and makes all final decisions. The president plays an active role in the daily operations of the school, works closely with the school principal and administrative cabinet, and answers to the Board of Trustees, which includes members of the Catholic sponsorship. The president is a graduate of the school and thus, has a strong affiliation and loyalty to the school.

The high school’s principal is second in line after the school’s president, is responsible for the day-to-day operation, and answers directly to the School President, who oversees all decisions, and develops long-term strategic planning and vision for the future. The principal is an educator and an ordained minister of the Catholic Church, who is also committed to both
academic rigor and community service. He is mindful of the importance of the school upholding its Catholic identity and mission as a Catholic, college-preparatory high school.

Recruitment. The study site was an urban, Catholic, college-preparatory high school where the researcher is a veteran teacher. To recruit participants, the researcher followed protocol set forth by the school’s administration when seeking permission to conduct semi-structured interviews and field observations. Participants were recruited through approved letters of informed consent that explained the purpose of the study, requested their participation, and ensured confidentiality of responses by interviewing each participant separately in a location of their choosing. Field observations also required informed consent, as the teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators being observed were also interviewees. Approval of letters of informed consent was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University.

All recorded responses and all data collected were stored safely until such time when all data can be destroyed in accordance with the rules set forth by the doctoral program in Education of the School of Professional Studies at Northeastern University.

Data Collection

In this section, data collection was described as gathering information from the following sources: interviews, field observations, artifacts, and documents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for all three sub-groups in my research study, that is, AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators, and recorded on an audio device. Observations of classroom activities and meetings and recorded through handwritten field notes. Information was also gathered from artifacts and documents related to the Catholic identity, school mission, school-sponsorship, academic rigor, and community service. All data, recorded and handwritten,
was safely stored in accordance with the rules set forth by the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University.

**Interviews.** The justification for involving AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators was based on the problem of practice, in which the dual commitment to academic rigor and mandatory community service directly involved educators and stakeholders. Two open-ended, semi-structured interviews for each participant were conducted in a secure location, each approximately forty-five minutes in length. The first set of interviews attempted to explore the phenomenon of being an AP teacher, of being personnel in the campus ministry program, and of being an administrator within the school of my study. The second set of interviews focused on the beliefs and expectations of these participants with regard to the problem of practice, how these participants made meaning of the phenomenon of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, and how this phenomenon had impacted their daily living and functioning within the school. All semi-structured interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and audio recordings were stored on a password-protected home computer. The researcher in this study needed to be conscious of how interviews were conducted, first by listening more and talking less, and second, by allowing the “inner voice” of these participants to come through (Seidman, 2013, p. 78)

**Field observations.** Classroom observations of AP teachers in their specific subject area were conducted to explore their experiences as teachers who were responsible for parlaying challenging course content, and how they made meaning as teachers in a Catholic high school that valued both academic rigor and community service. The researcher also observed personnel from campus ministry in their daily interactions with students in the campus ministry office. The researcher sat in on meetings of school administrators’ interactions with other administrators,
faculty, and staff through general faculty and administrative meetings. All observations were recorded manually in field notes for the purpose of data collection.

**Artifacts and documents.** Data collection from various documents was critical in exploring and understanding the research problem. These documents included, but were not limited to, the encyclical on the Catholic identity, the high school’s mission statement and philosophy, documents based on the philosophy of the sponsorship of the school, the school’s graduation requirements, State and National education standards, the nature of the AP program, AP instructional reports, and the school’s community service program. Artifacts included religious symbols evident throughout the school building.

**Data Analysis**

After collecting data from semi-structured interviews, field observations, artifacts, and documents, the researcher transcribed data utilizing the coding process of open coding by manually highlighting and annotating key points and repetitions through MAXQDA12 software. The researcher began the coding process by using the left margin of the interview transcript and field notes for in vivo codes (Creswell, 2012). In order to properly reflect on my data collection, analytic memos were written and information summarized from artifacts, field notes and interview transcripts. Once all data had been summarized and reflected upon thoughtfully, lean coding was used to organize the data by grouping similar code words and checking for redundancy (Creswell, 2012). In reducing the codes to a final list, common elements and themes emerged, and, according to Creswell (2012), I was able to “identify five to seven themes” (p. 245). MAXQDA12 software was used to further analyze the text, as it allowed for the weighing of codes more accurately through visual maps and code relationship browsers (Creswell, 2012).
Trustworthiness

In order to maintain trustworthiness and validity in this study, the researcher needed to clarify research bias (Creswell, 2013) at the start of my research study, by being aware that positionality as both the researcher and an AP teacher could potentially influence the study’s outcomes. Thus, the researcher was conscious of and made a concerted effort to remain as objective as possible throughout my study, especially when conducting interviews and field observations.

Alternatively, the researcher needed to acknowledge the value of perspective as an AP teacher, yet to the extent that it did not influence the study’s outcome. In so doing, biases were bracketed. Conducting a series of two semi-structured interviews per participant helped build trust, and through the observing of class activities, the interactions between campus ministry personnel and students, and observing administrators during faculty and staff meetings, helped to deepen an understanding of the subgroups, and to “check for misinformation that stems from distortions introduced by the researcher or informants” (Creswell, 2013, p.251).

Member checking was performed (Creswell, 2013, p. 252) by asking participants to read through transcripts of their own interviews for accuracy in the data collected in order to increase trustworthiness and credibility. Furthermore, the utilization of peer review or debriefing provided a way to validate the research process (Creswell, 2013).

When analyzing data, aspects of the study were examined, such as participants’ feelings, opinions, perspectives, attitudes, and behavior, and objectivity was paramount in judging participant responses. To further increase the validity of the data, triangulation was used as a process that “corroborates evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection” (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). In this study, triangulation involved categorizing data from
semi-structured interviews of AP teachers, campus ministry personnel and administrators, from field observations, and from the evaluation of artifacts and documents, in light of Catholic Identity and the Catholic school mission.

The following figure represents triangulation used in this research study:

![Triangulation Model](image)

*Figure 1. Triangulation Model*

**Conclusion**

The overarching threat in maintaining internal validity was positionality as both the researcher and the AP biology teacher, in familiar surroundings, who interviewed supervisors and colleagues, where there may have been some reluctance in responding to various questions, or who may have responded in ways they assumed the researcher preferred. Intentions were clarified while conducting interviews and field observations so that the researcher could support the role of participants, and ensure anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study.
Chapter IV: Thematic Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, two features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission at an urban, Catholic, college-preparatory high school. Additionally, it attempted to understand the beliefs of educators and stakeholders at the school, with regard to the school’s Advanced Placement (AP) program and the community service program, and how they make meaning of their experiences in light of a dual commitment to academic rigor and community service.

This chapter presents a data collection of participants’ interviews, field observations of AP classes, administrative meetings, and campus ministry meetings, as well as artifacts and documents. All participants, and the school itself, were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The data were analyzed using MAXQDA12 software.

The contents of this chapter are structured in the following way: Section A is focused on central research question one; Section B, on research question two; and Section C, on research question three. In section A, a participant is introduced and background information, such as roles and responsibilities, is provided. In addition, the participant’s overall perspective on the central research question is gleaned. In sections B and C, an analysis of the participant’s beliefs and expectations are discussed. Through an evaluation of interview transcripts, field observations, artifacts, and documents, a series of themes began to emerge. Themes were further evaluated and synthesized into several key findings that provided the basis for the explanation of the problem of practice.
Research Question 1

What is the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, two features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission, at an urban Catholic, college-preparatory high school?

School President. Mr. Smith, the school president, has been associated with St. Pio High School for several decades, first as a student, then as alum of the school. A few years after graduating from college, he was hired as a math teacher, and has worn many hats since, including athletic coach, summer school principal, director of continuing education, and principal. The president’s undergraduate and graduate experience include business degrees, which serve him well, as he is responsible for all of the school’s finances. His job description includes that of chief executive officer, overseeing the principal, administrative cabinet, faculty, and staff, and must answer himself to the school’s board of trustees. Mr. Smith values Catholic education, having spent his primary and secondary school years in Catholic schools. He credits his Catholic upbringing as being influential in his life, and stated he would not have gone into the vocation of teaching if he couldn’t teach at a Catholic school.

Overall, Mr. Smith’s perspective on the problem of practice highlights the phenomenon of a dual commitment, where he values both academic rigor within the AP program and the community service model implemented at the school. His belief that Catholic education is defined by academic rigor and associated with academic excellence is clear, and acknowledges the number of offerings within the school - “we offer probably more courses at the AP level than most schools do” and, “the advanced placement model dovetails quite nicely with what we try to offer here in our school.” Mr. Smith firmly believes in the school mission and philosophy of “pushing young people to their fullest potential” and lauds the AP teachers who spend their own
time voluntarily and without compensation, outside of the school day, including weekends, to
cover course material, review for tests, and prepare for the AP exam.

Mr. Smith also views the community service model as a symbol of the Catholic identity
and the school’s mission. He states, “St. Pio High School is about what Catholic education is
about, and what being a Catholic is about - giving back in service to others.” He draws attention
to the fact that many faculty members chaperone retreats willingly, and that “there are many
within our community who would like to see service opportunities expand and for more time to
be taken for service programs.” He also acknowledges, “we also see a significant part of our
population cry out, and rightly so, for more class time.” When describing his own teaching
career, the president refers to teaching as a “vocation”, in other words, “a call to serve.” This is
an interesting point, as it appears in the view of the president that teaching itself is reflective of a
community service model.

Principal. Mr. Brown is the principal of St. Pio High School and has a longstanding
association with the school in a variety of capacities. When first hired, he taught Theology and
English for a number of years, followed by administrative positions as dean of students, the
director of guidance, and the assistant principal for academics. In his current position as
principal, Mr. Brown answers directly to the president. He is responsible for the daily operations
of the school and has an administrative team consisting of assistant principals, deans, directors,
and department chairs.

Mr. Brown readily admits that he initially joined the faculty as a young teacher because
“I needed a job”; the fact it was a Catholic school also influenced his decision to apply, as he
strongly identifies as being Catholic, “I’m a Catholic educator.” Mr. Brown emphasizes the
significance of this statement in that “being Catholic is a lot more than parroting dogma…it’s a
perspective of a worldview…in which we see the world as God’s canvas.” He views two things that are paramount in his position, (1) “we’re a Catholic school”, and (2) “we’re a college-preparatory school.”

Mr. Brown’s belief in the academic rigor of the AP program reflects a commitment to challenging students to take courses that may seem out of reach. However, he also acknowledges that standards must be maintained in the AP program, and firmly believes that “pushing” a student demonstrates strong academic rigor and the goal of opening minds to see logic and application in everything they do. He sees value in helping students exceed beyond what they believe are their capabilities in order to create generations of individuals “who want to do more, who push more, who aren’t happy with, that’s enough…but say, what’s next”? Alternatively, the principal acknowledges that some students placed into AP level classes may not always be prepared for the demanding workload.

Mr. Brown offered an historical overview of the community service model, in place for over forty years. He states the original intention of the community service program was to provide opportunities for graduating seniors in their final semester to make better use of time as they had already fulfilled graduation requirements prior to that time period. As a result, the service component evolved into an added graduation requirement that gave students a wide array of community service opportunities, including, but not limited to, elementary schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and professional offices.

Mr. Brown emphasizes the longevity of the community service program to be a pivotal aspect of what defines the school; “it is a hallmark of what we’ve done for over forty years…you have to also hear the tradition…service is as important as an English or a Bio course.” He acknowledges the issue of the loss of class time during the community service program,
commenting the program has had to adapt throughout its history, “we’re packaging a 1970 product into a 21st Century reality.”

**Director of Campus Ministry.** Mr. Jones, the director of campus ministry at St. Pio high school, is responsible for the spiritual development of all students through prayer service, mass, retreats, and community service programs. He has been a faculty member of the school for close to twenty-five years. He began his teaching career at another high school, teaching English and Sociology, but admittedly moved on to St. Pio’s in search of a “better paying position.” He soon realized the potential to support a family while teaching in a Catholic school, sensing the school was where he felt comfortable and where he belonged. Mr. Jones is a product of Catholic schools and currently teaches a religion course at the high school.

Mr. Jones’ perspective on academic rigor is that having a Catholic identity is “hard work” in that it often brings about a struggle between Catholic spirituality and academic rigor. He believes academic rigor is a “gift” that should be used to benefit human kind, and that students need to push themselves to further develop their gifts. Furthermore, Mr. Jones believes a school cannot survive without strong academic rigor and suggests that students should approach course material of a religion class with the same approach as course material in any other class. He points to other high schools having chosen to place academic rigor as their top priority by not allowing students to experience community service, and that the academic rigor of the AP curriculum at St. Pio high school is more affected by scheduling issues such as abbreviated school days.

As the director of campus ministry, Mr. Jones clearly believes the community service model is an integral part of the development of the whole student. He highlights the technological age as a factor in producing a “culture of self-centeredness”, such as overuse of
cellphones and little verbal communication. Mr. Jones sees the community service program as a way to break down the self-centeredness and enlighten the student as to their gifts and strengths. He points out, “Empathy - you can’t teach that in a classroom.” From his perspective, there is a great need for a community service program at the high school level because it promotes the possibility of change, as it can bring a student “to a different area, spiritually, emotionally, and socially.”

**Co-Director of Campus Ministry.** Mr. Williams is co-director of campus ministry at St. Pio high school and has been associated with the school for nearly fifteen years. He began his teaching career in the History and Religion departments, and continues to teach several classes of religion across grade levels. Mr. Williams is an alum of the school and credits the faculty and staff for his formation as a student; one of the main reasons for his return: “…because of the individuals that I found to make the school feel as it was, at times, a first home…”

Mr. Williams describes academic rigor in light of the Catholic identity as a way of challenging students with coursework like the AP program. He believes there is a strong connection between academic rigor and the Catholic identity; that although academic programs are inherently difficult, they should also be available for as many students as possible. He sees the connection in opportunities like the AP program which allows students to utilize their “spiritual gifts” and help identify who they are individually as they face the difficulties of AP subject matter.

In light of the school’s mission, Mr. Williams believes academic rigor is clearly reflected in the school’s mission statement, which has undergone recent changes. He sees parallels among a changing world, community, and school, and feels the remodeling of the school’s mission is appropriate: “as the world continues to change, our school continues to change, our mission
continues to change.” Mr. Williams agrees the school’s mission should evolve because of the need to move forward, both in the academic and spiritual formation of the school.

The co-director of campus ministry defines community service in light of the Catholic identity as a growth process for students, where they are given opportunities to help others in need and to reflect on that experience. He sees the main objective of participating in community service is to help bring students closer to their faith, aligned with the Catholic identity and the school’s mission. Mr. Williams acknowledges the importance of the sponsorship of the school, the founding religious order who were instrumental in establishing the community service program decades ago, and believes students should be given the opportunity to do community service as a way to learn more about the values of the school’s religious order.

**AP Teacher 1.** Mr. Moore is an AP history teacher who has spent nearly fifty years as a faculty member at St. Pio high school. He became interested in teaching by chance and applied for a position as a language teacher upon graduating from college. Throughout his teaching career, Mr. Moore has taken on a variety of roles, including coaching and moderating the student council. Mr. Moore expresses his deep affection for the school, how much he enjoys teaching, and sharing his perspective on historical events and issues with his students.

Mr. Moore defines academic rigor as the way students process information and whether they are able to synthesize new connections among given facts; he does not believe academic rigor includes a student’s ability to memorize or recite text. He comments that questions related to academic rigor and the Catholic identity are difficult to answer, as he believes “there is a notion that if you’re a religious person you cannot be terribly intelligent.” He feels an individual can be an intellect and be faith-filled; this he views as the connection between academic rigor and the Catholic identity. Regarding the school’s mission, Mr. Moore believes the school has
done a good job of preparing students for the academic challenge of top-tiered colleges and universities. He states that from what he has observed, students in the AP program “seem to be doing quite well” in post-secondary education.

The AP history teacher’s perspective on the school’s community service program is one that reflects, “what it means to be Catholic”, that is, the “caring of neighbor” and the “sacrificing of time to help others in need”. In this regard, he sees a distinct connection between community service and the Catholic identity. Regarding the school’s mission, Mr. Moore believes the mission is to “raise good Catholics” through charitable work, and is impressed by the number of students who volunteer their time to help the less fortunate during holidays. He points to the community service program for students who are in their final semester as something the school does exceptionally well, because it is a “wonderful experience.”

**AP Teacher 2.** Mr. Anderson is an AP Mathematics teacher who was hired several years ago at St. Pio high school. He attended public school from elementary through high school, and was accepted to a prestigious Catholic college. Although he is Catholic, Mr. Anderson states that at the time, he was unaware of the Catholic sponsorship of the college. It is for this reason he felt that St. Pio high school would be a good fit for his teaching career. As a math teacher, Mr. Anderson is highly organized in his lesson planning and prepares his AP class by mapping out the entire school year while hardly missing a class or taking a personal day.

Mr. Anderson views academic rigor in terms of priorities - it is the expectation that students acknowledge that academics are a top priority among all their commitments. He defines academic rigor by the idea of “pushing yourself beyond your own expectations”; to think critically, to make evaluative conclusions, and to see connections in what is learned. Mr. Anderson views academic rigor as a significant component of the Catholic identity based on his
own experiences as an undergraduate. He states the college’s religious order would always preach the importance of education, and he sees an interconnection among academic rigor, the Catholic identity, and the high school’s mission statement. To that point, Mr. Anderson agrees the high school’s mission is focused on academic excellence, and that colleagues generally challenge students to be their best.

Mr. Anderson acknowledges however, at times, academic rigor does not appear to be a consistent priority for students, in that there are many options available to them that may cause schoolwork to occasionally take a backseat. He perceives that many students “want everything”, but that “it’s not always attainable to do everything.” The AP math teacher has a sincere appreciation for the academic rigor of the AP program, and states he enjoys teaching the math course immensely. In comparison to public schools, Mr. Anderson believes St. Pio’s offers fewer options within the AP program in order to make room for other required classes, such as religion and the STEM program. He also believes there is an underlying opinion among a number of students during course selection to, “just take this”, or, “I’ll just do this because I have to.” Consequently, Mr. Anderson believes students may not be taking the course selection process for AP enrollment in a serious manner.

Mr. Anderson explains the aspect of community service in light of the Catholic identity as “putting others before yourself.” He sees a connection with the Catholic identity and the school’s mission, encouraging students to perform selfless acts of community service, and “thinking about other people’s struggles.” He believes the school’s community service program is a pathway for removing a student’s self-focus, in that, “the world isn’t your own life.”

Mr. Anderson recognizes the community service experience as an integral part of “educating the student from a different perspective, not just academically.” He points out that as
students in the lower grades begin to participate in community service on their own time, outside of school hours, the nature of the community service model changes as students enter twelfth grade, mainly due to participation in community service now taking place during the school day.

**Research Question 2**

*What are the beliefs of individuals who are educators and stakeholders at this high school, namely, administrators, campus ministry personnel, and teachers in the Advanced Placement (AP) program?*

**School President.** Mr. Smith views Catholic education as an integral part of the Catholic identity and one that is defined by academic excellence and rigor for its students, stating the Catholic school system provides the “greatest academic rigor”. His perspective on the Catholic identity is a belief that “it is the heart of what we do as a school.” The president recognizes the efforts of teachers in the AP program who are willing to give extra classes outside of school hours, and acknowledges the AP courses “get squeezed” due to time constraints within the school schedule. He raises the question of whether AP courses should be offered only to the highest achieving students as opposed to providing all students the opportunity to experience at least one AP-level course, as recommended by the College Board. In that regard, expectations within the AP program change in order to adapt to a more inclusive enrollment. Mr. Smith states that incremental improvements have been made over the last ten years in AP score performance within the school. He speculates the reason other schools have better AP scores is due in part to fewer AP course offerings, and that graduating seniors overall take fewer classes, giving them more time to adequately prepare for AP exams.

Mr. Smith explains the school’s mission historically through the lens of the school’s founding religious order and through recent changes to the school’s mission statement.
According to Mr. Smith, part of the school’s mission is to recognize the potential in students, to develop students into leaders within our society, and to encourage students to give back in service to others.

The school president values the community service model as one that allows students in all grade levels to experience first-hand what it means to serve the community, and has continued the tradition of mandating the community service program as a graduation requirement. Mr. Smith states that he has witnessed first-hand the positive impact a community service experience has on a student, and believes the community service model plays a critical role in the education of the whole student. He views the community service program as a way to connect what students have learned in their formative years in high school to what they are “called to do as Catholics.”

**Principal.** Mr. Brown’s perspective on academic rigor is further assessed in his commentary on pushing students “out of their comfort zone” and believes that this may not be measurable by grades alone, but that effort needs to be considered as well. He states that true academic rigor is in the effort made when a student works beyond expectations.

According to Mr. Brown, the Catholic identity translates into a Catholic understanding, where there is no choice, in that “we are compelled to engage the world”, a goal which he desires to instill in every student. He believes the path to this goal lies within the standards of academic rigor. Mr. Brown has likened the full school schedule to “trying to put five pounds of apples into a three-pound bag”; that the school traditionally offers more in the way of academic programs, courses, and extra-curricular activities [“we can do everything”]. However, he acknowledges, “this also hurts us at the same time.”
The principal deeply values the commitment to the community service program and associates the school’s mission of service to others (“we serve with humility”) as an integral part of the Catholic identity. He believes the program takes away the self-centeredness of the student, which he feels has become more pronounced due to technology. According to Mr. Brown, the way students break free from this self-centeredness is by “getting out of the building”, which “demands that they see the world larger than themselves and larger than the school itself.”

**Director of Campus Ministry.** Mr. Jones views the association between academic rigor and the Catholic identity, particularly Catholic spirituality, as somewhat conflicted, in that students need to learn information, but that learning should also “go to the heart.” According to Mr. Jones, this causes tension between the student’s academic and spiritual development.

Mr. Jones believes the foundation of the Catholic identity within the school is established by the administration, and that in order to promote the spiritual development of each student, the religious education laity “need to collaborate.” Regarding the AP program, Mr. Jones readily admits his unfamiliarity with the program, having never taught an AP class, except to say the AP program is a prime example of strong academic rigor in any school.

Alternatively, Mr. Jones is very familiar with the school’s longstanding community service program, and has slowly taken over the responsibilities of its implementation. He is proud of the continued work in engaging students in their final high school year to perform community service at a site of their choosing, and emphasizes the importance of the spiritual development of each student through community service work. Mr. Jones states what is most impressive is, “seeing our seniors in a way, in a place…they are doing something that you normally don’t see in the classroom…paying attention and reaching out to help…engaging
someone else…so it’s very powerful.” The directory of campus ministry is fully committed to keeping the community service program as a graduation requirement for students in their final semester, along with all other service activities in place for underclassmen to complete as a requirement in religion class.

Co-director of Campus Ministry. Mr. Williams believes a Catholic school needs to “evolve” both in its course offerings and faith-based programs in order to adapt to a changing world. He views the school’s mission as one that is reflective of a contemporary age, whose tenets will help the school meet the challenges of academic rigor and service to others, yet remain centered on faith. When considering academic rigor, Mr. Williams firmly believes all students should be afforded opportunities to take at least one AP course:

I know when I say this, it almost waters down the integrity of AP, but I’m not trying to do that…I believe a student has a subject strength, a mastery…and just because their GPA may not reflect the academic requirements for AP, if a student has an academic mastery in a certain course, allow them the opportunity to see what AP is like…challenge themselves.

He further states that if a student has worked to his or her ability and receives a satisfactory grade, then it is more important to acknowledge what is “genuinely earned” as opposed to focusing on just score performance on the AP exam.

In discussing the school’s overall AP score performance, Mr. Williams questions whether it can be attributed to one specific factor or if there are multiple variables at work. He states that overall, improvements have been made, but not consistently, noting fluctuations in score performance across disciplines year to year. He views positive change to the school’s AP program is partly based on increased class time and the hiring of teachers who bring creativity to
the classroom and who challenge students intellectually: “I have heard exceptional things happening in the AP program, and I believe, specifically with the hiring of new teachers.” Mr. Williams also notes that he is not familiar with data on how students’ AP exam performance compares to the rest of the country.

Regarding community service, the co-director of campus ministry believes the main purpose of a student performing community service is to provide an opportunity for self-reflection and to “bring one closer to the faith.” He also views the uniqueness of the service activity as capable of affecting a student in different ways. In his ministry, Mr. Williams emphasizes the importance of the sponsorship of the school, of modeling the founding religious order’s commitment to serving others, and in keeping the community service program as a graduation requirement. He considers the program for students in their final semester to be an opportunity to reinforce the school’s message of a call to serve, to promote spiritual growth where students see that what they do in service to others can make a difference, and to encourage service work beyond graduation.

**AP Teacher 1.** Mr. Moore states academic rigor relative to the AP program is evident when students think critically and can “convince others of their argument.” When asked if the AP history class is representative of academic rigor, Mr. Moore emphatically states, “in my case, no”, citing the presence of three different groups of students in his class – average, advanced, and students who enroll only for college credit. He notes academic rigor is most evident when students can point to contradictions in the material. He adds that this level of critical thinking is demonstrated from students who are typically motivated, interested, and take the course with the intention of preparing and performing well on the AP exam.
The AP history teacher recognizes the school’s community service program is a “graduation requirement” and believes wholeheartedly that, “you graduate from a Catholic school, therefore you have to show us that you want to be a good [Catholic] individual.” He further states that this is easily demonstrated through community service work. Mr. Moore acknowledges that although the community service program is a graduation requirement, he has observed students willing to volunteer their time, in that, “they don’t seem to do it reluctantly.”

**AP Teacher 2.** Mr. Anderson acknowledges that although the construct of academic rigor is difficult to define, he agrees the academic rigor within the AP program is appropriate. He believes the AP coursework in mathematics truly prepares students for college-level work, in that questions are “thought-provoking and creative, well beyond textbooks.” He admires the structure of questions where new connections are made among single topics, which adds to the course rigor. Mr. Anderson believes the AP curriculum is “a great equalizer”, where student performance within the high school can be compared to that of other students across the nation.

When asked about the school’s adherence to pre-requisites for AP enrollment, Mr. Anderson speaks only to the math class, feeling that pre-requisites may not be stringent enough; that certain students are enrolled for reasons other than math achievement, interest, motivation, and commitment to prepare and perform well on the AP exam. Ultimately, he states that for the most part, students enrolled in the AP program are “there for the right reasons.”

The AP math teacher sees the community service program as worthwhile and important, but firmly believes in upholding standards of academic rigor and “not sacrifice that by having a rigorous community service component.” He reasons why he has not actively participated in the community service program as a teacher, mainly due to his unwillingness to take time off from teaching. In that regard, Mr. Anderson promotes a community service program during vacation
and summer breaks as a more appropriate way to fulfill the graduation requirement of community service.

**Research Question 3**

*What are the expectations of these individuals, and how do they make meaning of their experiences in light of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service?*

**School President.** Mr. Smith is committed to academic rigor and the call to serve as two features of the Catholic identity and the school’s mission, but acknowledges there are struggles in maintaining both the AP program and the community service program with regard to time constraints. He expects all students to work to their full potential and achieve academic excellence; alternatively, he hopes for students to experience community service work on a meaningful level and to instill a lifelong commitment to “serve others.”

Mr. Smith views the work of AP teachers in preparing students for the rigors of AP coursework beyond the school day as an example of the blending of the “service component in action and addressing the rigors of the AP.” In this regard, he attributes the success of the school in part to the caring commitment of teachers in promoting positive learning outcomes and academic achievement.

Mr. Smith recalls fond memories as a student performing community service, stating, “the service experience had a profound effect upon me in my four years.” He credits the community service program as to why so many who are alumni of the school return in a teaching capacity. Each year, Mr. Smith addresses the graduating class at an official ceremony as they are commissioned to perform community service. He informs them the first three years of high school were spent preparing them for this community service experience. He states that as underclassmen, they were learning from teachers and coaches; but that it was for the purpose of
preparing them for what they were about to do, and makes references to the spiritual experience of community service.

The school president views the dual commitment as one that can produce tensions within the school environment. He and his administrative team are examining alternative solutions, such as changes in the daily class schedule or a shift in when community service hours are performed, so as to provide more time for AP coursework, particularly on the senior grade level.

Mr. Smith recognizes that such changes can produce further tensions among constituencies of the school: “people become critical, to say, you’re doing away with the heart of the Catholic service model…so again, I struggle with that.”

Principal. Mr. Brown recognizes there is a “price to pay” for implementing a community service program of this magnitude, that is, lost class time. Thus, he points out the school has attempted to accommodate the class schedule by reducing the number of service hours required in the final semester, and shifting the start of the community service program earlier in the semester. This change was done in anticipation of the students’ return to classes full time for approximately two weeks prior to the AP exam schedule.

The principal addresses the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service in light of changes to the community service program that came about in response to the increased requirements of the AP program. He acknowledges that academic expectations are greater, and changes in the community service program were “not without some growing pains”, in that there were individuals who “criticized the decision.” He is committed to keeping the community service program a graduation requirement and that it is one good aspect of the school, but not the only aspect; that there needs to be a delicate balance between maintaining the academic rigor of the AP program while promoting the community service program.
**Director of Campus Ministry.** Mr. Jones views the dual commitment of academic rigor and service to others as a struggle for coexistence, but believes the tension is appropriate. While he agrees that academic rigor is essential for the survival of any Catholic school, he also sees community service as an integral part of the curriculum. Aside from the community service program at every grade level, Mr. Jones is responsible for religious retreats and outreach programs, and at times feels pressured to either reduce the number of religious activities, or shift the time frame when they occur so as to minimize the loss of class time. For the community service program in the twelfth grade, he points out to recent changes in the number of hours that students are required to serve in their final semester, in order to accommodate AP teachers with more instructional time to complete the curriculum.

The director of campus ministry acknowledges that time is critical for both programs: “I think for community service, you do need a certain amount of time to experience…and there’s got to be a balance of time in academic rigor…I’m guessing the amount of time depends on the subject material…I would imagine math and science class need more time.” His view on both programs is they “both have to be respected”; academically, students need to be challenged, but that it is equally important for students in a Catholic school to develop their spirituality.

**Co-director of Campus Ministry.** Mr. Williams’ expectations regarding academic rigor and community service are a way to “build the entire student” and feels this aligns with the Catholic identity and school’s mission. In discussing the variable of time devoted to AP coursework and community service work, Mr. Williams acknowledges, “academics come first” and that calling students down to the campus ministry office during class is “never intentional”, and “we need to be more conscious of it.”
Mr. Williams feels motivated each day when underclassmen, who are also required in their religion classes to perform community service on their own time, recount their community service experience to him, and relay their strong desire to become part of his retreat team in their senior year. He believes this is a culmination of the celebration of the spiritual gifts students possess and “eye-opening moments.” The co-director of campus ministry also recognizes a need to reexamine the school schedule in order to increase class time while incorporating “the value of community service.”

**AP Teacher 1.** When asked specifically about the coexistence of academic rigor and community service for students in their final semester, Mr. Moore finds the question difficult to answer. He explains the importance of maintaining academic rigor in promoting independent learners. Alternatively, he believes students should “gain experience in dealing with people” in order to promote maturity, responsibility, and a “real human being.” Mr. Moore sees the latter being more important than a student’s academic ability and knowledge. He adds:

I think the (community service program) creates a well-rounded individual…you don’t want an individual who just studies, that’s not enough…you have to do more than that to contribute to society, and so I believe that it does make for a better graduate by having community service.

Regarding the variable of time for the AP and community service programs, the AP history teacher believes AP students are “unique, confident”, and independent learners who are capable of learning course material on their own. Therefore, he does not perceive a conflict between time devoted to AP classes and time devoted to community service work, and believes both programs can coexist with minimal conflict or time constraints.
AP Teacher 2. Mr. Anderson appreciates and enjoys teaching at the level of intensity in the AP math class, and expects students who enroll in the AP program to understand the nature of this level of coursework and be prepared for the challenges. He also values the significance of community service work in the education of the whole student, and in allowing students to “gain a better perspective on the world.” He also agrees the community service program should remain a graduation requirement.

Regarding the academic rigor within the AP program and the concurrent implementation of the community service program, Mr. Anderson believes this coexistence is not without tension and conflict. He views the community service program offered to students in their final semester before graduation as a “great opportunity for a lot of [students] who maybe have never had that sort of experience…where they were exposed to being around people who are in need of help.” Alternatively, he believes by offering the opportunity for community service in place of class time may send the wrong message to students about the importance of keeping up with AP coursework and preparing for the AP exam. If participation in the community service program took place during weekends or holiday breaks, then Mr. Anderson believes it would be a greater symbol of self-sacrifice and the true meaning of a call to serve.

The AP math teacher’s view of the AP program and the community service program is, “they are equally important”, and believes this to be the point of the school’s mission, where the fusion of these programs is what differentiates Catholic schools from public schools. However, he does not believe in prioritizing these programs, and feels conflicted in that he supports the idea of community service and the school’s continuation of the program, clearly values instructional time necessary in the AP program. In response to what he sees as conflicted, Mr. Anderson states he has adapted to the coexistence of both programs, and intentionally navigates
around the loss of class time by being available for students after school and weekends to cover material or review for exams. He acknowledges there is much planning on his part to maintain the level of academic rigor within his AP math class, “a two-semester college-level course in a high school year”, particularly when the community service program is in place.

**Field Observations**

In observing administrative meetings, campus ministry meetings, and AP class lessons, data collected revealed the focus of each participant in light of their position as educator and stakeholder. The school president’s and principal’s focus on the future of the school through a strategic planning meeting emphasized the Catholic identity of the school and the importance of improving AP, STEM, and SAT score performance, which is further discussed in Chapter V. Campus ministry personnel met with underclassmen in planning for performing community service at a local soup kitchen for the day. The campus ministry department stressed the need for students to be open to the experience and allow spiritual transformation to take place by serving others. The director and co-director stressed the importance of serving the soup kitchen patrons with respect and whenever possible, engaging in conversation with patrons who are in need of support and sympathy. The AP teachers each had their own style and approach to the lesson; where the AP history teacher delivered a structured lesson on constitutional law and engaged students in a variety of issues, the AP math teacher covered several topics and allowed students to work collaboratively in problem-solving, and encouraged participation in students writing solutions to each problem set on the board.
## Emerging Themes

<table>
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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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| Delicate balance| • Promoting a meaningful spiritual experience through community service work against all the other demands of high school life  
                                      • Having a tradition of offering everything and being able to do everything and calling for an administrative “no” to some projects  
                                      • Tension between academic rigor and Catholic spirituality within the context of the Catholic identity  
                                      • Tension within the AP program, particularly for students who are placed but may not succeed  
                                      • Students are conflicted as to what they want – seek rigors of AP coursework, but also interested in community service work  
                                      • Teachers are conflicted, as they see value in both academic rigor and community service |
| Priorities       | • Academic rigor and academic excellence should be a top priority  
                                      • Students have to choose between spending time preparing for classes and participating in community service work  
                                      • Academic rigor becomes secondary  
                                      • Sense that students are getting the message that it’s acceptable to participate in community service work instead of attending classes |
| Whole student    | • Building the entire student – physical, academic, intellectual, and spiritual development  
                                      • Development leads to greater self-awareness, self-esteem and empowerment to make a difference  
                                      • Gaining the experience of dealing with people can promote maturity and social responsibility, and have a positive impact  
                                      • Community service experience helps to educate students from a different perspective; encourages development of a wider worldview |
| Call to serve    | • Community service helps to move a student away from his/her centeredness to understanding the needs of others  
                                      • Teenagers can be egocentric; community service opens students up to the experience of serving others, to do something for someone else, which is powerful  
                                      • Call to serve through community service models faith and the Catholic identity; as a Catholic you must give of yourself unselfishly, thus the community service program is worthwhile for how it affects students in positive ways |
An evaluation of the data collected from semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and field observations yielded four emerging themes:

On the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service:

1. A delicate balance between promoting a spiritual experience through community service work against all the other demands of high school life has created some tension and struggle.

On the dilemma of priorities for time and resources:

2. Maintaining academic rigor in the AP program often becomes secondary to the requirement of community service participation for students in their final semester before AP exams and graduation.

On the Catholic identity:

3. The community service model is framed in response to the self-centeredness of high school students by promoting a “call to serve.”

On the Catholic school mission:

4. A commitment to the education of the whole student is paramount.

Each of the themes is discussed in some detail below.

A delicate balance between promoting a spiritual experience through community service work against all the other demands of high school life has created tension and struggle. As in all grade levels, students in the twelfth grade enrolled in the honors/AP program typically have a full course load that may also include participation in one or more divisions of the school’s music program, as well as myriad extra-curricular activities. Through the college selection process, many students are well informed as to the college they will attend by the end of the first semester. As common as it is for high school students to, at times, become poorly
motivated when their college career choice is secured, the school in this study couples this time period with the community service program, where students participate during school hours at community service sites two days a week for a period of approximately eight weeks. Upon returning to class three days a week, there is a noticeable change in students’ work ethic, motivation, focus, and even attendance. In the remaining two to three weeks of the final semester shy of the AP and final exams, students are attending classes full-time; however, this is often considered time to “catch-up” on course material, complete the curriculum, and, time permitting, review for exams. AP teachers often have to balance a rigorous course curriculum against the time remaining, which may result in tension and struggle to achieve course objectives and prepare students for the AP exam. As an AP teacher participant, Mr. Anderson expressed his own struggles with completing the curriculum:

> It is so conflicting, because the AP program is, I think, a model that stands for the idea of taking college courses as a high school student. I mean, that alone is just a difficult task, especially when they (students) are doing so many things. I think the way the community service program and the AP program coexists, it forces teachers to do much more beyond, I think, what their class time allows them to do. It is not possible to really finish certain curriculum. As a teacher, I can never be absent, because if I were, I would feel like I lost such valuable time. The community service aspect makes you really have to pay close attention to how you are going to do things, how you are going to assess kids, and making sure that they are not overwhelmed, too.

Some teachers seem to be more conflicted than others over the dual commitment to the AP program and the community service program. The conflict lies in the lack of class time and resources, i.e., test preparation, needed to thoroughly complete the AP curriculum. Some have
resorted to providing after-school and Saturday classes, while others have had to modify their curriculum to meet the timeline. Alternatively, the other AP teacher participant, Mr. Moore, seemed less concerned about this conflict, but more about the mixed abilities of his AP students, stating the class did not entirely represent academic rigor. He agreed in the community service program as a graduation requirement, and felt the students who were AP caliber should be independent enough to complete coursework on their own during their community service participation:

This whole thing [academic rigor and community service] is a little bit more difficult; nevertheless you expect the AP class to do a lot of the work on their own, so I don’t see much of a conflict.

The perspectives of the AP teacher participants shed light on opposing views of tension and struggle regarding the delicate balance of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, where one participant believes a balance on the current model is difficult to achieve without sacrificing curriculum, and the other believing the dual commitment can exist without conflict if students are true, independent learners, capable of completing the remaining coursework on their own.

The perspectives of the administrators in this study were similar, yet unique in their recognition that although there is tension and struggle, a delicate balance is achievable. However, both agreed the history of the school reflects one that attempts to offer everything to its students, i.e., specialized programs, extra-curricular activities, music, sports, and community service opportunities. They acknowledge there is tension and struggle with the desire to do everything, and consequently are looking to significantly adjust the school schedule in order to accommodate all programs and activities. Mr. Smith, the school president, gave credit to the
extraordinary work and commitment of teachers who offer extra time and resources - without compensation - in order to prepare students for AP exams, and firmly believes the delicate balance between academic rigor and community service is possible through their efforts and dedication:

You look at all of the teachers in our building, and – some to a great extent than others – how they will give of themselves after hours to prepare students. I see teachers who have review classes, who offer classes on weekends, and who will have these long study periods for kids. I think that’s a marvelous example of how there is a blend of the service component in action and addressing the rigors of the AP; it’s one of the reasons, I think, that we are successful.

The figures below represent the code co-occurrences of academic rigor and community service. The darker lines represent a stronger co-occurrence.

*Figure 2. Code co-occurrence Model of Academic Rigor*
Maintaining academic rigor in the AP program often becomes secondary to the requirement of community service participation for students in their final semester before AP exams and graduation. The participants in this study all agreed the AP program was a symbol of academic rigor that requires time, energy, and resources to nurture and maintain quality instruction and learning. It is well known the AP program is the academic jewel of high schools, particularly Catholic schools competing for top-level students against increasing tuition costs. A variety of AP course offerings and a higher percentage of students achieving qualifying scores on AP exams tend to be attractive features for prospective students and their parents. However, some participants acknowledged the difficulties in keeping up standards in AP classes that don’t regularly meet when students are performing community service work.
But the thing is, it’s not like they’re (students) doing it (community service) on their own time. It is replacing class time and not supplementing it. So it might appear as if they are doing more, but in fact it is taking away from class time to do more, which definitely hurts how they do, especially in advanced placement courses. And I’m sure with community service having two days off, during a critical time before an important exam, contributes to students’ lack of focus.

Still, all participants agreed the community service program should remain a graduation requirement, and touted the benefits of student participation. Some participants cited the change in the school calendar which cut back the program to approximately eight weeks in an effort to provide more class time and exam preparation.

Other participants focused on the AP program’s all-inclusive enrollment; they cited the value in having students who may not necessarily meet course criteria to experience the academic rigor of an AP class and challenge them beyond what they feel they are capable of, regardless of exam performance outcomes. One administrator gave his perspective on challenging students:

I think we have to push our kids; and our teachers as well; and our administrators; to push themselves outside of their comfort zone. Really that’s where they belong. That’s where I think the rigor is. Sometimes it can’t be defined by grades alone, although grades are obviously the primary way we do it. But we also have to look at the effort.

A campus ministry participant gave his perspective on an all-inclusive AP program and the nature of challenging students.

I know I have said this in the past, that I am a firm believer in each student taking at least one AP course. I know when I say this, it almost waters down the integrity of AP, but
I’m not trying to do that. I believe there is always – a student has subject strength – mastery, maybe. And just because their GPA may not reflect the academic requirements for AP, allow them the opportunity to see what AP is like, to challenge them. And when a student gives 100 percent of their effort in a subject, and that 100 percent effort arrives at a 75 average for the course for the year, then that’s what is genuinely earned.

Figure 4 represents the code co-occurrence of time.

![Figure 4. Code Co-Occurrence Model of Time](image)

The community service model is framed in response to the self-centeredness of high school students by promoting a “call to serve.” The participants in this study shared their perspective on the idea that community service is a call to serve those in need. The key finding describes the community service model as a feature of the Catholic identity, where one serves others in need in a selfless, non-judgmental manner. Some of the participants believe the model
is not just a graduation requirement. They have witnessed student behavior transform during community service participation, which “is powerful.” Participation also has the potential to instill a lifelong commitment to service. Mr. Brown, the school principal, expressed his perspective on the call to serve:

It takes away the solipsistic reality that it’s all about me (the student). I’m centered into my own world, and I make the rules; that kind of self-fulfilling reality that’s very easy now with the technology we work with all the time. They have to realize that they have to get out of their building. They have to put their phone away, and they have to deal with a kid who hates math. They have to deal with an old person who’s going to tell them the same story for the tenth time. There’s more to them than meets their eye and their screen.

Participants from campus ministry echoed a similar view of the previous administrator participant. They argued technology was a factor in over-promoting a sense of self, and the community service model could serve as an alternative to a narrow worldview. As the director of campus ministry stated:

I think the community service program does a number of things. It breaks down that self-centeredness. I think one of the negatives of our culture is the technological age…the kids are on their phones and so there is no real communication…so it opens them up to the experience of serving people.

And the co-director stated,

Holistically, the community service program absorbs everything that Catholic identity is about, and the school wishes for us to charge our students with that desire for helping others, for helping those in need, putting others first, and not to be selfish but selfless in
the activities we do. Once a student is engaged in a service work opportunity, they get to see the fulfillment, not just for themselves, but also the impact it’s made on people, and the relationships that grow from that. Then it becomes a wish to continue that.

One AP teacher participant described the community service program in light of the Catholic identity as “letting go of our own selfishness and thinking about other people’s struggles.” Furthermore, he sees the value in a student engaging in community service work where they may gain a different perspective, which may lead to recognizing the “world is not your own.”

The figure below represents the code co-occurrence of the Catholic identity.

Figure 5. Code Co-Occurrence Model of the Catholic identity

**A commitment to the education of the whole student is paramount.** The participants in this study generally agreed that educating the whole student has strong implications for future success. They viewed the intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual development of the
student as a reflection of the school’s mission statement. One AP teacher participant expressed the view that academic development was important, along with social and emotional development; that gaining the experience of dealing with people can promote maturity, social responsibility, and gain a “wider worldview.” He stated, “It is more important to develop human beings, not intellectual robots.” He added that community service participation helps to create a well-rounded individual, which he believes is a greater contribution to society. A participant from campus ministry stated that an education is not just what is gained in the classroom, but what is also gained outside the classroom such as in a community service program.

An administrator assessed the education of the whole student by describing the first three and one-half years of high school as preparation leading to community service participation in the final semester. As an educator, he recounted the number of times freshmen students would ask why it was necessary to learn certain subject matter if it had no bearing on their future career choices. His response was “trust me.” As an administrator, he hopes that students in their senior year see the connection between what is learned in the classroom and that which they are called to do in their faith. Thus, he views the community service program as an extension of the school in that the education of the whole student is critical in helping them to “actually put into practice what they see and live in the school building each day.”

The figure below represents the code co-occurrence of the school mission.
Figure 6. Code Co-Occurrence Model of the School Mission

Artifacts and Documents

The following sources became important for exploring and understanding the phenomenon of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service in light of the Catholic identity and the school’s mission: (1) Catholic identity in Catholic schools, (2) profile of an educator teaching at a sponsorship school, (3) guidelines for the school’s community service program, and (4) the school’s mission statement. These documents were used as sources to support the research study and to begin to understand the phenomenon of the problem of practice.
### Table 2

**Artifacts and Documents**

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<th>Artifacts &amp; Documents</th>
<th>Main Points</th>
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| Catholic Identity in Catholic schools | • Catholic means universal; highlights inclusiveness of Catholic schools  
• Strong Catholic identity in schools “point to a reality beyond itself”  
• Catholic school curriculum based on “whole culture” and effective religious education  
• Faculty and staff collaborate across disciplines  
• Teaching is a ministry  
• School welcomes all students regardless of denomination  
• Students take ownership of faith through community service  
• School culture where prayer is infused daily in school and parents work together with teachers to educate children |
| Mission statement             | • Comprised of five values and tenets  
• Humility, simplicity, compassion, zeal, and trust |
| Profile of an educator         | • Shares and helps shape the school’s mission  
• Demonstrates a knowledge of content and pedagogy  
• Creates a culture of respect and rapport in the classroom |
| Community service program      | • Graduation requirement in final semester of grade 12  
• Coordinated effort on the part of administrators, faculty, and staff  
• Reflects the sponsorship philosophy of the school’s founding religious order  
• Affords each student opportunity to deepen awareness of social justice issues:  
  o To develop a student’s personal faith and spirituality by increasing self-awareness  
  o To move students toward ownership of response to the need to serve others  
  o To breakdown stereotypes, biases, and prejudices  
  o To build the school’s faith community and mission |
These artifacts and documents highlight the connection between emerging themes of this chapter and key findings discussed in chapter five. Regarding the Catholic identity of a school, it is clear that part of identifying as Catholic is the vocation or ministry of teaching. As teaching is viewed as a ministry, this aligns with the theme of a call to serve the school community, but with little or no compensation for time and resources spent preparing students in after-school class sessions. The Catholic identity also speaks to the theme of educating the whole student, and to create a whole culture that is truly universal and accepting of all faiths and religious affiliations.

The Catholic identity of a school stresses that students take ownership of their faith through charitable works and community service. This is no more visible than in the options underclassmen have for fulfilling community service hours required by their religion classes. In the final year, seniors are allowed to select their community service sites, but are required to perform community service work during school hours. In this regard, full faith ownership on the part of students is somewhat limited by a community service program that is also a graduation requirement.

The mission statement for the school in this study has been updated to reflect the charisms espoused by the school’s founding religious order. The charisms of simplicity, humility, and compassion reflect the theme of a call to serve and the importance of moving away from one’s own self-centeredness by helping others. The perception that a new mission statement was needed, and conveyed in the form of daily prayer at the start of the school day, is indicative of the theme of educating the whole student, as well as changing the school culture. In making students more aware of these charisms, it is hoped the ideals behind the charisms are reinforced, and that students will respond in kind through community service work.
One role of the profile of an educator within the school in this study is the sharing and shaping of the school mission. Similar to the ministry role of an educator, this artifact aligns with the themes of a call to serve the school community and the education of the whole student. Teacher expectations center on a commitment to the school mission of living humbly and simply, learning with zeal new and innovative ways of delivering instruction, and being compassion toward students and colleagues. The creation of a new mission statement involved a collaborative effort (sharing and shaping) on the part of a few administrators and a select group of teachers, with considerable time spent on restructuring the school mission into a routine of daily prayer.

The community service program connects to the themes of a delicate balance, a call to serve, and the education of the whole student. This mandatory program is also representative of the charisms of the school mission, put forth by the founding religious order, and seeks to deepen an awareness of social justice issues by developing the spirituality of every student, moving them toward ownership of the need to serve others, and breaking down stereotypes and biases, all in an effort to build the faith community of the school. It is clear how the community service program aligns with a call to serve and the education of the whole student. It also connects to the theme of a delicate balance between academic rigor and a call to serve, where participation in community service takes place during school hours, superseding the requirements of the AP program during that time.

Taken together, the constellation of artifacts and documents appear to provide substantial support for the emerging themes of a call to serve and the education of the whole student. This, in turn, reflects a greater emphasis on the value of the school’s community service program.
Although academic rigor is a tenet of the Catholic identity of a school, the commitment of a call to serve seems to take precedence and is embedded within the fabric of the school.

Teaching is viewed not necessarily as a career, but more a ministry or vocation. This also emphasizes the emerging theme of a call to serve, as teachers are expected to provide additional time and resources to help improve student learning and performance outcomes. When this commitment is countered by a decrease in contact time due to students participating in the community service program, AP teachers are left to navigate around the loss of class time by providing extra time and resources outside of school hours.
Chapter V: Key Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

The trend in Catholic school education has seen a downturn in enrollment in recent years (Miller, 2012). Surviving schools have had to reinvent their academic programs in order to distinguish themselves as unique educational institutions (Cook & Simmonds, 2013). Part of a Catholic school’s uniqueness is its Catholic identity and the school mission, which are conceptually intertwined with multiple meanings and interpretations (Fuller & Johnson, 2014). In this research study, two distinct features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission, that is, academic rigor and service to others (Weitzel-O’Neill & Torres, 2011), have evolved into a dual commitment at one urban, Catholic, college-preparatory high school. Furthermore, this dual commitment has led to a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources for the Advanced Placement (AP) program and the school’s community service program. The dilemma has further contributed to a cultural mismatch among subgroups of AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators.

This research study sought to understand the phenomenon (case) of a dual commitment of academic rigor (AP program), and service to others (community service program) through the eyes of educators and stakeholders – their perspectives, expectations, and experiences – and how they make meaning of the dual commitment. Catholic high schools generally maintain their AP and community service programs as distinct entities; thus, participation in community service activities occurs outside of school hours. The high school in this study interweaves its community service program for students in their final semester (prior to the administration of AP exams and graduation) during school hours, as students venture out to volunteer at community service sites two days a week for approximately eight weeks.
Participation in the community service program for the school in this study is a graduation requirement. In this regard, it appears the idea of volunteerism lies in students being given a choice of their community service site. Studies have explored the debate over whether community service programs in high schools should be voluntary or mandatory (Henderson et al., 2007). The blending of curriculum and community service work has allowed some schools to mandate community service participation in a way that doesn’t seem imposed. In that regard, the high school in this study implements “service learning” (Webster & Worrell, 2008, p. 170) for students in the lower grades, conducted through their religion classes. All students in grades nine through eleven must complete a set number of hours of volunteer work on their own in order to meet religion course requirements.

Although recent changes to the community service program on the twelfth-grade level have reduced the number of weeks of participation, the format of the model has remained essentially the same from its inception in the 1970’s, when all graduating students in their final semester were given time during the school day, two days a week, to meet the community service requirement. Since that time, schools in general have significantly changed – curriculum, instruction, and learning initiatives have dramatically shifted. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to re-examine this high school’s community service model with fresh eyes and a new perspective.

**Review of the Methodology**

This qualitative, descriptive case study was designed to explore and understand the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service in light of three research questions:
1. What is the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor and community service at an urban Catholic, college-preparatory high school, which are two features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission?

2. What are the beliefs of individuals who are educators and stakeholders at this high school, namely, administrators, campus ministry personnel, and teachers in the Advanced Placement (AP) program?

3. What are the expectations of these individuals, and how do they make meaning of their experiences in light of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service?

In order to explore these questions, a semi-structured, one-on-one interview format was conducted of participants who represented the scope and balance of this study. The interview format was used because the researcher needed participants who were “not hesitant to speak and share ideas” (Creswell, 2013, p. 164). In order to make this possible, these informal interviews were conducted in secure locations within the school at the start of the academic year. Additionally, conducting the interviews during that time was more convenient for participants, as teaching and work schedules quickly fill up free time once the academic year is underway. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, coded using MAXQDA12 software, and analyzed for pattern coding and emerging themes.

In addition to data collected from one-on-one interviews, field observations of the participants were conducted so as to gain information relative to their roles as administrators, campus ministry personnel, and AP teachers in their own setting. Other forms of data collection included artifacts and documents related to the problem of practice, namely, school demographics, the mission statement, teaching criteria, AP score performance reports, guidelines
of the community service program, and documents on the Catholic identity and school mission. Some of these documents were evaluated in order to explore connections between document components and data collected from interviews and field observations.

This chapter is organized into the following sections: discussion of key findings, discussion of findings relative to the theoretical framework, discussion of findings relative to the literature review, significance of the research study, implications for practice, limitations, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

**Key Findings**

Data analysis from participant interviews, field observations, artifacts, and documents, aligned with emerging themes, yielded key findings on the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service:

1. **Dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources**

2. **Cultural mismatch among educators and stakeholders**

These findings help to explain a school environment of tension and struggle, especially in the final semester, which continues despite the impact on the school community.

**Dilemma of competing priorities.** Time and resources are perceived as commodities during the period of community service for students in the final semester before AP exams and graduation. The community service program is mandatory, and in order to fulfill this graduation requirement, students participate at sites during the school day.

Community service participation during school hours fulfills one-half of the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor (AP program) and service to others (community service program). The dual commitment has led to a dilemma of competing priorities for time and
resources. The dilemma evokes tension and struggle among AP teachers, campus ministry, and administrators alike, as both programs continue to exist in this phenomenon.

**Cultural mismatch.** As the dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources has produced tension and struggle, a cultural mismatch has also formed among subgroups in light of the dual commitment. Among AP teachers, findings indicate varying opinions regarding how academic rigor and service to others should exist within the school in this study. One AP teacher participant believed that academic rigor had taken a backseat to the commitment of community service, causing frustration, tension, and struggle in completing the rigorous AP curriculum. The other AP teacher participant believed students of this caliber should be able to offset the reduction in course contact time through independent study, and by preparing for AP exams on their own. Therefore, this AP teacher did not feel a dilemma was of great concern, nor did he experience tension or struggle in meeting the rigors of the AP curriculum.

The campus ministry personnel participants appeared to have a more united front in the dual commitment, aligned in the importance of educating the whole student through spiritual formation and community service. Although they acknowledged the significance of maintaining academic rigor, they also drew attention to a decrease in the required number of hours of community service from the original program in an effort to increase course contact time. This has yielded some tension and struggle for campus ministry personnel as they strive to successfully promote the spiritual development of every student.

Administrator participants were also united regarding the dual commitment, with the understanding that both academic rigor and community service were important features of the Catholic identity, and that both programs were necessary in order to fulfill the school’s mission. The cultural mismatch exists, therefore, when administrators, campus ministry personnel, and
AP teachers continue their work despite how the dilemma of competing priorities further impacts the two programs, as well as other educators and stakeholders, and most importantly, the students.

**Discussion of Key Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

This research study was guided by the theoretical framework of culture theory, specifically school culture, by way of a cultural mismatch through the lens of critical theory. This theoretical framework was selected based on a proposed cultural mismatch among subgroups relative to the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor and community service. From the perspectives of educators and stakeholders, along with an analysis of field observations, artifacts, and documents, this dual commitment, having evolved into a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources, will be discussed in this chapter. First, culture theory in light of school culture will be explained, then more deeply through a critical theory lens as a subcomponent of culture theory.

**Culture theory.** Rodriguez (2008) defined school culture as “a set of processes informed by the intersection of school structures, cultures and individual agency” (p. 761). Berkemeyer et al. (2015) argued that although school culture is a reality, the concept of school culture might be ambiguous and lack clarity. School culture, whether positive or negative, may impact contextual factors such as student achievement and motivation (Berkemeyer et al., 2015). Rodriguez (2008) described “the push factor” (p. 771) as part of the culture of high expectations teachers and administrators have for their students. This notion can be attributed to the way educators and stakeholders in the school of this study challenge each student to enroll in at least one advanced placement class, even if they don’t necessarily meet all prerequisites. The implications of the interview findings point to concerns over whether there is justification in placing students in at
least one AP class who haven’t necessarily met all prerequisites, and thus causing one to question the selection process for AP course enrollment. A number of participants voiced their concerns over the selection process, and questioned the philosophy behind challenging students to the rigors of an AP class without being fully prepared for the challenge. In this regard, the first key finding of a delicate balance between promoting community service participation against all the other demands of high school life, which has created tension and struggle, is further exacerbated for students who may not be well prepared for AP coursework from the start.

If school culture matters (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011), then examining juxtaposition of AP course enrollment and participation in the community service program may prove useful. Schools with stronger cultures are “more adaptable” and “better able to resolve conflicts” (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011, p. 52). The culture of the school in this study is such that there is an equally high regard for both the AP and community service programs. The participants have confirmed this dual commitment, yet have also acknowledged time and resource constraints in both programs. As a result, a culture of offering multiple opportunities for students by way of AP course offerings, extra-curricular activities, and community service work, has evolved into a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources.

For the second key finding, that maintaining academic rigor becomes secondary to community service participation, a calendar change was made in the previous academic year to reduce the number of weeks of community service participation in the final semester prior to the administration of AP exams and graduation. The administrator participants believed the reduction in the length of the community service program may have been a contributing factor in some gains in AP scores within certain subjects, but added that more improvement was needed. The AP teacher participants stated that often they could predict the AP score performance of
their students; that is, students who had met the prerequisites, had demonstrated a consistently strong work ethic throughout the year, and prepared independently for the AP exam, achieved qualifying scores. However, one AP teacher was concerned that even the top students yield to the notion that once the community service program is in place, and classes meet only sixty-percent of the time, the school year is virtually over, that most college decisions are known, and there is little value in achieving a qualifying score, particularly if the college of their choice does not accept AP credit. Therefore, this aspect of the school’s culture needs strengthening, where educators and stakeholders need to reinforce in their students the intrinsic value of completing AP coursework successfully, the value of hard work and AP exam preparation, and the importance of achieving a qualifying score, regardless of the policies of colleges toward AP credit and placement. As school culture change begins with the adults and is determined by values, shared beliefs, and the behavior of stakeholders (Carpenter, 2014), such change is necessary in order to resolve the dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources and the cultural mismatch among subgroups.

In order to change school culture, in this case, toward a more selective process of AP course enrollment, and toward a more unified agreement on the value of achieving qualifying scores on the AP exam, some studies have shown the value of involving the entire school community (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). The researcher in this study took notes in a field observation of a meeting conducted by the school president, where representatives of the school, including members of the administration, listened intently to the president’s discourse on strategic planning for the future and the need to “separate from the pack.” He divided the strategic plan into five areas of concentration: (1) the Catholic identity, (2) academic excellence, (3) student life, (4) admissions and enrollment, and (5) advancement and alumni development. A
detailed report presented by one administrator studied exam score performance within the school across many disciplines over a six-year period, citing a twenty-percent gain in the number of students earning qualifying scores on AP exams compared to previous years. However, the prevailing opinion was that there were subject areas that remained poor in performance or needed improvement.

The president circled back to the need for forming subcommittees to tackle one area of concentration in an effort to maintain the high school’s enrollment. He also stressed that subcommittees should not be isolated or form into “silos”; instead, he advised there should be collaboration in the sharing of data and productive discussion among the groups. This observation aligns with research on cultural leaders as those who engage in distributed leadership in order to change a school’s culture (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011).

In seeking to understand a cultural mismatch among the subgroups of participants in this study, it is clear that participants share some common ground, yet they are also unique in their perspective on the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service. Administrator participants sought to meet in the middle when describing the dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources. They fully supported the work of AP teachers and acknowledged those who voluntarily gave extra classes and review sessions beyond the school day, often with no compensation, to help students review material and prepare for exams. They also emphasized the need for the school to maintain its Catholic identity and the school’s mission, through academic rigor by way of the AP program, and spiritual development by way of the community service program. The school recently developed its mission statement into a prayer that emphasizes values held by the founding religious order: humility, compassion, zeal, simplicity, and trust. The entire school community, as a way of emphasizing the school’s Catholic identity
and the education of the whole student, recites the mission prayer daily. Therefore, the mission prayer has become part of the school’s culture, as it represents the core values, perspectives, and beliefs of the school’s constituencies.

A cultural mismatch was observed in several participant responses regarding the value placed on completing AP coursework during community service participation. This was observed not only between subgroups, but also within subgroups. For example, the AP teacher participants both agreed that community service should remain a graduation requirement. Yet, when asked of the time and resource constraints influencing academic rigor and community service, one AP teacher believed there wasn’t enough time throughout the school year and especially within a twelfth grade level AP math class in the final semester during the community service program. This was seen in a field observation of his class. Although it was shortly after the start of the school year, in anticipation of this change in the final semester, the AP teacher’s style of delivering instruction was swift and deliberate. The class appeared to be a homogeneous group of top-tiered students who were engaged in a class activity involving problem sets and problem solving. The AP teacher appeared to be well-organized, moving from topic to topic in sequence, but not losing sight of the speed of the class, and took some time to pause if students needed help. It was clear the AP teacher had planned the lesson thoroughly, and in interview responses, acknowledged he had the entire course planned out for the school year in order to account for time constraints during community service participation.

The AP history teacher believed students should be independent learners during the critical final semester, able to prepare on their own for the AP exam. This was not necessarily in sharp contrast to the AP math teacher’s perspective; however, a cultural mismatch within this subgroup of AP teachers lies in the degree of urgency to complete the curriculum and the level of
acceptance of time and resource constraints, where one participant values the independent thinking and development of the whole student, and the other values the importance of providing students with full instruction and adequate exam preparation. The perspective of the AP history teacher may also be attributed to a heterogeneous class of mixed abilities, where not all students are required to take the AP exam.

The director and co-director of campus ministry perceived the Catholic identity by way of the spiritual development of each student. On separate occasions, while observing the campus ministry participants individually during meetings with students, each emphasized the significance of a call to serve, in this case, eleventh graders who were scheduled to spend one school day volunteering at a soup kitchen. The focus of both field observations was an emphasis on students being open to transformation through the experience of performing community service work, through collaborating with classmates, and supporting each other. Although both campus ministry participants, who are also teachers, agreed that high standards of academic rigor are essential, both participants did not want to see another reduction in the length of the community service program, citing that both academic rigor and community service must be “respected”. One participant stated, “the school wishes for us to charge our students with that desire to help others, helping those in need, and putting others first.” This participant was firm in his belief in the education of the whole student through exposure to the AP program and engagement in community service work. He asserted that participation in community service work in the final semester was a culmination of a student’s high school years, where each student is engaged in any of the following forms of service: completing a set number of service hours as a requirement in religion classes outside of the school day, attending outreach programs over
several days including weekends, and volunteering in a soup kitchen with other classmates during the school day, one to two times a year.

A cultural mismatch between campus ministry personnel and AP teachers did not appear to be as distinct as this researcher would have believed, as both subgroups agreed on the value of community service participation and in maintaining high standards of academic rigor. Generally, the mismatch lies in the dual commitment – that academic rigor and service to others coexist on an equal footing, which, given the nature of the school schedule and the intensity of AP coursework, risks negative impact on either program.

Finally, a cultural mismatch may apply to this research study in a way that identifies the community service model as unchanged over the past forty plus years. This perhaps is an attempt to hold onto the tradition of community service as a graduation requirement. The cultural aspect is the traditional format of the community service program, and the mismatch is the inability to make significant changes to the community service program that have the potential to support all constituencies within the school.

Critical theory. Critical theory, a subset of culture theory, was proposed in light of the cultural mismatch among subgroups, focusing on “empowering human beings to transcend constraints placed on them” (Creswell, 2013, p. 30). In this research study, time and resource constraints have developed from a dilemma of competing priorities. Kellner (2003) described critical theory as a “way of seeing and conceptualizing, a construction of categories, making connections, mapping, and engaging in the practice of theory-construction, and relating theory to practice” (p. 8).

In this research study, the empowerment of AP teachers to overcome time and resource constraints is demonstrated on an individual basis. In other words, AP teachers respond in
different ways to address and/or resolve time and resource constraints, either by voluntarily offering additional classes, modifying their AP courses, assigning students to independent work, or making the AP exam optional. Campus ministry personnel have attempted to resolve these time constraints by reducing the number of weeks required for community service in support of more instructional time. However, as noted in one interview, this, in turn, has also produced time constraints for campus ministry personnel, as well as community service site personnel, who would clearly rather have an increase in the number of hours students serve at their sites. As a result, some community service site personnel have been critical of recent changes to the program.

Discussion of Key Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

The literature review in Chapter II presents an investigation of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service as features of the Catholic identity and the school’s mission. This section discusses the key findings against the literature review topics, broken down into the following areas: academic rigor, community service, and school culture.

**Academic rigor.** In light of the Catholic identity, academic rigor is also an essential feature of a Catholic school’s mission. Studies have compared the curricular offerings of public and Catholic schools to determine if Catholic schools were keeping up with National and State standards, and with the offering of unique programs to justify tuition costs (Ognibene, 2015). In a comparative study of public and Catholic schools, Ognibene (2015) examined the uniqueness of Catholic schools – their Catholic identity and school mission - but also stated that Catholic schools’ “instructional practices have evolved in ways similar to that of public schools” (Ognibene, 2015, p. 27). The drive to be unique in course offerings was evident in the high school in this study, as myriad high level academic programs are available for students, including
honors, STEM, and AP programs. All students are enrolled in the STEM program, whether they are tracked in an honors or mainstream program. Students are advised to take an AP class, offered as early as the tenth grade. The administrator participants believed that academic rigor and the Catholic school’s mission work in tandem, and that Catholic education is defined by academic rigor and excellence. The campus ministry personnel perceived academic rigor to be a feature of the Catholic identity and school mission, but that education of the whole student was the true hallmark of the Catholic identity and school mission. One of the campus ministry participants also advocated strongly for students to gain exposure to at least one AP class, regardless of performance outcomes. The AP teacher participants clearly valued the academic rigor of the AP program, but approached their respective curricula in different ways relative to learning outcomes and AP exam preparation. For example, the AP history teacher’s view of academic rigor:

I’m sure there are other definitions I can think of but primarily it [academic rigor] is the ability not just to read and repeat what you have read, but to explain clearly and be able to convince others of your argument especially in the subject like history or law for that matter where the issues are so controversial and so critical.

The view of this participant in terms of academic rigor was that of developing independent and critical thinking in his AP students. The AP math teacher perceived academic rigor in the following way:

I think academic rigor is defined by the expectations students devote to their academics; academic rigor also means pushing yourself beyond your limits, trying to do things that may discomfort you, and help you realize things about yourself that maybe you didn’t know you were capable of doing.
The perception of this participant is that academics should be a top priority, and that also students need to prioritize and manage time if they are involved in multiple school activities, particularly during community service work.

**Community service.** The common features of public and Catholic schools became less emphasized when the latter began to implement discipline-centered curriculum reform and humanistic education, derived from the 1940’s public school program known as “life adjustment education” (Ognibene, 2015, p. 27). This change initiated a breaking away from public school education by mandating classes within the Catholic faith, such as religion/theology, as a graduation requirement, and providing opportunities for high school students to participate in community service. The spiritual development of each student is a tenet of Catholic education and is clearly emphasized in the high school in this study, where not only are students engaged in community service work on the twelfth grade level, but are also engaged at the lower grades, since community service hours are a requirement for all religion classes. The required number of service hours is more obvious for students in the final semester as service occurs during the school day. This is in contrast to what many Catholic high schools advocate for their own community service programs – that students are either mandated to participate in community service, or do so voluntarily; in either case, service hours are fulfilled with little or no disruption to the school schedule and to course contact time.

**School culture.** For this study, part of the theoretical framework of culture theory is school culture, whose definition is difficult to isolate, as it has multiple meanings for multiple subgroups. There is no single definition that is all encompassing for school culture. Sailes, Cleveland, and Tyler (2014) refer to the work of Plata and Robertson (1998) in defining school culture as a variable that determines students’ level of “confidence, aspiration, and motivation in
how they approach life events” (p. 34). According to Mok & Flynn (1998), school culture is defined as a “configuration of core beliefs, values, symbols, traditions, and patterns of behavior in the life of a school” (p. 411).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Rodriguez (2008) points to a dynamic component of school culture that is arguably a representation of society, and that this fluid dynamic has the potential to promote or inhibit change in a school. The key finding of the perception that academic rigor becomes secondary to community service participation for students in their final semester speaks to a school culture that allows the use of AP class time (and other classes) for students to participate in community service in fulfillment of a graduation requirement; that it is acceptable to sacrifice course contact time, exam prep time, and general fulfillment of AP course requirements, in order to participate in community service work.

In this study, the researcher found school culture to be an overarching construct that underlies key findings. For example, in the key finding of a delicate balance between maintaining academic rigor and promoting the spiritual development of students, a school culture of tension and struggle is the status quo, as one participant proposed, “some tension and struggle may be appropriate.” There are multiple levels of tension and struggle, as seen in the pushing of students to take at least one AP course, coupled with mandatory participation in community service, often causing students to experience the dual commitment in varying ways. Teachers struggle to complete a rigorous AP course curriculum and still have enough time to prepare for the AP exam. As teachers lose significant class time to a mandatory community service program, there is a culture of acceptance of the status quo with an option for AP teachers to resolve time and resource constraints on their own and on a voluntary basis.
Campus ministry personnel struggle to fulfill the charge to impart faith and promote the spiritual development of each student through retreats, outreach programs, and community service. Some school constituencies argue not enough time is devoted to spiritual formation and the development of the whole student. The tradition of offering the community service program at the same time on a yearly basis has been so for over forty-five years; other than recent changes in the length of student participation, the program has essentially remained unchanged, and thus, is part of the school culture.

The administrators in this study value both the AP and community service programs, but clearly want to see better AP exam results; there is a strong belief that alternative ways can be explored to deliver instruction, to support AP teachers whose curriculum is intense and content-driven, yet still provide students with an experience of community service that has the potential to change a student’s life. Although there is common ground among all subgroup participants in this study, there are also divisions that have created tension, struggle, and a cultural mismatch.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this research study was to understand more deeply the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, two features of the Catholic identity and school mission. This qualitative, descriptive, single case study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the phenomenon of a dual commitment of academic rigor and community service at an urban Catholic, college-preparatory high school, which are two features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission?
2. What are the beliefs of individuals who are educators and stakeholders at this high school, namely, administrators, campus ministry personnel, and teachers in the Advanced Placement (AP) program?

3. What are the expectations of these individuals, and how do they make meaning of their experiences in light of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service?

In seeking the answers, data was collected through one-on-one interviews, field observations, artifacts, and document. All data were analyzed through coding, which provided emerging themes that were further analyzed and evaluated. The results of this study indicate that in light of the beliefs and perspectives of the participants, the origin and nature of the dual commitment is made more clear in that the AP program, a symbol of academic rigor, is perhaps more about challenging students and less about exam performance outcomes; that the school’s community service program can take up class time if the completion of an AP curriculum and test preparation are, to some extent, optional.

Therefore, the definition of academic rigor becomes more subjective and takes on different meanings for different participants. If this is the case, then it is also clear that taking up class time to implement a mandatory community service program appears to be justified in light of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service, but has also contributed to a dilemma of priorities for time and resources, leading to tension, struggle, and a cultural mismatch among educators and stakeholders. The cultural mismatch lies in the perspectives among the subgroups and how they make meaning of the dual commitment.
Significance of the Research Study

As many Catholic schools seek alternative ways of distinguishing themselves in an effort to attract prospective students with new and innovative programs reflective of strong academic rigor, the high school in this research study as well seeks to offer such high quality academic programs, while keeping with the tradition of a mandatory community service program for students in their final semester of the graduating year. As a result, the study’s subgroups - AP teachers, campus ministry personnel, and administrators – navigate around constraints in time and resources on an individual basis.

The focus of this study was to understand more deeply how the subgroups make meaning of the dual commitment of academic rigor and community service. Through data analysis and emerging themes, this study has shown the approach AP teachers use to complete their curriculum while providing enough preparation for the AP exam under constraints of time and resources varies. Some teachers conduct voluntary classes to make up lost contact time, while others modify the curriculum to fit available class time in the final semester. Still other AP teachers believe in placing the responsibility on AP students for their own learning. In an attempt to resolve issues facing AP teachers, and in response to a need for improved AP exam performance, the school’s administration reduced the length of the community service program by two weeks, equivalent to four days of course contact time. While the participants valued both academic rigor and community service, the significance of this study presents the argument that although a reduction in the length of the community service program has increased course contact time in AP (and other) classes, the fact remains these classes do not consistently meet during what is the most critical time period – the final semester prior to the administration of exams and graduation. The continuity factor in an AP program is significant if a Catholic high
school wishes to distinguish itself as one of academic excellence and achievement, with AP score performance to support that distinction.

**Implications for Practice**

The implications for practice are derived from the relationship among the factors of time, resources, AP achievement, and community service participation. As a Catholic high school, the nature of the Catholic identity and the school mission is to promote both academic rigor and a call to serve. In order to attract top-level prospective students, a Catholic high school must be competitive with public high schools that offer quality instruction at no cost. This translates into the delivery of a high-quality AP program and impressive AP exam performance outcomes, a key feature in the school selection process for prospective students and their parents. According to findings in several studies, students may benefit even from mandatory participation in community service, which may also serve to promote a positive school culture. Thus, the value of participation in community service should not be overlooked, as many graduates each year look upon their community service experience as among the best in their high school career.

Since the dual commitment has led to a dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources, the problem of practice needs to be re-examined for its impact on school culture. As a result of a cultural mismatch, members of a subgroup navigate the dilemma in their own way, without a definitive plan to reduce any negative impact on AP achievement and community service work due to competing priorities. Therefore, the findings in this study may influence administrators, teachers, and campus ministry personnel to collaborate on issues in a professional development setting, and to discuss potential solutions.

One solution offered by this researcher is the shifting of the community service calendar after AP exams are completed and all course requirements have been met. Typically, there is a
window of approximately two to three weeks from the last final exam to the graduation ceremony. If students participated in community service for a consistent period of time, for example, Monday through Friday for two or three consecutive weeks, they would likely gain a similarly positive experience while fulfilling the required number of hours of community service. Such a solution would answer the dilemma of competing priorities, as it would not interfere or disrupt AP course contact time. Some may argue that a community service program administered toward the end of the school year may seem like a toss-off and not have as much meaning or impact on a student’s experience. However, going forward, individuals make meaning, and time frames do not necessarily dictate the quality of experience a student gains from community service participation.

As the findings are significant for the school in this study, other Catholic schools that experience similar issues regarding the dual commitment, namely, tension and struggle as a result of competing priorities for time and resources, may use these findings to their benefit. The findings and recommendations in this study may help these schools evaluate how they perceive their Catholic identity and school mission in light of academic rigor and community service participation. Other independent schools, as well as some public schools, especially those that have high regard for community service to the point where they may mandate it as a graduation requirement, may also stand to benefit from the recommendations in this study, as they strive to balance the coexistence of their own AP and community service programs in more balanced and harmonious ways.

**Limitations**

The conclusions based on this study should be used to inform the high school’s educators and stakeholders in positive ways. Yet there are a number of limitations that may have impacted
the validity of the study. As the researcher and an AP teacher, researcher objectivity was a challenge; yet each interview was conducted with the same protocol of questions that rarely deviated from the script. There is always a risk of response bias, but the researcher attempted to reduce this risk by informing each participant of the purpose of the study and explaining, in an introductory script prior to the interview, that responses would be kept confidential. The researcher had good rapport with each participant, which may have further reduced response bias. Additionally, field observations, artifacts, and documents helped to triangulate the data.

The study was conducted with six participants who, although they represented multiple school constituencies, were also a limited number in the data collection. Although two AP disciplines were represented, more disciplines would have strengthened the data collection. Exploring the perspectives of twelfth-grade students, guidance counselors, and parents, through interviews, focus groups, or surveys, would have been helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of the problem of practice. Lastly, conducting the research study during the time period when the community service program was not in place may have limited data collection. Alternatively, conducting the interviews prior to or at the beginning of the school year allowed for or no distractions or inconvenience in participation due to teaching schedules.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this research study could encourage future studies regarding the Catholic identity, school mission, academic rigor, community service participation, and their interconnectedness. As previously noted, school culture can be influential in student motivation and achievement. Positive school culture is paramount in the successful design and implementation of high school programs such as Advanced Placement and community service (Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2011).
Future studies of this high school could seek to understand the perspective of AP teachers across disciplines to determine if they experience the dilemma of competing priorities for time and resources in similar ways. Other school contextual factors could be studied to determine their influence on AP achievement. For example, teacher competency and student engagement in AP classes may be worthwhile to study, particularly during the time period when students have been notified of college acceptances and have begun community service work. The perspectives of guidance counselors, particularly those assigned to the senior class, may be valuable for understanding how they advise students in the AP selection process and the college admissions process itself. Lastly, the contextual factor of parental influence on student achievement in the AP program may provide a new perspective, as parental involvement is an important aspect of the Catholic school identity.

For community service programs, some studies have examined the methods in which different service opportunities are integrated in Catholic or religious high schools (Cook & Simmonds, 2011). Future research may include a comparison of the implementation of similar Catholic high schools’ community service models. In light of the Catholic identity and the school mission, future studies may seek to better understand the norms of the Catholic identity, the effectiveness of the school mission, and the extent to which preservation of Catholic core values influence how community service programs are implemented in Catholic high schools. As Miller (2012) examined the new realities faced by Catholic schools, it is a wise endeavor to continue to promote the uniqueness of the Catholic high school through a community service model that is focused on the education of the whole student, while ensuring that standards of academic rigor are consistently supported and maintained.
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APPENDIX A

Participant Interview Protocol

Thank you for consenting to this interview. Your participation will help me in my research study in pursuit of a doctoral degree in Education. The purpose of this interview is to gain a deeper understanding of your experience and perspective on the school’s commitment to academic rigor and community service, two features of the Catholic identity and of the school’s mission. All responses will be kept confidential and I will strive to maintain objectivity throughout the interview, more as an outsider, less as a colleague. All recordings will be discarded at the conclusion of the dissertation phase of the doctoral program at Northeastern University, of which I am a student.

The format of the interview will be informal and consist of questions from the following topic areas: (1) your background and experience as a (teacher, campus ministry personnel, administrator), (2) your views on academic rigor as it relates to the AP program within the school, (3) your views on the school’s community service program, and (4) how you experience the commitment to both academic rigor and community service as an educator and a stakeholder of the school.

There will be two interviews conducted at separate times at a quiet, undisclosed location with the school. Each interview will last approximately forty-five minutes. If at any time you wish to skip a question during the interview, end the interview before questions are completed, or withdraw from the study after the interviews, you have the option to do so. Do you have any questions? Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Background

1. How long have you been an educator overall?
2. How long have you been an educator at the school?

3. What is your title and role in the school?

4. Why did you choose to be at this particular school?
   a. How did the fact that it is a Catholic school influence your decision, if at all, to teach here?
   b. Did you attend Catholic school as a student? If so, which grade levels?

5. What subjects do you currently teach/have you taught?

Academic Rigor

1. In your professional experience, how do you define academic rigor?
   a. What role do you believe academic rigor plays in the Catholic identity?
   b. What role do you believe academic rigor plays in the school’s mission?

2. What is your experience of the AP program model as it relates to academic rigor?

3. Based on your experience as an educator, how do AP course offerings in this school match up to those in other schools?

4. Based on your experience as an educator, what value do you place on the AP program with regards to the ways it is implemented within the school?

5. How would you describe student performance within the school’s AP program?

Community Service

1. How do you define community service as a feature of the Catholic identity?
   a. How does community service relate to the school’s mission?

2. What is your experience with the school’s community service program?
   a. In what capacity, if any, have you been involved with the program?
3. How would you describe the school’s community service program offered to graduating seniors in the final semester?

4. What role does community service participation play in the education of the whole student?

5. Based on your experience, do you believe the community service program should remain as a graduation requirement in the high school in this study? Please explain.

Summary

1. How do you believe the school allows for academic rigor within the AP program and the community service program to coexist simultaneously?

2. As an educator, describe how the variable of time influences academic rigor in the AP program and in the community service program.

3. How has academic rigor within the AP program influenced your role as an educator of the school?

4. How has the community service program influenced your role as an educator of the school?

5. Is there anything else you wish to add regarding your experience on academic rigor in the AP program and in the community service program?

Thank you so much for your time and willingness to participate in my research study. Upon completion, I will provide you with a copy of the interview transcript and give you ample opportunity to read through and comment. After taking all comments into consideration, the final interview transcript will be used to support my research study.
Hi ________________.

I hope all is well and you are finding some time to enjoy the summer. As you may already know, I am a doctoral student in the EdD Program of the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. I am currently in the dissertation phase of my research study, which will attempt to explore and understand more deeply two features of the Catholic identity and the Catholic school mission: Academic rigor and Community service.

I am seeking your participation in my research study because of your role within the school as ____________________________, which is an integral part of my thesis. Your participation will involve two interviews at your convenience, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, as well as one field observation, e.g., classroom or meeting. The interviews may be conducted during these summer weeks when schedules tend to be more flexible.

There is no risk to you and all aspects of each interview and field observation will be kept confidential throughout the dissertation process. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask. You may also discontinue participation at any time.

Do I have your permission to provide you with a hard copy of an informed consent form?

Thanks for your time,

____________________
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, 
Doctor of Education Program 
Name of Investigator:  Chris Unger, EdD 
Student Researcher:  Roseann Guido 
Title of Project:  The Dual Commitment of Academic Rigor and Community Service at an Urban, Catholic High School

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

As the student researcher, I am inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but I will first explain it to you. You may ask me any questions that you may have regarding this project. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell me whether you want to participate. You do not have to participate if you don’t want to. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy for your records.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are an educator who represents an important component of the school in this study.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to explore the nature of Catholic education in light of two features of the Catholic identity: (1) academic rigor, and (2) community service.

What will I be asked to do?

If you take part in this study, I will ask about your beliefs and experiences as a Catholic school educator, as well as your perspective on academic rigor and community service.

This data collection will occur through two semi-structured, open-ended interviews, and one field observation.

Where will this take place, and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed at a location within the school, at a time that is convenient for you. There will be two interviews, each of which will last approximately 45 minutes and separated by 1-2 weeks. The field observation, i.e., classroom, office, meeting rooms, will take place at your convenience and will last approximately 45 minutes.
## Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort should you decide to participate in this study.

## Will I benefit by being in this research study?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the information gleaned from this study may be helpful to the school community in the future.

## Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be kept confidential. Only I, as the researcher, will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being a participant in this project.

All recorded and handwritten data will be safely stored in my home. In transcribing the data, I will use coding methods that will NOT identify you in any way. I will also destroy all data once it is deemed proper by the dissertation committee of the Doctor of Education Program at Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies.

## Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to, and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may opt out at any time. If you do not participate, or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

## Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me at this Email: **guido.r@husky.neu.edu**, as I am the person mainly responsible for this research.

## Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: **n.regina@neu.edu**. You may call anonymously if you wish.